

UNDER  
NORTHERN SKIES

4

*A  
Song  
of Joy*

LAURAINÉ  
SNELLING

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*Song*  
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LAUR AINE  
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## *Prologue*

Heinrik Schmitz stared at his three brothers around the table. “Our discussion today will go no further.”

Jacob, in charge of the lumbering arm of the family business, asked, “Is someone going to record this meeting?”

“Yes, Jeffrey will.” Heinrik nodded to his son, who leaned slightly forward and spoke.

“It might help if I had some idea of what is going on. I have another class in two hours. What could possibly be causing—?”

Heinrik barely raised his hand. “I am getting to that.”

Jeffrey reached for paper and a pen, sending his father a slight frown at the same time.

The brothers were gathered around a small table in a private room off Heinrik’s office. The door was locked. Usually they met in the boardroom with their elder sister, Gertrude Schoenleber, sitting at the head of the table. Lately Miss Carlson, her assistant, was always at her side.

“What is bothering you?” Jonathon, who was in charge of the railroad branch, scraped a match and lit his cigar. After an initial puff, he narrowed his eyes and studied his brother.

“I had a horrible nightmare two nights ago.” Heinrich stared at each brother as his voice deepened. “I know this might be hard to believe, but I am convinced it was not a dream but a portent of things to come.”

Jeffrey looked up from his notes. “Fa—”

Heinrich’s hand came up again, just off the edge of the table. “Let me finish.”

Everyone stared at him.

“In my dream, our elder sister died and left all her property to Nilda Carlson, including her seat on this board.”

The scratching of the pen stopped, along with every other sound.

“I have made lists of ideas.” He motioned to a notebook on the table in front of him. “And the only feasible thing—actually the easiest and most brilliant—is to neutralize Miss Carlson by having her married into the family.”

He nodded to Jeffrey.

## Chapter 1

**JUNE 1911**

Life in America certainly wasn't like Nilda had dreamed. She closed her eyes for a moment, letting memories of home float through her. The house with the big kitchen, the farm, the *seter* where she had helped take the cows, goats, and sheep to summer pasture.

Making cheese. School, friends, the church. But mostly her family, the laughter in their house, all the parts of home.

Now, looking out the window again, she could see that farming here and farming in Norway were similar, but here it was so flat in comparison and so much larger. Cattle, horses, and farm animals dotted the pastures, while wheat and corn and other crops stretched for miles. This land used to be covered with gigantic pine trees, but loggers had cleared this land and moved north. Her onkel Einar's farm in Blackduck, Minnesota, grew white pine or red pine trees like the thousands of acres left to be logged. Like many other immigrants, he paid for the tickets for other family members to come help him clear the land so they could farm it. First, her brother Rune and his family

immigrated, then she and their younger brother, Ivar. While helping on Rune's farm, she had hoped that one day she would meet a young man, and they would have a farm of their own.

Little did she know what God had in mind for her.

Indeed, who could have dreamed such a life as she was living now? A verse her mother had often quoted tickled her mind. "God would provide far beyond anything she could dream or imagine." True, she had scrambled the words a bit, but still, her life now fit that verse.

She stared out the window of the train as it rocked from side to side. Two fishermen in a boat on one of the sky-blue lakes caught her attention. How her nephews loved to fish. And hunt. The bounty of the trees extended to the land and the water too.

Not once since arriving in this country had she gone to bed hungry. Nor had any of the others. Porridge was no longer their staple food.

And look where simple, country-bred Nilda was riding now. Mrs. Schoenleber's private railroad car was as lavish as her home, with flocked wallpaper, a lovely little writing desk and other fine furniture, a separate sleeping compartment, *and* a small private room with porcelain fixtures in which to answer nature's call.

The towns, roads, and farms grew closer together as they drew nearer to St. Paul and the quarterly meeting of Schmitz Enterprises. Accompanying her employer, Mrs. Gertrude Schoenleber—mentor, employer, and friend, and a driving force in her town—to these meetings had become a part of Nilda's life.

"Are you concerned about the meeting?" Mrs. Schoenleber, slim and slight, smiled from the seat across from Nilda.

Nilda thought for a moment. "Not so much concerned as . . ." She paused, the movement of her seat setting the feather on her navy hat to nodding. She had lifted the veil to be more comfortable. If she had her way . . . But she didn't.

Mrs. Schoenleber waited. She was good at that. Even with her back straight, not touching the seat, she still looked comfortable and patient.

“I think I am a bit apprehensive, but then, these meetings often cause that.” Not that she’d been to the Twin Cities more than three times. “I just want to do my best. I believe they want to intimidate me to the point of being ineffective.”

“Of course they do. That is their way of doing business, especially with a woman, and a young woman at that. My brothers will do anything to succeed, and right now they are worried about the timber running out, where to get more, and how to compensate for its loss with other branches of the company. I often wonder how none of them inherited the kindness of our father. After all, he accomplished all he did without destroying other people.”

“I wish I could have met him.”

“He would have loved you.”

Nilda stared at her. She felt her mouth drop. Never had Mrs. Schoenleber said anything like that to her. While she was generous with approbations, this . . . Nilda closed her eyes and swallowed. The *clickety-clack* of the train wheels nearly drowned out her words. “Thank you.”

“Fifteen minutes until arrival in St. Paul,” the conductor called as he passed by.

“Excuse me while I visit the necessary,” Mrs. Schoenleber murmured as she stood.

Nilda nodded. “Can I get you anything?”

“No, thank you.”

When the door closed, Nilda stood in front of the mirror on the inside of the door.

Never had she dreamed she would be wearing a dark navy traveling suit of heavy silk with a gored skirt that swished

her ankles, a fitted jacket decorated in jet beads, and fitted long sleeves banded at the wrists with the same beads. A hat with veil and feather finished the ensemble. She tucked a light brown strand back into a chignon at the base of her head and smoothed her eyebrows. Satisfied, she picked up her navy leather gloves from her seat and slid her hands into them. Ready. She knew she looked every inch the formal traveler of 1911. Mrs. Jones, the dressmaker, made sure of that. But getting used to this fashionable look—in fact, this entire new life—took exquisite and dedicated training. Training that continued every day.

Speaking, reading, and writing in English; proper etiquette, dress, and manners; how to assist with correspondence; business principles, history, and politics; music; and overall confidence. Between Mrs. Schoenleber, her friend Miss Walstead, and those serving them, Nilda had time to visit her family near Benson's Corner only one weekend a month. While Nilda ached to see her mor, who had immigrated to America after her husband passed away, and the others more often, whole seasons seemed to fly by.

Mrs. Schoenleber returned to the small room. "I think we will have supper at the hotel tonight. I believe we need to go over our ideas one more time at least. Something is niggling at me."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Nilda set their bags up on the seat, including the leather briefcase that was a recent gift from Mrs. Schoenleber.

"St. Paul, next stop, St. Paul," the train conductor announced from the door to their compartment. "Is there anything I can get for you before we arrive?"

"Thank you for asking." Mrs. Schoenleber smiled at him. "You help make the trip more comfortable."

"You are welcome, ma'am." He touched the bill of his hat.

“And thank you for . . . for . . .” He swallowed and exited the room.

Nilda sent a questioning look at her employer across the narrow space between the two seats.

“His son is attending college.”

“I see.” Nilda raised her eyebrows. “A little bird told you and you decided to help?”

“Something like that. Treating employees well makes sure they want to continue to work for your company. My brothers and I have had a few discussions on matters of this sort. My father tried to instill this in all of our heads, but . . .”

“Women learn more easily than men?”

“Possibly.” They shared a look of agreement. This was one of the principles the older woman had dwelled on often. “I think we women learn to care more about people. Perhaps we are born that way. My father lived by the principle ‘do unto others as you would have them do to you.’” She glanced out the window. “He was a kind man. I’m not sure what happened to my brothers. I think success has gone to their heads.”

Nilda’s mind skipped back to her onkel Einar, who had died of his obsession with cutting down the big trees, all at the cost of the people around him. He was not missed much. *Like Dreng.*

She shuddered and forced her mind back to preparing to leave their compartment.

The conductor assisted them down the train steps. “I believe your driver is coming now.”

“Thank you, and please congratulate your son for me on the hard work he is accomplishing. He hopes to go to medical school, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. Doctors are much needed.”

“The carriage is outside,” their usual driver said in greeting.

“Good to have you back.” He took their handbags and led the way, their shoes tapping against the black and white tiles in the cavernous station. The cacophony of arriving passengers surrounding them made conversation impossible.

Nilda knew the conductor’s son was in his fourth year of college and dreamed of going to medical school after graduating. Since she now took care of the accounts, she knew of most of the contributions Mrs. Schoenleber sent out behind the scenes.

Good thing the driver had brought the carriage today, as when they reached the portico, the rain was coming down in sheets.

“It appears we will not be doing any shopping,” Mrs. Schoenleber commented as they settled into their seats.

“We weren’t planning on it, were we?”

“I had thought of a couple of things, but they are not worth the effort. It is not that long to supper anyway.”

Nilda breathed a sigh of relief. Shopping had yet to become a pleasing pastime.

After greeting them, the clerk at the front desk handed Mrs. Schoenleber an envelope. “This came for you. And thank you for coming to stay with us again. Your rooms are ready.” He motioned to a bellman who was waiting.

“This way, Mrs. Schoenleber,” the bellman said. “Welcome back.”

“Thank you. Could you please have a maid come to our rooms when she is able?”

“I believe one is already there.”

“Thank you.”

As soon as they entered their rooms, Mrs. Schoenleber removed her hat and handed it to the smiling maid.

“Very well, madam, would you like your bath drawn immediately or . . .”

“I think I will lie down for a few minutes. That train was

wearisome today. Nilda, bring your notebook into my room as soon as you've changed into something more comfortable. I have some ideas. Oh, I almost forgot." She picked up the envelope from a small table by the door and handed it to Nilda. "You read it."

Nilda did as asked. "We are invited to the symphony. Hmm, Jeffrey is included. Isn't he still in college?" He'd not attended most of their social events in St. Paul.

"Yes, but here in the Cities. That is unusual. I am sure Fritz would enjoy attending. It's a shame he can't."

Nilda felt herself smile inside. Fritz Larsson, nephew to Mrs. Schoenleber, taught Nilda's nephews at school in Benson's Corner, where he also played the organ at the Lutheran church. He and another young man, Petter Thorvaldson, whom she had met on the ship to Duluth, had become friends. They both attended the monthly socials held at Mrs. Schoenleber's home. Fritz loved music and taught piano lessons also, including a few to Nilda.

"Should I decline?" Nilda asked.

"No, tell Henrik thank you. At least we brought appropriate clothing. There will most likely be a late supper afterward." The older woman sat down on her bed and swung her legs up. "Ah, this feels heavenly. Feel free to lie down a bit if you would like. We can talk later."

Nilda adjourned to her own room and divested herself of her outfit, allowed the maid to hold up a wrapper for her, and then sighed her way to lying down. *Heavenly* was indeed a good description.

At least she was no longer in awe of the boardroom and the men standing around talking the following morning. The four brothers each had at least one assistant, sometimes two, and the other department heads came, along with the male secretary, who also had an assistant. Cigar smoke already dulled the

crown moldings decorating the high ceiling, making her think the meeting had begun well before the official starting time.

And what was this? The recording secretary set up a heavy black machine in front of himself. Nilda had seen pictures of such things. A typewriter, it was called. Mr. Jurgenson cranked a sheet of paper into it on a roller, adjusted it, and placed both hands over the bank of keys. *CLICK CLACK-CLACK-CLACK CLICK CLICK CLACK-CLACK-CLACK*. Good heavens, what noise!

Someone had just wheeled in a cart with coffee, hot water for tea, and all the accoutrements, including a lovely tray of pastries. As the servers filled the orders, Heinrik showed Mrs. Schoenleber and Nilda to their seats at the head of the table.

Mrs. Schoenleber smiled and nodded, greeting the others in attendance as they made their way to the table. Once everyone had assumed their places, with Heinrik on her left, she began. “Heinrik, will you please open our meeting with prayer? Remember, Father always used to do that, and today it seems most appropriate.” She glanced around the table. “If I remember rightly, we used to take turns. I think we shall return to that practice.”

Nilda looked at the woman beside her. This was something new, or at least she’d never known of it.

Heinrik shot his sister a questioning look but did as she requested. “God and Father of us all, we thank you for the great success you have given our companies, for wisdom now as we traverse the morass of today’s business world. As our father always said, please show us the way to go and help us to remember who is indeed in charge in this country and world. Amen.”

“Would that we believed and lived that all. Thank you.” Mrs. Schoenleber smiled around the table, her white hair catching the light from overhead. “Are there any questions before we begin?”

The meeting continued as had all the other meetings with one new and jarring element: the constant *CLICK CLACK* of Mr. Jurgenson's typewriter.

Heinrik spent twenty minutes on his overall report. Jacob closed his report with "We still have a few years, but we are running out of timber in Minnesota. There are still pine forests in other states, such as western Montana and northern Idaho, but they are remote. Shipping costs money."

Jonathon nodded. "We ship more than just logs and lumber, but that is a significant part of our profit."

At the end of day, Mrs. Schoenleber stood. "The size of this corporation has grown far beyond the scope of anything we or our father ever envisioned. It would be easy to rest on our laurels, but we must not. Nor must we neglect the charity that was our father's primary aim. Everyone is dismissed."

Everyone gathered their papers and prepared to leave, general conversations raising a hubbub in the boardroom and down the halls. Mrs. Schoenleber turned to Nilda, started to say something, then turned back when someone asked her a question.

"Will you be joining us for supper at the club tonight?" Jacob asked.

"You mean they are allowing women entrance now?" Mrs. Schoenleber asked.

"Oh, yes, they are quite progressive. There is one dining room set apart for couples."

"Well, thank you for the offer, but I prefer a quiet supper after a long day like today. Will you be joining us at the symphony tomorrow night?"

He shook his head. "The symphony is just—just . . ."

"You mean you'd rather sleep in your bed at home?"

He nodded and leaned closer. "But don't go telling Heinrik.

He thinks everyone enjoys classical music like he does. Now, if there were dancing at the same time, we would be there.”

The next evening, as the maids assisted them in dressing and styling their hair, Nilda asked, “Why do I have a feeling that there is something deeper going on here than attending the symphony? After all, they’ve never invited us before.”

“They used to. When I was younger and enjoyed attending music and theater and such events. But I stopped going a few years ago.” Mrs. Schoenleber stared into the mirror, nodding slowly. “I have a suspicion you might be right, but we will follow along, innocent as lambs, until we know what is behind it. Have you been to a symphony before?”

“No, but I love to listen to Fritz play both the piano and the organ. I’m looking forward to hearing and learning more.”

“Another good experience for you. And I do enjoy it too.” She stood and thanked the maid. “We will return late, so we will expect your help then.”

“Of course, ma’am. Can I get you anything else?” A knock at the door called her away.

“They are here,” Mrs. Schoenleber said.

A young man bowed in the hallway. “Your driver is downstairs waiting for you.”

“Thank you.”

The maid helped them into their wraps and saw them out the door.

Mrs. Schoenleber settled herself in the cab. “Hmm. I assumed Jeffrey would come for us.”

Nilda shrugged. While Jeffrey seemed an intelligent and charming young man, she’d much rather have attended with Fritz.

The thought stopped her. Now, that was a surprise.

As they descended from the cab, it appeared to Nilda that

thousands of people were here for the concert, but it was probably only hundreds. Mrs. Schoenleber spoke to an usher, and he led them to their seats. Heinrik and Jeffrey were there already. They stood as Mrs. Schoenleber and Nilda sat down between them.

Nilda found herself next to Jeffrey. He said excitedly, "I'm glad you came. I bet this is your first symphony concert."

"It is, yes."

"They're playing Beethoven, you know."

She consulted the program the usher had given her. "So I see." Jeffrey pronounced it as Fritz had; you would think the name would be pronounced *Beeth Oven*.

She turned her attention to the huge concert hall. The seats were all of dark red velvet. And look at the intricate and interwoven designs on the domed ceiling! Everything from leaves and grapes to a few cherubs here and there protruded in three dimensions. That could not all have been carved; it must have been plaster. The orchestra members were taking their places on a large stage, scraping chairs around and playing odd bits of music. This was the new word Nilda had recently learned: cacophony.

The electric lights dimmed. Electric lights! Would Rune's farm ever have electric lights one day? Now that would be real progress!

When one of the violinists stepped up on a riser and turned his back to the audience, the orchestra hushed. From the rear, an instrument played a single wailing note. All the violinists played that note. The man on the riser looked around, nodded, and sat down.

An august gentleman in formal attire came out onto the stage. The audience applauded enthusiastically. Why? He hadn't done anything yet. He stepped up on the riser, bowed deeply,

turned his back, and raised his arms. One hand held a small, thin stick. He brought his arms down sharply.

*Da-da-da DUMMMM!*

Nilda jumped a tiny bit in surprise. But then the second *da-da-da-dum* and the music that followed swept her away. This was amazing. And loud. Brilliant. Indescribable! There were too many voices in the orchestra to keep track of them all. She could not begin to analyze how all this could blend together so perfectly, so she simply sat back and let herself be lost in the beautiful music. The piece ended, but no one clapped. She glanced at Mrs. Schoenleber, who sat serenely.

The orchestra began again with another theme. How long did she sit here? She had no idea. She knew only that she was surrounded by something absolutely new and absolutely wonderful.

The ending was thunderous. The audience clapped wildly, and voices all around her shouted strange new words: “Bravo!” and “Encore!”

Jeffrey sounded bored. How could he be bored after that? “Oh, I do hope they don’t play the *William Tell Overture* again. That piece is becoming so dreary.”

The man on the riser announced, “*William Tell Overture*, Rossini,” and turned his back again. The music began quietly, reminding Nilda somehow of farm country, with birds singing. Then it pepped up.

“Here we go again,” Jeffrey grumped.

Now it was a galloping piece with lots of triplets. Fritz had tried to teach her the proper way to play triplets, but she was not good at it, her fingers not fast enough. This orchestra was perfect with triplets! Oh, how she loved this! Finally she was allowed to clap as the audience again burst into applause.

Mrs. Schoenleber looked as pleased as Nilda felt. “It has been

far too long since I enjoyed an evening of music this splendid. Nilda, we must come to these concerts more often.”

“Oh, I would love to!”

Heinrik smiled broadly. “So, what did you think?”

Jeffrey sniffed. He didn’t look nearly as pleased as Mrs. Schoenleber and Nilda. In fact, he looked tired. “All right, I suppose. But the brass seemed a bit behind the beat, and I heard the woodwinds go off-key in the third movement. Of course, I’ve never much liked the woodwinds anyway, oboes especially. Too whiny.”

Nilda stared at him. “If you find this so wearying, why do you come?”

“It’s the thing to do, of course. At our level of society, everyone goes to the symphony.”

Nilda said nothing, but she thought plenty. If his social level had to do what they didn’t feel like doing just because it was the thing to do, she didn’t want to be part of it. Instead, she would come to the symphony for the same reason Fritz would: because it was the most wonderful music in the whole world.