

SONG OF BLESSING • BOOK 3

Streams of Mercy

LAURAINÉ
SNELLING



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Lauraine Snelling, *Streams of Mercy*
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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Snelling, Lauraine.

Streams of mercy / Lauraine Snelling.
pages ; cm. — (Song of Blessing ; 3)

Summary: "A recent widow from Norway settles with her children in the early 1900s community of Blessing, North Dakota, where her growing friendships with two men in the community bring her to a challenging choice"— Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-7642-1730-2 (hardcover : acid-free paper)

ISBN 978-0-7642-1106-5 (softcover)

ISBN 978-0-7642-1731-9 (large-print : softcover)

1. Widows—Fiction. 2. Mate selection—Fiction. 3. Man-woman relationships—Fiction. 4. Triangles (Interpersonal relations)—Fiction. I. Title.
PS3569.N39S77 2015

813'.54—dc23

2015015379

Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

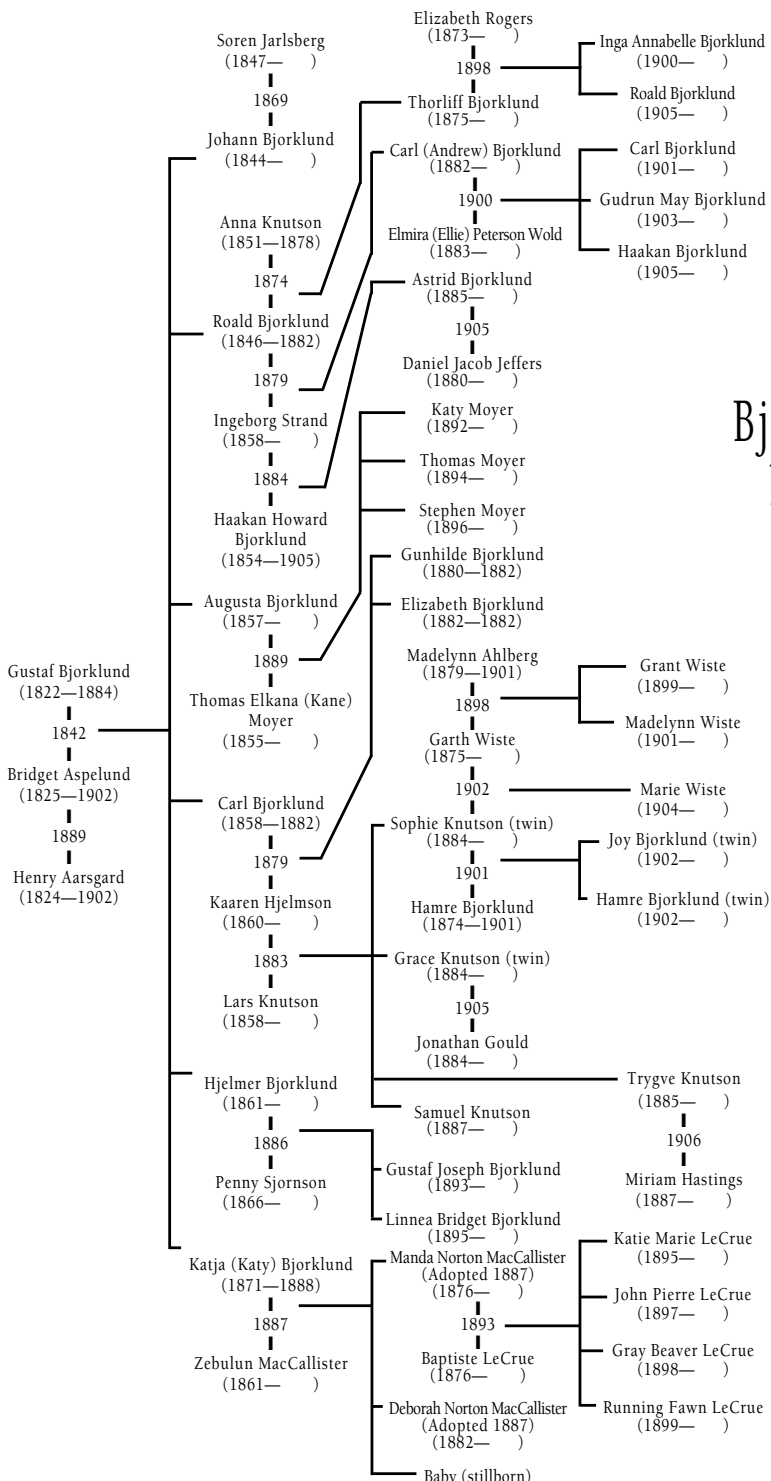
This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Jennifer Parker and Paul Higdon

Author is represented by Books & Such Literary Agency

15 16 17 18 19 20 21 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Bjorklund Family Tree





CHAPTER 1

APRIL 1907

Tears again. Ingeborg awoke. A dream. It had been a dream. She could almost vow Haakan had been right there with her. She wasn't sure if the tears were sorrow or joy, but her eyes felt as though a dust storm had just blown through. Dreams and weeping attacks came less often now that more time had passed since Haakan went home to heaven. The rattle of the grate at the kitchen stove made her smile. Who got there first this morning? Freda or Manny? The two seemed to have an undeclared contest going as to who would start the kitchen stove. Now that he could walk without a cane, even though he limped, Manny had a new zest for living.

Ingeborg stared up at the dimness that was the ceiling. She should get up, but today she'd rather huddle back down under the covers, where she could not see her breath on the air, not that she could in the predawn darkness anyway. The light under her

door beckoned. She reached for her robe at the same moment as she threw back the covers and slid her feet into the moccasins she kept right by her bed. Every morning she thanked her Lord for Metiz, who had made the moccasins those years ago and, like the moccasins, had helped her friends in myriad ways to adapt to life on the prairie.

That thought led to Metiz' grandson, Baptiste LeCrue, who had married Manda and moved to Montana, where her adopted father, Zeb MacCallister, had gone after his wife, Katy Bjorklund, died in childbirth. Later Baptiste and Manda had moved south to Wyoming. She hadn't heard from any of them in a long time. Perhaps today would be a good day to write to them, as well as to her family in Norway and perhaps even to Augusta, Roald's sister, who had settled with her husband, Kane Moyer, on a ranch in South Dakota. Winter, even with spring almost here, was always a good time for writing letters.

When she opened the door to the kitchen, she could feel the warmth flowing out from the stove. "You are down already. Good morning, Freda. Has Manny gone to the barn?"

"Ja. That young whippersnapper came down to the kitchen before I did and got the stove going. He sure takes his responsibilities seriously. Not that anyone said he had to start the stove."

"He is growing up so fast."

"Sure is. His pant legs are too short already. Good thing you put a deep hem in them." Freda glanced up at the clock just as Emmy came down the stairs. "Morning, Miss Sunshine."

That was some change since when Emmy first came to live with Ingeborg. Freda's attitude toward the little Indian girl had changed over time, from only accepting her at first to liking and now loving her.

Emmy was indeed family now, and Manny was too. To Ingeborg they'd been her family since the day they'd arrived, whether

they knew it or not. God had strange ways of giving her more children, but she never questioned the gifts. How Haakan would delight in watching Manny grow up into the farmer Haakan dreamed he might become. He had taught Manny how to use a knife for carving, and now Manny kept the box for kindling stocked as he carved both useful spoons and ladles and something he wasn't showing her.

“Grandma, can Inga come home with me from school and spend the night?”

“As long as her mother and father agree, I see no problem.”

“Good. May I call her and tell her?”

Ingeborg hid a smile. Emmy asking to use the telephone? Would wonders never cease? “Of course.” She watched as Emmy pulled the little stool Haakan had made for the grandchildren under the oak box attached to the wall and wired into the restored telephone service.

Slowly but surely the town was recovering from the explosion of the grain elevator a year and a half ago now. The bank had been rebuilt, the post office and telephone building as well. All the people who used to live in Tent Town now had homes of some kind, either in the apartment house or sharing one of the other houses. The boardinghouse remained full of mostly single men, including Dr. Jason W. Commons, who was their newest intern from the hospital in Chicago, and also the two student nurses, Abigail and Sandra, who had arrived in August.

She half listened to Emmy's conversation while she stirred the oatmeal bubbling on the stove. Freda had laid pieces of salt pork in the heavy black skillet to fry and then would pour beaten eggs into it. She checked the oven, where sourdough biscuits were rising nicely. Freda had made the dough the night before, left it to rise overnight, and rolled out biscuits first thing. Manny loved biscuits of all kinds, from the ones with

added cheese to the cinnamon-sugar-topped ones and everything in between.

Speaking of Manny, that was Manny outside the back door, stomping snow off his boots. Ingeborg could easily tell; one stomp was louder than the other. Manny's one leg, which had been not only broken but also shortened, was weaker than his other one. He burst in on a wave of cold.

Emmy pushed the stool back where it belonged and went to the cupboard to start setting the table. She glanced down at Ingeborg's feet as she passed. "You have Metiz' moccasins on."

"They are my winter slippers. Can you still wear the ones I gave you?"

"My feet are too big."

"We'll go look in the box when you get home from school." Ingeborg kept a box full of children's clothing that had been outgrown by other children but was good enough to use again. Emmy and Inga loved to search the box and try clothes on. Now they passed Emmy's outgrown things that weren't complete rags to Inga or to the boxes the ladies of the church kept available for the immigrant children, or anyone else in need.

"Are you going to quilting today?" Freda asked as they waited for Manny to finish washing his hands and sit down.

"I am and I am hoping you will too."

"I have some things I am working on here, and that is the only time I have alone it seems." She looked to Manny. "We have another order for cheese and we are nearly out of crates. Could you work on that when you get home?"

"Sure. Last time I checked you still had plenty." Manny had taken over the job of nailing crates together for shipping the cheese. That was something he'd started doing while his broken leg was healing, and now he took it as a point of pride that he kept ahead of Freda.

Patches barked, making the two young ones leap to their feet, bundle up in coats from the coat tree, grab books and lunch pails, and head for the door. Samuel Knutson drove a wagon with a big box on it to protect the children from the weather. When the snow fell last fall, they replaced the wheels with sledge runners. Ingeborg hoped they would be able to put the wheels back on in the next week or two. Samuel first loaded students from the deaf school taught by Grace Knutson Gould, one of Samuel's older twin sisters. The children in the deaf school attended the regular school as soon as they learned sign language, a fine arrangement. Manny waved and Emmy blew Ingeborg a kiss, as she so often did.

"Whew," Freda commented, making a joke out of wiping her brow. "How John Solberg corrals all that energy at the school and still loves his job, I'll never understand."

"It is easier on him now that Father Devlin teaches at the high school. Or rather, *Mr.* Devlin." Ingeborg picked up her dishes and, like the others had, placed them in the steaming dishpan on the stove.

Freda waved a hand. "You go on and get ready. I'll take care of things here. Are you taking the sewing machine?"

"Planning on it. Why? Did you want to use it?"

"If you don't mind."

"Not at all. There's plenty of other sewing to do at church without this machine along. I hope Miriam can come today."

"Will you try to talk with Hildegunn?"

Ingeborg shook her head. "She just freezes me out. I don't know if she talks to anyone anymore." Ever since her husband, Anner, left Blessing several months ago, she had withdrawn more and more. Since she was the postmistress, no one else knew if she heard from her husband unless she volunteered the information. As far as Ingeborg knew, Hildegunn had received very few

letters. She nearly asked Gerald one day but hated gossip almost as much as Reverend Solberg did, and that would be borderline.

“Is Kaaren picking you up?”

“Ja.” Ingeborg took out the bread knife and started slicing one of the loaves she had baked the day before. Once the bread was sliced, she started on a block of cheese from the icebox she now kept in the pantry, blocking the window, cooled by the frigid air.

“Who is bringing the soup today?” Freda took over stirring the oatmeal.

“Mrs. Magrun and Anji Moen.” Ingeborg stood erect and stretched her back. “How is the supply of sheep fodder—have you noticed?”

“Down. When you bought those sheep, I thought it was a good idea. Now, I’m not so sure. No milk, no meat, no wool. Just more and more hay and grain disappearing. And that ram? No use at all.” Freda gave the oatmeal one more stir and dragged it aside.

“To everything a season.”

“Oh, I know, but . . .”

Ingeborg smiled. “Have you forgotten what lambing is like?”

“Ja. Lots of work in the middle of the night. Never a nice convenient time. And shearing. Uff da.”

“Maybe I’ll ask Thorliff if he sees any ads for fodder. He gets papers from other towns. Someone might have spare. And possibly even for sheep. I have been thinking we might get a few more. We can always use the wool. I’ve not done any spinning for ages. And I would like to hang a couple of hindquarters in the haymow for fenalar. We’ve not had that for a long time.” Ingeborg smiled to herself. Since fenalar was brined and dried lamb or mutton, not smoked, the summer heat in the rafters of the haymow would do a fine job of drying the meat.

Freda nodded. “That does sound good, all right. So does salted and dried fish. We didn’t do any of that last summer either.”

“We never caught more than we ate. Besides, we get fresh fish from the fish house.” Manny had been joining Trygve and some others down on the frozen river, fishing through a hole cut in the ice. Cold weather didn’t stop her fishermen.

Ingeborg had her baskets of dinner contributions and sewing things ready when Patches announced that Kaaren had arrived. Waving as she went out the door, Ingeborg shivered when the north wind hit her as she made her way to the sleigh. She set her baskets in the back seat and climbed into the front beside Kaaren, tucking the heavy robe around their legs. “Sure feels like snow to me,” she said in greeting.

“I know. The clouds look it too.” Kaaren waited until Ingeborg was settled and flipped the lines to move the horse forward. “I remembered to bring the horse blanket this time. We should have built a long shed to protect the horses, you know.”

“Should have built lots of things, but an addition to the schoolhouse or a new one needs to top the list. How is Jonathan coming with the plans for the deaf school?”

“He and Grace have big dreams. I have trouble looking beyond the cost. But we’ve had to turn away too many people who need our help, and that is not good either. We have four bunk beds to a room now, and we might have to start eating in shifts. It’s a good thing I’ve been able to hire two women who once lived in Tent Town to work in the kitchen. Their English is improving all the time, so life is easier for Ilse. Whoever dreamed that my little school would grow this big?”

“God did and does. I think Grace is right. You should go back to New York and visit the school where she taught.”

“Uff da, now you sound like her and Jonathan. As long as they are knowledgeable, why should I have to put up with that

terrible long train ride? Besides, who would run the school if we both left?”

“Ilse, of course.” Ingeborg tightened the scarf around her neck and over her hat. Although it was her habit to wear a hat to church, no matter the purpose, she should have abandoned it for the warmth of a heavy wool scarf and a shawl. Or a knitted stocking hat. Now, wouldn’t that draw attention and probably chuckles. The first to comment on anything was always Hildegunn, and critically too.

Ingeborg thought about that for a moment. “Why is it that we women continue to wear hats like we do in the middle of the winter, and why have we allowed Hildegunn to be our dictator of what is proper?”

“Style? Fashion? Habit? How should I know? Regarding Hildegunn, because it is easier to give in than to argue. Your question makes me think of Inga.”

“The bottomless question pit?”

Kaaren grinned and continued. “She asked why God made some people deaf.”

“And you said?”

“I asked her what she thought, and she said it was so they would learn to listen to Jesus in their hearts better.”

Ingeborg felt her jaw drop. “She didn’t. I mean . . .”

“I know. I just smiled and nodded, because I could not think of an appropriate response.”

“You need to tell that to Thorliff and Elizabeth.”

“I plan to.” Kaaren turned the horse to the hitching rack on the south side of the church, where several others were already waiting. Together the two women climbed down, threw the heavy blanket over the horse, and after tying a lead over the rail, fetched their baskets from the back of the sleigh. Kaaren paused. “Are you all right?”

“Only a twinge. I have decided that God wants me to kill her with kindness.”

“Kill?” Kaaren could arch her eyebrows very effectively.

“My translation.” Fighting to keep herself calm and thinking kind thoughts, Ingeborg led the way up the three steps. That time she was frozen in the wagon, unable to move, because of confronting Hildegunn, still caused twinges in spite of the months in between.

Warmth and laughter greeted them as they pulled open the heavy carved doors given to the church in memory of Haakan. He had started carving them before he got so weak, and Thomas Devlin, along with Manny and a couple of others, had finished the job. The doors had been installed on the anniversary of Haakan’s death in August.

Hildegunn must not be here again, Ingeborg thought as she walked down the stairs. Too much frivolity going on. *Ingeborg Bjorklund, what happened to your resolution to think kind thoughts?* Sometimes her inner voice could be sarcastic too.

Anji Moen smiled at them both as she took the food baskets from them and carried them to the table. “Coffee will be ready in a few minutes.”

Anji seemed so much older than Ingeborg remembered her to be, and sadder. Anji had grown up in Blessing, and after Thorliff went away to college, she had met a journalist from Norway. After they married, they divided their time between Norway and North Dakota. Ivar already had two daughters and together they had four more children. Last fall, a year or so after he died, she and her four children returned to Blessing to be closer to her brothers and sisters, leaving her husband’s daughters with his family in Norway.

With a smile Rebecca took their sewing baskets over to the sorting table.

Usually Hildegunn came early and fixed the coffee. If one or the other of them failed at their duties, she'd be huffing and slinging criticism as if they had committed a major sin. Ingeborg flinched inside but managed to smile on the outside. At least she hoped she did. She unlooped her scarf and laid coat and scarf on the coat mound on one table. Kaaren nudged her and smiled.

“All will be well,” she whispered.

Ingeborg inhaled and breathed out slowly. “Ja, all will be well.” So often through the years she had said that to others. She believed it bone deep, but it was easy to forget, and everyone needed reminding.

“I am sorry to be late,” Hildegunn said as she came rushing down the stairs.

Ingeborg flinched in spite of herself. The desire to leave immediately blew through her mind. She turned. Hildegunn had apologized. Say something!

“You are just in time so we can start the meeting. Welcome, everyone,” she said, raising her voice. “Will you please get your coffee and take a chair so we can begin?”

Ingeborg glanced up to find Hildegunn staring at her. *Haunted* was the only word she could think of to describe the look in her eyes. *Move!* the voice in her head commanded in no uncertain terms. So she did. “Here, let me help you with that.” She took Hildegunn’s basket to set on the table. “It’s so terribly cold with that wind. Did you walk over?” Smiling over her shoulder, she saw Hildegunn close her eyes for just a moment. Surely those were tears she had blinked back. *O Lord God, give me the right words.*

“How else would I get here?” Hildegunn shook her head as she laid her coat on the mound. “Some of us do not have a team and sleigh, you know.”

“I’ll get your coffee.” Choosing to ignore the barb was definitely heavenly grace. It would be so easy to snap back. “I’ll set it on the table.”

As the fifteen women took their places in the circle of chairs, the hubbub calmed to a murmur. Kaaren patiently waited, her smile intact.

Ingeborg felt like she was off in a corner observing, even though she was sitting next to Anji with Rebecca on the other side.

Across the circle Amelia Jeffers smiled at Anji with a bit of a wave. “How are the children? Did your youngest get over the croup?”

“Ja, thanks to Astrid and the syrup Ingeborg has been making for so many years. I couldn’t find anything like it in Norway.”

“I know. Metiz taught me the basis and I added more ingredients.”

Anji smiled. “Speaking of Metiz makes me think of my mother. Coming back here has made me think of her even more.”

“You are the picture of her in those early years. Agnes Baard was the best friend anyone could have.” Ingeborg squeezed Anji’s hand. “I’m glad you are back here for always.”

“My, how our group has grown,” Sophie said as she took the chair beyond Rebecca. “We should be able to accomplish great things.”

“Uh-oh. Something gives me a feeling we are about to—”

“Let us pray.” Kaaren bowed her head and the others followed her actions.

Ingeborg settled herself, but her mind wanted to follow that conversation.

“Lord God, thank you for bringing us together to praise you this morning and to do your will. You promised to be right

here with us, and we count on your presence to teach us, to mold us always into your family so that we may obey your command to love one another even as you have loved us. Father, we confess that we stray so easily from your Word. Controlling our minds and tongues is an ever-present duty, so please fill us with your spirit of love today and every day. Guide us on your path, we pray in Jesus' precious name." They all joined together on the amen.

She raised her head and smiled around the group. "Thank you for braving the cold. Yesterday I thought spring was almost here, but winter is surely blowing back today. We have a lot to accomplish, but let's start with the Word. Penny, would you read our verses for today?"

Penny opened her Bible and stood. "Our lesson today is from First John 4, starting with verse 7: 'Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God. . . .'"

Love. There it was again. Love for all, and that included Hildegunn. The Bible did not make easy demands.

Kaaren thanked her and nodded. "For those of you who are working so hard to learn English, Amelia, could you please simplify the first three verses?"

Ingeborg glanced across the circle when she heard a tongue clicking. Sure enough, Hildegunn was making her disapproval known.

Shades of Anner Valdars. And it was so sad. Anner had considered anyone who did not speak fluent Norwegian to be a foreigner, including any Indians who might have lived in the Dakotas for centuries before Norwegians ever arrived. But he had mysteriously disappeared several months ago after losing his position at the bank because of his mistreatment of an immigrant. Packed a carpetbag and got on the train. Ingeborg had wondered once if Hildegunn actually had a problem with

foreigners moving to Blessing or if she was simply parroting her husband's opinion. Apparently it had become her opinion as well.

Amelia stood and repeated the verses slowly and clearly, then reworded them.

Several of the women smiled and nodded.

"Thank you, Amelia. Hopefully one of things we are doing here today is showing God's love for each other and those who are blessed by our quilts and our sewing. Let's get through our business as quickly as possible so that we can get to work. Hildegunn, will you read the letter we received from the tribal agency where we sent the girls' clothes we sewed?"

Hildegunn nodded and unfolded the piece of paper.

"Dear Women of the Lutheran Church in Blessing, North Dakota,

Thank you for sending the warm dresses to our school-girls. For many who are new here, that was the first time they had something brand new of their own. They loved the bright colors, and thank you for putting deep hems in the skirts, as they are growing so fast."

Hildegunn folded the paper. "They thanked us for the quilts we sent earlier too."

"Thank you, Hildegunn. Sophie, you had something you wanted to say?"

"I do." She paused while the whistle of the incoming train made it hard to hear, then continued. "I've been talking with doctors Elizabeth and Astrid, and they said that they could use more gowns at the hospital. We had sewed a stack of them before, and they are hoping we will do so again. As some of the sheets and bedding begin to wear out, they will give us the

holey ones to use to create new gowns. The fabric, of course, is usually still pretty good around the edges. Are we willing to do that for them?”

“What about the quilts we have already started? Shouldn’t we finish those first?” Rebecca asked. “I think some of our townspeople still do not have warm enough bedding.”

“If only we had more wool batts.”

“I raised many sheep in Latvia, before we came in America,” one of the women said. “I make quilt battings out of the locks and thribs; you know, the short, coarse wool.”

Ingeborg nodded. “I purchased some sheep last fall when they were cheap and plan on buying more sheep if I can find them without going too far. Perhaps others might consider that too. I haven’t done any spinning for so long, and I miss it.”

“Oh, ja.” Mrs. Juris, the woman who had just spoken, nodded. “I too. Spinning is so peaceful, relaxing. I help you?”

“Ja. Perhaps others too?”

Another woman raised her hand. “I too.”

Kaaren interrupted. “Let us continue that discussion later. In the meantime, Penny, how many batts do you have in stock?”

“None, but I have some on order.”

Heavy footsteps caught their attention. They all looked at the stairs.

Anner Valders! The prodigal banker. Many gasped; others whispered. After all these months of silent absence, Anner Valders!

He came sweeping into the room, as imperious as ever. He didn’t even bother to take his hat off. He stared at his wife, no hint of a smile or a glance for any of the others, no word about where he had been all those months. “Mrs. Valders, come now! We are leaving.”

“But—”

“Now!” He barked the order and headed back up the stairs.

Ingeborg and Kaaren stared at each other, dumbstruck, then watched as Hildegunn stood, crossed to the pile of coats and hats, and picked hers up, sliding her arms into the sleeves as she mounted the stairs. Hildegunn Valders disappeared.