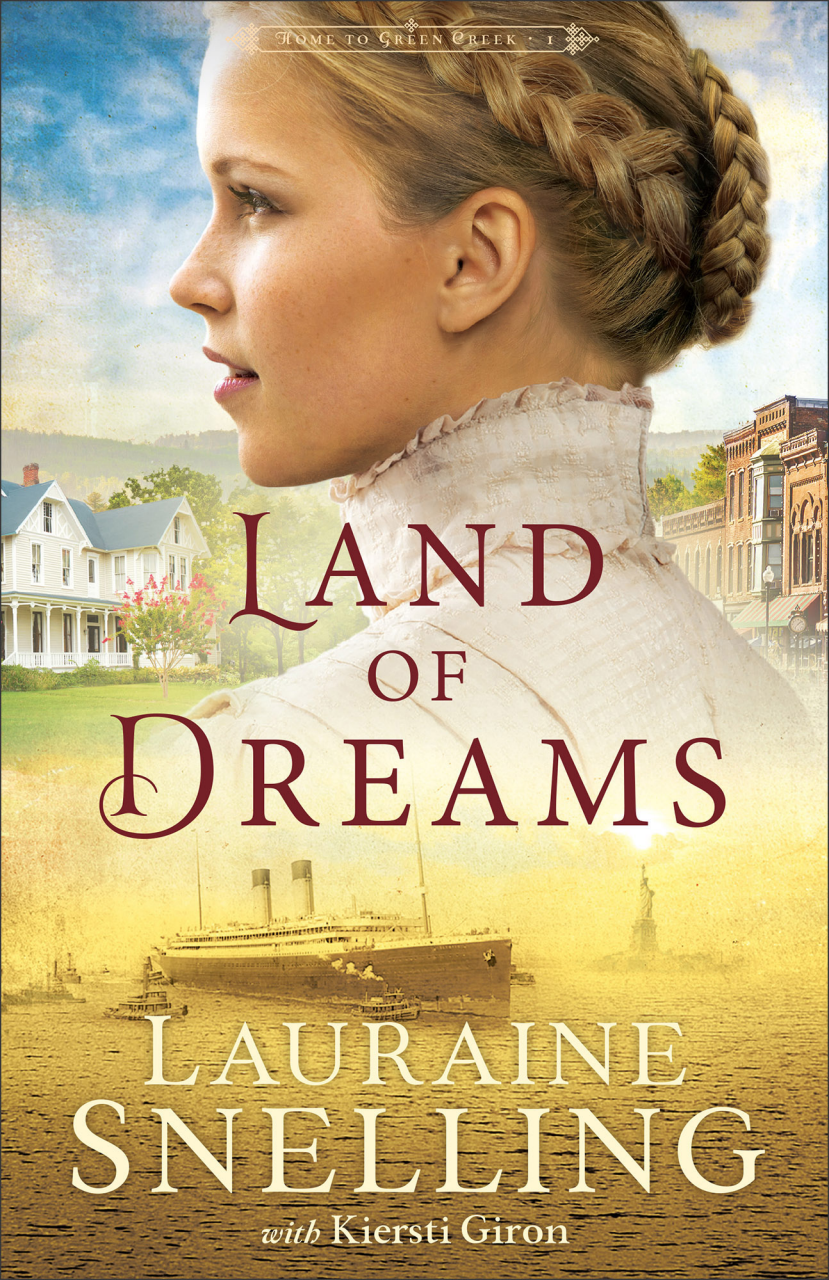


HOME TO GREEN CREEK · I

A woman with a braided hairstyle, wearing a white high-collared dress, is shown in profile, looking out over a landscape. The background features a white house with a porch, a town with brick buildings, and a large steamship on the water. The scene is bathed in a warm, golden light.

LAND  
OF  
DREAMS

LAURAINÉ  
SNELLING

*with* Kiersti Giron

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*The HOME TO GREEN CREEK series  
is dedicated to both sides of my family,  
those who emigrated to America  
and those who remained in Norway.  
God bless.*

# ONE

**EARLY APRIL, 1889**

**T**he sound of the splash ripped her heart in two.

Amalia Gunderson stared straight ahead, one hand gripping the ship's rail. Today the horizon held no sense of promise. Mor and Far were gone, their bodies now sunk beneath the ocean's churning waves, along with their dream to find their son, her older brother, in the new land. What was she to do now?

Slowly she became aware of a small hand shaking her own.

"Bitte, Mor needs you. Please come now."

Glancing down, Amalia saw tears streaming down the little girl's pale cheeks.

"What is it, Ruthie?"

The five-year-old girl shook her head, setting her long braids to swinging. "Mor said it is very important. Her voice is so faint I could barely hear her." Ruth wiped her runny nose on the back of her mitten.

Amalia fought back the tears that insisted on dripping down her cheeks. She sniffed again and obeyed the tugging hand.

The captain of the ship stepped in to take her other arm. "I am so sorry, Miss Gunderson. Be careful going down the stairs now."

He closed the door against the wind, and the silence was broken only by their breathing and the tapping of their shoes.

Amalia wanted to stop at her room that now only she occupied, climb into the curtained bed, and forget the world existed. She had been taking care of several people recovering from the cholera, along with her own fading mother, who had now left her with no family of her own.

But like Amalia, little Ruth had already suffered the loss of her father in this dreadful epidemic, and if her mother made it through another night, it would be a miracle.

“Here.” Captain Alberg stopped at another door, tapped, and turned the knob, pushing the door open. Ruth threw herself into her seated mother’s arms.

Holding her daughter close, Hilda Forsberg looked into Amalia’s tear-reddened eyes. “Thank you for coming.” She paused to breathe. “I have the greatest favor to ask.” Another pause for breath. “As you know, we are on our way . . . to inherit a farm with a large house . . . in the state of Iowa . . . near a town called Decorah.”

Amalia nodded. “Of course, both of our families have talked about our lives ahead.” *And there are only three of us remaining. Lord God, hold us close.*

Ruth sniffed again, and her mother pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve to mop her daughter’s nose and eyes. Her hand trembled to nearly missing contact. Pleading, she looked to Amalia.

Her own eyes nearly blinded by tears, she took the bit of cloth, dried the child’s cheeks, and tucked the square into the coat pocket. The two women exchanged a look that made Amalia want to run from the room.

The captain cleared his throat. “I need to tend to more matters on deck.”

Hilda nodded. She held a packet of papers out to him. “Could you please explain why we are meeting?”

“Are you sure you . . . ?” He cleared his throat again.

“Ja, I am sure.”

The captain turned to Amalia. “Miss Gunderson, these are legal documents that say if Mrs. Forsberg passes on to her heavenly home before this ship docks, you will become the legal guardian of Ruth Forsberg, and as such, will manage the estate until Ruth reaches a legal age of twenty-one when she will assume the inheritance.”

“But . . .” Amalia stared from the extended packet to the shivering woman in front of her.

“Please, there is no one else that I can trust.” Her words were punctuated with panting breaths, as if she’d been running rather than sitting huddled in a shawl-covered blanket.

When Amalia looked to Captain Alberg, his shrug did nothing to reassure her.

*Lord God above, what do I do?* Her plea brought no answers.

“Mor, I will stay with you,” Ruth insisted.

“Ja, that you will.” She rested her cheek on Ruth’s near-to-white braids, braided the last few mornings by Amalia.

Amalia accepted the packet. “What do I need to do?”

“Sign where I tell you.” The captain set an inkstand on the small table and pulled a quill pen from another pocket. “You can read and sign your name?”

“Ja, if it be in Norwegian.”

“It is,” Ruth’s mor whispered.

The captain untied and rolled out the papers, smoothing them to lie flat. “You will sign here and here, under Mrs. Forsberg’s signature, and fill your name in here.”

Holding the page in the light of the porthole, Amalia read the document. “This will stand up in court if anyone ever contests it?”

“Yes.” Captain Alberg glanced up at a thud from overhead.

*Lord, I trust you. Please help Mrs. Forsberg become well enough that we will not have to use this.* She sucked in a breath, signed on all the lines, and handed the document back to the captain.

He checked to make sure all the lines were filled and tied the

tasseled cord around the roll. Handing it to the shivering woman in the chair, he snugged his hat down on his head, bowed, and with a “please, excuse me,” exited the room.

“Takk, my dear friend. And now could you please help me back to bed?”

“Of course.” Amalia slid her arm around the woman’s back and lifted her to her feet, so thin the lifting was easy. She half carried Ruth’s mor to the curtained bunk bed, sat her down, and leaving her shoes on, lifted her feet into the bed and tucked the quilt around her. Lying on her side, Hilda held up her arm so her little daughter could snuggle in spoon fashion.

“Takk.” Her eyes drifted shut.

“I need to go check on the others, so Ruthie, you stay here.” The little girl nodded. “I will bring you some soup for supper after a while.” A nod was the only answer.

Amalia closed the door behind her and strode down the hall, past her door and two more. She tapped on the door. “It’s me, Mrs. Haugen, just coming to see if I can do anything for you.”

“Ja, bitte. Come in.”

While her patient lay covered in the lower bunk, her voice sounded stronger than at breakfast. Amalia pulled back the curtain and earned a smile from the older woman inside. “You look and sound better.”

A nod. “Ja, I am. Can I please have a drink of water?”

Amalia poured water from the pitcher and, after sitting on the edge of the bunk, held it for Mrs. Haugen to sip. “Perhaps tomorrow I can help you to the chair.”

“As small as this cabin is, how can the chair look so far away?” The ghost of a smile made Amalia want to dance across the room. Finally, one of her patients was getting better. *Takk, Lord God.*

“How is Ruthie’s mor?”

Amalia blew out a breath. “Please keep praying for her.” The

three women had all agreed to pray for the sick on the ship. Mrs. Haugen's husband had been one of the first to succumb.

"And yours?"

"She splashed into the waves earlier today." How could that already seem like it happened days ago, when only an hour or so had passed? Time that she would have spent huddled under her quilts, soaking them with her tears.

"Oh, my dear friend." Mrs. Haugen reached out a shaky hand to squeeze Amalia's.

Amalia fought a losing battle against the tears, then mopped the drips away with her own square of cloth, made by her mor with a forget-me-not embroidered in one corner. Something to treasure of her mor's love.

"I must go check on the others." Back in Norway, she and her mor had often gone on rounds through their village, caring for the sick—it had felt only natural to do so here once the cholera began. She refused to ponder the question of whether her mor would have caught the disease if she'd stayed away. To ignore the suffering went contrary to her mother's nature. As for Amalia herself, she seemed immune—why, no one could say.

Now two other surviving patients shared one cabin, and the rest slept in steerage. She hated going down the ladder nailed against the wall. Invariably she'd hear and see rats scurrying around, and the stench burned her nose. If only she could convince the captain to allow those still living to be moved up into an empty cabin. Cholera was no respecter of wealth.

Amalia drew a breath and tucked away her damp handkerchief. "I will bring you soup when it is ready. Lars will check on you?"

"He always does. My good son."

Squeezing the woman's hand, Amalia tucked the quilt in around her and shut the door behind her. After blowing her nose again, she made her way out onto the deck and over to the closed opening to

steerage and waved one of the deckhands over. “Could you please open this for me?”

He shook his head as he came. “Not good for you to go down there.”

Surely by now they knew that would not stop her. “Will you please light the lantern for me?”

Grumbling all the way, he descended the ladder, struck the match to light the lantern, and returned to the deck.

“Takk.” She closed her eyes going down the ladder and breathed through her mouth. As far as she knew, there were no dead bodies down there, but the stench was still beyond belief. Once she was on the floor, she took down the lantern and made her way to the occupied bunk beds, throwing shadows against the walls and the row of bed frames. As others had died, she had the living move closer to the ladder.

An older man who said he’d lived through cholera before had the children gathered around him for school. On sunny days, he brought the children up to the deck for school and a chance to run around. The huge steam stacks provided protection from the wind, so the remaining passengers often clustered there. Amalia had attended the classes on speaking English rather than Norwegian. She often wondered if her brother had learned any English on his way to America. If Erik was still alive, where was he and what was he doing? Why had he never written letters home?

“Good afternoon,” the man said in greeting.

“Ja, good—” She stumbled over the word. “Afternoon.”

“I believe your patients are improving.” He spoke slowly.

“Takk, er, thank you.” She turned to the right a couple of bunk rows later to find another patient sitting on the edge of the bunk, a quilt wrapped around his shoulders. “God dag. Good to see you sitting up.”

“Ja, finally.” He coughed into the corner of the quilt. “For a

change, I am looking forward to feeding myself soup and bread. Takk for your care for those of us who are getting stronger.”

“Thank our Lord God, He is the one who does the healing.”

“Ja, that is so.” He lay back down with the quilt wrapped around him. “I run out of energy quickly.”

Amalia checked on several others, finding some improving, others unchanged. She carried water and changed one bed of soiled linens, then returned to deck and insisted a deckhand help her carry down a kettle of the soup the cook had simmering. At last she climbed the ladder back to the upper deck and made her way back to her own empty cabin. As soon as she closed the door behind her, weeping for her mother attacked like a ferocious beast. She wrapped herself in the quilts that no longer comforted her mor and cried herself to sleep.

Sometime later, the clanging of the supper bell jerked her up from the deep well. She threw back the covers and, crossing to the mirror, smoothed her hair back into the bun at the nape of her neck. She still had passengers too weak to feed themselves. Ruth’s mother especially.

Amalia carried the bowls of soup into the Forsberg cabin where Ruth was still in bed with her mor. “I brought you supper.”

“Takk.” Ruth slipped out of her mor’s embrace. “I don’t think Mor wants any supper. She won’t wake up.”

Amalia felt her heart clench. She set Ruth in the chair and pulled the little table up in front of her. Setting the soup and bread on the table, she tried to smile. “Let’s say grace. I Jesu navn . . .” The little girl helped her complete the prayer.

“Should we save some for Mor?” Ruth dipped her bread in the soup.

“Nei, you go ahead and finish.” *Oh Lord God, how do I tell her?* While Ruth ate her meal, Amalia slipped over to the bunk and felt Hilda’s still face and hands to be sure. Cold—cold as her own

mor's that morning. She swallowed back the tears and returned to the little girl.

"Finished?" At the child's nod, Amalia took Ruth on her lap. "You know how much your mor loved you?"

Ruth nodded and turned to look in Amalia's eyes. She heaved a sigh that came clear from her toes. "She's gone to heaven to be with Far and Jesus, hasn't she?"

Amalia nodded and hugged the little girl close, not even attempting to fight the tears. *Oh, Lord, I am so tired of cholera and burying people at sea. Will we never reach land?* She sniffed and blew her nose. "I must go tell the captain."

"You will be my mor now?"

"Um, perhaps your Tante Amalia? We will move your things into my cabin but leave the trunks and boxes in here." *After all, your family paid for their tickets.*

Ruth wiped her nose and eyes on her sleeve and stood up. Blinking, she took the hanky offered and wiped again. "Tante Amalia."

"Ja, little one." Amalia stood, settled her skirts, and secured her hat on her head. "All will be well. God said so, and He never makes mistakes."

They found Captain Alberg in his cabin.

"She's gone?" he asked.

Amalia nodded.

"We will commit her after dawn. Good thing she took care of her daughter's future when she did." He looked at Ruth with a sad shake of his head. "I am so sorry. Your far and mor were good people, you can remember them with pride." He stood. "Dear God, I pray this is our last burial."

Amalia tucked Ruth into her bunk and when she was asleep returned to the other cabin. She left Hilda in her shift and wrapped her shawl around her, folding all the daytime wear of woolen skirt, vest, woolen petticoats, blouse, long stockings, coat, hat, and gloves and storing them in a trunk. She tucked the boots in

along the edge, closed and locked the trunk. The roll of papers, she stored in her own trunk. Holding the lantern high, she saw the Forsberg family Bible at the foot of the bunk. “Takk, Lord. Someday Ruth will appreciate that.” She locked the cabin and returned to her own.

Amalia cuddled Ruth close when she climbed into her own bunk. She could see the stars out the porthole with the ship running smooth after the last storm.

She woke to a knock on the door. “Ja?”

“Captain said to tell you the ceremony will be in half an hour, just before breakfast served in the dining room.”

“Takk, we will be ready.” Leaving Ruth sleeping, she got herself ready for the day, braiding her hair and wrapping the long golden rope around her head, then woke Ruth. “Dress quickly and I will braid your hair.” She’d contemplated leaving Ruth asleep until the morning meal but decided the little girl would want to say good-bye.

They stood in the cold wind, watching the sun rising. Captain Alberg read the service, the people gathered sang the Norwegian hymn Amalia had requested, “I Know of a Sleep in Jesus’ Name,” and the wrapped body was lowered into the sea. Ruth hid her face in Amalia’s coat, clinging so tightly to her hand, it started to cramp.

The captain raised his voice. “Thank you all for gathering. Breakfast is now being served in the dining room. Thank God for smooth sailing today.”

“Any idea when we will see land?” one of the men asked.

“Today or tomorrow, I should think.”

The next morning, they woke to the sound of a tugboat meeting the ship. Within minutes, it pulled away, returning to the harbor.

The passengers clustered around the captain.

“I am sorry to announce that due to the cholera that took so many lives, we will not be allowed to dock in New York Harbor. Food will be brought out to us, but no one from the ship may

disembark. I will try to find some other port that will take us in, or we may have to remain in the harbor in quarantine for some time.”

“So what will we do?”

“Pray God intervenes.” The captain turned and strode to his cabin.

Amalia took Ruth’s hand. “Come, we will go eat and then I need to take care of those below.” *Lord God, I know you have a plan. You must.*