



AT
MORNING'S
LIGHT

LAURAINÉ
SNELLING

with Kiersti Giron

HOME TO GREEN CREEK · 2

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

ONE

GREEN CREEK, IOWA, MARCH 1890

I can hardly believe I have family coming here.” Hands on her hips, Amalia Gunderson surveyed the work on the unfinished third story of the boardinghouse. JJ, their elderly handyman, stood nailing in the frame for a new wall this chilly Saturday afternoon, with the help of Eben Miller from the farm next door and Amos, one of their boarders who worked on the railroad every other week. Previously one long, open room for bachelors to bed down, they now aimed to finish this floor into a hallway with rooms on either side. One of the larger rooms would be for her cousin Maya and Maya’s husband, Einar.

“But you already have family here.” Six-year-old Ruthie peered up at Amalia, her forehead scrunched beneath her pale blonde brows.

“Of course I do, den lille.” Amalia smoothed the little girl’s near-white braids. “You will always be my family.” Ever since Ruthie’s mor had asked Amalia to become the child’s guardian before she died of cholera aboard the ship to America, the two had become close as sisters.

“And Hank, and Mr. JJ, and Noah . . . oh.” Ruthie’s mouth drooped. “I keep forgetting Noah is gone.”

“And we all miss him.” Amalia hugged Ruthie to her side. “But remember how happy he was to be going west with his father?” Curtis Williams had come to take his son west two weeks ago, both of them ready for a fresh start away from the racial prejudice that had dogged their family. Tears stung Amalia’s eyes as she thought of Noah’s sweet face, dark curls, and the way his chubby arms clung around her neck when they’d said good-bye. But she knew this was for the best, and the love on the young father’s face when he looked at his child had swept away any doubt. “Anyway, you’ll love my cousin Maya. We grew up together back in Norway.”

“When you were little like me?”

“Ja, and even younger. She and her parents lived in the same village as my family.” Though since Maya married, she’d moved a bit closer to the coast, as her husband was a fisherman. But making a living in Norway was hard, whether farming or fishing. Amalia’s fingers tingled at the thought of Maya and Einar actually being right here in the boardinghouse, helping share the workload—of having her dearest cousin under the same roof to talk with and hug in person.

“Knock, knock.”

Absalom Karlsson, her fiancé, rapped on the side of the stairs as he climbed to join them on the third floor. His brown eyes twinkled at her behind his spectacles beneath his unruly shock of dark curls.

“Mr. Absalom!” Ruthie dashed over to hug him.

Smiling, Amalia had to squeeze her hands together to keep from rushing to hug him too, right then and there. How did she get so blessed as to be marrying this man in only three weeks?

“I didn’t know I’d get to see you today.” As Ruthie ran off to answer a call from Hank, Amalia crossed to meet Absalom and slipped her hand into his, savoring the rub of his thumb across her knuckles.

“My afternoon appointment cancelled, so I thought I’d come

see you.” He squeezed her fingers, the warm pressure sending flutters from her middle clear to her toes. “I haven’t seen you since Thursday.”

Two whole days—it felt like forever. Amalia leaned her head against his shoulder. “I’m glad you didn’t wait till church tomorrow.”

“Hey, you two lovebirds,” JJ called. “Can you take a minute from your canoodlin’ and grace us with your opinion over here?”

Her face flaming, Amalia lifted her head from Absalom’s shoulder.

He laughed and tugged her toward the construction down the hall. “Let’s see what they want.”

JJ shook his balding head and chuckled at them as Hank pulled Ruthie away to show her something by the window at the end of the hall. “Sorry, Miss Amalia. Hard for this old coot to resist teasin’ ya. Such a nice change to see you so plumb happy.”

Amalia smoothed a stray strand of golden hair back toward her crown of braids and shook her head at him, though she couldn’t help smiling. “You had a question?”

“Got this wall frame squared away, but I just wanted to check before we start the next. You want three rooms on this side, ain’t that right, and two on t’other?”

Amalia tapped a finger on her chin. “I think so. I like having different options for different boarders. This side can be singles, the larger on the other side for couples or those who want to room together, like the Rykavyk brothers. They’ll be back in town again once spring comes.”

The older man nodded. “Figured as much. Just wanted to check.”

“Mange takk. The other double room can be for Maya and Einar. They won’t be here for about a month, I think—will that be enough time?”

“Should be, at least to have it walled in. We’ll work on that side first, make sure it’s ready for your cousins.”

"Tante Malia." Ruthie danced over on her tiptoes. "Hank and me are hungry."

"That would be Hank and 'I,' Miss Ruthie." Helen Stenerson, Green Creek's schoolteacher and another boarder, appeared at the top of the stairs with a smile.

Ruthie sighed, her shoulders hitching up and down. "Hank and I are hungry."

"Oh, you are, are you?" Amalia quirked a brow at Hank.

The eleven-year-old boy grinned and spread his hands. "She's got a hollow leg, that 'un."

Amalia laughed. Hank was the one eating them all "out of house and home" these days, another American expression JJ had introduced her to the other day. "I suppose it is about suppertime."

"I stirred the soup for you." Helen surveyed the third floor. "My, a lot of work going on up here."

"Indeed. And mange takk. I suppose I lost track of time up here. I'll come down and serve it up." Amalia glanced at Absalom. "You'll stay to eat with us?" Her eyes begged him to say yes.

He smiled and nodded. "If you've got enough."

"Always, for you."

His gaze lingered on her in a way that made Amalia forget everyone else around—till Ruthie and Hank clattered down the stairs ahead of them. Catching herself, Amalia swallowed hard and put out her hand for the banister, noting an amused smile from Helen.

"Come up to my room this evening," Helen whispered as she followed Amalia down the stairs. "I have something to show you."

"What?"

The schoolteacher tipped her graceful blonde head. "You'll see."

In the boardinghouse kitchen, Amalia stirred the soup, the savory aroma of meat, carrots, and potatoes making her mouth water.

"Set the table, please, Ruthie," she said as the little girl skipped in, then promptly skipped out toward the dining room.

“What can I do?” Helen asked.

“Slice the bread for me? We’ll eat simply today, with most of the boarders away this weekend. But Eben will be joining us, and Amos.” Amalia set out the crock of butter and one of pickles, then removed a dried apple pie from the oven. “Mange takk for your help. Inga is sick with a cold this weekend—when she’s not here, I realize how much she does to help, young though she is.”

“This last cold snap took out a swath of my students with sickness. I’m thankful I’ve escaped so far.”

“How goes the spring term?”

“Quite well, overall. I find it hard to believe we only have a couple of months left.” Helen sighed. “Sure wish I could have gotten Hank into school this year. That feels the biggest failure on my part.”

Amalia glanced at her. “You did your best, Helen. What did you tell me last week? You can take a horse to the stream . . .”

Helen’s lips twitched. “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink. I know. I just really thought letting him teach drawing to the other students might woo him in. But after that one time . . . he would never come back.”

“He never told you why?”

She shook her head. “I can only guess he felt he didn’t fit among the other children.”

“You mustn’t give up.”

“I won’t.” Helen sliced through the loaf with a firm *thunk*.

Soon they gathered around the long dining table, planked and planed by JJ’s gifted hands. Absalom slipped into his seat beside Amalia and reached for her hand to say the blessing. Glancing around the table at everyone who had come into her life and become her family in these past eleven months, her chest caught at all she had to be thankful for. Hard to believe only a year ago she had been the one embarking on a ship to America, coming with her parents to this new land in search of her brother. Now Mor

and Far were gone, taken in the same terrible epidemic as Ruthie's parents, but she had a new home . . . a new family. Though she hadn't given up hope of finding her brother. Would Erik ever answer her letter? Had he been released from prison yet?

Absalom's gentle squeeze on her hand brought her back to the present, and she bowed her head as he led the traditional Norwegian grace.

"I Jesu navn, går vi til bords . . ."

Chatter and laughter rose with the steam from the soup bowls passed around. Amalia spread butter on her bread and bit into the thick slice, savoring the tang from Zelda's sourdough starter, which she still kept going every day.

Zelda . . . whatever had happened to her? The sting of remembering the bitter older cousin of Ruthie's had softened over the months since the woman left after trying to sue Amalia for custody of both Ruthie and the boardinghouse. Thank the Lord for Absalom's help in winning their case, as well as a wise and honest judge. Amalia shuddered at the memory. But the Lord had taken care of them. As He would with all the unknowns ahead now.

"So, JJ, that upstairs is gonna be a big job, huh?" Hank shoveled another spoonful of soup into his mouth.

At least he'd waited till he finished speaking to take another bite this time. Amalia smiled to herself. Little by little, Hank was losing his wildness—already, in his clean woolen shirt and overalls with his shock of brown hair trimmed off his ears and neck, he presented quite a different picture than the raggedy orphan boy who'd appeared with his faithful companion, Dog, last summer.

"Deed it is, boy." JJ nodded. "Be back at it early Monday mornin'—soon as I get back from drivin' to the school of course."

"I feel badly you have to do that every day." Helen furrowed her brow. "You have enough to do here."

"Not a problem, miss. Gotta get the schoolhouse warmed up for the young'uns."

“Tom Nygard used to start the stove for me, but I’ve given up hope of him coming back to school this term, especially with spring coming. I’m afraid his family is of the mindset that a boy his age is better put to use on the farm.”

JJ wiped his gray beard with his napkin. “Sounds like my pa. Always wished I woulda gotten more schoolin’ when I’d the chance.”

“What a pity.” Helen glanced between JJ and Hank, her eyes narrowing.

What was she thinking? Amalia hid a smile. She’d no idea, but some idea seemed to have sparked in the teacher’s brain.

“Whatcha want more learnin’ for? You build stuff just as good without it.” Hank slipped a scrap of bread to Dog, who lay at the boy’s feet, never far away. His shaggy black tail thumped the floor in appreciation.

“Right you are, boy, right you are. Got nothin’ to complain about. Still . . . be nice to be able to read those books you got in the parlor, Miss Stenerson.”

Helen had begun a small library on bookshelves JJ had installed under one of the parlor windows. Amalia loved to see the gilt-printed spines when she sat in there to sew on the treadle sewing machine.

“Hank and me—I mean, Hank and *I* could read them to you, Mr. JJ.” Ruthie wiggled on her chair. “Miss Stenerson taught me to read, so I’ve been teaching Hank. Maybe we could teach you too.”

Hank ducked his head over his bowl of soup, his neck reddening.

JJ, ever astute, kept his attention on Ruthie. “Why, that’d be right fine, Miss Ruthie. If’n this old codger’s brain is still fittin’ for it.”

Ruthie nodded hard. “Miss Stenerson says reading opens up the whole world for us to see and understand.”

Seeing Hank still absorbed in his soup, Amalia gently led the conversation in another direction.

After supper, Amalia walked Absalom to the door. She wished

she could follow him out on the porch where they could have more privacy, but the March cold still nipped keenly in the evening. He donned his brown overcoat and hung his scarf over his shoulders.

"You're good to come out all this way just to see us."

"That's plenty of reason." He grinned at her.

How she wanted to hold onto him and never let go. *Three weeks.* "Please greet your father for me, and tell him he must come for supper, too, sometime next week."

"I will." Absalom took her hands in his, rubbing his thumbs over the backs of her hands, but his brown eyes shadowed, something distant in them.

"What's wrong?" She could read his moods so easily now, it seemed—feel them almost as her own. Though not always ferret out the reason.

"Nothing. Well—just my father. I worry about him, sometimes, how he'll manage on his own. He's never been without me, you know, except when I was in college, and then—well, he knew I'd be coming back."

Amalia bit her lip. Absalom and Magistrate Karlsson had been the only family that either had known for most of Absalom's life. Something twisted in her middle at the thought of the gray-sideburned man, with his old war-injured leg, alone in their rambling house. But what could they do? She couldn't very well leave the boardinghouse—even if she wanted to, which she didn't, she legally held trust of it till Ruthie came of age in twelve years.

"Would he want to move into the boardinghouse with us?" Even as she spoke, she knew the answer.

"No—no. That would upheave his whole life. He'll be all right, as he often tells me." Absalom tried for his usual grin, though it didn't meet his eyes. "We'll just have to visit often."

"Perhaps he can hire a boy to help him, if needed."

"Maybe. Anyway, sorry. I didn't mean to worry you." He bent

to kiss her, a light peck at first that deepened till she rose on her toes and leaned into him. After a few moments, he gently set her back a bit and released her hands. His chest rose and fell under his overcoat. He gave a half-laugh, slightly breathless. “Better stop there, Miss Gunderson, or you’ll have me whisking you away to the courthouse to elope.”

“Couldn’t we just go to your father, the magistrate?” Amalia quirked a brow at him, then burst out laughing when he stared at her, appearing to consider the idea.

He shook his head and chuckled, then lifted his hand to cradle the side of her face. “I love you.”

“And I you.” She lifted her hand to press her palm against his fingers, so warm and gentle on her cheek. “We are doing the right thing, aren’t we?” She hated the idea that marrying her would cause his father—and him—pain.

“The Lord brought us together.” He lowered their hands, then kissed her knuckles before releasing her to pull on his gloves. “Of that I am certain. We just have to trust Him to lead us through each step.”

They finally said good-night, and Amalia closed the door gently. Not long till “good-night” to this beloved man of hers didn’t have to mean “good-bye.”

Helen was just wiping the last dish when Amalia returned to the kitchen.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Amalia leaned her hands on a wooden chair back. “Was I gone that long? I never meant for you to do all the washing up.”

“I didn’t. JJ, Hank, Ruthie, and I made quite a team. I just sent them all upstairs a few minutes ago.”

“You’re a wonder. I can see how you manage a schoolhouse of two dozen lively children.”

“Some days better than others, I assure you. But I’ve always liked to keep busy.” Helen hung the damp dish towel and took

off the apron she'd donned. "Now, do you have a few minutes to come up to my room?"

Of course—what she had mentioned earlier. Cocking her head, Amalia nodded. What could it be?

Up in the schoolteacher's room at the end of the second-floor hallway, Helen lit a lamp and nodded toward a rocking chair JJ had fashioned, now festooned with blue-checked cushions. Amalia sat in it, enjoying the gentle rock, and glanced about the room, so much cozier and more comfortable than when Helen first moved into its bare-bones state last summer. A blue-and-white braided rug lay on the floor, and calico curtains hung at the windows, sewn by dear Mrs. Askeland's arthritic fingers before the elderly boarder moved away to be with her family. Quilted throw pillows crafted by Helen and Amalia brightened the bed. The lamp's rose-colored shade cast a warm glow around them.

Amalia clasped her hands in her lap. "So. What did you want to show me?"

"Give me a moment." Helen knelt before her carved cedar trunk in the corner. She moved aside a stack of neatly folded shawls, and Amalia caught a glimpse of beautifully worked doilies and antimacassars. Hopefully the teacher would have reason to use such things in a home of her own someday—she certainly was worthy of a man to love and win her.

"Here we are." Helen emerged from the trunk, holding a bundle wrapped in tissue paper. Cradling the parcel in her arms, she sat on the bed and laid it in her lap.

"What do you have there?" Amalia leaned forward.

Gently, Helen ran her fingertips over the fragile paper wrappings. "What do you plan to wear for your wedding?"

"I—I thought my best Sunday bunad." Norwegian brides typically wore the traditional garb of embroidered skirt, vest, and blouse, often with an elaborate headdress, but she had nothing fancier. But what was Helen getting at?

Helen nodded, her fingers rubbing at a wrinkled spot in the paper. “I thought so. And of course you still can—but I wondered if you’d want to wear this.” She stood and deposited the paper bundle onto Amalia’s lap.

Amalia lifted the paper wrappings and uncovered the bodice of a dress of soft cream-colored silk, pearl buttons trailing down the front like dewdrops. She caught her breath and looked up at Helen. “Where did you—what—I can’t wear this.”

“Why not?”

“It’s—it’s—so fine.” Tentative, she lifted the bodice, and the creamy silk skirt spilled out over her lap. “How did you . . .” She let the garment fold back onto itself. “Helen, whose was this?”

“Mine.” The schoolteacher clasped her hands in her lap, but her voice quivered, belying her usual composure. “It was to be my wedding dress, once. I’ll tell you the story sometime . . . suffice to say, I never wore it—I became a teacher instead—but I would love it if you would. Only if you want to, though. Please don’t feel any obligation.”

“It’s so beautiful.” Amalia ran her fingertips over the puffed sleeves, her work-roughened skin catching slightly on the silken fibers. “First you loan me a dress for the dance last summer, and now this.”

Helen laughed, though a tear trembled on her eyelashes. “I’m better than a ladies’ dress shop.”

“Which I’ve never been to.” Amalia shook her head. “I don’t know what to say. Except thank you—mange takk, Helen. How can I say no?” But what story did this unworn wedding gown hold? As well as she’d thought she’d known Helen, clearly there still lay much she didn’t.

“Good.” Helen slipped off the bed to hug her. “Next week, you can try it on, and we’ll see if it needs fitting anywhere.”

Tears suddenly pricked Amalia’s eyes as she embraced her friend, her nose sniffing above Helen’s blouse sleeve.

The teacher pulled back and cocked her head with a frown. “Is something wrong?”

“No. I just—I always thought my mor would help me with all this, you know. Preparing for my wedding . . . what I would wear.” Amalia squeezed her friend’s hand. “I’m thankful for you.”

Helen squeezed back. “And I for you. We orphans must stick together, as I’ve heard Ruthie say.” She smiled.

“Ja. How good of God to put us together.”

Amalia carried the dress to her room that night at Helen’s insistence, tucking it into her trunk as Ruthie slumbered in her nearby bed. Soon she would move downstairs to Zelda’s old room to share with Absalom, and Ruthie would have this room to herself.

Three weeks, and everything would change again. Would she be ready?

Two

COASTAL NORWAY, MARCH 1890

I don't want you to go."

Einar held his wife loosely in his arms and leaned back so he could see her face. "What's wrong? This isn't like you."

"I know." Maya Bredesen clung to the lapels of his sheepskin-lined, three-quarter coat. *Lord God, help me.* They had been married less than a year, and soon they would be leaving for their new life in Amerika. Against her wishes, Einar had decided to go along with this last-minute fishing trip, knowing how precious each coin earned could be.

He gathered her close and kissed her forehead. "We're nearly done with the packing, so why don't you go visit Kaaren and the baby? Spend time with them while you can." A boat whistle blew, two short blasts.

Maya reached up to kiss him one more time and then, swallowing hard, stepped back out of his arms. "Go with God." But instead of turning away, she watched as they threw off the hawsers and the outgoing tide carried them out until the wind could fill the sails. *Please, Lord, bring them back safely. Please.* When she could no longer see them and she was shivering from the cold wind, she made her way up the cobblestoned street to the store on

the corner across from the sturdy Lutheran church built of stone. A bell tinkled, and a blast of warm air greeted her as she pushed open the door.

“Velkommen,” her sister Kaaren called from behind the counter where she was waiting on a woman and putting her purchases into a basket. “You look frozen. Go stand by the stove and get warmed up. The coffee is plenty hot.”

“When will you be leaving?” the woman asked Maya with a smile. “We will miss you so.”

“In a couple of weeks.” Maya rubbed her hands together over the heat that made her cheeks tingle. While coffee sounded necessary, right now pouring a cup took more effort than she could manage. As the heat penetrated her outer clothing, she pulled off her mittens, unbuttoned her coat, and unwrapped her long red scarf from around her head and neck. Now if only the shivering would stop too. A wail from the room behind the store announced baby Karl’s presence and made his desire for his mor very clear.

The customer chuckled as she made her way to the door and waved goodbye.

“I’m coming, I’m coming.” Kaaren rolled her eyes as she turned away to fetch her child. “Pour yourself a cup of coffee, cookies are in the tin, then come on back and keep me company while I take care of his highness.”

Maya did as instructed, pouring a cup for Kaaren while she settled in to meet her infant son’s demands.

Maya had just collapsed into a rocking chair when the bell tinkled over the door, announcing another customer. “I’ll take care of this one.”

“Takk.” Kaaren gave a helpless shrug. “I forgot to put the sign on the door.”

Maya pushed aside the curtain over the doorway and pasted a smile on her face. “Why, Mrs. Nordahl, god morgen. How can I help you today?”

“Is Kaaren all right?” The woman frowned and sniffed. “I thought you were on your way to Amerika? All the sales talk you and that husband of yours have been doing . . .”

Her nose rose a bit higher.

“She is feeding the baby. And ja, we are but . . .” Maya swallowed and changed the subject. “What do you need this morning?” Sure enough, a bit of a bite had weaseled into her voice. Mrs. Nordahl managed to set her on edge as usual.

She’d just finished collecting all the items on the list when the bell announced another customer. “God morgen, I’ll be with you in a minute. Have a cup of coffee.” She needed to add more wood to the fire too.

“Good to see you here. I saw the fishing boats go out again,” the new arrival said.

“Ja.” Tears burned again behind her eyes.

“Kaaren?”

“Nursing King Karl.”

The two women shared a smile. Amazing how two customers could be so different.

Maya wrapped the items in brown paper and string. “Mrs. Nordahl, do you have bags for your supplies?” She raised her voice to be heard in the room back of the store.

“Nei, just put them in the wood crate out in the trap at the hitching rail.”

Maya swallowed her frustration. Kaaren put up with this on a daily basis. Well, her husband usually ran the store, but today he must be off on a delivery or some such. Maya snagged a shawl off the pegs on the wall behind the counter, pulled bags from under the counter, filled them, and headed for the front door.

Rev. Odland pushed open the door just as she reached it. “Why, Maya . . .” He reached for the bags. “Let me help you.”

“Takk. The supplies go in the Nordahl trap, but the bags come back inside.” Mrs. Nordahl was another good reason Maya was

grateful she no longer worked at the store, as she had when she and Einar first moved to this village after they married. Besides, the woman had repeatedly criticized her and Einar for encouraging others to go with them to Amerika.

"You'll stay for dinner, won't you?" Kaaren asked some time later as she turned the sign on the door to closed for dinner. "Henrik won't be home till late afternoon, and with Karl back down, we can have a real visit. Seems forever since we've had time for just us."

"That's only because it has been." Maya stoked the stove and set the coffeepot on the back. The two of them let the curtain swish behind them. She sniffed the appetizing fragrance. "What do you have cooking?"

"Mutton stew. An old ewe weaned her twins and just wasn't regaining her strength, so Henrik decided it was time to butcher her before she turned into skin and bones. I hate that part of farming."

"Me too. I'm looking forward to helping Amalia with the boardinghouse. Whoever would have thought she would be running one, or that she would be caring for a little orphaned girl?"

"Especially since her mor and far died on the ship, leaving her an orphan too." Kaaren handed Maya a steaming bowl of stew. "The bread is sliced in the basket, butter on the table." They sat at the round oak table, sun warming their shoulders. "Hard to believe there is a storm coming, the way the sun is melting the snow away here."

Please, Lord, let the fishing boats get back to port before that hits.
The same sense of dread wrapped itself around her shoulders.
Please, Lord.

Kaaren bowed her head, said the grace, and settled back in her chair. "So, tell me, what do you have left to pack?"

"More of the garden seeds, cuttings, and bedding—the last-minute things." She spread butter on her slice of bread. "Einar's

tools. He said those would be last since he uses them all the time.” She paused. “How I wish you were coming along.”

Kaaren wrapped her hand around Maya’s on the table. “Me too, but Henrik has always wanted to run this store. He has no desire to start over again in a new country. At least, not now.”

Maya stared at her sister. Was there a glimmer of hope there? “Like Mor always says, God’s will be done.”

Kaaren nodded.

That night the storm hit with a vengeance. Wind-driven sleet fought to rip the roof from the buildings. Branches torn from the trees thrashed against the walls. Maya huddled in the quilts wrapped around her to keep in the warmth of a lonely bed. One particularly vicious crash made her yelp and clap her hands over her ears. Had she ever endured such a storm? She didn’t think so. At least, she hadn’t by herself. Before the wedding she had shared a bed with her younger sister. And never while worrying about a family member out at sea—her family were merchants and farmers.

The storm died as morning dawned. Without conscious thought, Maya finally drifted off to sleep, not waking until a pounding on the door jerked her back to consciousness. “Coming!” She snagged the top quilt to wrap around herself and slid her feet into her sheepskin slippers. The stove had gone out, and the house was frigid.

“Maya!” More pounding.

“Coming.” Whatever had possessed her to lock the door? She turned the lock and fought to pull the door open. A snowdrift covered the bottom half of the door. Kaaren’s husband and Rev. Odland stood together in the knee-high drift.

“What?” She stared into the reverend’s sorrow-filled eyes. “Nooo.” All strength drained out of her body, and her world faded from shimmering to black.

She woke on the small bed mounted into the wall of their living

space, with the reverend kneeling beside her and Henrik rattling the lids on the stove. Shaking her head, she clung to his hand. "Say it isn't so. Surely there's been a mistake."

"Two of the boats went down with all hands," the reverend said gently.

"Kaaren wants you to come to our house. You can't be alone here," Henrik said.

"Nei." Maya turned her face away. "Nei! I must be here when Einar returns. He said he would. . . ."

"Nei, you can't remain here by yourself." Rev. Odland's voice deepened. "We need to call on the other families too."

Maya turned away. Her eyes dried of their own accord. *Lord God, you took my husband, now take me too.*

"We will send someone to be with you." The reverend laid his hand on her head. "The Lord bless and keep you . . ." His words faded away as she clutched the quilt tighter and sank into darkness.

Later that day, two men and Kaaren joined forces and without Maya's permission, as she refused to get up, wrapped her in quilts and carried her over to Kaaren's.

"We can care for you more easily this way," Kaaren whispered in Maya's ear.

"Just let me go home to heaven with Einar."

The weather turned to spring after the storm blew out. Maya lay on a pallet and listened to the icicles dripping from the roof, singing their own song, usually one of Maya's favorite melodies. Today they called her to leave the bed of sorrow and come join in the dripping dance, but she pulled her pillow over her ears. While several of the bodies from the sunken boats had been found washed up on a shore, Einar's was not one of them.

She attended the service held for those drowned in the storm, but she might well have been a carved statue for all her responses. No tears, no words that she would remember. *Lord, please get me*

through this would float through her mind one moment, only to be chased by a barb of rage.

What am I going to do? The following morning, she woke up with a clear head. Either she would go ahead with their plans to leave for Amerika, or she would give up and remain in Norway. She was needed at the boardinghouse in Amerika. She had told Amalia she would come.

She announced her decision at the family meeting that evening.

“But you cannot travel alone.” Kaaren shook her head. “That cannot be possible.”

Maya inhaled a deep breath. “Do you have any other suggestions? Einar’s ticket is paid for, as is mine. Amalia has written that she needs help at the boardinghouse. That I can do.” She could feel her spine straightening like locks clicking into place.

“I will go with you.” Ødger, the brother a year older than she, spoke quietly but with the same sense of finality. He had come from nearby Stavanger when he heard the news.

“But you are registered for school, the seminary, in the fall.”

“True, but I have heard there is a seminary I could attend in Iowa, Luther College. It was founded by Norwegians. And I cannot let you travel alone.”

Kaaren stared at him. “You can be ready to leave in such short order?”

“Ja, I can.” He turned to Maya. “If you are in agreement.”

And even if I’m not. This would make the voyage more possible. She knew their parents, who still lived in the village where she and Amalia had grown up, would be set against her determination, but she was a married woman, albeit a widow, and no longer under her far’s authority.

“The ship sails in eight days. Do you want me to pack Einar’s tools or leave them here?”

“Bring them. I will only have one medium trunk, and there will be space for them. And my guitar, of course.”

Maya inhaled a deep breath and let it all out. This certainly wasn't the way she had planned this new life. Einar had called it an adventure. But now she would have to do it without him.

Another surge of rage flashed through her, leaving her shaken. Why, oh why, had he insisted on going out with the boats that day?