

EMMY LAYBOURNE

RANSACKER



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS

NEW YORK

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

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For Rex

My dearest Stieg,

I cannot tell you how glad I was to find your letter of June 10 waiting for me at the address of our contact in Årstad. Forgive me if I overstep in any way, but I must tell you I am concerned—you say the days have settled into a routine you find monotonous. You write that life in a small town is often dull and your students have little ambition to learn beyond the rudiments. I say thank the Gods if your life is dull.

My young friend, do not forget what your sister has done and is capable of doing. Do not become complacent in your comfortable small town.

Since the death of his wife, the Baron Fjelstad has become obsessed with the Nytte and those gifted with its powers. Though Agatha could be demanding at times, I see now that she had a calming influence on her husband. I serve the Baron as best I can, though his intensity of purpose chills me at times.

The Baron has assured me many times that he had no part in the violence the Berserker Ketil brought to your family, but, after all this time, I remain uncertain.

You should know that we have encountered no females with the Nytte in the past year. This concerns the Baron. If he knew of your sister Hanne's talents, he would come, himself, all the way to Montana to seek her out. Of this I am certain. Though I respect him,

I am convinced he must never learn of the powers you and your siblings possess. This is why I urge caution and restraint.

Do not think me hard-hearted. It is my love for you “Hemstads” that makes me stern.

I dearly miss our study sessions by the fire. I’m a foolish old man—here I sit, surrounded by luxury, thinking fondly of the miserable winter we all spent together huddled in that tiny homestead cabin.

I pray daily and nightly to Odin All-Father for your safekeeping and your continuing health, all of you.

*Most sincerely,
Rolf Tjossem*

CHAPTER ONE

JULY 1886

CARTER, MONTANA

Sissel sat on a branch that swept low from an old willow, watching Stieg work his Nytte.

Her brother pressed two fingers to his temple and began, creating a little gust of wind at his feet. He made it puff, puff, puff, like a living pulse.

Then he made the gust grow and turn on itself, funneling it into a little dirt devil.

Watching it closely, Stieg made it whirl over to Sissel and pluck at her skirt.

“Don’t,” she said. “You’ll muss my clothes, and Hanne will wring your neck.”

The dancing funnel of air lay down at her feet like an obedient dog.

Stieg paused to remove his vest. He pressed his sleeve to his face to blot the sweat.

Stieg did exercises every day to improve his control over his Nytte—the ancient Viking blood-gift that ran in both sides of their family tree.

He turned his attention on the hazy mountains in the distance, shrouded in thin, peevish clouds. His tall, lanky body was drawn ramrod straight, taut with energy.

Stieg pressed his head with both hands. Sissel saw lightning dance above the closest peak.

“That’s very good!” she said, clapping. “Even better than last time. There’s more lightning and it’s brighter.”

Stieg exhaled. He made a gesture as if doffing his cap to acknowledge the compliment, then he leaned forward to put his hands on his knees and breathed deeply for a moment, catching his breath.

With his daily practice sessions, Stieg had been able to put an end to the headaches that used to plague him whenever he used his Nytte. The exercises had been prescribed to him by their wise and trusted friend Rolf Tjossem, before Rolf had returned to Norway two and a half years ago.

Now came Sissel’s favorite part of the practice sessions. Stieg turned toward their sister Hanne’s small garden near the side of the house, to water it. At Hanne’s insistence, establishing the garden was the first thing they had done after building the house, just over two years ago. It was a magnificent garden, thanks to Stieg’s Nytte, but the Hemstads never drew attention to it when they had visitors. They wanted to seem plain and commonplace, and keep their gifts a secret.

The garden was abundant and lovely—a tangle of vines splashed with colorful produce. The tomatoes were colossal—huge, beautiful

fruits, skins nearly splitting apart. Snap peas and wax beans grew in a tangle over the brace Hanne's fiancé, Owen, had built. Fat purple cabbages grew in tidy rows next to giant acorn squashes with such thick rinds they had to be split with an ax.

Stieg stepped closer to the garden. He placed one fingertip on each temple and closed his eyes.

Sissel watched the air. She always tried to see it happen, but the cloud materialized in wisps so delicate the eye couldn't perceive them at first. Then they were there—white filaments drifting in the air, like tendrils of wool, fattening by the moment. Under Stieg's power, they floated together and began to swirl and dance.

A weight of gray gathered in the belly of the new cloud.

The top layer of the garden soil was bleached tan by the mid-summer sun. *Splat*. Then another fat *splat*. Dots of deep brown appeared as Stieg let the raindrops fall from his cloud.

"That's the way!" Sissel called. She breathed in deeply as the sweet smell of the rain spread in the dry air.

Once the cloud was nearly spent, Stieg released a great breath. He staggered a bit, holding his hands out to steady himself.

"You're not supposed to hold your breath," Sissel reminded him. The cloud dried up in the air and was gone.

Sissel walked over to where Stieg stood. "Rolf wanted you to keep breathing."

Stieg brought his hands up to his forehead and massaged his temples.

"It's difficult," he admitted.

They walked to the house. Hanne was inside, preparing supper, and Owen and Knut would be making their way in from the fields to wash up.

“Why do you think it is so difficult to remember to breathe?” Sissel asked. “I’m truly curious.”

Stieg thought for a moment, looking back at the wet, glistening garden.

“Because it sweeps me up. I feel connected to a great source of power. When I use my Nytte, I rather forget I have a body to begin with.” There was a faint smile on Stieg’s face, and a stab of envy pierced Sissel’s chest.

Sissel’s sister and two brothers each had a Nytte. Stieg was a Storm-Rend. Hanne was a Berserker, driven to kill to protect herself or anyone she loved. Knut was an Oar-Breaker. Knut had tremendous strength that would have been used in the days of the Vikings to row their massive ships.

Sissel, the youngest, had no power. This was not uncommon. The Nytte often skipped children in a family—in fact, it was unusual that three of the four Hemstad siblings had received a gift, and one of them a girl.

Still, it rankled Sissel. It was hard to forget how different she was. It did not help that her siblings were healthy and strong, while she was thin, underdeveloped, and had a limp from an old injury. Her leg ached after her daily walks to and from school with Stieg, but she would not admit it. She had spent her childhood complaining, and now, at sixteen, she had made up her mind not to bring the habit into her adulthood.

“We should write to Rolf and tell him of your progress,” Sissel said. “He’d be proud of you.”

“He’d be proud of you as well.”

“How so?”

“Your studies. Your English is nearly better than mine.”

Sissel set her foot down wrong, and a shock of pain seized her calf. She bent and took hold of it to calm the spasm.

“I wish you would let your beau drive us home from school in his wagon,” Stieg said.

“No,” she said through gritted teeth.

“It’s cruel to him, actually. He wants to spend his every waking hour with you, but you hold him at a distance.”

Sissel did not want to talk about her beau right now. And not with her brother.

“The walk is good for me. It’s making me stronger.”

“If you say so,” Stieg said.

Sissel straightened up, and Stieg searched her face, concern etched on his features.

“Please don’t worry about me,” Sissel said with irritation. “It makes me tired.”

“I’m sorry.”

Stieg offered a smile. He exhaled, and a puff of wind toyed with the hem of her skirt.

“Don’t,” Sissel said. She held her skirt down with her hands.

“I will never worry about you again, I promise.”

He blew the wind at her more strongly.

“Stop it!” Sissel said. She gathered her skirt away from him and walked ahead.

“I was only teasing,” he said.

“I know,” Sissel said, not turning back. “I’m going in. Hanne might need my help.”

They came around the side of their pretty timber house. It had two rooms—a large living area with a loft above for the boys, and a small bedroom, which Sissel and Hanne shared. The living room had a

cookstove in the center that served to divide the room into two halves—a kitchen, with cabinets built along the walls, and a cozy space with a table and chairs.

The brothers shared the loft with their future brother-in-law, Owen Bennett. Owen had hired on to serve as their guide when they first came to Montana. That journey had turned dangerous and deadly, when a Norwegian baron sent a bloodthirsty Berserker to track them down. Owen had learned the truth about the Hemstads and their powers. By the end of the ordeal, he and Hanne had become sweethearts.

Hanne and Owen were waiting to marry until the harvest was in, so they could afford a wedding and the addition of another bedroom onto the little house.

Their first winter in the United States had been cramped and difficult. They spent it in an abandoned homestead cabin that a friend of Owen's had told them about, provisioning themselves from a town ten miles away. During those long months Rolf had taught them everything he knew about the Nytte.

In the spring the Hemstads had traveled east to the small, burgeoning railroad town of Carter. They used the remainder of the money they had brought from Norway—some cash and two ancient Viking gold coins—to purchase the land and the building materials for the main house.

For now, the family's only income was Stieg's salary from his teaching work, but soon the wheat would be harvested and then there would be enough for lumber, and a wedding feast and a cake.

The door to their house was open, and inside, Hanne was humming to herself. She set a large loaf of brown bread on the table and a slab of her homemade cheese beside it.

“You look like a happy young wife,” Sissel told her as she came limping through the door.

Hanne gave Sissel a smile. She had on a clean apron over her faded blue work dress. Hanne wore her blond hair in a plaited crown, though few young women wore their hair that way in America.

She placed a large platter of sliced tomatoes floating in a pool of fresh cream on the table.

“It was so hot in the house today,” Hanne said. “I couldn’t bear to cook a hot meal. I hope the boys don’t mind.”

Sissel sank into a chair that had been placed near the door.

“Are you all right?” Hanne asked.

“Yes,” Sissel said. “Fine.”

Stieg came in, followed by Knut, sweaty from his work in the wheat fields.

“Hello!” Knut said. “Is supper ready?” Knut was six foot six, a giant of a man, even though he was only seventeen, with a broad, well-muscled torso and huge, strong arms. His blond hair was plastered to his head in the shape of the crown of his wide hat.

Owen slipped in the door behind Knut. He was of medium height, with wavy brown hair and kind-looking brown eyes. He went straight to Hanne and pecked her on the cheek. Daisy, Owen’s cow dog, followed him in. She paused to lap at the water bowl set inside the door.

“Did you have a good day?” Owen asked Hanne. She began to answer but Knut interrupted.

“No meat?” Knut said as he looked over the table.

Sissel felt bad for him. The food was intended to feed five, and he probably could have eaten it all himself.

“It was a very hot day,” Hanne said, irritated. “I thought a cool supper would be best.”

Knut shrugged. "I'm hungry."

"We've got plenty of tomatoes."

"I'm hungry for meat," he said.

"There's some roast chicken in the root cellar," Hanne said, relenting. "Go fetch it up and I'll cut some slices."

A smile broke over Knut's broad face.

"Thank you, Sister." He ambled out to fetch the chicken.

"I look forward to when the harvest comes in so we can afford some beef," Hanne said.

"The end of summer term is but a few weeks away," Stieg said.

"And the wheat is coming along real good," Owen said. "The heads are nice and fat. Everyone says we had just the right amount of rain this spring."

"Say," Stieg said, "the evening is so fine and still. Shall we bring the table outside to eat?"

"That's a lovely idea," Hanne said.

So the newly set table was un-set, and Owen and Stieg carried it outside.

Hanne lifted the platter with the tomatoes, and Sissel reached forward to take it.

"It's a bit heavy," Hanne said.

"I'm fine," Sissel answered.

"I think it's too heavy for you. But you could bring the plates."

"Please, Hanne. Don't baby me. I can carry a platter of tomatoes!"

Hanne bit the inside of her lip. "Very well." She released it into Sissel's hands, and Sissel turned for the door.

It *was* too heavy. Sissel knew it instantly.

She took two steps toward the door. Her arms began to tremble. She gritted her teeth.

Sissel lowered the platter slightly and inched out the door, as Stieg bounded back into the house, coming to fetch the chairs. Sissel shifted the platter to avoid him, but too late . . .

The edge of the platter slipped from her hands, and the beautiful red slices of fruit slid onto the ground, the cream raining down around them.

Then the platter tumbled out of her hands and fell. It broke in two pieces over a half-buried rock.

“Oh!” Sissel cried.

“Sissel!” snapped Hanne, coming to the door.

“It was my fault,” Stieg said quickly. “I bumped her.”

Tears welled up in Sissel’s eyes.

“It wasn’t your fault,” she said. “It was mine!”

“Come, come. It’s all right.” Stieg bent over and scooped the tomatoes back onto the larger half of the broken platter. “We can eat a little dirt. It’s all right.”

Sissel turned back into the house, pushing past Hanne.

“Don’t run off, Sissel,” Hanne said. Her voice was thin and tired. “It’s all right.”

Sissel limped to their bedroom. She wanted to be alone.

“I’m sorry,” Sissel said over her shoulder. “I should have known better.”

Sissel went to splash her face with water at the washbasin, and instead she stopped, gazing into the looking glass nailed above it. She saw her thin, peaked face; her limp hair, so white blond as to be colorless; her pale eyes too large and rimmed with red. It was not a face she liked much.

She was weak, too weak to carry a platter of tomatoes. She cursed herself as she lay down on her bed—that she should be so

feeble, that she should be so prideful, and that she should cry over it all.

She closed her eyes, hoping to compose herself for a moment.

When Sissel woke, it was dark. Hanne was in her own bed, across the narrow gap. Her sister's shoulders rose and fell with sound, steady sleep.

There was a slice of bread topped with cheese waiting on the crate they used as a bedside table, along with a covered dish containing a pretty slice of tomato in cream sauce.

CHAPTER TWO

The next day, Sissel thought she would help preserve the rest of the tomatoes, but Hanne wouldn't let her near the stove. Apparently Sissel's slip with the platter had been forgiven, but not forgotten.

Hanne fished the empty, sterilized jars out from the boiling water with a pair of wooden spoons and filled them with the stewed fruit. Her shirtsleeves were rolled up, and her face was flushed and sweaty.

"I don't remember last July being so hot, do you?" Hanne asked. "Owen says it's good weather for the wheat. That may be, but it's bad weather for kitchen work, and yet it must be done."

"I wish you'd let me help," Sissel said.

"Just sit, Sissel. Sit and rest and tell me about school to keep me entertained," Hanne said. "Has Howie asked Alice to the dance yet?" There was a leading, playful tone in Hanne's voice. Sissel knew where this was going.

“No,” Sissel said. “*None* of the boys have asked any of the girls yet.”

“What on earth are *they* waiting for?” Hanne said. “It’s just a few weeks away!”

Hanne wanted her to talk about her beau, James Peavy. All her siblings seemed fascinated by him.

Maybe they were all wondering what James saw in their frail little sister. Sissel certainly wondered herself.

James and his father had moved to town two years ago and bought the general store. They had come all the way from Chicago. James was undeniably handsome, with his dark brown eyes and hair that was a deep auburn, sometimes red and sometimes chestnut. Sissel often had to fight the urge to determine the color for once and for all by grabbing a handful and holding it up to the light.

James’s father, Russell Peavy, looked nothing like him, and didn’t have James’s nice manners, either. But Russell was proud of his son, in a gruff way. He was proud enough of James to want him to go to college. That was why James was still in school at seventeen, an age when most were already doing a man’s work.

Sissel didn’t like talking about James with her siblings because he made her feel a little bit woozy. Not quite herself.

It seemed strange, even to her, that James was so taken with her. Sissel was far from the prettiest girl in class. Her figure was nearly free from curves, where many of the girls were fashionably plump and round. And her limp made her seem graceless at times, Sissel knew it did. Yet James hardly looked at another girl, except to be polite.

Privately, Sissel supposed James might like her because she was smart. She knew she was smart. She was at the head of the class without really even trying.

She understood mathematics, even the more complicated alge-

braic formulas. Sometimes she could do them in her head, while a peer struggled to figure at the blackboard. She also enjoyed history, both American and European. She liked it when Stieg quizzed her on the lineage of the old kings of Scandinavia. As for America, it was so new you could fit all its history in your pocket.

“Abigail Masterson has a new dress,” Sissel told her sister. “It’s a coral-colored poplin with full hoopskirt. She looked like a great pink cloud. I suppose all the girls will now copy the fashion.”

“When the wheat comes in, we could make you a dress like that,” Hanne said.

“We’ll make you a wedding dress when the wheat comes in. And if you wish it to have a hoopskirt, that’s your own mistake!” Sissel replied. Hanne smiled at that.

“We’re probably better off without them,” Hanne said. “I hear they are very inconvenient.”

“I hear just the opposite,” Sissel said.

“Really?”

“One can hide things under them . . . like a butter churn. Or a small child.”

Hanne let out a distinctly unladylike snort of laughter.

“I’d like to see that!” Hanne said.

“I bet you could fit a cannon under a full hoopskirt,” Sissel said. “Only how could you hold it between your knees?”

“Sissel!” Hanne said, laughing so hard she had to dab tears from her eyes.

That made Sissel feel better. Maybe she couldn’t help much with the chores, but at least she could make her sister laugh.

“You can make fun of hoopskirts all you like, little sister, however”—Hanne turned from the stove and leveled her wooden

spoon at Sissel—"you need a new dress. The Ladies' Aid dance will be here soon. And James Peavy is sure to ask you."

"He hasn't asked me, though," Sissel said.

"I know. But he will," Hanne said. "He wouldn't come around visiting all the time, and bringing you candy from the store, and mooning over you—"

"Shhh!" Sissel said.

"What will you wear?" Hanne said.

"I will wear my church dress," Sissel said.

"No. It's too old."

"Then I'll wear yours."

"Sissel!"

What would it be like to dance with James? Sissel imagined his hands set down low on her back, and felt a blush spreading across her face. She picked at the fabric of the white shirt she wore. It clung to her neck with a thin layer of perspiration.

"I'll meet you in town after school on Monday. We can go to the Oswalds' shop, and Alice will help us pick out a good fabric," Hanne said.

Stieg strode in. He had four eggs in his hands.

"I found some eggs, Sister," Stieg said, holding them out to Hanne. "Some of the chickens are hiding them near the cow's bedding."

"Set them in the basket, please," Hanne said. "I'm in tomatoes up to my elbows."

Stieg put the eggs down and went to the girls' bedroom, where they kept the basin for washing hands.

"Sissel, grammar awaits us," Stieg said, returning. "I think we should review reduced relative clauses this afternoon."

"English is a horrible language," Sissel said.

“I thought you were trying not to complain anymore,” Stieg reminded her.

“I’m not complaining, I’m stating a fact.”

Stieg took his notebook, their grammar book, and Sissel’s slate from the shelf where they sat, along with his prized volumes of Ibsen, Dickens, and Shakespeare. Sissel made her way to the table.

“Say, I heard James Peavy is renting a buggy to take you to the dance,” Stieg said.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, he hasn’t even asked me!” Sissel said. “And if he does, who’s to say I’ll say yes?”

“I believe you dislike him because he’s so handsome,” Stieg said. “That’s not right. Even handsome men deserve to be taken seriously.”

“You are an unkind person, Stieg Hemstad. I refuse to study grammar with such a bully.”

Stieg was about to make a response when Hanne dropped a pot with a clatter. Tomatoes splattered onto the tidy plank floor. Sissel looked up to her sister’s face and found Hanne frowning toward the door.

“There’s something wrong,” Hanne said. She strode over to the doorway. Distracted, she wiped her wet hands on her spattered apron, only smearing them more.

Sissel came to look out over Hanne’s shoulder. To the south the sky was a strange color, as if a bright stripe of yellow and green gray had been drawn at the horizon line.

“What is that?” Sissel asked with rising alarm. Stieg hurried over.

“It’s a fire,” Hanne said. “Wildfire!”

Hanne ran as fast as she could toward the fields where Owen and Knut were working. “Stay inside!” she called over her shoulder.

“Dear God, no,” Stieg said. He pushed past Sissel and strode out into the yard.

“What do we do?” Sissel asked.

Hanne raced out of sight, over a rise on their land toward Owen and Knut. They were out in the beautiful, nearly ripe wheat fields, directly between the fire and the house.

Stieg began to pace in the yard.

“If we’re lucky, it won’t come this way,” Stieg said.

He pressed his fingers to his temples.

“What are you doing?” Sissel asked.

“I’m going to blow it away. It will take our wheat!”

“But if you blow it away from us, it will go toward the town!” Sissel cried.

“Damn it all,” Stieg yelled.

He pressed his head again and began to concentrate.

“What should I do?” Sissel cried.

“Quiet, now!” Stieg snapped. “I’m making it rain.”

Sissel watched him for a moment. The air to the south was thickening with sick green smoke. She turned around, feeling terribly helpless.

“I’ll go for water,” Sissel said to no answer.

The sky was darkening at an alarming rate. Now Sissel could smell the fire, not a smell like wood smoke from a stove, but the smell of green things burning.

Sissel took the buckets and ran to the gully near their house as fast as her leg would allow. She pushed through the scrub oak and dropped the tin buckets into the stream with a clatter. Bits of ash were landing in the water like snowflakes.

Sissel lifted the heavy buckets. The water sloshed in the pails as

she limped back toward the farm. Much of the water spilled, and she cursed her lame leg.

As she neared the house she felt rain on her face.

Stieg stood in their yard, hands pressed to his temples. The rain fell in a circle around the house and the barn as he tried to wet down the structures so the fire would go around them.

“Stieg, is Hanne back? The boys?” Sissel tried to shout. Her words were strangled as she choked on the dense smoke now rolling over them.

Sissel turned to the fields. She could see the fire itself now, a terrible orange-and-yellow streak, racing toward their farm. It was moving faster than she could believe, faster than a horse or a train. It was like someone was drawing a blanket of fire up across the prairie.

She started toward the rise with her half-full buckets as Hanne, Owen, and Knut came stumbling to the house.

Hanne had her shoulder under Owen’s and was half dragging him as he coughed and struggled to breathe. Daisy ran with them, barking at the fire and the smoke.

The heat was rising. It made everything in Sissel’s vision shimmer and boil.

Hanne dropped Owen at the house.

“Sissel!” Hanne shouted.

“I brought water,” Sissel said. She blinked, her eyes stinging from the smoke, and in that one blink Hanne was at her side. Hanne picked up the buckets, one at a time, and dumped the water over Sissel herself.

Sissel sputtered, shocked.

Hanne slung Sissel over her shoulder, like a shepherd would a lamb,

and ran for the house. Sissel gasped for breath. Her belly and rib cage jounced against her sister's shoulder.

Rain pelted the house and the barn. Stieg was clutching his head with both hands. He fell to his knees as Hanne knelt and deposited Sissel on the ground.

"Are you all right?" Hanne asked Sissel.

Sissel could only cough, nodding her head. Her eyes streamed with tears, some from the smoke and some from her anger at being so useless. Daisy came to lick at Sissel's face, and she pushed the dog away.

"It's coming closer!" Knut cried. He was pacing within the circle of rain Stieg was holding.

The smoke and heat assaulted them.

Owen appeared from inside the house. He had their good wool blankets, which had been stored for the winter.

"We can beat it back with these!" he shouted.

"Come, Knut!" Hanne shouted. She grabbed a blanket and threw one to Knut.

The fire was upon them. It ran at the house, crackling and streaming in flaming runners around Stieg's circle.

Hanne, Knut, and Owen beat at the flames, trying to defend the edge of the circle. Daisy barked at the fire, as if she could chase it away.

Sissel lay there, good for nothing. Struggling just to breathe.

Stieg let out a cry of effort. The rain was evaporating in the terrible heat of the fire. Steam rose in great clouds.

"The house!" Owen shouted.

Fire licked at the house, sending black lines of scorch up the planks. Soon flames surrounded the two front windows, beautiful glass windows Owen had set with pride. They exploded outward in a shower of shards that caught orange and yellow.

Hanne shouted, “Into the barn!” Hanne tried to lift Sissel again, and she pulled away. Sissel struggled to her feet, holding her arm across her mouth, trying to breathe through the wet fabric. They all hurried to the barn. Owen dragged Daisy by the collar. She continued to bark at the fire, fiercely trying to scare it away.

Inside, the usual smells of hay, manure, and sod mingled with the terrible smoke.

Only a half dozen of their chickens were inside, the rest gone. Their cow, Buttermilk, was out to pasture! She was lost. And what of Owen’s horse, Pal? Pal would have been yoked to the harrow . . .

“Owen!” Sissel said, her voice croaky. “Is Pal all right?”

But Owen was on his hands and knees, coughing, coughing until he vomited up black, tarry bile. He did not hear her.

Knut shut the great wooden door to the barn, dragging it along the rut in the earth.

Outside there was a roar and a crash from their house.

Hanne knelt next to Stieg, who was also on his knees. His eyes were fixed toward the ceiling, commanding the elements outside.

The temperature in the barn kept climbing. It was like being in an oven. Sissel sank down near the cow’s stall. She struggled to breathe, drawing in painful gasps of the scorching air.

There were two narrow, empty slots high in the walls—glassless windows near the roof, set there to let in fresh air. Sissel saw flames licking at them.

Yellow light also shone through the cracks and chinks between the sod bricks. It looked like a scene from hell, all of them smeared with char, the harsh light from the dancing flames making their faces into hideous masks of shadow and light.

They did not have long now.

“*Ásábeill*,” Hanne began to pray in Norwegian. “Hear me, Odin; hear me, Freya. Strengthen our brother! Great Thor, lend us your strength.”

She knelt next to Stieg. Knut came, too, putting his large meaty hands on his older brother’s thin shoulders.

“*Ásábeill!*” Knut said. “Father Odin, help my brother!”

Stieg began to tremble. He gave a great roar, as if spending all his remaining strength at once.

Sissel felt something hit her neck. Like pebbles. She looked over her shoulder, and there, coming through the high window in the wall—hail!

“You’re doing it, Stieg!” Sissel cried. “It’s working!”

The heat was still fierce, but the crackle of flames receded. The sound of the fire moved past them, racing north.

Then the yellow glare through the cracks went dark.

“Praise the Gods!” Hanne cried.

The fire had passed them by.

Stieg fell back into Knut’s arms. Hanne collapsed onto them, weeping, embracing them both. Owen staggered to them and threw his arms around them all.

Sissel could not rise to join the huddle of bodies. She could not get her breath. More hail spattered through the window. One bit landed near her face, and she looked at it.

Ice. Ice in a wildfire.

Her brother had magic. Powerful magic. His gift had saved them—the *Nytte* had saved them.

And she had helped not one bit.

CHAPTER THREE

James Peavy rode fast, grimly assessing the possibility the Hemstads had survived the wildfire.

The fire had cut a swath miles wide across the prairie. Every bit of brush and low-lying plant life in its path had been incinerated. A few broken, black trees jutted here and there, forsaken scarecrows protecting nothing at all.

There were houses beyond the charred fields, James knew that. He knew the Hemstads' neighbors: the Hensleys, the Wicks, and the Baylors. He had taken pains to introduce himself, to spread goodwill. He had delivered groceries and other supplies from the store to these neighbors, sweating and straining to unload their purchases from the wagon. Country folk took their time to come to trust city folk.

It had been dull, slow work, earning their trust. It had taken months. And it had taken far longer to get the Hemstads themselves to trust him. They were wary and skittish.

From what James had read in the files pertaining to the case, they had every right to be.

The Pinkertons had been briefed by their client, a Norwegian baron named Fjelstad. There had been a big mix-up several years ago. Sissel's brother Knut had been falsely accused of a series of grisly murders in Norway. Months later, in America, a dead man had been identified as Knut, and the reward claimed.

Coming to America, Knut and his siblings had all changed their last name to Hemstad. But even though the warrant had been canceled and their last name didn't match, Knut still looked everything like the man on the wanted poster. It would be easy for a bounty hunter with the outdated poster to try to bring him in or take a shot at him. The Pinkertons were there to prevent that.

The Baron not only wanted the Hemstads protected, he wanted them observed. He seemed, to James's mind, a bit obsessed with them. James's boss and make-believe father, Russell Peavy, had to file weekly reports on all the Hemstads' doings, no matter how routine.

That was fine with James. The Baron was rich, the Pinkertons paid well, and this was the easiest job he'd ever worked. Much easier than his last job as a bellboy at the Palmer House back in Chicago.

When one of the guests at the hotel had noticed James flirting with an older woman, the wife of a prominent businessman, James was sure he'd be sacked. Instead, he was offered a job. The guest was a Pinkerton agent, and if he hadn't had the badge, James wouldn't have believed him about the job. New clothes, a train ticket west, a chance to go to school, and all he had to do was keep tabs on a schoolgirl?

He'd signed up on the spot.

Now the job was over, James thought bitterly. It had to be.

James had no hope for the Hemstads as his horse galloped past the blackened fields. Who could survive this?

He thought of Sissel and felt his chest tighten up with emotion. He liked her more than he'd ever thought he would. Sissel was thin and sickly, but never complained about it. Instead, she was funny. She told the truth. It was so unusual. Other girls her age were busy giggling and patting the lace around their necklines, hoping he'd notice their developing bustlines. James'd known plenty of bustlines. Honesty was something else.

He liked all the Hemstads. Stieg was an excellent teacher. Sissel's older sister, Hanne, and her beau, Owen, were so transparently, deeply kind, one couldn't help but enjoy them. Then there was slow, smiling Knut, always amiable and amusing in his own way.

James had come to enjoy his moments in their small, clean house, posing as Sissel's suitor.

He kicked the horse to go faster, though the animal was already pouring sweat and its eyes rolled with fear.

James focused on identifying the road that led between two hills to the seventy-five acres the Hemstads owned. He recognized the shape of the turn and the dip in the elbow of the turn. It was a rut he'd had to watch out for when he brought a carriage to take Sissel driving.

Now he came over the hill, around the bend, and the farm was in sight, what was left of it.

The house was a smoking shell. His heart sank.

James steeled himself to what he might find . . . but as he came closer he saw, somehow, the barn was standing, its roof intact.

He felt a jagged burst of hope and then saw two figures standing near the house! Sissel and Knut!

"Dear God, you made it!" James said as he slid off his horse. Sissel

and her giant brother looked dazed and exhausted. Sissel's face was stained with soot, streaked with tears. He clasped her hands in his.

"I thought . . . I worried you'd all been lost."

"We are all right," she said, her voice a hoarse whisper.

Owen came from behind the house. He looked grieved and somber, as he set down blackened parts of stovepipe near a pile of their belongings. Clearly he was rummaging for anything that might be saved from the smoking husk of their home.

James shook his hand. "Did the fire reach town?" Owen asked.

"No, no. The river stopped it."

Owen motioned to Knut, and the two went to the back of the house, to leave James and Sissel alone for a moment.

James cast his eyes around the farm. "Hanne and Stieg?" he asked Sissel.

"Alive. Safe," Sissel said. Using her voice clearly pained her.

"I can't believe you are all right." He felt foolish. After the mad rush to get there, he hardly knew what to do with himself.

"Do you have any fresh water?" Sissel asked.

James shook his head.

"How stupid of me!" he said. "I was worried. I didn't know what I'd find."

Sissel coughed again. James walked toward the small pile of possessions that Owen and Knut had gathered and saw a bucket there.

"I'm going to go refill this bucket," he told her. "And then I'll go to town and bring back supplies—"

James was interrupted by the jangling of a wagon. It carried what must be a crew of volunteers and was driven by Isaiah McKray,

Isaiah was the son of the famous gold miner Jerome McKray. Isaiah was a stout, muscly fellow with sandy-brown hair and a beard,

only twenty years old but already given charge of a hotel in town and several mining outfits in the hills nearby.

He was thick in body, built like a barrel. He was notably blunt, always spoke his mind, and was uncannily shrewd in business. James didn't like how smart he was, or how successful.

Now McKray hailed them from the wagon, as did the other volunteers. There was Mr. Campbell, from the mill, and Mr. Trowley, one of the carpenters who was building the new town hall, along with some other workers from that site.

Hanne came out from the stable, and Owen and Knut walked out from the smoking shell of the house. The volunteers began exclaiming and thanking the heavens when they saw the Hemstads were alive.

McKray climbed down, his fine suit straining at the seams to accommodate his powerful build. He was what they'd call in Chicago a bruiser. No fine suit could hide it.

McKray shook Owen's hand. "We've been making a circuit of the area, looking for survivors."

"Is the teacher all right?" Mr. Campbell said, craning his neck to search for Stieg.

"He's resting in the barn," Hanne said.

"Thank God!"

"We've got fresh water and some blankets," Mr. Trowley said.

"We have food as well," McKray added.

Mr. Trowley started unloading supplies from the wagon.

"Are the Hensleys all right?" Hanne asked McKray. "Did you come that way?"

McKray shook his head. "Mrs. Hensley was in town, selling eggs, but Mr. Hensley . . ."

"No!" Hanne said.

Owen pulled her into a hug.

“What of the Baylors?” Hanne asked, her face anxious.

“We’ll visit them next,” McKray answered.

Hanne rested her forehead against Owen’s chest.

One of the workers had a flour sack bulging with food. He reached in and handed Knut a red apple and a sandwich wrapped in waxed paper. Knut took a bite of the apple, and the crunch of it made everyone look at him. He didn’t seem to notice.

“What a blessing it is you all made it safely,” Mr. Campbell said. “How did you survive? Did you hide in the stream?”

“We took to the barn,” Owen said. “Being sod, it didn’t burn.”

“You got lucky,” Mr. Campbell said. “The Hensleys’ house and barn burned, and they were both sod.”

“Listen,” Mr. Trowley said. “I think we should take you back to town. We need to stock up on more supplies, anyway, and folks will be so glad to know you all are safe.”

Owen scratched his head, looking around the ruined farm. “Hanne, maybe we should—” he began.

“I don’t think so,” Hanne said. “Stieg shouldn’t be moved.”

“You can have room and board at my hotel,” McKray offered.

“You’re also welcome to stay at the store,” James said. He was irritated with himself for not offering it first. He didn’t want to be outdone in hospitality by the jackass McKray.

“I don’t want to go anywhere,” Hanne said abruptly. Owen put a hand on her arm to steady her. “But if you have it, we would take some coffee. Oh, and you don’t have any headache powders, do you?”

“We have them at the store,” James said. “I can ride back to town and get them for you.”

“That would be very helpful,” Hanne said.

“What else needs doing?” Mr. Campbell asked.

“We are just tired. Thank you so much for your help,” Hanne said.
“We just need to rest now.”

“We’ll let people in town know you’re all right,” McKray said.
“And do let me know if you want to come to the hotel. I would never turn away a neighbor in need.”

James wanted to snort at that. So McKray wanted to be seen as a model citizen, did he? What a clod.

After another round of hand shaking and promises to return in the morning, the men climbed back onto the wagon and rode off.

James watched them go. He decided to mention McKray in his report. Maybe the boys back east could dig up something on the ambitious young man and his infamous father.

Then James set about making a list of provisions to gather from the store. Owen worried aloud about the cost. Of course he’d worry, James realized—they’d just lost their whole crop.

James assured Owen that they could have an unlimited extension on their line of credit.

The siblings were grateful. He looked around at their grim, tired faces and suddenly wished he could tell them, *You have a secret benefactor. The Baron Fjelstad is looking out for you. He’s the one who owns the store. You can have anything you want.*

But he would never do such a thing. He’d be fired, and Peavy would surely beat the pulp out of him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Twilight settled over the blackened fields. Lingering smoke magnified the sunset—the sky was shot through with dusty apricot and brilliant orange, the colors so intense they seemed nearly lewd to Hanne.

Their supper was bread and cured sausage that the men from town had left. Hanne had also built a fire—a fire, of all things, in order to make coffee for Stieg.

Hanne crouched next to the small blaze, feeding it just enough so that she could boil water. Their coffeepot survived the wildfire, though the wooden handle had burned away. Hanne settled it into the embers, using the iron poker that Owen had also plucked from the wreckage.

Sissel was in the barn with Stieg now. She had the assignment to force him to drink water every time he woke.

It was too early to know if Stieg's vision was intact. The headaches

Stieg suffered when he used his Nytte would someday take his sight, or at least this is what their aunty Aud had told them to expect.

Aud was a Storm-Rend, like Stieg. Before they had met Rolf, their aunt had been the source of almost all their knowledge about the Nytte. The little else they had learned had come from their bitter drunkard of a father.

Each Nytte had a curse that accompanied it. Storm-Rends would eventually go blind; Oar-Breakers would grow so large their hearts would give out. Shipwrights, which is what their father had been, gradually lost their fingers and toes, like lepers. Berserkers, when they killed to protect their loved ones or themselves, became intensely hungry and would die if they did not eat. There were other types of Nytte mentioned in the ancient poems, Shield-Skinneds and Ransackers, but there had been no sign of them in generations.

Hanne had eaten more than her share of the goods left behind by the volunteers, but then, the hunger had not been too powerful today. She had not killed anyone.

“I found another cup,” Owen said, approaching. He sat down, collapsing onto the bare earth. He reached forward and set a dented tin cup on a rock near the fire. He had scrubbed it in the stream, and it was nearly clean.

“I’m so sorry about Pal—” Hanne began.

“We can’t stay here—” Owen said at the same time.

They stopped speaking. Hanne reached out her hand, and Owen took it in his. She noticed there was char under his nails and embedded in the lines of his knuckles.

His hand, no matter how grimy, was so dear to her.

“It’s hard to say what we should do,” Hanne said.

“We can stay here until Stieg recovers, but then . . . I don’t know.”

Daisy padded out from the barn and flopped herself down at Owen’s side. She offered up her belly for scratching.

“At least Daisy is all right,” Owen said.

Hanne burst into tears, her first of the long, awful day.

“Oh, Owen, I’m so sorry for Pal. You never wanted to farm, anyway. If you had been off on Pal, doing the work of a cowboy or training cow dogs the way you wanted to—”

“Shhh,” Owen said, drawing her close.

“This was never your idea to farm, and now all your work was for nothing!” She choked on a sob. “And poor Pal!”

Hanne pressed her head against Owen’s chest. His shirt reeked of sweat and smoke.

“Shhh,” Owen said. “Hanne, animals die. That’s a fact of working on a ranch or a farm. We made it, and it’s a miracle we did. We’re all safe and alive, and that’s what matters.”

Daisy, not liking to be left out, came over and nosed into their embrace, licking faces.

“Off,” Owen told her, not unkindly. “Down stay.” Daisy sank immediately to her haunches and set her face on her paws. “Good girl.”

“Do you wish you had never met us?” Hanne said quietly.

“Hanne, meeting you and your brothers and sister is the best thing that has ever happened to me. Please don’t doubt that even for a second.”

Hanne closed her eyes and allowed herself to be truly comforted, body and heart, by the solidity of the man she loved.

There was a sound behind them, and they turned to see Stieg emerging from the barn, leaning on Sissel.

Hanne wiped her face and rose quickly to help them. Anxiety

flared up—Sissel was too weak for him to lean on, and Hanne didn't want either of them to fall.

"Why are you up?" Hanne said. "You should be resting. Both of you."

"Not so loud," Stieg said, his eyes squinting against the small brightness of the fire. "I smelled coffee."

Owen had retrieved their single surviving chair from over by the house and offered it to Stieg. Hanne and Sissel helped ease him down onto it.

"How is your vision, Brother?" Hanne asked in a low voice.

Stieg shrugged. "It's a bit blurry, but I can make out the fire. And the sunset. And your face. It's scowling at me."

Owen chuckled.

"I'll be all right," Stieg said.

Hanne put her hand on her brother's shoulder.

"You saved us all today," she said.

Stieg squinted into the fire. He was shivering a bit.

"The Gods saved us," he said. "Once again, we must be thankful for the Nytte."

Hanne saw Sissel look away. She knew Sissel wished she had a Nytte. Hanne saw it on her sister's face sometimes.

Hanne wished she could tell Sissel how lucky she was to be free of it. It was hard on one's body and one's mind, and Sissel was frail to begin with.

She could escape their history altogether, Hanne thought. She could marry James Peavy, take his name, and move back to Chicago with him.

James planned to go to college and become a lawyer. Sissel could make a new life with him, free forever from the fear that the Baron

Fjelstad would one day track down her family and send more Berserkers after them.

There came a sudden crash from the back of the house, where Knut was still working at extracting items that might be of use.

Though Hanne felt no inner alarm, she crossed anyway, to make sure Knut was all right.

He came around the side of the house just as she approached. In his hands he held the straw tick from her bed. The fire had not taken the small bedroom she and Sissel had shared. Their precious trunk had survived, and so, it seemed, had this straw tick.

“Look what I got for Stieg!” Knut said. “It smells smoky, but it’s still better than sleeping on the ground, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” Hanne said. A smile came to her lips. Her strong brother, holding up a mattress, and grinning as if he’d just caught a fat fish.

As bad as the fire had been, Owen was right. They survived, each of them—a miracle of their own contrivance.