La Porte, Indiana, 1907

'This happened many years ago, in the valley where I grew up.' My children crowded around me on the bed; their hands were sticky with porridge and the empty china was stacked on the floor, where Prince, our collie dog, huffed and rolled over in his sleep. I had turned the kerosene lamp on the bedside table down, and the little flame cast the room in a soft, warm glow.

Outside the window, it was dark.

'A man was out in the woods chopping wood,' I said, 'when his wife suddenly came out from among the trees. She looked just as she had that same morning when the man set out from home. She was carrying a bowl of sour-cream porridge, which she offered him to eat. "This is for you, dear husband, for working so hard in the woods," she said. The man took the porridge from her hands, and it smelled *so* good and looked even better. Then he noticed that his wife wasn't sitting on the log with him but was crouching down in the underbrush, and he suddenly got suspicious that his wife was not really his wife at all but a hulder from beneath the earth!' At this my children chuckled and shuddered, and crept even closer to me under the knitted blanket.

'"I think you are fooling me!" The man cast the food aside. "I think you are a hulder," he cried. And up she went, and now he could see the long tail trailing under her skirt, and she ran off, screaming and cursing and neighing like a horse!'

The girls giggled with delight, but my son's eyes were large with fear. He was not yet four and a little too young for such terrible tales.

'Why did she give him food?' asked Lucy, her little face upturned.

'Because that's how they cast a spell, the hulder people. If you

eat or drink something of theirs, they can catch you.' I widened my eyes and twisted my lips. Lucy whined and squirmed beside me, and I could not help but chuckle.

'What happens then?' Myrtle's soft mouth hung open. She was easier to scare than her younger sister was, and I saw just as much fear as delight in her expression.

'Oh, they take you with them into the earth – and you can never come back then, or see your family again.' I shook my head with a solemn expression.

'Why?' Lucy asked. I could see a trace of porridge on her round cheek.

'They always want a human bride or groom.' I reached out with a finger to wipe off the smear.

'But she looked like his wife.' Lucy's clear brow furrowed as she struggled to understand.

'That's right. The hulder can look like anyone you know.'

'But how will we know then?' Lucy suddenly sat up straight. 'How will we know that you are you?'

'Well, that's easy. If I am kind, I am myself. If I'm not . . . then I'm a hulder.' I suddenly felt hot. A tightening in my chest made it hard to breathe.

'And you'll take us underground?' Myrtle shuddered beside me. Her dark eyes glistened in the dim light. 'Never to come back?'

'Just that.' I reached over to the bedside table for some of the silver-wrapped caramels I kept in a bowl. The story had suddenly soured on me.

I did not want to speak more of it.

PART ONE

Brynhild Paulsdatter Størset

I.

Brynhild

Selbu, Norway, 1877

The smell of meat drove me out of the storehouse to rest against the timbered wall. My head was spinning and I felt sick. It had happened often lately.

'You should be careful, Little Brynhild.' Gurine came outside as well, climbing slowly down the stone steps while wiping her hands on her apron. She was chewing on something: a piece of mutton. The old woman had become scrawny over the winter; age had sucked all the fat away, leaving her a bony frame and wisps of white-gray hair. She followed my gaze across the farmyard to the six men who stood by the barn. It was a cold but sunny morning in May; the birches in the yard were budding and the horses grazed in the pasture. One of the men, a farmhand called Ivar, told a story while gesturing wildly with his hands. All the others laughed. They were far enough away that we could not hear what he said, but we could certainly hear the laughter: hard peals of mirth hauled through the air. For a moment, I thought they were looking at me, but if they did, their gazes shifted away before I could be certain.

'They are not to be trusted, the young ones,' said Gurine. 'Like bucks in heat, the lot of them.' She spat gray gristle down on the grass.

'He can't deny me forever,' I said, although I was not so sure about that. I could not make myself stop looking at him, standing there laughing with his head thrown back. His dark, thick hair curled out from under his knitted cap, he looked healthy and strong, and his cheeks blushed red in the chill morning air. His

hands were buried deep in his pockets. I knew those hands well, could feel the ghost of them on my skin even as I spoke. 'I can make him do it, even if he says no.' Even if things had changed between us, I still held out hope that I would know those hands once more. I found it hard to believe that all was lost.

'You put too much trust in the priest, Little Brynhild. He was never a friend to women like us,' Gurine said.

'Women like us?' I glanced at her.

'Women with nothing to their names.'

'Well, he doesn't much like sinners either. I will talk to the priest about Anders. If the priest says he must, he will.' I lifted my chin just a little.

'Oh, Little Brynhild.' The old woman shook her head. 'I don't think it will be that easy . . . Anders has a farm to his name, and money too. Who do you think the priest will believe?'

My hand fluttered to my belly, caressing it through the worn fabric of my apron. 'I have the child as proof.'

Gurine clucked with her tongue. 'You could have gotten that child anywhere.'

I nodded. Anders had said that as well when I went to his room and told him what had happened. He laughed even, as if I should have known better than to come to *him* with my plight. 'I haven't been with anyone else,' I told Gurine, although she already knew that. We shared work and a bed at the farm six days a week, and it had become too hard to lie about the changes in me. We often toiled alone in the kitchen, stirring porridge and carving meat, so it was better that she knew in case I became faint. The fumes from the food did not agree with me since the child took hold. I was often tired and sick. The price I paid for my candidness was Gurine's constant warnings and a quiet offer to solve my problem with a knitting needle. She had seen this before, she said. It never ended well for the girl.

I did not believe that to be true, though. I would make him do what was right, even if I had to force him. It was the two of us together, after all, who had caused this to happen in the first place. I had not been alone in the barn after dark, deep in the musty hay.

He had been there too, and I said as much to Gurine, who had sunk down on a stone slab that served as a step to the storehouse.

'Oh, but the world doesn't work like that,' she said as another peal of laughter rose from the group of men by the barn. 'You know it doesn't, Little Brynhild. If he were a lesser man he might do you right, but *that* one' – she nodded in the barn's direction – 'he is heir to all of this and won't bother with a girl like you.' She paused to spit gristle down in the grass. 'If you are lucky, he will slip you some money or set you up with a tenant, but I don't think he'll do even that.' Her face took on a thoughtful expression. 'He is spoiled, that one . . . he won't care.'

I could tell that she felt sorry for me, and that hurt more than any words. I never did well with pity.

'Hansteen will set it right,' I insisted as a pounding at my temples warned me that a headache was coming on.

'The priest won't lift a finger.' Gurine squinted up at me as I stood there beside her, wringing the gray, worn apron between my clammy hands. I hated how sure she sounded. I hated that she might be right. Cold sweat broke out all over my body and my heart raced when I thought that I might not get my way. This was a long departure from the giddiness I had felt when I first caught his eyes after Christmas. I had thought it all so easy then. I had thought it was the beginning of something. I always believed I could do better than porridge and toil, that my hard work and diligence would earn me a reward. And for a while, I had thought that he might come to care for me, and that one day, I would cross the yard in front of me not as a maid in threadbare shoes but as the mistress of it all – and him.

I never told Gurine about those hopes of love, but I did tell her about my plan to force him. I confided in her the same night that I knocked on Anders's door and found him drunk in his room. I had prepared every word I was to say to him. I had meant for him to feel remorseful of how our time together had left me in such trouble.

'How do you know it's mine?' he asked instead, sitting on the lip of his red pullout bed. His eyes were glassy from drinking. 'I'm not the first man you have tricked into the barn.'

'But you are,' I protested. 'There hasn't been anyone else.'

'No?' He emptied the tin cup in his hand. 'That's not what they say.'

I felt confused. Who were *they* and what did they say? 'Well, they lie. There never was anyone else.'

He shrugged. The light from the candle he kept on the table chased shadows across his handsome face, and on the timbered walls. 'I don't see what you want from me.' His gaze met mine across the small room; the air was stale in there, warm and musty. I could hear the crackling of fire coming from the small black oven in the corner. There was no warmth in his eyes, though; they were much like dark pebbles in the flickering light. 'Why are you telling me this?'

'Why?' I could not believe my own ears. 'Because you should do right by me. We ought to go to the priest.'

The corner of his mouth lifted in a smirk. 'What for, Brynhild? Why should you and I go to the priest?'

'To marry,' I replied, and my voice did not quiver when I said it. It was the right thing to do, after all. He might not care for me as I hoped he would, but he *had* gotten me with child. Outside the window, between the plaid curtains, I could see the birch trees moving with the wind, black silhouettes against a dark blue sky. I felt like they laughed at me all of a sudden, as if they were chuckling so hard they could not stand still.

'Marry you?' Anders laughed as well. 'Are you mad or slow, or as shrewd as your father? Do you really think you can trick me like that?' Anders's brow glistened when he lifted the bottle from the floor and filled his cup to the brim. 'I should never have sullied my hands with the likes of you.' He put down the bottle and lay back on the bed, still with the cup. I had changed that bed just the other day, beaten the pillows and smoothed down the sheets while saying a quick little prayer. Not that it seemed to do me much good.

'You are drunk,' I decided, and straightened my pose. 'You aren't thinking clearly. Tomorrow you will see things differently.'

'Oh Brynhild.' He flung his arm across his eyes and gave a little laugh; the liquor in his cup danced and escaped, landed on his shirt,

and created dark stains. 'Don't you see? I would never, ever marry *you*.' He spat the last word as if it were repulsive.

'I will go if you're with me or not.' I forced my voice not to quiver. 'Hansteen will see to it that things are set right between us.'

He removed his arm so I could see his face. Something hard had settled on his features. He did not look so handsome just then but reminded me of my father. 'Are you threatening me, Brynhild?'

'I just want what's right – and I'm sure the priest will agree. He never liked a sinner.' This was not how I had wanted things to go between us, but what else could I do but stand my ground? The child was *there*, in my belly, growing and thriving. 'Surely it's God's will for us to marry now,' I tried. 'He wouldn't have sent me this child if it weren't.'

He glanced at me. 'I think it's your *will* that's at work here, and that has nothing to do with the Lord.'

'The priest might see it differently.'

He chuckled down in the bed. 'Oh, you wouldn't dare.'

'I would! And then the shame would be all on you.'

'Oh, I think some shame would drip on you as well, and Hansteen can't make me do anything.' His lips twisted up and made him look ugly. Outside the birches laughed and laughed.

'You wouldn't like it if he banned you from church – your father wouldn't be happy, that's for sure. Maybe he'd even take the farm.' I tried my very best to come up with things to change his mind.

'Go!' he suddenly shouted from the bed, so loud that I was sure his parents would hear it. He had dropped the cup down in the bed, and the rest of the liquor soaked through the hay.

It scared me, though, that outcry. Enough that I tiptoed back downstairs to the bed I shared with Gurine behind the kitchen. I crawled in under the woolen blankets, shivering from it all. Her arms came to hold me then, fragile as they were. 'There, there, Little Brynhild.' She made soothing sounds in the darkness. 'Why is the young master shouting at you in the middle of the night?'

'It doesn't matter,' I said. 'I will see the priest about it.'

She sighed when she realized what I meant. 'So that's how it is, then?'

'It is.' I stared up at the ceiling through the darkness.

'And now he won't –'

'No.'

Her voice dropped to a whisper. 'You know I can help you get rid of it –'

'No!' Even in my wretched state, I was not about to let this opportunity slip. 'I can make him – I'm sure of it.'

Gurine, however, was not so sure, and nothing I had said since could make her feel any different. She did not think I could make the marriage happen – but I could! I *had* to believe that I could. Hansteen liked me, and I had always been diligent at church. He would put the blame where it belonged for sure. Anders should have known better than to kiss a young maid in the barn. Hansteen would make him – and then he had to – and then I would never eat gruel again.

The men by the barn were moving now, carrying heavy tools. Anders carried an axe. They were to work on the western field today, mending fences.

'They are headed up,' Gurine observed with a warning in her voice. It meant they had to pass us by and she wanted me to slip inside the storehouse. I did no such thing. I stayed put, righted my headscarf, and tilted my chin up as they drew closer: a gaggle of filthy men, hair greasy and shirts stained. I could see their muscles working as they walked toward us, how they bulged and strained under their clothes. Their lips were all drawn out in hard smiles.

'What is wrong with you, Little Brynhild?' Ivar said, mocking me. 'You look like you just licked a lemon.'

'What would you know about that?' I replied. 'I'm sure you've never even tasted one yourself.'

Ivar laughed. 'They're fine enough with a little sugar, or so I've heard. You should try some of that.'

Before I had time to reply, a man called Gunnar spoke. 'I think she's gotten enough sugar for a while. Enough that she has started to swell.' He kept his eyes on the ground in front of his feet; a smile played on his lips.

I drew my breath to reply to him when I noticed that Anders had

fallen behind the others. His gaze met mine, as cold as before, but at least he approached me and that was something. 'Leave us alone, Gurine,' he said. The old woman got to her feet and gave me a worried glance before she shuffled across the yard with her head bent, leaving the two of us alone outside the storehouse. The men had continued up the hill, though a couple of them looked back over their shoulders. Gunnar was still smiling.

Anders let his hand with the axe drop down by his side. His brow looked slick despite the chill in the air. His eyes did not meet my gaze. 'Have you come to your senses yet, Brynhild?' The axe swung slowly back and forth. 'It's bad enough that everyone knows –'

'I didn't say a thing,' I said quickly. I wanted to stay on his good side if I could. I wanted him to be my husband, after all.

'Women talk.' He shrugged.

'I don't.' And neither did Gurine. 'I think it's you who have told them.' I looked after the men.

Another shrug then. 'Be as it might, I didn't come to talk about slippery tongues.'

'No?'

'I wanted to know if you still think it's mine, that child you carry –'

'It is! There hasn't been any other.'

He swallowed hard and would still not meet my gaze. 'I suppose you still think we should marry, then.'

'I do!' Could it be that he had come around? My heart beat faster in my chest.

He shifted on the ground before me; the axe still swung back and forth. 'Why don't you come to the dance on Saturday night? We can talk then, down by the lake.' He did not smile, did not look me in the eye. 'It will be easier then, when there aren't so many people around. We can sneak away, just the two of us.'

I nodded while all sorts of feelings battled inside me: some worry, some hope, and a bottomless want.

He lifted his gaze; it lingered on my belly, although there was not much to see yet. 'I'll see you on Saturday, Brynhild. Alone.' His gaze slid away from me. He heaved the axe over his shoulder and

walked on fast to catch up with the rest, leaving me behind by the storehouse.

Gurine appeared in the open door to the farmhouse; she had heard every word, of course. She used her bony hand to shield her eyes from the sun as she stepped outside and came toward me while slowly shaking her head.

'What is it now?' I was annoyed. 'Things are finally going my way. He wants to meet me – you heard what he said!'

'Yes, and I don't like it . . . Be careful, Little Brynhild.' She took hold of my arm. 'I don't trust that man at all.'

2.

Even before my skirt turned wet, I knew that I was bleeding. Though I had never felt it before, I knew what that pain at the bottom of my spine meant. I knew that the child would leave me.

I do not know if I already bled when he left me by the water's edge, or if the bleeding began when I slowly tried to rise. I knew I could not faint down there. It was May and the nights were still cold. I had to stand up and move my feet, get myself back home. I would *not* die, I told myself. I would not die – I would survive. I would survive if only to spite him. He wanted me dead; well, look: I was walking, if slowly and on shivering legs. I was walking in pain, away from the lake and across the dirt track to the safety of the woods. I wiped blood off my face with the hem of my skirt; tears and snot soaked the dark fabric too. A sharp edge was the only thing left where my tooth used to be; another tooth was clean split in half.

I did not feel that pain yet.

I could not stop the violent shivers, or the deep sobs that came ripping from my chest. Hoarse noises poured from my throat as I lumbered along like a wounded bear. The nosebleed stopped, so perhaps it was not broken, but my jaw was swollen and tender to the touch. Then it was the real pain – the only one that mattered. Before long, it came in ripples and aches as my belly convulsed to rid itself of the damaged cargo. I leaned against a spruce, pressed my shoulders to the rough bark, and tried to breathe through the contractions like women in labor do, although this was no birth. When it eased up some, I stumbled on and lifted my gaze, but there was nothing to see except for more trees, heavy branches crowded with lichen, ghostly white in the pale night light. The thick moss that covered the ground looked blue and the air smelt of wet soil and sap. Størsetgjerdet was still miles off, the way home steep and hard. I thought I might die before I made it that far.

I held on to trunks as I walked, careful to keep out of sight from the farms. No one was to see me like that. I would not let anyone laugh at me, even if it meant I perished in there, hidden by the trees. I paused again as more pain ripped through me, and my thighs were slick with fresh blood. I lay down on the mossy ground, folded my elbows under my chest, and spread my legs. Perspiration washed the blood from my brow, hot and thick, as I lay there panting, bleeding. The convulsions lasted for hours, maybe – minutes, I could not tell. It was fast, though, as births go. Anders had been thorough in beating the child out of me. When the cramping finally stopped, I fell over to my side and lay there for a while, gazing skyward. Every breath I took was a struggle as my ribs ached and burned. When I had gathered enough courage, I looked down on the mess on the ground. I could not tell it with my eyes, but I felt it was a girl, curled up in the hot blood.

The beginning of a daughter of mine.

Now it had come to nothing.

I used my hands to rip away moss and dig a hole in the soft, cool dirt. I was not sure how much good it would do, but I wanted to protect her from scavenging foxes. It did not get very deep, as I had no strength to give. I pulled off one of my woolen stockings, the cleanest piece of cloth on my body, and wrapped my daughter in it. My belly had just started to curve so there was not much to wrap. It felt slippery in my hands, though. Slippery and warm. The scent of iron was strong and fresh – it was animal scent, the scent of slaughter.

Down in the hole she went. Into the fragrant soil, next to a coiling root. As I pushed the damp dirt back on top of the remains, I marveled at the way it covered her up, smooth and soft, as if the girl were erased by blackness.

As if nothing were down there at all.

I smoothed the earth on top of the grave, but I did not weep, oh no – he had kicked all the tears out of me too. 'If I put it there, I better get it out again,' he had said before his foot hit my belly. Then he grabbed hold of the little bit of lace I had on my blouse – the very best I had – and yanked me from the ground to plant a fist in my jaw.

No, I would not weep for that man.

After I buried my daughter, I lay still for a little while longer, bleeding, while I looked up at the tall pines moving uneasy against the pale sky. Clouds came drifting with the dawn: wisps of slate gray that chased one another and snapped at one another's tails. Like wolves, those clouds, rushing across the sky, waiting for the red sun to rise. I waited for it too, down on the ground, curled up, ruined and empty inside.

This was what we were worth, the dead child and I. We could be torn asunder, cast away and laughed at while we bled. We were nothing but vermin and stains to those people. I wanted to be a wolf too, to snarl and bite and tear apart, and taste the blood of those who laughed.

Instead, I staggered to my feet and stumbled on. I did not even look back.

I would rise, if only to spite.

Vermin always survive.

Daylight had long since arrived when I finally made the last, slow climb up to Størsetgjerdet, my father's small tenant farm. A sour smell of wood smoke greeted me, and the bleating of our single goat. Just a few steps left and I barely made it – it felt like crossing a mountain. Crusted blood striped my calves, my clothes were stiff with it, and yet I was still bleeding.

The single room inside the small house was dark, the ceiling low. Mother was out, but Father was there, sitting by the stove. He had his knife in his hand and whittled chips of wood into the flames. The scent of thin coffee reached me by the door and made my aching stomach convulse.

My father looked up, his gray beard thick and tangled. He took me in, top to bottom. 'What mess have you gotten yourself into now?'

I found the pail by the door and threw up, heaved and sputtered into it.

'Looks like she's *rid* herself of the mess.' Olina's voice sounded behind me. I could hear her uneven steps on the floor as she came to gloat. Her fingers grasped my stiff skirt, tugged at it almost gently.

'Not so haughty now, are you?' Her voice was not as spiteful as I had expected. She was tall like me but slender and spindly; her left leg was stiff as a twig. There was nothing to do for that. My sister would never leave home.

Bright light flooded the dark, smoky room when Mother arrived, carrying water. My head was still curved over the pail as I did not trust the heaving to be over, but I heard her familiar shuffle behind me and my shoulders sagged with relief. The floor shook when she set down her heavy load, and then I felt her fingers splayed on my back. 'Can't you see she's sick, you fools?' She pushed Olina back and my sister made a complaining sound. 'Standing there like a cow,' Mother snapped at her. 'And you' – to my father – 'is that all you can do? Sit there whittling while your daughter is bleeding?'

'She's no child of mine,' he said, as he always did when displeased.

'Olina, help me get her on the bed.' Mother did not hear him. I cried out when their hands came to touch me and force me away from the pail.

'Good God, child, who did that to you?' Mother paled when she saw the state of my face. Even Olina's eyes widened and she bit her lower lip. I tried to answer, but fresh pain was throbbing at my temples, and my swollen jaw made it hard to speak.

'Get her on the bed, on the bed, bring the pail.' Mother barked orders while she and Olina forced me to move my legs and cross the floor. They took me to the bed in the corner, the one I shared with Olina. I slumped down on top of it, smelled the musty hay and sour sweat, blood – always the blood. Mother went to heat water; Olina sat on the three-legged spinning chair, staring at me, her mouth hung open as if she had never seen an uglier animal than me. Then suddenly there was a thudding sound and the quiet hum of steel.

My father had risen from the chair and thrown his knife across the room. It was embedded in the timber above my head, stood there, quivering. A curse.

Father had made his opinion known.

*

The first few days were a haze. I remember wet cloth on my face and an aching all over, a searing pain in my back and belly. Something was wrong in me. I could taste it as a bitter cloying on my tongue; I was festering from within. The blood on the rags Mother brought me turned from red and black to pink and yellow, and it reeked.

I often lay awake, too weak to talk but not to listen, staring at the ceiling. I knew the patterns and swirls of the timber by heart, just as I knew every inch of that room. The awkward angle of the small cooking stove, haphazardly installed. The open shelves on the wall above the table with cups, plates, and tins filled with printed psalms and letters. A large chest under a window for storage. The narrow stairs to the loft where we slept as children. The rickety spinning wheel placed in a corner. The four mismatched chairs with flaking paint. There were three clotheslines strung across the ceiling, heavy with musty garments. Two beds. One bench. Oh, how I loathed that place, and even more so when I found myself trapped there, too sick to move an inch.

Listening in on my family did nothing to soothe my pain.

'She won't last,' Father said from his place by the stove.

'Don't you have any work to do?' Mother was sitting by the table, preparing moss for drying. It would help soak up the blood. 'She will or she won't. It's up to God now.'

'Will he hang if she dies?' Olina was stirring the pot of gruel. She would want me to taste it later. The thought of it made my stomach churn.

'No one will hang.' Father sucked his pipe.

'Maybe we *should* tell someone,' Mother muttered.

'Tell them what?' The pipe came away. 'That she has made a fool of herself and gotten herself in trouble? We reap what we sow in this world.'

'What did you sow then, to have such a grand life?' The bitterness coiled like smoke in the room.

'You knew what I had when you took me. If it's not good enough you're free to go elsewhere.' He spat on the floor. 'You and the changeling both.'

Mother laughed then, loud and shrill. 'Oh Paul, you can't talk your way out of that one.' She would be nodding in my direction. 'She is yours; just look at that nose.'

'The changelings can look like anything they want; what do I know if you've been seeing some troll?'

'When would I have had time for that with your brood hanging in my skirts?'

It was Father's turn to laugh, a hard-edged chuckle. 'Too late for regrets now, isn't it?'

'You *should* talk to someone, though.' Mother's voice again. 'If she dies, someone will have to answer.'

He took a while, seemed to consider it. 'We're losing income, that's for sure.'

Mother sighed. 'You should let her keep what she earns or she'll never get far.'

'We feed her, don't we? Clothe her?'

'Barely. She saved up for that lace with what little you left her. Now I don't see how I can get the blood out.'

'They say she was beaten by Selbu Lake.' Olina had been out then, down in the valley. 'They say it was *he* who did it – he who put that child in her.'

Mother gave another sigh. 'I'm just glad he didn't drown her, then.'

'He was about to' – Olina's voice rose with glee – 'but then someone came and he lost his nerve.'

Do you want to sleep in the lake tonight, Brynhild? That was what he had said to me down by the lapping water. *I'll help you get in there, don't you worry. You and your bastard both!*

'They have never been very good to us, the people down in the valley.' Mother's voice was hard as rock. 'They always looked down on us, even those with little to their name.' This was an old and worn complaint. I knew what she would say next: 'We ought to keep ourselves to ourselves.'

'If Father weren't so mad all the time –' Olina stopped mid-sentence; there was a scratching sound and a loud smack. He had gotten off his chair and stopped her foul mouth.

I heard him sit back down again, the creaking of his chair. 'Perhaps it's better if this is the end.'

Mother sucked in her breath. 'Shame on you for saying such a thing. She is your own flesh and blood, and a blessing.'

'Doesn't look much like a blessing to me, lying there bleeding in the hay.'

'Have you no heart?'

I heard Father filling his cup from the bottle; strong fumes mingled with the smoke and sickness in the air. 'The Lord gives and the Lord takes.'

'And we ought to be *grateful* for every small gift he gives.'

I opened my mouth then. Lips dry and split, and spoke my very first words since that night: 'Or I could leave.'

The room fell quiet; only the flames crackled and sputtered. Then there was a flurry of motion as my mother and sister crossed the floor and came into my vision, Olina with an angry red mark on her cheek.

Mother's dry hand landed on my forehead. 'I think the fever has broken.' She sounded surprised. I was not. I had sworn to live, if only to spite – and that was what I would do.

My brothers Peder and Ole came by, delivering letters. They had already heard about me; I could see it on their faces when they entered. None of my siblings but poor Olina with her limp lived at Størsetgjerdet anymore. All had thought Peder would take over when Father grew old, and perhaps he would, but not yet. He was a tenant on another farm where he got more land to work for himself. Ole, far younger, stayed with him. Father complained about that; he would rather have Ole at home. My brother was happy to escape, though. Peder was not an easy man either, but he had a wife and young children. It was livelier there.

Peder nodded in my direction when he saw me. I was no longer in bed but sitting on the spinning chair with a cushion of moss between my legs. It did not smell as bad as it had. The blood had cleared up some, trickling pink.

'So you're up then.' He delivered a small wad of letters to my

mother. She took a quick look at them and noted the handwriting. Then she gave them to me.

'She is just sitting there,' Olina complained, looking my way. 'She can't *do* anything.'

'She'll be back to work in no time, I'm sure.' Peder's gaze avoided mine and he turned to serve himself coffee from the kettle. Ole was still lingering by the door, tall and broad-necked, a little simple. He did not look at me at all but stared down at the floor instead.

'Are they talking in the valley?' Mother asked Peder. Father was out, so we could chat freely.

'Some.' Peder sat down and tasted his coffee, grimaced at the heat. His beard was dark and full, as Father's used to be, his face tanned and worn from long hours in the sun. 'When will you go back to work, Little Brynhild? I'm afraid they'll find another maid if you –'

'She won't.' Mother cut him off. 'Not if I have any say in it.'

He took a moment, thought about it. 'Father won't be pleased if she stays at home.'

'She could go elsewhere, like Marit did.' My sister had served outside Selbu before she got married. I could see her crooked scribblings on one of the letters in my hands. Another envelope beckoned me, though, shone like a moon on a starless night. I knew that slanted handwriting, that poor spelling, as well as my own. The stamp was like a gemstone, glittering bright. I lifted the letter to my nose and sniffed it: paper glue and dust, but it was different from all other paper and dust, because it came from across the sea.

'I'll go back to work.' My speech was still garbled due to the swelling.

'Not looking like that.' Olina glanced at me. Her fingers were busy with the sewing in her lap.

'You won't,' Mother agreed.

'The pain will go away.' I shifted on the chair as if to prove it. Everything ached and burned.

Peder's gaze measured me. 'Not for another few weeks yet.'

'One week,' I promised.

Ole finally sat down by the table and let Mother fetch him coffee. 'He should be treated the same, he who did that.' His voice was quivering, with anger perhaps.

'Wouldn't do much good.' Mother sounded weary and wiped her brow with the back of her hand.

Peder was still measuring me. 'Marit went to Rødde farm. Perhaps you could go there too.'

'Is it far enough away?' Ole's cup shook when he brought it to his lips. 'Won't they know?'

'Probably, but she wouldn't see *him* all the time.' My brother's lips curled with distaste.

'They say I asked for it, don't they?' I could not help but say it aloud. Neither of my brothers answered, which was a good enough answer for me.

Peder sighed and stretched out his legs. 'You should have been more careful. It never pays off taunting those who have more to their name.'

'I should have gone to the priest. He would have set things right.'

Peder shook his head. 'Hansteen would rather believe a farmer's son than you.'

'I would have had the child to prove it.'

Mother sighed; Peder shifted. 'Stories like that never end well. They would say you were hungry for gold.'

'They already do, I reckon.' I looked to my brother for an answer.

Another shrug. 'Sure they do. It was a stupid and reckless thing you did.'

'I didn't get with child on purpose.'

'That doesn't matter if they think you did.'

I clutched the letters in my hands so hard the ink was starting to smear. 'Are they laughing?'

A pause. 'Yes.' Peder's gaze dropped away. 'They're laughing.'

They all bent their heads then: Olina over her sewing, Mother over the knitting, and my brothers over their cups. All bent their heads in shame but me. Mother sighed and bit her lip. Ole fidgeted. I ripped open the bejeweled envelope in my lap and tried to catch a whiff of that other place as I pulled the paper out. Nellie's scribbles

filled two pages. *Dear Mother and Father . . .* it began. *You will be happy to hear that we are settling in nicely in our new apartment here in Chicago . . .*

'What is she saying?' Mother asked. She never learned to read well.

I skimmed the letter. 'She is doing fine. She complains about the weather . . . She says the streets are filled with people, but nobody really knows one another.' She wrote it as if it were a thing to mourn, not to envy.

'You must read it out to me tonight.' Mother's shoulders slumped with relief. She always worried that there would be bad news: sickness, fire, or death. 'We must write her back too. I won't see her again in my lifetime, I reckon.' She folded her hands in her lap and sighed. 'But at least we have those letters.'

'Maybe we all ought to go to America.' Peder's gaze narrowed. 'We can own land there, not break our backs plowing someone else's dirt.'

'There's not a single acre left unclaimed around these parts.' Ole nodded. 'We'll be tenants till we die.'

'It's crowded over there as well.' Mother lifted her head. 'It is dusty and vile: horses rotting in the streets, houses burning down around people's heads . . . you've heard what your sister writes.'

'That's in the cities, Mother. It is different in the country. Black soil as far as the eye can see.' Ole's voice had turned wistful.

Mother gave him a look. 'Who have you been talking to?' She picked up her knitting from her lap; the needles clicked softly as her fingers worked the yarn into neat rows.

Ole did not speak more of it. He knew Mother did not like talk about America. She was foolish like that. Shortsighted. I looked down at the pages in my hand and a lump formed in my throat, making it hard to breathe. I hated my sister for having escaped, leaving me behind to rot.

That night, after writing down Mother's words, useless sentences about the goat, crops, and her terrible gout, I added some extra words to the letter: *Little Brynhild is not doing so well. She has problems finding her place in the valley. She was attacked for no reason,*

bleeding badly from the stomach. It seems they have it in for her. Perhaps the best thing would be if she could join you in America. If your husband has any amount to spare that could help pay her fare, I am sure she could be a great help to you in the house. I signed the letter, *Your Mother and Father.*

3.

Nellie

Chicago, 1877

I folded the letter and pushed it back into the envelope. The stiff paper had turned soft, as I had already read it many times, once aloud to my husband, John. I lifted the little piece of home to my nose to see if I could catch a whiff of pine, wood smoke, and soft, damp moss. Størsetgjerdet felt so very far away; it seemed like a lifetime since I last crossed the threshold and entered, beheld the cramped quarters, the soot-stained walls and the rough-hewn chairs, the rickety spinning wheel in the corner. I had no use for such a tool in Chicago; I bought my yarn in skeins ready for the knitting needles. The scent of wet moss was replaced by that of burning coal and horse sweat, boiling food from a dozen kitchens. The sound of chirping birds no longer greeted me in the mornings; instead, I heard the racket of wagon wheels on the bricked street, children crying and mothers scolding, men scrambling down the stairs of our tenement building ready to go to work. I did not regret the change, but sometimes I longed for the quiet. It is in your blood, I suppose, if you grow up as I did, high up, yet still far below, stern faces of mountains flecked with snow.

You will always long for peace.

I could barely see my family's faces anymore; they remained blurred in my mind no matter how hard I tried. I could see their bodies, though: Mother with her bony hands in her lap, always working on something. Father with his unkempt beard sitting before the fire, and Little Brynhild, still twelve in my memory, with square shoulders and hooded eyes, fists always clenched at her sides, as if preparing for an oncoming fight.

My heart ached for her as I put the envelope away in the empty tea box where I kept my letters from my family. The box had a picture of a ship on the side, which I thought was appropriate, since there was such a long sea journey between us. The ship on the box had sails, though, while I had traveled on a steamer, and the scent of tea leaves lingered and erased whatever smell there was of woodland. It was a pretty box, the prettiest one that I owned, and so it felt right to use it to keep such treasured words – even if not all of them were pleasant but made me fret and worry.

'I know only too well how she feels,' I told John when he rose to have his breakfast. 'That sense that there is nothing for you but struggle and toil.' I poured his coffee and placed a bowl of porridge before him on the well-scrubbed table. My two-year-old son, Rudolph, sat perched on his father's knee, clumsily spooning breakfast into his little mouth. His feet were restless, kicking out in the air and landing on John's shins. I should have scolded him for that, but just that morning I did not have it in me. 'What will become of her now?' I asked my husband. 'You know what it's like once people are set against you, even if for no good reason. Once they have their eyes on you, it's hard to escape wagging tongues.'

'Seems to me that *tongues* are the least of her worries.' John looked at me with his soft brown eyes brimming with compassion for my sister. It made my heart fill with warmth to see his brow crease with worry for a girl he had not even met. He was a good man, my John. I was lucky to have him. 'If they have beaten her as badly as the letter says, she should worry for her life.' He blew on the porridge in his spoon. 'Won't your father do anything about it?'

'Hardly.' I fetched some coffee for myself and slumped down in the chair opposite his. 'He's a broken man, my father, with no will to do anything at all. Ailments and loss have taken what little spirit he had. Mother is different, but she cannot protect Little Brynhild. They are not well respected in the valley, and those with more means will always have a louder voice.' I sighed and reached over the table to touch my little boy's dark hair. He lifted his gaze – as dark as his father's – and smiled at me with smears of porridge on his lips and chin. I wondered what I would do if someone hurt my

child the way Little Brynhild had been hurt, and the mere thought of it made my chest contract and caused a sickening wave of anguish to spool out in the pit of my stomach. I certainly would not sit back and do nothing.

'I agree that she should leave Selbu.' John spooned more porridge into his mouth and dried off his mustache with a pristine handkerchief.

'Yes, she should,' I agreed. 'She should leave and never return.' My gaze fastened on my coffee, lingered on the brown, murky surface. My brow knitted with a fresh bout of worry. 'I just wish the letter said more about what happened.'

'It sounded like a terrible thing . . . bleeding from the stomach –'

'Hush,' I scolded gently, and waved my hand in the air. 'Not in front of the child.'

'He is too small to understand,' John reassured me in a calm voice. 'You would prefer for her to come here, wouldn't you?'

'Of course I would. It would be safer for her, strange as that may sound.'

'She could save up same as you,' he suggested, not from any heartlessness but only because we did not have very much.

'Of course, but it took me a very long time.' Years of toiling, milking, and cleaning. Sleepless cold nights in a maids' loft, and an ache in my back that I could not get rid of, and which only grew worse after Rudolph was born. I had paid for my crossing with pain as well as labor. 'I worry that something more will happen to her before she has the money together or that the misery will eat at her and ruin her spirit before she arrives.' In my mind's eye, I saw my mother's scrawny form – still with no face – and the sense of hopelessness she emitted cut into my heart even across time and distance.

John's warm hand came to cover mine on the table. Our gazes locked and he smiled. 'I shall see what I can do. Perhaps I can work some extra hours . . . I know how much you care for her.'

I gave him a shivering smile in reply; I hated to burden him with more than he already had – we were hoping to have a house of our own – but it was true what he said, I cared about Little Brynhild.

More than I did for any of my other siblings. Perhaps it was just because she had such a hard time getting along; she was born with all these sharp angles and thorns and got in her own way more often than not. I was thirteen when she arrived in this world, almost a woman grown, and Mother was already fading by then; her smiles had become fewer and her laughter scarce, while I still had some to go around. Little Brynhild was mine in a way, before I left her behind.

Perhaps it was guilt I felt that made it so important to offer her my help.

'I would have had a miserable life if I'd stayed in Norway,' I said, 'but fortune has been good to me since I came to America. Perhaps the same will be true for her.' I rose from the chair and crossed the creaking floor to John's chair, bent down, and pressed a kiss to his cheekbone. 'I am grateful,' I told him, and smiled when he squeezed my hand. 'I know it will take time for her to get the money together even with our help, but whatever amount we can spare is certainly of more use to her than my tossing and turning on the pillows at night.'

'Worry is a poor bedfellow,' said he.

'It certainly is,' I agreed.

When John had left, I hoisted Rudolph onto my hip and grabbed the rolled-up rug with my free hand. Together we made the perilous journey down the steep, narrow stairs that descended the outside wall to the yard below. My son rested his cheek against my shoulder and looked up at the cloudy sky above.

'Birds.' He pointed with his chubby hand. I could still see sticky flecks of porridge on his fingers even though I had dried them off. Small children are often a challenge like that, always filthy in some way, but my boy was worse than most. No matter how often I was at his face with my damp cloth, he always seemed to grow a mustache of grime above his upper lip. I thought that it might have to do with how we lived. It was not a clean house, dusty and infested with coal smoke. It did not matter how often I scrubbed the floors of our apartment when everything outside of it was filthy. I did not

complain, though; it was better than what I came from – we even had a bedroom – but I could not help but dream of having a house of our own. A place where the dust stayed outside whenever I closed the door and I did not always smell the neighbors' potatoes boiling on the stove. I knew, though, that in order to get good things in life, one had to be patient and plan ahead. Take stock and save – be wise. Paying for Little Brynhild's crossing would certainly upset every plan I had laid, but then again, perhaps my son would not always be so grimy if I had a sister around to help me out. Perhaps my days would be better if I did not have to do all the work myself, and maybe – just maybe – I would not lose another child if I did not have to be so tired all the time.

We arrived at the bottom of the stairs and stepped out in the yard: a cramped, uneven space framed by fences of graying boards. On one side, outhouses and sheds stood huddled together like a flock of frozen sparrows. There was no pavement, only the trampled soil, and whenever it rained, puddles would form and the ground would turn muddy. Above our heads, laundry hung on taut lines that crisscrossed the space between our building and the one on the other side of the fence. The sheets and shirts moved with the wind like little sails. They made a rustling sound, like leaves, scraping against one another on the lines, stiff and hard but doubtlessly clean. A bright red skirt had bled excess dye down on the shirt that hung below.

I never much liked to hang my wash out like that for everyone to see. I always dried our own underthings in the apartment. It was different with wash I took in for money – I did not much care if my neighbors saw the mended pants and yellowing undershirts the unwed immigrant men brought in for me to scrub. My line was always full.

I put my son down in a patch of grass next to the outhouse, scanning the sparse greenery for hazards: rusted nails or pieces of glass, sharp edges of metal. I had performed the same survey the day before, but one never knew what people dropped. One day the summer before, I had found him squeezing a dead rat. Sometimes the older girls in the building looked after the little ones, but so

early in the morning they would be busy helping their mamas or readying for school. I was on my own for another half hour at least before my friend Clara would come out with her small daughter, Lottie, having sent her posse of older children out the door. It was easier then, when there were more of us. I did not fret so much whenever I had to turn my back on my little one if there were other women about to keep an eye.

In that bleak early morning, though, I was all alone as I hoisted the rug onto the line that traveled all the way from the building to the fence and got the beater out from the shed. No one knew whom it first belonged to; we all used it to clean the few rugs that covered the worn floorboards in our apartments. My rug had been bought from a fellow Norwegian, woven from scraps of fabric, mostly blue and gray. I dreamed, of course, of thick rugs with oriental patterns; flowers snaking across vivid red and emerald green, but that was not something we could afford, and so I settled to take care of what we did have the best that I could.

Rudolph laughed as I started beating the rug before me; he always did like the sound. It scared him but thrilled him too. He all but clapped his little hands and the sound of his joy filled the chilly yard. I could not help but laugh a little too, just from the sound of that childish laughter. Soon I did not even feel the chill, as my vigorous beating had me sweating and huffing. Underneath the blue plaid headscarf my hair was drenched through, but I went at it a little longer than I had to, just to keep him laughing like that.

Little Brynhild had not been so easy to please as a child.

'Come,' I said when I was done, then hoisted my son back onto my hip and brought him with me as I went to put the beater away. I carried him to the stairs and sat down on a step with Rudolph in my arms, cradling him tight while waiting for Clara. 'Once there was a –' I started, but I was not in the mood to tell fairy tales. They reminded me of Little Brynhild too, and no matter how much I tried, I could not quash the worry that rose in me whenever I thought of that letter.

It was written in my sister's hand, that much I knew, but I did not know if they were her words, or if it was Mother who had asked

her to write that plea for money. Not that it mattered – I had no reason to doubt the truth of the tale, and even if Little Brynhild had changed since I left, I could not imagine that she had lost that pride that always got her in trouble before. Whenever I thought of my little sister, that was what I remembered: how she always refused to bend her neck but held her head high and stubbornly clenched her jaws. When other children teased her, or a schoolteacher or neighbor scolded her, she never shed a tear but bit back the best that she could.

It would have cost her to ask for that money – the situation had to be dire.

The worry in the pit of my stomach moved again, made me feel a little sick. Without thinking, I tightened my grip on Rudolph, who wriggled and complained until I loosened my hold. 'I am sorry, my sweet,' I murmured into his soft, dark hair. 'I did not mean to hurt you.' I did not know if it was he I spoke to or the phantom child of my sister, who had seemed so close all day, as if she sat right there, in my lap, next to my son: a stubby little girl with a square jaw and eyes that cut, even when she was small.

I remembered one day when she was six or seven; it was late in summer and the sun burned like an ember, painting the sky in shades of gold. I was outside at Størsetgjerdet, coaxing our cows inside for the night. They were a couple of skinny things, even in summer; bad stock, my father said, but I loved them anyway.

'Come, then.' I called them in from my spot a few steps from the barn door. 'Come so, Dokka, come so, Staslin.' The animals regarded me with large, dark eyes but did not heed me at all. Their heads just dipped back into the grass while their jaws worked slowly, tirelessly. Their udders, swollen with milk, swung back and forth below their bellies. I was growing impatient and was about to get the switch when I heard the barking of a dog, loud and insistent – angry sounding, and close. I stopped and shaded my eyes with my hand while scanning the steep hill for signs of the animal as the barking came ever closer. It was chasing from the sound of it, and I wondered what it was it had found; a fox perhaps, or a hare.

The ruckus came from behind the tree line and so it was hard to

tell, but soon the barks were joined by other sounds, snapping twigs and rustling branches, and I figured it had to be something big and was prepared to see a moose calf come jolting out of the woods. Instead, I saw my sister come bursting into the open, running as fast as her little feet could muster, straight up that steep hill. Even from the distance, I could see the panic in her eyes, the terror drawn on her features. She did not run home, though, but ran straight by. She was blind with fear – too scared to think!

Soon I could see the dog as well: a slick-looking mongrel with bared teeth and a black coat, chasing her up the hill.

'Little Brynhild!' I called out. 'Little Brynhild!' But she did not heed me. Soon another patch of wood swallowed her up, and the dog followed suit, crashing through the underbrush. I lifted my skirts as high as they would go and set out after them as fast I could. My heart was hammering all the while, and my lungs soon ached for breath.

'Little Brynhild!' I cried as I reached the dense growth of spruce and pine. 'Where are you? Answer me!'

I did not get a reply, but I could hear the dog's angry barks before me and continued in the sound's direction. I saw all sorts of things in my mind as I ran: sharp teeth slicing through soft skin, blood beading on a plump leg. I heard the sound of bone crushed between jaws.

Finally, I could see them before me: the girl stood close to the waterfall, on top of the steep embankment. Behind her, the river ran red with iron, rushing past her with the sound of a storm. One wrong step and she would fall. Little Brynhild's face was flustered and she had lost her headscarf; her brown hair had escaped the braid I had made and hung about her face in slick tendrils. She was clutching a pine branch in her hand, longer than her arm, and was waving it aimlessly at the crouching dog, which was growling and showing its teeth, creeping ever nearer.

'Tsjuh!' I called out, and grabbed a lichen-covered rock from the mossy ground. My aim was off, but it did not matter; I was out to scare, not to harm. 'Tsjuh! Go home!' I cried at the growling beast, and grabbed another rock from the ground. The dog startled

when the rock hit close to where it crouched. Little Brynhild, having heard me, took up the words:

'Tsjuh!' she cried out. 'Tsjuh!'

I threw more rocks and clapped my hands loudly as I moved in closer. The dog seemed confused then, and looked between us as if unsure of where to strike; but it was still angry, still showing those teeth. I knew that what you have to do is make the dog scared of *you*, so I bellowed from the top of my lungs as I rushed toward the animal, clapping my hands wildly. Finally, it rose and jumped away so as not to be trampled by the angry creature that came rushing forth. The dog paused between the trees, looking back, hoping perhaps that there was still hope for quarry, but I bent down and got a branch of my own, a rotten thing with moss hanging off it, and started hitting it against the ground, shouting all the while from the top of my lungs.

Finally, it slunk away and disappeared into the woods, finding me too much of a hassle to take on, perhaps. I turned to Little Brynhild and scooped her up in my arms. The girl shivered against me, but there were no tears.

'It wouldn't go away!' she cried.

'You must not let it see that you're afraid.' I scolded her with a voice hoarse from shouting. 'They can smell it, the dogs, and then they'll come for you.'

'I wasn't afraid,' she lied while her arms wound tight around me and she cleaved to me for protection.

'Why did it chase you, then?'

'Because it wanted to bite me.'

'Is that so?' I had no time to lecture her just then. She was still shivering, was still stiff as board, and she was not a toddler anymore so I could already feel the strain in my arms, even if I was strong. 'Maybe the dog is mad,' I said. 'Do you know who owns it?'

I could feel her nodding against my neck. 'He only laughed when it chased me,' she said. 'He didn't even try to stop it.'

My jaws tensed up with anger, but I found no words to give her.

I carried her all the way back home.

Receiving the letter reminded me of that day. It was the same

sense of imminent danger – and the same instinct to lift my skirts and run to her aid, screaming.

That same night, as we lay in the loft, I had sworn that I would always protect her, and I felt called upon now by her words of distress to fulfill that very promise.

'The world is not kind to those who are different,' I whispered into Rudolph's hair as we rocked gently back and forth on the step. 'But then again,' I continued, 'she may not always be so kind to it either.'

4.

Brynhild

Selbu, 1877

'How old are you, Little Brynhild? Sixteen?' Gurine's blue eyes were kind. She had just been looking into my mouth to inspect the damage done to my teeth. We were perched on wooden chairs in the kitchen, next to the flour-strewn table. Outside the windows, the sky was gray, but the fields had turned green and the birch trees sprouted leaves. Summer had arrived and the barn was empty while the animals were grazing up in the mountains. Usually I spent this time of year up there, tending them on the summer farm. Not this year, though. Not while I was still so poorly. Instead, I stayed behind with Gurine, cooking for the farmhands and the family, cleaning, scrubbing, and sweeping floors. Mother was distraught by this. She had been hoping I would go to the summer farm and not have to see much of Anders that summer. I did not care much at all.

'Seventeen,' I murmured, and rubbed my jaw, still swollen even after all those weeks. I had seen my face for the first time since it happened in the mirror in the farmhouse. The bruising had started to fade, turning a ghastly yellow.

Gurine's face was concerned under the faded headscarf. 'I wasn't surprised when you didn't come to work, but I worried when you weren't in church. You never miss church.'

'Father wouldn't let me go,' I was quick to explain. I would not let her think I was a coward. 'I wanted to come, but he said I couldn't be seen like this, and I was –' Still bleeding, but I could not bring myself to say that aloud.

'You shouldn't be here, though.' There was fear in her voice. 'Why ever did you come back *here*?'

'Father said I couldn't be home anymore. I had to work.' That was not what Gurine asked, though. She asked because of Anders.

The old woman gave me a look and lifted a lukewarm cup of coffee to her lips. 'Did Paul say that because he was afraid people would think you are lazy, or because he wanted to punish you?'

'Punish me, I think.'

'And the . . .?' She raised her eyebrows, motioned to her stomach with her hand.

'Gone.' I cradled my own cup of coffee in my lap.

'Well, that's a good thing, then.' Gurine pursed her lips. 'You should have that tooth pulled too, what's left of it.'

'Have no money for that.' I shrugged. 'It was a poor tooth anyway. He did me a favor knocking it out.'

'Hush.' She looked stern. 'Don't say such a thing. He has done you nothing but harm. You're not still pining for him, are you?'

'No, no – I'm not.' I would rather see him buried, but I did not say that.

'That's something, then . . . And you're sure that it's gone?' Another motion to her belly.

'Yes.' It did not bother me to say it. I had had many nights to teach myself how to answer that question. It was only a lump of flesh, after all – nothing to ache for. I handled flesh all the time; skinned and cut, bled and cooked. That tiny lump that slid out of me was no different from any other slick meat. No different from the pigs I cut with Gurine, the hares I skinned, or the kids' legs I cured with salt. Just flesh – nothing special at all. It might not even have lived through birth. Children die all the time.

'You shouldn't be *here*, though. I'm sure that if Paul knew for sure who it was, that he –'

'I don't mind. I can stay on. I don't see *him* much anyway, as long as I'm in here.' I looked around at the large iron cookstove with the black pans resting on top; the bucket of potatoes in the corner, skin wrinkly and tough after winter storage; the blue chairs with peeling paint; the soot-stained ceiling and timbered walls; and let out a breath of relief. 'Anders never comes to the kitchen.' None of the men ever did.

'But why would you want to?' Gurine's blue eyes peered at me.

'It wouldn't be better anywhere else; everyone knows what happened. At least this way they'll know I'm not ashamed.' I watched a gray kitten Gurine had let in stumble milk-drunk away from a bowl by the stove. I reached out a hand to let it sniff my fingers and felt the silken fur as it went by.

Gurine looked worried. 'They might think you're still hoping –'

'Maybe, but I can live with that.' The kitten had jumped onto the windowsill and tried to catch an orange butterfly on the other side of the glass. The cat's childish antics made me hurt inside.

Gurine shook her head again. 'You should seek service elsewhere and leave Selbu behind.'

I nodded; on this we agreed. 'I hate this place.'

'*Hate* is a very strong word that shouldn't be used lightly.'

'Nevertheless, I do. I am tired of always being laughed at.'

Gurine sighed, put her hand on mine, and squeezed. 'Where do you want to go, then?'

'Big Brynhild says it is better in America. No one cares who your parents are. I think I could do well over there. Big Brynhild calls herself Nellie now.'

'That's a fancy name.' Behind her on the stove, water began to bubble in a pot. It was for the potatoes. We should have peeled them long ago.

'I could take another name as well.'

'You know it's an expensive journey.'

'Big Brynhild did it. She worked for years to do it.' The kitten had all but given up on the butterfly and hit the floor with a thump. It went back to the bowl in search of more milk, its tiny tail straight in the air.

'If I were your age maybe I would go too.' A longing came into Gurine's voice. 'They say there's plenty of land, and big cities.'

'Big Brynhild seems happy enough.' I bit my tongue to curb the unbidden jealousy that flared to life when I said my sister's name.

'It's a good dream.' Gurine rose and started for the stove, where the water was bubbling in the pot. I rose too and tightened the apron at the small of my back, where it still ached.