

SONG OF BLESSING ♦ BOOK 4

From This Day Forward

LAURINE
SNELLING



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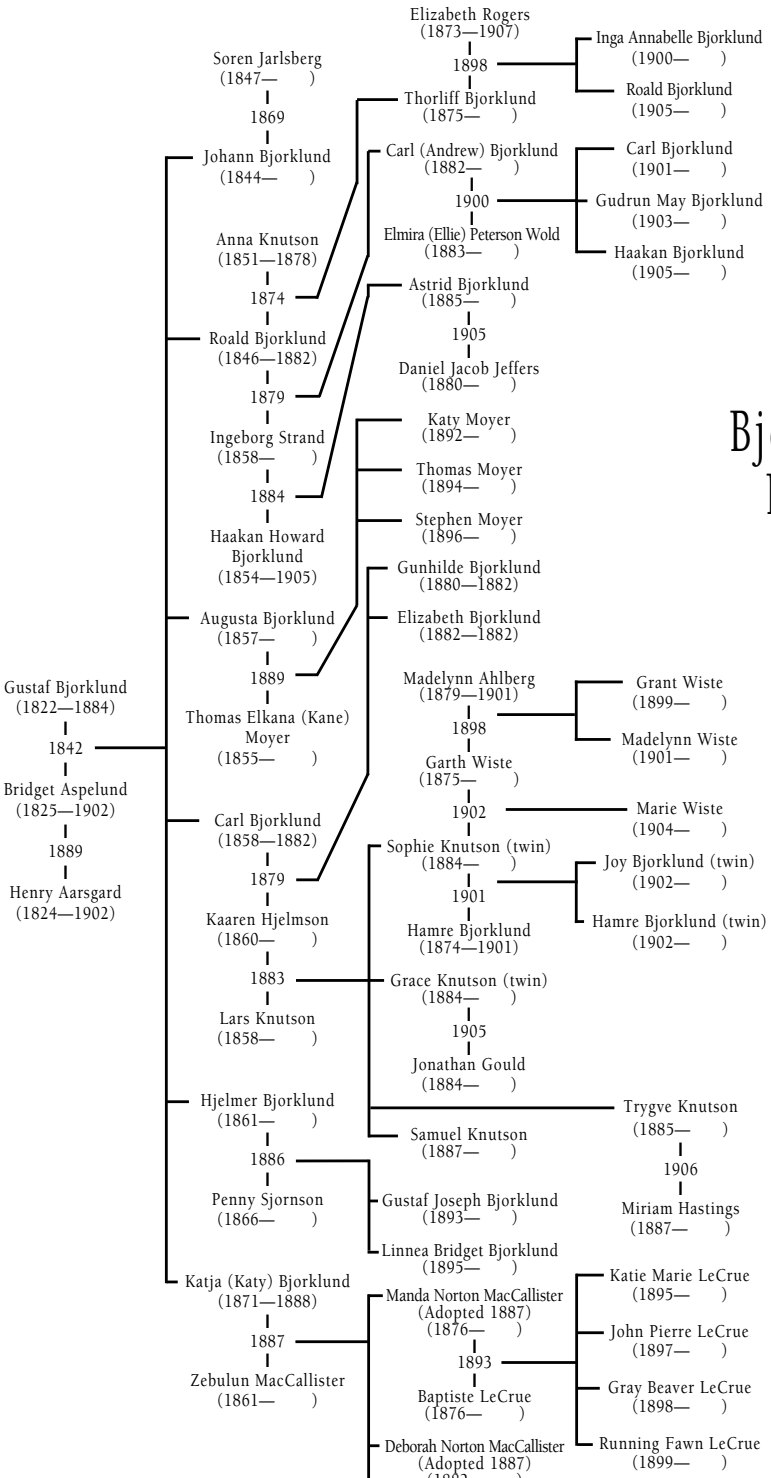
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Bjorklund Family Tree



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CHAPTER 1

When will it be my turn?” Deborah MacCallister paused to sniff a spray of lilac. Heavenly!

Ingeborg Bjorklund looked up from the abundance of lilacs she was arranging in a bucket, her second, to set by the door to the sanctuary of Blessing Lutheran Church. “Ah, Deborah, what makes you say that?”

Deborah reached for another lilac branch to insert into the vases she was filling for the altar. “All the others have married but for me. Some even twice, like Sophie and now Anji. I . . . I always dreamed of being married, and look at me, an old maid.”

“And you are how old?”

“Twenty-five.”

“Only twenty-five and you are the supervising nurse at the hospital. That’s a lot of responsibility, and certainly more than your fair share of drama and excitement. So many girls dream of that.”

Deborah laughed. “True. And you know I love my job.” Oops. Here was a ladybug among the leaves. She certainly did not belong in the church. Deborah seized her with two fingers and gently carried her to the door. Ingeborg was right that she led

an exciting and useful life. But Ingeborg did not know how Deborah really felt, deep down inside.

The community considered her a member of the Solberg family, and most of the time, she did too. And yet, not really. Not like their natural children.

Ingeborg was right, but in a way she was wrong too. She talked about drama as if it were always a good thing; it was not, not always. Oh my, no. When Deborah's pa and Manda and Baptiste went to Montana all those many years ago, leaving half the family behind, that was dramatic but not good. How many nights did Deborah lie in bed, wishing her pa would come back to take over the ranch again?

Deborah scissored out a dead twig that was spoiling the bouquet. Drama? Dear Zeb MacCallister stopping by a soddy dug into a hill near the Missouri River, probably hoping for a meal, only to find two young girls with no parents in sight. That was drama. Zeb did his best for the orphans. When he married Katy Bjorklund and they adopted Deborah and her sister, it was almost like having a whole family again.

That was it, right there. Whenever she thought of those years, deep in her heart, that was what she wanted. Love and laughter and good hard work to build that ranch.

But then Katy died and the light went out of the world for Zeb. And then the circus brought disease to town and people died. Why did drama and heartbreak so often go hand in hand?

"There now, how is that?" A smile trembled on Deborah's lips as she pointed to the explosion of purple and white that filled the vase to bursting with spring. With a bouquet on either side of the white-painted traditional Norwegian altar, and more on the side railings, spring and joy danced together.

Ingeborg cocked her head, studying it. "So lovely. I always think spring is my favorite season, and then fall slips in with

the painting of the leaves and the cooler weather, and I think fall is my favorite. And of course I love summer too, with the garden and the berries.”

“And the white and sparkles of winter, until it drags on too long and sends one more blizzard and we all dream of spring.” Deborah gathered up the few remaining stems of lilac.

“We humans are so funny, I often think God must just shake His head and chuckle; but sometimes, especially with the children, I can see Him laughing in love.”

Deborah watched Ingeborg. “You really see Him, don’t you?”

“In my mind, I guess I do.” Ingeborg seemed to smile at an invisible Father. “God has become so real to me through the years.”

“Was it always this way?”

“No, I don’t think so. I have believed in Him since I was little, but learning to accept His love and guidance, to trust Him with all that I am, has grown through the years. Now I want to walk right beside Him, seeking His face like He tells us. I think of Inga and how when you are walking with her, she is either pulling ahead to see something, or dragging behind to study something else she found. I think we are all like that, and I don’t want to do that anymore. I want to walk right beside Him, looking up to see His face and letting Him do the leading.”

“Trust is a big word, isn’t it?”

“Ja, it is. It is so human to want to go our own way and then say, ‘Oh, by the way, God, please bless what I am doing.’” She wagged her head, smiling at the young woman who was watching her so seriously. “Dearest Deborah, you have grown up with a wise man for a substitute father, and he and I have learned to believe this way.”

Deborah nodded. “Almost losing Johnny last summer was terribly hard on him. In fact, I wonder if sometimes his faith

wavered. There were many nights he didn't sleep while he and Mary Martha kept vigil at the hospital. We all prayed so hard."

"I know you were a big help with the younger children."

"When I wasn't on night duty. That is one problem with being a nurse."

"Patients need round-the-clock care. And being the supervisor, I know, just adds to it. You have to fill in if someone else can't be there."

"I am grateful that doesn't happen often. But with that diphtheria epidemic, I was so afraid more of our people would come down with it. The wisdom of Astrid and Elizabeth and their contacts with the hospital in Chicago are what saved the rest of us, and getting that antitoxin here so quickly." Deborah heaved a sigh. "I learned so much, but then I am always learning something new."

"So true. We all are." Ingeborg stood up straighter. "But back to your situation. I'm not going to call it a problem, just something for God to work out."

"Seems like a problem to me." Deborah picked up some leaves and blossoms that had fallen to the floor. "But today I will be glad for Anji and Mr. Devlin—er, rather, Reverend Devlin." She frowned. "That seems stiff. Does that church call their pastors *Reverend* or *Mister* or what?"

"I heard John say that some are called *Rector*."

"Rector?" Deborah's eyebrows disappeared into the fringe that curved over her forehead. "I heard some ministers are called *Father*."

"That is the Catholic faith. The Jews are called *Rabbi*."

"This can get confusing." Deborah looked around the sanctuary. "I think we are all done here. At least the blossoms will stay nice for church tomorrow." She inhaled. "And the whole sanctuary smells heavenly." She looked at the lilacs in her hand. "I'm going to put these as a bouquet on Ma's table."

“Good idea! Mary Martha does love flowers. We’d better hurry.” Ingeborg looked around the big room one more time, and then gently closed the doors.

Three hours until the wedding started.



“Now remember, you children will be sitting right in the front row of the sanctuary, so *no fidgeting* during the ceremony. Understand?” Anji Moen stared right at Annika, her youngest.

Melissa, her eldest, who had just turned eleven, said, “Don’t worry, we’ll all be right there too, and Annika will sit by me, right?”

Annika nodded. “I’ll be good.” She twirled to enjoy her new dress. “How come my dress is pink and Melissa’s dress is yellow?”

“Because this is spring and these are spring colors. And yours is really peach.”

“I like mine better.”

Melissa rolled her eyes, just barely putting up with her five-year-old sister. “Let me tie your bow again. Twirling like that made it get tangled.” She grasped Annika’s shoulder.

“Ouch! Ma, Lissa is being mean.”

At Anji’s feet, her younger sister, Rebecca Valdars, tugged at Anji’s skirt. “There. I sure don’t know how that hem got so crooked.” Rebecca stood and set the pincushion on the table by the window.

“Ma is like me, she can’t stand still either.” Annika giggled with her hands over her mouth.

Gilbert, Anji’s son, who would turn ten next month, wandered into the bedroom. “Do we have to call Mr. Devlin *Pa*?”

“That would be proper.”

“But we already have a pa, or rather we had one. Do you think he’s watching us from heaven? What if he doesn’t want you to get married again and us to leave Blessing? He liked being in Blessing better than Norway.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I heard him say that one day. He and some lady had an argument.”

“Gilbert, the things you come up with.”

“Where is Joseph?” Rebecca asked. Joseph had been born between Gilbert and Annika.

“Out playing with Benny.”

“Out playing where? I told you all to stay in the house so you could keep clean.” Anji turned to her sister. “Can you go call him?”

“Them, you mean.” Rebecca looked up at the clock. “I’ll send Joseph back in and then get dressed. Lissa, can you read to the younger ones, please? You all want to look nice for the wedding, don’t you?”

Melissa nodded and took Annika’s hand. “Come on, we’ll go sit in the parlor. Gilbert, are you coming?”

“I guess. I’ll be glad when this is all over,” he muttered just loud enough for his mother to hear. He stopped at the door. “When we move away, we won’t see Benny anymore. Why can’t I stay here with Tante Rebecca?”

Anji started to scold him, but instead sat down in a chair and beckoned him over. “Gilbert, I know you don’t want to leave Blessing and all your cousins, but you will make friends in Michigan. Our house will be right near Lake Michigan, and there are lots of trees and hills, more like we had in Norway. You’ll be able to go fishing and even hunting, maybe. Thomas said there are boys there just your age, and the people are very friendly.”

“But here we have our family.” His blue eyes shimmered with tears. “We might as well go back to Norway.”

Ah, my son, one day you'll have to, but not now. She smoothed his hair back with both hands. “You look very handsome. Can you keep a secret, if I tell you?”

He glared at her from under his brows. “I guess.”

“Thomas said there’s a dog living at the house and he needs a boy to love him. And there are two cats.”

“Will we have a horse too?”

“Ja, Thomas has a horse that can be ridden or hitched to a buggy. It sounds like a fine place to live. You and Joseph will share a room that looks out to the lake, and the girls’ room will look over the garden. And we will have an extra room for company. Maybe one day your cousins can come there to visit.”

“How could Benny go on a train?”

“Knowing Benny, he could do anything he sets his mind to.” Anji paused to listen. “I think it’s time to go to the church. After the service we will have cake and ice cream.”

“Can we go fishing after?”

“Probably not today. We have to finish packing so we can catch the train on Monday.”

“I packed all my stuff in that box you gave me.”

“I know, you have been very helpful.” She stood up.

“What about our garden? We got some of the seeds planted and the lettuce and peas are up. The onions too.”

“Onkel Toby will have a fine garden. Now, go wash your hands.” She looked up to see Joseph stop in the doorway. *Oh, please Lord, get me through this day.* “Joseph, come with me.” The tone of her voice brooked no argument.

By the time she’d scrubbed the dirt off the knees of his pants, tucked his shirt back in, scrubbed a dirty spot off his shirt, and washed his hands and face, he was squirming.

“I told you to stay in the house to stay clean and you did not mind me.” She hung up the washcloth, grabbed a comb, wetted his hair, and combed it—again. “Now it’s almost time to leave for the church, so go listen to the story Lissa is reading aloud.”

“Is Benny going to the church too?”

“Ja, we are all going.” She pointed to the stairs. “Go! Sit!”



“How can a grown Irishman be feeling almost terrified?” Thomas Devlin stared at his friend and officiating pastor.

John Solberg fought to keep a straight face. “I think marriage sounds wonderful in the courting phase—you’re in love and all is well. Or at least in your case, it finally became well. Thoughts and dreams are great, but when it comes down to the actual ceremony, your life flashes before your eyes.”

Devlin stopped his pacing and asked, “How be ye so wise?”

“I’ve not only been there myself, you know, but I have performed the weddings for many, and I can’t think of a man—or woman—who hasn’t had a panicky feeling when that music starts to play. Some manage to go through with it stoic as can be, and others nearly pass out.” He thought for a moment. “In fact one did.”

“Man or woman?”

“The man, actually. I think his collar was too tight.”

Devlin barked a laugh. “Well, me collar is not too tight, but I do want to get this shindig on the road. I’m sure I’ll feel better after we get started.”

“Breathe deep and think about something else while I go check on Anji. I’ll come back for you, and we’ll go wait at the front just like we practiced. You performed weddings in the old country, didn’t you?”

“Aye, but being the clergy be far easier than being the groom.”
“Breathe!”



“The veil feels lopsided.” Anji wished there were a mirror in the room.

Rebecca tweaked the veil and reset the hairpin keeping it in place. “Now remember, you cannot talk to Thomas before the ceremony. They say it is bad luck for the groom to see his bride before the wedding.” She stepped back to make sure her sister was ready. “You look lovely. That ice blue makes you look like an angel.”

Some angel who nearly scrubbed her young son’s face off.
Anji kept her thoughts to herself. “Gerald has all the children?”

“No, Clara is taking care of my two little ones. I decided they did not need to be at the wedding, so I asked her to help. Being a bride’s matron of honor is about all I can manage at the moment. And I want to enjoy myself too.”

Once they were at the church, Anji clamped a hand over her middle. The butterflies now felt more like a swarm of bees inside. Was she doing the best thing for her children? She knew she was doing the best thing for herself. Once she realized that her commitment to take care of Thorliff was finished, she’d been so afraid that Thomas Devlin might have changed his mind. But he hadn’t. He said real love was not turned on and off like a faucet, and the thought of facing life without her had made him miserable. But he figured God had other plans for him, for a priest can remain single and still be a good priest.

“Getting on that train and leaving you was the most difficult thing I ever did,” he’d said. “Even worse than my discussion with the archbishop that sealed me fate and forced me to leave the auld sod.”

Then he had cupped his hands around her face and stared into her eyes, mesmerizing her. And then he kissed her and her world had exploded.

She jerked herself back to the present. She could hear the piano playing. People coming in. “Rebecca, I have a bad case of the jitters.” She held out her trembling hand. “What if . . .”

A knock at the door spun her around. “Ja?”

“Reverend Solberg here. May I come in?”

“Of course.” But when Anji started for the door, Rebecca laid a hand on her arm and shook her head. She opened the door and welcomed John Solberg inside.

“Ah, Anji, you look so lovely. When I conducted the wedding for you and Ivar, you were like a shy maiden, and now you are a lovely grown woman with four children. You have been through many hard things and now you are about to start on a new adventure. I want to pray for you, and then we’ll meet again at the altar. All right?”

“Ja, I am shaking.”

“Brides are nearly always shaking, and usually their grooms are too.” He took her hands. “Lord God, today we celebrate the marriage of two of your finest children. You have brought this union about and helped them work out the wrinkles. Bless them, Father, as they join together in holy matrimony, as they become one flesh. Calm Anji and fill her with joy. Remove from her mind the concerns about the children being just so. We love her, her soon-to-be husband and her children. Help them all become a family in their new home, in their new parish. We thank you and praise your name, that this union will bring glory to you. Amen.”

He stepped back. “Now I have one very important piece of advice.”

Anji waited.

“Breathe. Take several deep breaths to calm yourself. Right. Breathe again.” He nodded, his smile bringing even more calm. He turned to Rebecca. “Are you ready?”

“Ja, we are all ready.”

Anji licked her lips and reached for the glass of water Rebecca had brought her. She took a drink, then another deep breath and blew it out. “I’m ready.”

I hope.