

Chapter One

Eden Valley, Minnesota, June 1876

In her favorite corner of the barn loft, Ingrid Johansson lingered over the last paragraph of Chapter Three of *Ivanhoe*, a book borrowed from her younger brother Jens. Stumbling across a long word, she muttered a curse he had taught her. *How will I ever teach if I can not learn this new language?*

“Where is Ingrid?” her father shouted from down in the yard. “We will be late for the wedding.”

She snapped the book shut and hurried over to the loft’s open window. Below her, Hans Johansson stood tall and impatient next to the team of horses, his tawny beard contrasted against his reddened face.

A resistant shudder went through her. *I do not want to go!* The last person she desired to see would surely be there.

Her father’s angered glance in her direction, like an arrow, pierced her with guilt. “Coming, Papa,” she answered, slipping the treasured book under a hay bundle. She scrambled down the ladder.

His loud complaint reached her ears even before she entered the side yard. “You have been reading those English books again, and not helping your mater.”

Jens and her sisters Marie Lisbet and Briget waited in the back of the wagon. With eyes downcast, Ingrid took a basket of freshly baked bread and a smoked ham from her mother and loaded it behind the seat. Wrapped in blue-and-white checked gingham, two apple pies peeked out from the top of another basket.

Marie Lisbet held the family's gift to the bride and groom, a finely sewn quilt. Ingrid had apprenticed with the quilt after her chores, watching her mother Sigrie’s work-worn fingers make each tiny detailed stitch.

"The Lindstrom wedding will be the biggest celebration of the summer," her mother declared

from the front seat as they headed out of the yard. "The Lindstrom boy is a good catch."

Her father gave a short laugh. "Ja, his folks own the only hardware store in town."

Hilda Grinvold may be a lucky bride but there are few, Ingrid thought. I will not be tied down to this hard life. I will move away and become a teacher first.

"The Lindstrom nephew will be the best man -- a railroad man from St. Paul," her mother went on.

"And a Norskie!" her father grouched, his tawny beard quivering. "If he crosses my path, he will have to explain why they charge me a fortune to ship my grain to the city! I hear they do not pay their workers a living wage."

"Do not worry, Papa," Ingrid placated, hoping to keep his temper in check. "We have no interest in anyone who works for the railroad."

A flock of blackbirds soared above the wheat field stretching southward from the house as the wagon creaked along the narrow trail. Young green stalks rippled in the morning breeze. Alongside the road, cherry-red hollyhocks brushed against the wheels, bees humming in the air above them.

It was a perfect day for a wedding, Ingrid had to admit, despite her vow not to marry until she was at least thirty. By that time, she would have earned her education and become the first teacher in the Johansson family.

When they neared the Grinvold farm, the road in both directions was clogged with arriving guests. Ahead she saw their neighbors, the Pederson family, and her stomach twisted.

Her father pulled the horses up to the Pederson's team of oxen under a clump of shade trees. Alighting from the wagon with her brother and sisters, Ingrid greeted the Pedersons politely. When she saw their eldest son, Daxe, standing near the oxen, she turned away. Her father had hired Daxe for the summer to help with heavy work around their farm. She soon discovered he was a randy oaf.

Yesterday morning, he had come up from behind when she was milking. He had snaked his large hand around her and roughly squeezed one of her breasts. Sudden pain and embarrassment flooded through her. Her hands had shaken so badly that she squirted some of the cow's milk down the front of

her apron.

Swinging around on the wooden stool, she had challenged his bold smirk. "Daxe! If you come near me again, I will take the pitchfork to you!"

Now, her attention shifted to the young man just reining in his horse and buggy downhill by the lake. He drove a fancy new rig upholstered in shiny black leather. The buggy had a gold-tasseled canopy over the seat and large spoked wheels. The driver got out and assisted his riding companions, the Lindstroms.

"He is the nephew." Sigrie spoke low in her ear. "I hear his *pater* is a big stockholder in the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad."

Ingrid tilted her violet blue, lace-trimmed bonnet and smoothed some of the wrinkles from her best summer dress as she watched the handsome guest stride up the grassy hill. "He looks like he is from the city," she murmured.

The smart bowler hat he wore at a jaunty angle set the stranger apart from the farm boys. Except for full sideburns, the young man was clean shaven. Ingrid guessed him to be in his mid-twenties. A rich man's son.

When he reached the crest of the hill, he tipped his hat.

"*God morgon,*" she said with a hesitant smile.

Hans shuffled by carrying their food baskets. "Come now, you women, into the house. Do not waste the day gawking at the Norskie."

Ingrid stared after him, wondering if he was just envious of "the Norskie's" riding buggy as were Daxe Pederson and a few of his friends. Exchanging glances, the young men loitered around the buggy until Mrs. Pederson shooed them away.

The Lutheran wedding ceremony took place in a pine grove on the hill behind the Grinvold's log house. When the groom kissed his bride, half on her mouth and half on her rosy cheek, she flushed as pink as a wild rose.

If only time could stand still, Ingrid wished, and this glowing moment never end. If only

matrimony did not mean endless back-breaking toil in the fields and the home, a baby arriving every other year, followed by the constant fear of life-threatening childhood disease.

Beneath the maple trees, she helped the women lay the long table with so many food dishes it should have collapsed. She glanced across the yard, her gaze taking unwitting advantage of her view of the new man. He stood surrounded by half a dozen gushing women.

She saw the way his suit jacket fit snugly across his broad shoulders, the strong outline of his nose and chin, the curl of dark hair behind his ear. When his gaze met hers, firework sparklers flashed between them. She quickly averted her eyes.

"Ingrid is blushing," an elder woman teased.

The Norwegian broke from the group of female admirers and walked in Ingrid's direction. Her knees shook beneath her skirt, and she was powerless to stop them. Had he noticed her staring?

"I am Andreas Eriksen, the groom's cousin." His smile was warm, his manner confident. "Do you live in Eden Valley?"

His eyes looking down into hers were the color of the lake in the morning light, the clearest blue. Words tripped over themselves on their way across her tongue.

"Ja. I live a mile from here," she said, "just past Swede Grove."

Behind Andreas, the bride's father ushered the pastor to his rig. Soon afterward, he returned to the party and shouted in a jovial voice, "Come now, you sinners. Let us have some dancing!"

One of the bride's uncles got out his seasoned fiddle and played a lively Scandinavian tune.

The bridal couple started the Old Country spring dance. Other couples joined in. Some of the women danced together, foolish expressions on their faces. Ingrid tapped her foot, yearning to give it a try.

With a daring smile, Andreas took her arm. "Miss Johansson, from the look of your foot, I'd say you would like to join them." He whisked her into a hop-step that took her breath away.

Ingrid held onto him as they swirled and bobbed. "Where did you learn this dance, Mr. Eriksen?"

"From family friends. They call it a polka."

He twirled her around until her bonnet, only attached by its loosely tied ribbons, flew from her head and flopped at the back of her neck. She tried to follow his unfamiliar footwork but finally stepped on his toe and fell against him.

He laughed and caught her around her waist. "I wondered what your hair looked like, tucked up inside your sunbonnet." His eyes were admiring. "How do you get it so tightly braided?"

Out of breath, Ingrid touched her hand to her braided coronet. "My mater and I do each other's hair."

"It is the color of spun gold," Andreas murmured softly.

She was unable to prevent a warm flush from spreading through her limbs. "Do you always say what you are thinking, Mr. Eriksen?"

"I meant no offense, Miss Johansson."

After Andreas went to get them some punch, her father walked past, a glowering look in his eye. "Be careful the railroad man does not trip you up, girl."

She gazed across the yard at the Norwegian. "Leave me alone, Papa," she said under her breath.

When Andreas returned, they watched the others from the shade of an oak tree and sipped the punch. Ingrid felt a strange queasiness in her stomach. Was her father watching?

She had already defied him this morning. Knowing his resentment of her desire to learn English, she had hidden her brother's book, *Ivanhoe*, in the barn loft.

Continuing the conversation with Andreas, she asked, "Will you be staying with the Lindstroms for long?"

"About a week. I will help my cousin build his new house." Assuredness shone in his azure eyes. "Now that I have graduated the university, I am going back to St. Paul and learn the railroad business."

She eyed him suspiciously. "So, you are going to be a railroad man."

He nodded. "My father says the future of the country will depend on the railroads."

"And the farmers."

Andreas' dark brows lifted. "It will take both railman and farmer working together. Raucous

laughter interrupted their conversation.

Over by the barn, Daxe Pederson swaggered among a group of young farmhands, drinking and joking. She guessed their mugs were not filled with cider. Just the sight of him repulsed her.

As sunset fell, Ingrid and Andreas strolled along the footpath toward his buggy. Escaping from the adult's sidelong glances was a relief. A fading crimson ball lingered behind the trees on the far side of the lake.

"The sun is saying goodnight to the lake," she murmured. Instantly her face flushed with heat. Why had she said that?

How foolish Andreas Eriksen must think her. But he merely nodded at her observation, a hint of amusement in his eyes.

His buggy gleamed in the soft, dusky light, the upholstery as rich as black satin. Ingrid reached out and touched the front seat with shy fingers. She had never smelled new leather before; a sweet heady smell it was.

"Would you like to go for a buggy ride, Miss Johansson?"

His offer caught her by complete surprise. "Oh ... I do not think I should ..."

Andreas stroked his horse's mane, rays of bronze highlighting his hat and fine dark hair. "Only a short ride."

What could it hurt? Her parents were out of sight, enjoying the celebration with the other guests. "Well, why not?"

She accepted his offered hand and hopped onto the smooth buggy seat.

Andreas Eriksen gave the reins a smart little snap and off they went. Around the lake, shimmering in the last light of day. The black pranced along as if on clouds. An easy breeze teased her bonnet. Seated next to her, Andreas' strong masculine length was disarming. Was this what it felt like to be 'courted'? She was afraid she liked the exhilaration far too much.

Breaking her reverie, he asked, "Do the farmers welcome the railroad here, Miss Johansson?"

She shifted uneasily. "They do ... but I have heard some say the shipping charges are too high."

His intent eyes met hers. "I appreciate your honesty, Miss Johansson."

His gaze lingered on her face, causing an unfamiliar flutter in Ingrid's heart. She steadied herself against the seat.

The ride was over too soon. He assisted her down with a flourish never shown by any farm boy she had ever known.

From behind them, the hulking frame of Daxe Pederson and two other youths slipped out of the shadows. "And this is the fine riding buggy of Mr. Eriksen." His companions snorted at Daxe's remark.

Raising an eyebrow, Andreas turned.

Reeking of alcohol, Daxe brushed roughly against Ingrid's shoulder. "Got yourself a new dandy?" he rasped into her ear. "Why, ain't the Swedes good enough for you?"

She recoiled against his choice of words and glared at him. Before she could respond, Daxe swaggered up to Andreas.

He pointed a stubby forefinger at Andreas' face. "You think you are a fancy pants?" Sneering, Daxe gestured toward Ingrid. "Maybe you would like to sample what is in her drawers?"

Anger flared in Andreas' eyes. "You are a drunken fool!" he snarled, drawing himself up several inches above the brutish Daxe. The other two youths hovered; one spit, the other snickered through teeth set wide apart as a picket fence.

Ingrid stared at Daxe, afraid of what might happen next. Where was Papa? Where were the other men?

"Go back to where you come from, Norskie." Lunging, Daxe threw his full weight against Andreas, knocking him backward onto the ground. His bowler tumbled off into the grass.

"Stop this!" Ingrid cried out. "Go get my *pater*," she urged a red-faced farm boy. Dutifully, he raced back to the wedding guests. Then rough hands grabbed her from behind and she struggled to break free.

Andreas leaped to his feet and rolled up his shirt sleeves, revealing bare muscular arms. Silently, she urged him to give Daxe the beating he deserved. The two men faced off. "Get the Norskie!"

someone hollered. The air grew hair-trigger tense.

Brawny farmhand and agile railman shuffled in a slow circle. Two young bulls with fire in their eyes. Ingrid held her breath.

Andreas landed the first punch in the middle of Daxe's face. Daxe bellowed like a stuck sow, his nose spouting blood onto his bedraggled shirt. Daxe threw a jab to Andreas' stomach. Grimacing, Andreas doubled over. Recovering quickly, he slammed Daxe on the jaw.

Daxe stumbled, then swung wild in blind fury. One fist struck Andreas just below his right eye.

Andreas dived for Daxe's legs. Dust swirled up around the beefy farmhand as he thudded, face forward, to the ground. The air wrested from his lungs in one long "Oooph!"

Mounting him, Andreas took a fistful of Daxe's straw-colored hair and yanked the hired man's head back until he yelped in pain. "Apologize to the lady!"

Daxe whimpered. Blood trickled from his injured nose down into his open mouth.

Andreas gave Daxe's head another hard yank. "I said apologize to her. Now!"

Daxe exhaled through gritted teeth and mumbled his apology.

Ingrid looked at Daxe squinting up at her, unable to move, and felt a rush of victory. This Norskie had just humbled the brash bully and given her at least partial satisfaction.

"Hey - what is going on here?" her father called. The Grinvold clan chased down the hill on his heels.

His eyes glazed, Daxe got to his feet.

"Papa!" Ingrid ran to his side. "Daxe picked a fight with Mr. Eriksen --"

One of Daxe's comrades bulled his way forward. "That ain't the way it happened. The Norskie started the whole thing."

Her father shook his head, his mouth set tight above his beard. "Well, Daxe?"

Averting his eyes, Daxe muttered something coarse. He swiped his bloody nose on his ragged shirt sleeve, then shouldered through the onlookers and stomped off.

Instead of addressing Andreas Eriksen, her father sent him a glacial stare. He would waste no

time hearing the outsider's story.

Andreas's smudged shirt hung open to his waist, exposing his tight-muscled chest. He bent over and retrieved his bowler, dusted it off, and climbed up on the buggy seat. His unreadable gaze found Ingrid's, then dropped to the reins in his hands.

For reasons she did not understand, her heart sank.

"Come, daughter," her father called from behind her in a stern voice. "We are leaving now."

Dejectedly, she went back along the path to join her brother and sisters.

Sitting in the rear of the wagon with the others, Ingrid stared out at the darkening sky. Men. Why did they always have to fight things out? That damnable Daxe! Andreas Eriksen must have thought she ran with a pack of wolves.

"I do not think we will be seeing the railroad man around here again. You see what trouble he started." Her father darted a glance over his shoulder from the front seat, daring her to challenge him.

"He never started the trouble!"

"And, there will be no more English books in the house," his voice boomed above the creaking wagon wheels. "Reading is unnatural for a woman. You will help your *mater* with the farm chores."

Ingrid's eyes misted in anger. There was no good reason why she should not see Andreas Eriksen again.

And not even her father could keep her from reading and learning. He might as well take away the air she breathed or the sun that shone across the wheat fields. Her destiny waited on the fragmented horizon - far in the distance - yet as close as her heart wished it to be.

She was no longer a child. The day would come when she would leave the farm, leave the family she loved, and pursue her dreams.