

SONG OF BLESSING • BOOK 1

To Everything a Season



LAURAINÉ
SNELLING



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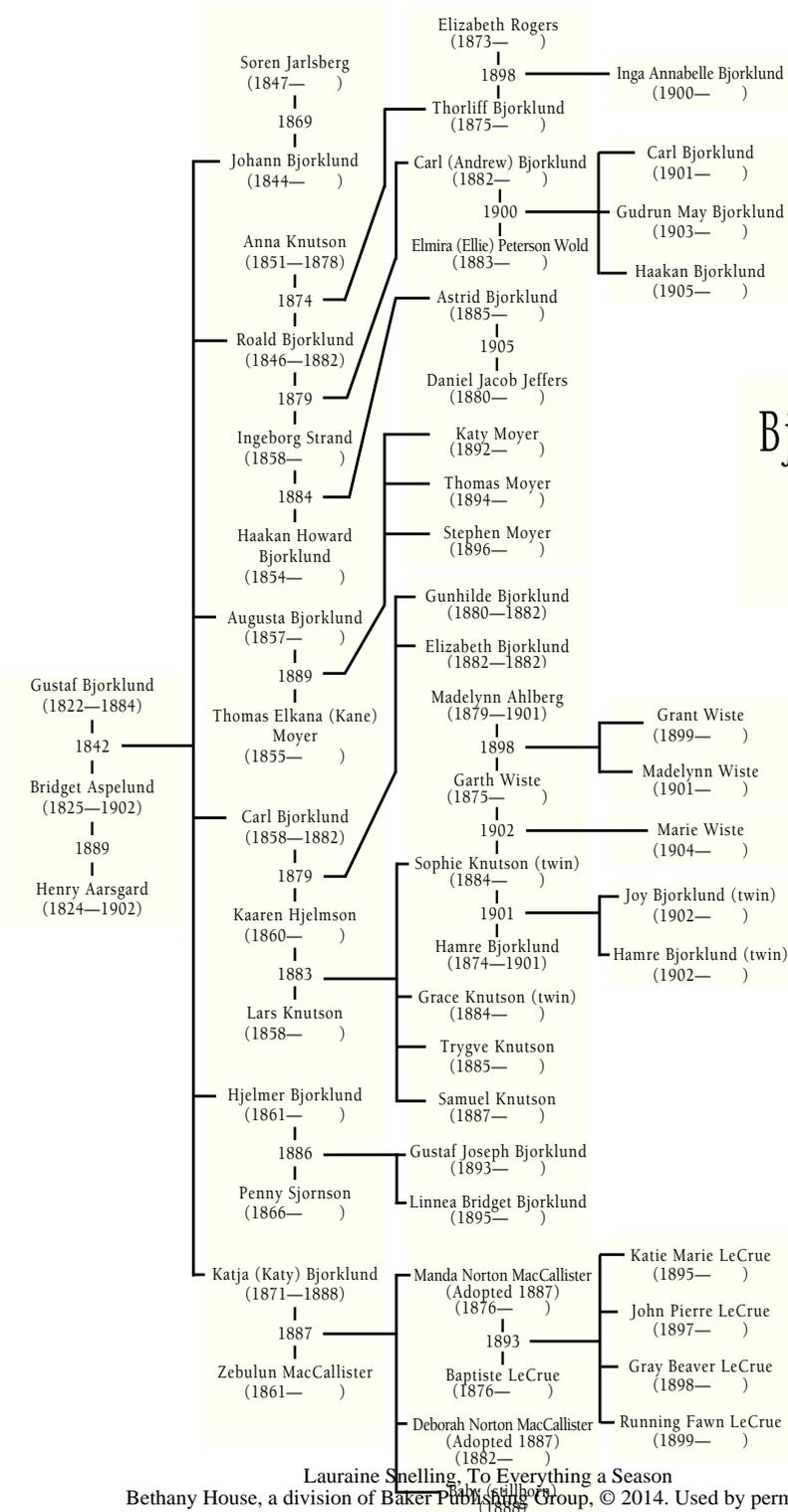
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[Dedication, if any]

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Bjorklund Family Tree



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CHAPTER 1

BLESSING, NORTH DAKOTA
MAY 1905

I fear something is seriously wrong.”
Dr. Astrid Bjorklund Jeffers stared at her mother. Mor never said things like this. She always said God was in control and He knew best. Astrid forced herself to step out of daughter role and into her doctor role. Forced, because raging through her mind was *Far, my far. What is happening to you?* “Mor, can you tell me what you see that is different?”

Sitting in her rocking chair, her hands quiet in her lap, something so rare that Astrid caught that too, Ingeborg let the song of the rockers fill the quiet room. She slowly wagged her head. “There is nothing specific, like his speech or the shaking. Just a sense I have. One cannot be married for all these years and not sense when something is changing or amiss.”

Astrid heaved a sigh, remembering the stroke Far had suffered two years ago. As far as she could tell, he had recovered

completely, other than getting tired more easily, but then, he was getting older too. Someone else had mentioned one day after church that Haakan had aged in the last couple of years. But wasn't that to be expected? He worked hard, and always had. Farmers did that. Norwegian farmers maybe even more so. The farm was his life. It provided for them, and he believed God gave them the land to husband and flourish. Mentally she catalogued the scenes she remembered from the other episode, searching for more knowledge.

"He will resent it if I ask him to see me or Elizabeth for a checkup."

Ingeborg nodded. "He is a man, after all."

"And I am his daughter and Elizabeth his daughter-in-law. Women always see male doctors without qualms, but the reverse . . ." She shook her head, sharing a smile with her mor.

"He respects what you do and admires you for it."

"I know, but letting me help him is something else." Even though both daughter and daughter-in-law were fully accredited physicians, she and Elizabeth still fought the stigma of being women in a man's field. Astrid tucked a strand of aged-honey hair back in the chignon she wore at the base of her head. She'd never gotten into the habit of wearing braids pinned into a coronet like her mother wore.

"I know I must turn this over to God and not fret." Mor stared out the window to the burgeoning greens of spring. Sparrows argued in the branches of the cottonwood tree she had planted at the corner of the house so many years ago. The liquid notes of a meadowlark out in the field floated through the open window. A cow bellowed, adding to the chorus that sang of new life after the long, hard winter. "In my reading this morning, Paul says, 'Be anxious for nothing.' Such an easy thing to read and yet so hard at times."

“After all these years, I would hope it has become easier.” *If it hasn’t for you, my dear mor who walks so closely with our Lord, how can there be hope for the rest of us?*

Mor’s voice was soft, sad. “Ja, until it concerns your husband or your children. To not fret or be anxious takes more trust. God keeps giving me lessons in trusting Him, and about the time I think I understand it, something new comes up. . . .” She sighed. “Easy to do for myself and for all the others around me, but not when it comes to Haakan.”

Astrid turned at the sound of a harness jingling. Surely it wasn’t time for dinner already. She glanced at their carved walnut clock. The oak box on the wall, with the mouthpiece in black and the receiver on the hook at the side, started its call to attention. One, two, three rings. The call for Tante Kaaren over at the deaf school.

“Answer that, will you?” came from the front porch.

Astrid stood and hustled to pick it up. “Yes?”

“Oh, it’s you, Astrid. This is for Kaaren.”

“I know. She’s just coming in the door. Please hold for a second.” She held the receiver out to her tante Kaaren, whose once-golden hair was silvering even more than Ingeborg’s.

When Kaaren took the receiver with a smile, Astrid headed for the shiny black cookstove with polished chrome trim and pulled the coffeepot closer to the heat. Lifting the front lid, she inserted a couple of sticks of firewood from the woodbox, grateful that someone had refilled it since early morning. Adjusting the damper, she moved the coffeepot all the way to the hottest section.

“The ginger cookies are in the cookie jar, and we have some corn bread left from last night that we can pour syrup over if you want.” The creak of the rocking chair announced that Mor was on her way to the kitchen.

Kaaren replaced the earpiece in its metal hook and turned to Astrid with a smile. “What a treat to find you here. I’m on my way to town and wondered if you want anything at the store.” She smiled at Mor, who was retying her apron as she came under the arch from the parlor to the kitchen.

“Let me think. You will stay for coffee?”

“Ja, especially since you said corn bread and syrup. I’ve not made corn bread lately. No idea why.” She nodded to the telephone. “The last of the students just got on the train.” She heaved a sigh. “Another year done.”

Kaaren Knutson had started the Blessing School for the Deaf years earlier after she’d learned sign language to help her daughter Grace, who was born deaf. Since then the school had become so well-known, they had to turn students away for lack of housing.

The lack of housing in town was becoming more and more of a problem, for Blessing was growing from a farmers’ village into a real town, thanks to the hospital, the flour mill, Ingeborg’s cheese house, and various other businesses. All were supported by the farms in the Red River Valley, an expanse so flat that wagons never even needed brakes.

“You sit down, Mor, and let me serve you for a change.” Astrid smiled at her mother.

Mor rolled her eyes but joined Kaaren at the well-worn kitchen table.

While the coffee was heating, Astrid dipped some hot water from the reservoir into a bowl and set the syrup pitcher in it to warm, slid the pan of corn bread into the oven, and after arranging some cookies on a plate, brought that to the table.

“Use the flowered plates, if you will.”

“Oh, we are having a party?” Astrid put the plain white plates back in the cupboard and fetched the hand-painted dishes from

the glass-fronted china cabinet that her father had made for her mother last Christmas.

“Of course, to celebrate another year of Kaaren’s school and anything else we can think of to celebrate.” Ingeborg patted Kaaren’s hand on the table. “Whoever would have dreamed of all the changes that are going on. So many people blessed by coming to Blessing.”

“We named our town well.” The two women shared a memory look of all those years ago when the folks had voted on a name for their town. The men had suggested various names, but when Pastor Solberg decreed, much to the dismay of the males, that the women could indeed vote, the name Blessing carried. Women were still allowed to vote in church matters, but like women everywhere, they were not permitted to vote in general elections, including school elections.

When all was set on the table, Mor took their hands and bowed her head. “Thank you, Lord, for this day and these treasured moments with my sister and daughter. Amen.”

Astrid cut into her piece of corn bread smothered in syrup and smiled around the treat. “I’ve not made this for Daniel yet. I wonder if he will appreciate it like we do.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” Kaaren said after wiping a spot of syrup from her mouth with one of the embroidered napkins Astrid had set at the places. “Although how you find time to do any cooking, what with the hospital and your medical practice, I’ll never know.”

“Same as you two always have—mor with the cheese house, and you with a school full of students who board there. Deaf students, no less.”

“Well, we certainly do not have a noise problem.” They paused as the telephone started to ring again and they counted

the rings of the party line. Four rings meant the call was for Penny Bjorklund at the mercantile.

Kaaren paused a moment, looking daydreamy as she savored the corn bread. “I know I could call my order in and Penny would have it ready when I get there, but somehow that seems rude.”

Astrid shook her head. “It certainly is convenient.” Ever since she and Daniel had moved into their own house, the men having finished the interior during the winter, she’d been juggling the demanding tasks of creating a home while running the hospital and going out to birth babies. It seemed that every young pregnant woman in the area had either delivered already or would be soon. She and Elizabeth took turns with the deliveries, with only two having complications enough to use the hospital. Due to all that, she’d taken advantage of the new service Penny had dreamed up—her helpers brought the orders out to the customers. The service was working so well that the Garrisons, who owned the grocery store, were teaming up with Penny.

Mor set her cup back down. “I’ve been thinking of something.”

“Uh-oh.” Kaaren grinned at Astrid. “Now we’re in trouble.”

“Oh, you.” Ingeborg waved off her comment. “Andrew thinks this is a good idea too.”

“What about Far?”

A shadow passed over Ingeborg’s face. “That’s one of the strange things. He has come up with all kinds of objections.”

Astrid leaned forward on her elbows. “That’s not like Far.” Usually her father encouraged new ideas, no matter who they came from, but especially if his beloved came up with the idea.

“I know.”

Mor moved her spoon around, then glanced from Astrid to Kaaren. “My idea is to provide milk service to the people in town that do not own a cow. We could bottle it here, or probably at

Andrew's, and deliver once or twice a week. I would be sure to leave plenty of milk for the cheese house and yet help some of those struggling to create a home. I thought of having them come here to pick it up, but delivery seems like a good idea. I know they do things like this in the cities, even in Grand Forks. It's something to think about."

Astrid could only shake her head. Leave it to her mother to come up with another brilliant idea.

The phone rang again, this time for her. "I'm here, Gerald. What is it? Tell her I'll be there as soon as I can get there. Thank you." She turned to the others. "Tante Kaaren, can you give me a ride to town? Gerald says the baby that has dawdled so long has decided to come, and fast."

Kaaren and Astrid were out the door, Kaaren's thank-you sailing over her shoulder.

"I'll call my order in," Ingeborg called from the door as both Astrid and Kaaren climbed up into the buggy.

Turning the buggy, Kaaren set the horse to a fast trot, kicking up twin spirals of dust down the lane. "Do you anticipate trouble?"

"No. Most likely, she won't even really need me, but better safe than sorry."

Kaaren glanced down at the black bag at their feet. "You carried that out to Ingeborg's?"

"It's not heavy—well, not much anyway. Guess I never go anywhere without it."

Kaaren wagged her head, but she was grinning. "Astrid, you are hopeless."



Ingeborg plopped down on the settee on the porch and watched the women go until the buggy was nothing more than a small

hazy dust cloud beyond the trees. And who was this coming? She recognized the bonnet immediately—Grace. And the child’s face looked disturbed. Child? No. A bride to be, no longer a child.

Ingeborg sighed. She and Haakan were getting old, but somehow she avoided thinking about that. For sure, she still felt as though she were thirty. But here were grandchildren, nieces and nephews, even grandnieces and grandnephews, Grace among them, and still she did not really feel old.

Grace trotted up onto the porch and sat down on the settee at Ingeborg’s invitation.

“Tante Ingeborg, I . . . I . . .” Grace looked to be squeezing the life from her hands.

Ingeborg took the hands of this young woman beside her and signed *I love you* into her palm. “All will be well.”

All is well already, dear child, Ingeborg thought. What a wonder this young woman was. Grace, deaf since birth, was already a well-known teacher of sign language, and thanks to her mother, she had learned to speak with words as well. It was exactly like knowing two languages. Kaaren had learned to sign so she could help her daughter, and thus was born the Blessing School for the Deaf.

Grace clung to Ingeborg’s hands and spoke in her monotone, halting way. “You always say that.”

“I know, because it is true. Our Father has proven himself over and over all our lives. I remember when you were born—Sophie first and then you. Sophie was such a squally, noisy baby, and you were so quiet. When we learned you couldn’t hear, your mor and I prayed so hard that you would be healed. But God didn’t see it that way. And now look how He has blessed so many people through you and your mother!”

Grace leaned her head briefly against her aunt’s shoulder. “I am so thankful for you, Tante Ingeborg.”

“I will guess here about what’s bothering you. You are troubled about your wedding. Uncertain.”

“Uncertain. Exactly. Ja, and troubled.”

Ingeborg continued to stroke Grace’s hands, but was careful to make sure Grace could see her mouth to be able to read her lips. That was another skill Grace had perfected through the years. “You need not doubt your decision to marry Jonathan. I assure you, having the jitters is very normal. Almost everyone gets them.”

Grace forced a smile that wasn’t really there. “I was ready. But his mother . . .” She sighed.

That was certainly understandable. His mother, who never did like Grace, had done all she could to forestall the wedding and had succeeded in delaying it.

“You have worked so hard, Grace, and done so well. You can do this too. And possibly win her over. In any case, you have won Jonathan. And what does Jonathan want?”

“To be married as soon and as easily as possible. He wants to come here immediately after his graduation and get married that very weekend. Then he plans to farm with my father and Onkel Haakan.”

Ingeborg nodded. “We all want that too. When will Jonathan’s family be here?”

“They’ll be coming for his graduation but plan to stay in Fargo until the day before the wedding on the following Saturday. We will leave for our honeymoon on Sunday. His mother is not happy that I refused to be married in New York. Jonathan did not want to be married in New York either, but she . . .” Grace shrugged and tipped her head to the side. “As you said, all will be well.”

“Ja, it will be.”

“We *will* go to New York after the wedding for some celebrations

with Jonathan's family and friends. But I think Mrs. Gould is also angry because we declined her offer for a wedding trip to Europe. We asked, instead, if they would put the money into the building fund for the addition to the deaf school instead."

Ingeborg had heard all this from Kaaren, but that didn't dim her delight in Grace telling her. Knowing what little she knew of Jonathan's mother, Ingeborg had a pretty fair idea of where Grace fit or didn't fit in with the family. But her own memories of Jonathan's father, the man Ingeborg had met as a new immigrant in New York City, were always treasured in her heart. He had remained a friend all these years. So many years since he had come west, and now he was coming for a wedding of which she was sure his wife did not approve. Life takes strange turns.

Ingeborg had another thought. "Tell me, Grace, are you afraid a child of yours might be deaf? Cannot hear, like you?"

"Ja, sometimes. In the middle of the night if I cannot sleep."

"I have read what I could find about this, and there is no evidence that will always happen. But our God is in charge. Never forget that. And your family is here to gather around you."

Their silence stretched before Grace answered. "I am glad I do not have to live in New York." She fluttered a little wave and stood up, so Ingeborg stood also. Together they walked down the steps and out the lane to the path leading across the small field to the deaf school. The men had built stiles across the fences to make it easier for the visitors, and now that they no longer kept the bull in that pasture, the path was used often.

"Soon the wedding will be here, and you and Jonathan can get settled. And honeymoon, of course." Ingeborg hugged Grace again. "Now, is there anything that I can do for you?"

"Just pray for us and come to the ceremony. I want to keep this as simple as possible."

"Of course I will!"

Grace heaved a sigh and gave a little wave. “Takk. Tusen takk.”



Two hours later, Astrid walked back to the surgery, a two-story residence with gables and gingerbread that housed not only the doctors’ office and examining rooms but also Thorliff, Elizabeth, and five-year-old Inga. The two doctors had talked of moving to the hospital but so far hadn’t made the effort. Besides, they needed the rooms there more for hospital staff and training. Astrid had checked on their six patients at the hospital earlier in the morning.

“My, that was quick,” Elizabeth said when Astrid joined her on the back porch.

“The mother was right. That baby boy was not wasting any more time. He came in a rush, and I’m sure I heard him hollering before he emerged. Mother and baby are doing fine. I was mostly a spectator.” Astrid smiled up at Thelma, Elizabeth’s housekeeper, cook, and whatever else she needed to be. “Ja, I would love a cup of coffee, and no, I’ve not had dinner.”

Thelma believed her main mission in life was to take care of her two doctors, along with all the other things she accomplished. Both doctors had given up on trying to keep up with Thelma, a wiry, whirling wonder of doing and caring with no thought for herself. Even her hair could not keep up with her. Instead of a sedate bun, it flew in all directions, causing her to threaten it with scissors on a daily basis.

By the time Astrid had given the briefest report on their patients, Thelma had set a bowl of thick chicken-and-dumpling soup in front of her, as well as a steaming cup of coffee and fresh muffins, butter, and jam alongside. Just the way Astrid liked it.

“Mange takk.”

“Anything else?” Thelma also conserved words like water in a drought.

“I think not. You could bring a cup of coffee out here and sit with us.”

The look made Astrid and Elizabeth roll their eyes and share a smile. “I’ll keep trying,” Astrid called toward the slamming screen door. The first spoon of the meal-in-a-bowl made her sigh with pleasure, a normal reaction to Thelma’s cooking.

Elizabeth blew on her spoonful of soup. “We have no patients scheduled for this afternoon, so I suggest you go home, not back to the hospital, at least not yet, and—”

“I guess I can write letters to Chicago from home as well as here or at the hospital.”

“I was going to say to take the rest of the afternoon off.”

Astrid looked up from her dinner. “Why?”

“Why not?”

“I took time off to go visit Mor.”

Elizabeth started to say something, then stared at Astrid. “Something about that visit is bothering you.”

“You are too perceptive for your own good.” Astrid went on to describe her mother’s concern for Haakan. “She can’t put a finger on it either, but you and I have both noticed something is different. What do you see?”

“He’s been somewhat withdrawn at church. Talking with the men some but more listening.”

“Or just being there. Is he listening or . . . ?”

“How should I know? I’m not part of that circle.” Elizabeth put her feet up on the hassock.

“I shall ask Thorliff.”

“Or Daniel. He’s pretty observant, and Haakan is not his father. That makes a difference. Also Reverend Solberg. But what can we do anyway?”

“Knowledge is our first line of defense.” Astrid sipped her coffee, elbows propped on the round table. “I’ve been wracking my brain to pinpoint when the change began, what might have precipitated it.”

“He never returned to full robustness after his stroke. No matter how he’s tried to think so. Men can be so stubborn.”

“I take offense at that comment.” Thorliff, husband to Elizabeth, Astrid’s brother, and the eldest of the Bjorklund children, did not take the three steps as one, like usual.

“The newspaper is finished.” Astrid stated more than asked.

“Yes, thank goodness.” He sank down on the chair across the table from Astrid and reached for his wife’s hand. “Good to see you out here.”

“I know. This is the first day really warm enough to enjoy being outside.” An argument started in the tree that hovered over the porch roof and ended when one bird flew off. The cat settled back in her basket and Inga’s dog, Scooter, laid his head back on his front paws after greeting Thorliff.

Thelma brought the coffeepot out, poured a cup for him, and refilled Astrid’s cup. “Soup or sandwich?” she asked.

“Soup is faster.”

Elizabeth’s brows arched. “And what is the hurry after finishing the paper? A brief rest would not be amiss.”

Thorliff half smiled. “I need to check on the crews.”

“Your foremen have all quit?” That arched eyebrow took the slight sting from her words.

Astrid rolled her lips together. Yes, Thorliff was working long and hard hours, but that seemed to be a family trait from both sides of the family. Andrew too. Work hard and long but live the pace of the land.

The jangle of the phone and two rings brought Astrid to her feet.

“You are wanted at the schoolhouse,” Thelma told her a moment later. “Something has happened.”

“Did they say what for?” she asked as she grabbed her black bag.

Thelma shook her head. “You need a bicycle.”

“Good idea.” Astrid knew she could walk there faster than she could hitch up a horse. “Call Mor and ask her to start praying.”

“She always starts to pray when our telephones ring,” Thorliff called as, with one hand clapped on her straw hat to keep it from flying off, she jogged away toward the schoolhouse on the other side of town.