



Sophie's Dilemma

by Lauraine Snelling

Excerpt provided courtesy of LauraineSnelling.com

Chapter 1

Early September 1901

The same. Everything was always the same.

Sophie Knutson glared at the face in the mirror. Her face, her hair, her home, Blessing, and now that school had started, it was one more same old thing. The final same old? She'd not heard from Hamre in over a month. Not that it mattered, of course. She pinned her hair in a swirl on top of her head, but when she moved, it slipped and fell about her shoulders. Slamming her comb down on the dressing table, she leaped up and returned to her pacing.

"I hate school!"

Grace looked up at her sister stomping from one side to the other of the bedroom they'd shared all their lives, just as they'd shared their mother's womb seventeen years ago. Grace spoke slowly, as if choosing her thoughts with great care. She kept her fingers in her lap, fingers that spoke far more swiftly than the tongue she'd trained with great difficulty to form the words she could not hear. "Sophie, look at me. What did you say?"

"I said I hate school."

"I know. But this will be our last year, and you promised to finish." Grace picked up the hairbrush lying in her lap.

Sophie clamped her fists on hips clothed by a white lawn chemise, trimmed in lace, all sewn with love by Grace, who was now sitting cross-legged on the bed. As usual, Sophie had started something and never gotten around to finishing it. Months ago she'd cut out the lawn pieces, and when Grace tired of looking at them, she finished the garment for her sister.

"I wish ... I wish I ..." Sophie's eyes grew dreamy, looking into some faraway place. "School is so boring." She plopped down on the bed, facing Grace so they wouldn't have to sign. Grace had been born deaf but was liberated from her silent world when Kaaren, their mother, learned sign language and taught the skill to all of them, which led to starting the school she now ran for the training of deaf people.

"What do you wish?" Grace asked.

Sophie knew her sister already knew the answer, since it had been the same since their childhood. Nevertheless, Grace indulged her.

"I want to go places, see new things, meet new people." Sophie flung her arms dramatically wide. "There's a whole world out there, and we are stuck here in Blessing."

"Not forever."

"I know, but the *ever* seems so far away!" She flopped back on the pillows. *I don't want to go to school. That's all there is to it.*

"What would you do if you didn't go to school?" Ever practical, Grace unplaited her daytime braids with graceful fingers.

"I could help Bestemor at the boardinghouse or work for Penny in the store, since Rebecca will be back in school. I could even help Dr. Elizabeth in the surgery." *Maybe I could find work in Grand Forks or Grafton. Grafton—Ellie's family lives there. Surely Goodie could find me something to do.*

"But you don't like blood."

"Better than school." Sophie ran her fingers into her dark hair and pulled it straight up. "Maybe I should cut my hair into a fringe."

"Now that would be an adventure."

"I saw it in a magazine. It's the latest rage. If I get the scissors, will you help me?"

"But your hair waves back so beautifully. Not like mine." Grace pulled a hank of what she called mouse brown hair over her shoulder and waved it at her sister. She'd gone back to braiding it to keep it out of her way.

"Be right back." Sophie signed with flying fingers as she leaped off the bed. Racing down the stairs, she snatched the scissors out of the sewing room and raced back up. Sophie never walked if she could dance or run. She paused in the doorway. Grace lived up to her name. Right now she sat on the bed with her arms raised, braiding her thick hair for the night. The light from the kerosene lamp outlined her in gilt.

If I leave, or rather, when I leave, what about Grace? How will I live without her? Yet I know she won't want to go along. Grace loved school, loved being at home, loved helping their mother with the deaf school. Her patience with the new students was never ending, forming their fingers into the signs that would free them from their silent prison. After all, she had once been where they were. She understood.

Sophie crossed to stand in front of the mirror. Did she dare cut her hair? Just a few strands right in front. She tried folding her hair to hang short in front on her forehead to give her an idea what it would look like. She turned without thinking so that Grace could read her lips. "Would you help me please?"

"Hadn't you better think on it more?"

"No. At least I will look a little different. Hold the hair in back so I can drop just the ends over my forehead."

Grace did as she asked and looked over her sister's shoulder to stare into the mirror. Their eyes met, Sophie's dancing with the thought of such daring, Grace's caught in a question mark.

"I'm going to do it." Sophie handed Grace the scissors. "I'll hold the comb; you cut."

"No. If you want them short, you cut."

"I know. You cut mine, and I'll cut yours." Sophie whirled and, with the comb, tugged a few strands of Grace's hair loose from the night braid. While the two girls looked much alike in stature, Sophie had a wider forehead, an upturned nose, and darker eyes to match her hair. Grace's face was more oval, with a straight nose and dreamy gray eyes with thick lashes. While Grace called her hair mousy, Sophie referred to it as tawny, shot with gold. Together they decided to call Sophie's hair nutmeg with cinnamon trails. They'd been on a spice-searching mission that day, with Sophie dreaming of the lands that grew the spices they used to flavor food. Pepper had been too dark, cinnamon too red, allspice too strong, and nutmeg just right.

Grace hefted the scissors, opened the blades wide, slid one edge along her sister's forehead, and pulled away. "I can't do this."

"Of course you can. Just cut right above my eyebrows. I read that was best."

"But what if I slip and cut you?"

"You won't." Sophie combed the long strands all the way out and started again at her scalp, stopping at eye level. "There, now cut." She adopted a frown of command on her face, knowing her sister well enough to understand she would dither and back out unless she took a firm stand.

"Sophie Knutson, if Mor scolds you, don't you dare blame me." Grace slid the scissors back in place and snipped. The newly released long tresses slid through the comb and drifted to the floor. Both girls studied the results in the mirror, mouths matching in perfect Os.

"Do you like it?" Sophie asked, breaking the silence.

"Not much. Do you?"

"I think it will take some getting used to."

"What will Mor say?"

"What will Mor say to what?"

The voice from the doorway spun Sophie around with a shriek. "Ah, I ... ah ..."

Grace followed, her eyes as round as her sister's.

"Sophie, what did you do?" Kaaren stood stock-still.

"Ah, Grace ..."

Grace gave her a shove and stepped backward, her fingers flying so fast even Kaaren couldn't keep track.

"Sophie made you?"

Grace nodded vigorously.

Sophie felt like she was three years old again and caught with her finger in the cookie dough. She straightened her shoulders and huffed, "I've wanted a fringe for a long time."

"I see." Kaaren crossed the room to peer more closely at the damage. "Is it supposed to look ragged like this?"

"No-o." Sophie turned and stared in the mirror again. "The pictures in the magazine showed them even and puffy. Maybe we should cut it all off, right at the roots."

Kaaren shook her head, the lamplight catching highlights in her golden coronet that had always reminded the girls of either crowns or halos, depending on what they were reading at the time.

"Mother, don't laugh," Sophie wailed.

"I'm trying not to." Kaaren took the scissors in one hand and the comb in the other.

Sophie backed away, her hands splayed in defense in front of her. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to fix the mess you made. Now hold still. Unless you'd rather leave it the way it is." She turned to hand the scissors to Grace, who backed away, her hands locked behind her back. When she offered the tools to Sophie, she got the same reaction. "All right, then, go the way you are or let me fix it."

Sophie gulped and nodded. Surely her mother could redeem the efforts. She'd always been able to do so with everything else. She scrunched her eyes closed and offered her face as if going to the guillotine.

"Just look at me like you usually would, or I will not be responsible for the way it looks."

Sophie opened her eyes wide, then blinked and focused on her mother, her shoulders tense, arms rigid at her sides. Kaaren snipped a bit here and trimmed a bit there. The hair fell, and Sophie sneezed.

"Sorry."

"Good thing I wasn't cutting right then." Kaaren trimmed up the sides, dipped the comb in water from the pitcher, and combed the hair up and over her finger. "There, I think that will do." She stepped back. "Not bad if I do say so myself." She turned to Grace. "What do you think?"

"Better, much better, but I'm still not sure I like it."

"I'm afraid it will take some getting used to." Kaaren studied her daughter. "But I think it looks good on you."

"Now it's Grace's turn." Sophie gave herself a doubtful look in the mirror one more time.

Grace shook her head. "I am not cutting my hair into a fringe." She signed at the same time, her fingers slashing the air.

"But you said ..."

"No. You said I would." Grace knelt down and swept the fallen hair into one hand with the other.

"I'll bet you a penny that the other girls will have theirs cut like mine within a week."

"There will be no betting in this house." Kaaren brushed short bits of dark hair off her daughter's chemise. "Now, it is bedtime, and you should be grateful your pa is off with the threshing crew. The shock of this might be too much for him."

"Ma, you really—" Sophie caught the glint of teasing in her mother's eyes and tone. She shook her head and turned back to the mirror. "I think it does indeed grow on one." She fluffed the fringe with her fingers.

Kaaren kissed each of her daughters good-night. "You get to sleep now. Morning will come far too soon, and the cows need to be milked before you leave for school."

"I know." Sophie left off studying her new hairstyle and pulled her cambric nightdress over her head, then shimmied out of her chemise and camisole underneath it. She tied the blue ribbon at the neckline and folded back the blue-and-white nine-patch quilt they'd helped their mother make years before. "Come on, Grace. 'Night, Mor." She slid under the sheet and puffed her pillow behind her.

After Kaaren left the room, Sophie turned on her side to watch her twin finish getting ready for bed and waved to catch Grace's attention. "I haven't heard from Hamre for more than a month now."

"I know." Grace tied her pink neck bow. Their light nightdresses matched, including the deep ruffle edged with lace at the bottom and the bodice trimmed with a dainty row of tatting, but for the colored ribbons. "He is either fishing or forgetting."

"Hmm." Sophie pursed her lips and slitted her eyes. "We've been corresponding regularly. Why would he forget?"

"Maybe he found a girlfriend. Can I blow out the lamp now?"

Sophie nodded and sighed. "I guess." She stared at the ceiling in the darkness. Hamre wouldn't forget her, would he? Unless he had indeed met someone else. The thought made her roll over to her other side and clutch her pillow. Seattle was so far away. He'd said there were lots of Norwegians there; there must be plenty of attractive Norwegian girls. And he always signed his letters, "Your friend." Did he care for her or not? She tossed to the other side, and Grace reached over to pat her shoulder. Sophie rolled on her back and held her sister's hand until they both fell asleep.

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