








Chapter



Delivering



*F*lickering flames of orange and red reflected in the eyes of my brothers and sisters as we looked on the burning remnants of our childhood home. I snapped the reins, and Gerda responded intently. Through the snow we slipped, gliding furiously over the trails and across the crests of hills. When at last we stopped to look back and measure our distance, black clouds of smoke rose in pillars to the skies. The mountains of Norway were all I had ever known, but our once sacred, now savaged, mountain enclave faded into distant smoky memories of all we had lost and left behind.



Aged Gerda, her strength not what it once was, tired quickly. As we went ahead, we slowed to a more measured pace, giving us time to think and focus on the moment, if not the future. Which way should I go? Which way to safety?

Inside the sleigh, Garin, my weary brother of nine, waited. He denied the world his sadness as he played with a toy wooden bear, the only familiar element he was allowed to carry on our desperate journey.

The snowy-blond twins, Tamas and Talia, were only seven. They sat in awkward silence and clutched each other's hands. I hoped their bond would not be broken somewhere along our path. If nothing else, they might have each other as a reminder that they had once belonged to a family.

My freckled sister of five, Kendra, held our sleeping younger sister of three, Jess, in her arms. Kendra stroked Jess's curly red hair. They seemed to glow with a gentle radiance in the illumination of my torch.

Shivering next to my mother was my beautiful, violet-eyed two-year-old brother, Owen, who began to cry.

My mother smoothed her palm down Owen's cheek. "Hush."

We paused momentarily atop the ridge that was the boundary to our mountain home. Near the end of the trail stood an ancient, sprawling tree that was burdened and twisted like the weakened body of a dying elder, a tree I had climbed countless times but no more. From the tops of those branches I had look out across the lowlands and dreamed of a different life. One I was now destined to discover.

The children huddled around my once beautiful mother, now as twisted and as tormented as the tree looked to me. They seemed to be waiting for something, some clue, some comfort, and so I began a song that was familiar to them—a favorite we sang each winter as Christmas was approaching.

Delivering

*Crystal snowflakes, crystal night,
keep my brothers in your sight.
Watch my sisters, safe and dear,
through this Yule and through this year.
Falling snowflakes from above,
each unique and filled with love!
Keep them safe until I call
my Christmas wish as snowflakes fall.*

How I loved my brothers and sisters. How I lamented every mean word and accidental bruise born of childish arguments. How I wanted us to be safe, to remain together. My mother would not allow me to care for them in her absence. Back in the village, I had argued with her, insisting I could find a home for us all and watch over them.

“I am thirteen!” I exclaimed. “I have had my coming of age.”

She only scoffed at me, mocking my earnest desires.

“You are just a boy. A crumb. Not yet a man,” she said, while struggling to catch a painful breath. “You cannot care for these children or protect them.”

She cut me cruelly with her words. Furious and frustrated, I struggled to fight back welling tears.

“You must leave them,” she continued harshly. “Tie them to the pillars at the crossroads. Leave them in the road for travelers to find. Together you are doomed to be discovered for what you are. There is little chance they will live, unless some stranger should discover them and take pity. They are in God’s hands now.”

How could I leave my brothers and sisters tied helplessly along the roadside in the bitter cold? God would find them? God would give them

shelter? Who would give them shelter, except to place them in a shallow grave or leave them buried under mounds of snow and ice?

I hated her.

I realize now that I did not want to face her undeniable truth. I knew I would have to separate them as my mother commanded, and I hated her for what she asked me to do, even if she was right.

For who would take in so many desperate souls? Who would willingly provide us all with sustenance and shelter? Though none of us showed signs of the illness, who would endanger themselves with the plague God had brought upon my innocent village?

Each time I asked myself those awful questions, I knew with certainty I would have to unlink our fingers, if not our hearts, and find new families and new homes for them to start their lives again. While I hoped our love would never fade, I had to face the grim reality: they would not survive another day in this cold if I did not find them sanctuary.

We swept across the wasteland seeking salvation, some modest place of shelter from the perils of winter's hostile breath, until before us a windblown roadhouse appeared like a gift from heaven.

Who will be first? I thought to myself.

Then I saw my mother struggle to free herself from Owen's desperate grasp, and I knew she had already made the choice. I hid the sleigh among the trees and looked to my mother.

Gently, she stroked Owen's face and spoke to him almost teasingly. "As happy as I am to be getting an uninterrupted sleep, I will miss you at night, crawling in bed with me. When I see your smiling face, all is right with the world. No more night scares now. Sing them away, like your father would."

Owen couldn't fully form words yet, but he had a language all his own that he spoke just to us. At night when our father would sing as my mother slowly rocked him, Owen would sing along in his little sleepy voice.

"You are the most wondrous thing," she said to him. "I knew all too well these days would end. And though I am not ready, it is time you were off without me. I love you more than words can say."

I took Owen's hand and cautioned the others to be silent as I started off toward the isolated roadhouse. Watery eyes revealed their understanding.

It was a long march across the snowy meadow. Owen did his best to keep up with me, nearly waist-deep in the snow, until I swept him up into my arms and carried him the rest of the way.

Gently I sat him on the stairs and began to make a small snowman, forming the mounds and molding the face. Slowly he joined in.

I left him playing on the steps, quietly backing away to rejoin the others. Owen gurgled and laughed the way children do.

Just then the roadhouse door swung open and slammed against the wall. Owen began to cry. The roadhouse man, a grizzled, ham-handed giant, filled the doorway. He gazed out past Owen shrieking on his steps. Then he saw me, skulking off into the distance, and yelled,

"Hold!"

I was driven by fear that he would pursue me. I did not hold. I ran faster than I had ever run before, spurred by my stumbling anguish. Don't catch me. Don't follow me. Don't look at me. Don't see me for what I am, for what I've done.

I had left my little brother behind in the hands of a strange giant, a man who could squash him in his mighty grasp. Sobbing, I ran, fearful

that I had made the greatest mistake of my young life in leaving him there alone. The distant cries of my brother proclaimed my betrayal.

Please forgive me. God forgive me. Let this be a home. God give him a home. Please, if you are up there, don't abandon him the way I have. Give him love.

But I had little faith in a world where love was scarce. Whatever hope I had was dashed when I looked into my mother's swollen eyes.

"Get on with it," she commanded.



The morning sun glanced off the crystalline snow and sprayed a glaring light upon our ragged and weary group.

In such a harsh light as this, we now found ourselves illuminated, our desperation exposed as our sleigh moved forward across the powdery snow.

The devil time now became our enemy, waiting for us to falter, watching with glee as we drifted onward in hope of finding yet another way station or sheltered hostel in which to deposit one more piece of our hearts.

As we moved ahead, I noticed feral shadows peppering the snow, interrupting its glaring whiteness in slinking, threatening movements. Wolves, I thought. Or was I so tired that my mind now birthed twisted imaginings?

Vicious wolves, I imagined, marking time, waiting for us to hesitate or pause, so they might strike. This was their land, their hunting ground, their home, not ours.

Wolves know the value of time and how quickly it passes and changes us. They know the value of patience and of waiting for opportunity.

They surround their prey and paralyze it with fear while they stalk and distract and close their ranks in anticipation of the moment when they might spring.

The whole world can feel full of these savage predators, always advancing, always stalking, always ripping away at our youth. But sometimes the world offers salvation, and sometimes the wolves are imagined.



Another modest cottage. Another chance to dispense a desperate and hungry child and save him from the wild and release him to the vagaries of fate.

Bread. The sweet scent of bread. Hot loaves placed upon a windowsill to cool by the mistress of the house. Hot loaves of bread calling to me, making my mouth water, coating my wind-parched lips.

We all smelled it. Our forgotten hunger now pulled at our rumbling bellies. And again our mother chose, another boy, a twin, my brother Tamas.

“I am torn,” my mother said to him, “by wanting to know what kind of man you will be when you are grown up and wanting to keep you, my child. I cannot imagine a time when you will not be my little man. You were so excited to be six and with the toy whistles and bells your father hid about the house. So very frustrated with your sister for taking forever to find the gifts and then to play with each one before she moved on to the next treasure hunt. You are stubborn and bullheaded, and I love that about you. I hope you keep those qualities as you get older. I look at you and I see such possibilities. How excited I am for you and your new life.”

As my mother kissed and held him, he reached for our sister Talia. I pulled my brother Tamas toward the house and the scent of freshly baked bread. He began to fight me, screaming. I placed my hand across his mouth to silence him and held him fast, though he kicked and lashed out at me in his desperate anger. I was so afraid I might hurt him as he fought. But what could hurt him more than tearing him from his family? He would hate me for leaving him here alone.

He struggled. I walked.

I told myself over and over this must be done. “This must be done!” I said aloud.

I ignored his tears. I ignored his pleas and his struggles. Then, suddenly, he stopped fighting. The tension released from every muscle in his body. Talia’s fingers intertwined with his. She stood there holding his hand, their look sharing what only twins could possibly understand.

For a moment they glanced up at me with tears in their eyes, then turned and walked to the cottage.

How brave they were, how trusting. How beautiful they were, like lost angels filled with grace walking hand in hand as they approached the cottage door.

Who ever could have dreamed when they were born that such a day as today would arrive? My mother’s glorious twins, her pride, now pushed aside and sent out into the world alone.

I rushed to the windowsill and snatched one loaf of bread for the others, then ran back to the sleigh, nearly breathless in my desire to flee. The twins knocked upon the cottage door.



Of all the pain I had ever felt, none was so savage as the misery of separation. When my father died, I felt a wound that would never heal. He did not mean to leave us, I now know. But as he died, I was filled with rage.

“How can you leave us?” I demanded to know as he lay there dying. “How can you go and not think to take us with you?” I shouted when he was gone.

I wanted to walk with him no matter where he went, in worlds dark or distant. I wanted him to be strong and take my hand or caution me away from dangerous dispositions. He was my heart.

It was not so much the pain of loss but its permanence that echoed again and again for me—loss that could not be reclaimed in this world, or maybe even in the next. Everything I counted on was gone. Every memory. Every hope. Every small achievement measured by this man whose death left me abandoned one winter day. I was not ready to take on this world alone.

This is how my brothers and sisters must have felt. They had trusted that our parents would be there. That I would be there as an older brother should be. But that too was denied by my mother. I blamed her. However wrongly, I did blame her.

I knew I could not end our reckless journey until each of my brothers and sisters was given some chance, some place of shelter. So on we went, our sleigh glancing across the rugged terrain.

After we traveled for so long that it felt we might soon come to the world’s end, the music of mighty axes and the singing of lumberjacks floated out from a distant stand of trees. I reined in Gerda and slowed our pace, listening to the rhythm of the axes as I planned our next engagement.

Kris—The Legend Begins

THWACK, THWACK, THWACK, THWACK,

A lumberjack's life is a worrisome one, though some call it free from care.

THWACK, THWACK, THWACK, THWACK,

It's the ringing of the axe from morning till night in the middle of the forest fair.

THWACK, THWACK, THWACK, THWACK,

While life as a jack can be bleak and cold while the wintery winds do blow,

THWACK, THWACK, THWACK, THWACK,

As soon as the morning star does appear, to the wild woods we must go.

Then came a mighty and thunderous CRACK, and a giant tree surrendered its majestic form to the earth.

Garin did not wait for my next thought. He never seemed to need the rest of us. That is not to say he wasn't part of us. He loved us, and we him. Sometimes he would play with the rest of us, and sometimes he was a kind of loner. It amazed me how independent he was at nine years old.

He leaned his tired frame across the bench and kissed my mother on the cheek. The kiss held for just the slightest moment, and as he leaned back my mother spoke words to him that rang in my ears for years to come, "Don't ever let them know where you are from."

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Before I stopped the sleigh, Garin leapt out onto the snowy ground and began his trek toward the lumberjacks. I loved that he struck out on his own without looking back. He got that from our father.

He was strong and embraced his new calling with resolute purpose, like some tragic champion of old. My deep sadness and regret was that he might someday forget us all in his effort to cut away the painful past, forgetting all the happiness that once lived there.

The sleigh came to a stop, and I watched as he walked across the snowy expanse. He didn't look back.

THWACK, THWACK, THWACK, THWACK,

Some would leave their friends and homes and others they love dear,

THWACK, THWACK, THWACK, THWACK,

And into the lonesome pine woods their pathway they do steer.

THWACK, THWACK, THWACK, THWACK,

Into the lonesome pine woods all winter to remain

THWACK, THWACK, THWACK, THWACK,

A-waiting for the springtime to return again.

A snap of the reins and Gerda was off again, leading us forward into evening and tomorrow. Garin's old wooden bear, left behind, collapsed onto its side as if felled by one stroke of an imaginary axe. And it rolled to the rear of the sleigh, where it came to a halt as abruptly as Garin's childhood.



My mother coughed behind me. It was clear her time was coming to an end. I struggled with confusion. She was stern in the demands she placed on us and especially on me, but she always had watched over us and protected us in whatever ways she could. Now she was determined to see us scattered to the wind with only the smallest hope we might again take root. At the time, she seemed to me without feeling or compassion for our young lives as her own began to drift away.

I did not know what else to do, except to carry out this task as she demanded. I was helpless to change the path we were now upon, so I executed her dying wish because I could think of none to surpass it.



I became determined to take what little control I could in my effort to find real shelter for my brothers and sisters. It would be their only opportunity for survival. That my mother wanted me to leave them by the roadside or wandering alone in hopes some stranger would discover them only added to my frustration, deepened my anger, and left me feeling weak and pitiful. It would be years before I uncovered the simple truth that facing your own death was almost inconsequential compared to losing a child.

In the evening light I spied a modest country inn and set it as the next destination on our quest for gentle refuge.

My mother stroked Jess's hair. "You're beautiful. So, so pretty and red is your hair and your long, long lashes. Our neighbors would stop us to tell me how beautiful you are. I wish I could say it was embarrassing, but I never tired of it, because not only are you beautiful on the outside, you are even more so on the inside."

Jess had a sweetness, a kind of rosy glow around her wherever she went. She also had her own world that she lived in all the time. She loved to dance and sing and would make us call her by her name of choice for the day and would not respond to any other. Penelope was her best friend, though none of us could see Penelope. Jess was a joy.

With Jess in hand, I walked to the inn and sent her inside. I found a slightly open window through which I could see and feel the raging fire radiating from the hearth within.

A buxom bar matron busily served patrons and travelers, men and women that had gathered inside for warmth who ate and drank in great measure. They shouted raucous songs and engaged in playful banter in the spirit of holiday revelers and were so occupied with their merriment they failed to notice Jess as she entered through a swinging tavern door. I watched from outside and could see Jess make her way curiously through the room until she stumbled and fell in a carpet of scraps and sawdust. All eyes turned to Jess, but no one came to her rescue.

“Whose child is this?” the bar matron finally demanded. There was no response. Bewildered, the matron swooped Jess up and took her to a chair where she sat, placing Jess upon her lap. She combed Jess’s curly red hair with her fingers and made an occasional playful tweak at Jess’s nose and laughed with her as the singing and drinking carried on around them.

I raced back to the sleigh, feeling emptiness at losing Jess and great hope for her chances of survival.



As we pushed onward, night wrapped its gossamer cloak around our sleigh, concealing our secrets and the illness inside. Empty as the world around us, I prayed for some newfound fuel to carry us into tomorrow.

The church ahead, visible in the silvery moonlight, woke me from my delirium like a beacon of salvation created for us. In that moment, I believed in miracles, but simple momentary miracles are often forgotten in a moment.

Kendra was sleeping now, too exhausted to remain alert. Quietly, my mother spoke to her as she slumbered.

“I will miss our days together. I will miss eating fresh snow peas and watching the ducks and even laying on the bed talking. You are going to be a powerful woman. You are tough, but with the kindness you embody you will never be mean, just tough. It is a rare woman that can carry it off, but I believe it will come to you with ease. There is sometimes an old soul quality about you. You are my little wise one. I couldn’t love you any more.”

I don’t think my mother was done talking when I lifted Kendra from the bench of the sleigh and carried her into the vestibule of the church. I didn’t care. Kendra was cold and needed to go inside, I told myself.

Her beautiful, freckled, five-year-old face was radiant in the candlelight. She did not stir. She did not waken as I lay her upon a large wicker mat on a table in the vestibule and left her there for God and his messengers to watch over. On the table beside the mat was a small, rough nativity, crudely carved from some dark obsidian rock. For a moment I bowed my head; then in a burst of anger, I swept the figurines to the ground, bouncing and scattering across the stone floor.

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As the sleigh pulled away from the church, I felt someone watching, perhaps the eyes of heaven upon me. I didn't care. The only forgiveness I wanted was from the family I had left behind.



Snowflakes.

Lazy, floating snowflakes.

I ran through the experiences of the day as we rode through the slow, soft snowfall. My mother's task accomplished, I was done. Something good had taken place today. Something unexpected. Something impossible. But over and over again I lived each delivery. I critiqued each moment. And all I wanted was to turn around and gather us back together.

Sometime past the dark early hours of morning, my mother's shawl broke free, unraveled from about her head, and sailed into the night. I watched, mesmerized. It floated, turning gracefully in the sky like the snowflakes. Defying nature, it danced upon the air rising higher and higher.

I stopped the sleigh and retrieved the shawl from where it had finally come to rest on the snow. The peace of the quiet snowfall was calming. Still fascinated by the descending snow, I watched one oddly large snowflake fall as I walked around to give my mother her errant shawl. The flake landed on her face and didn't melt. I gently placed the shawl around her head, almost afraid to wake her from her endless sleep. A small, wooden snowflake pendant rested upon her neck. She had worn it my entire life. A gift, I believe, from my father. Carefully I untied the necklace and wrapped it in my hand. Then I wrapped my arms around

her. “What about me, Mama? What words for me? How am I special, Mama? How do you see me?”

The blankets covering her body began to stir, and a cry broke the tranquility of the silent night. I recoiled.

“My God.”

I had forgotten. I had forgotten the precious life my mother held to her breast. I had forgotten I even had a days-old infant brother. Frantically I tore at her clothes and pulled my naked brother from the ebbing warmth of her grasp. The wind whistled through the barren winter land surrounding us. Nikko cried as I held him away from my body.

What was I to do with this squealing infant who had no protection from the world? I trudged across the snowy field toward a gathering of trees.

How would I find him comfort in this forsaken land now that my mother had died? Surely, he would not survive until morning. Who would feed him?

Would it not be better for him? It would happen so soon. He would have no recollection of loneliness and suffering, only eternal life.

So I walked, the snowflake pendant dangling from my fingers, the tearful shivering infant in my outstretched arms.

I walked to one tree. And then the next. What I was horrified to consider I could not find the will to do. I walked through the stand of trees knee-deep into the fresh powdery snow. Slowly, I pulled him into my protective body, and I walked through the rolling snowy hills.

I walked until I could not walk another step. Until weariness overtook me. Until my legs became so heavy that I stumbled and fell. Until I had no other choice but to accept our fate and surrender to exhaustion.

I removed my old cloak and laid it over the snow then gently placed Nikko upon it, laying my own unprotected body in the snow beside him.

“Don’t worry, little one. The cold will not last long.”

As we lay there, gazing into a glittering and translucent sky, I held the wooden snowflake pendant and thought about the way snowflakes formed and fell to earth. Each like a crystal jewel. Each unique, with unrivaled form. Each drifting from heaven like a silent prayer or a gentle kiss from God. Each finding its own special place, yet joining so many others, as the world embraced and absorbed them.

And then I thought of Nikko and all my brothers and sisters, who were as delicate as any of these snowflakes. Each unique, each now sent drifting in search of a special place and hoping for the world’s embrace.

“Nikko, do you think it is Christmas yet?” I asked.

A star flared in the night and raced across the sky, then was followed by sparks and cinders that floated upon the wind. A fire, I thought. We must be near a fire.

I wrapped Nikko in the cloak and headed off to follow the trail of burning, pulsating embers.

From beneath the crest of a hill poked a smoking chimney. Attached to that chimney, among the hills of nowhere, was a cottage. When I found that cottage, with its chimney spewing sparks into the sky, I set about devising a way to deliver Nikko to his new home.

I laid him in the snow outside a window that had not been sealed and peered inside to see who might be within the small house. An old couple sat at the table near the fireplace, eating stew. I ran to their door and knocked on it boldly.

Surprised, the old cottager arose, picked up a walking staff, and headed to the door. His curious wife followed close behind. As they opened the door to see what sort of wandering stranger had beckoned them, I crawled through the window with Nikko in my arms.

“Who goes there?” the cottager called out to the empty night.

Quickly and quietly I set Nikko near the hearth, on an old blanket that lay folded there. I placed the wooden snowflake on his breast. Nikko’s tiny little hand held onto my thumb. I peeled his hand off my finger, and in the blink of an eye I was gone out the window. For the first time in hours Nikko began to cry.

The cottager’s wife must have turned to discover Nikko lying near the hearth, for I heard a muffled shriek from inside. Minutes later the old cottager started up again.

“Who goes there? Hello?”

But I was a far distance by then, now truly alone as I walked away into the night.



It is difficult to look back and remember the pain of that long day’s delivery because there were so many good times to follow. Though weary beyond belief, I did eventually make my way back to the sleigh and Gerda, who somehow braved and survived that chilling journey. As I think about it now, I realize that I wasn’t fully alone. I had her. She was with me through all of it, just as she would see me grow into a man over the coming years.

I wasn’t there yet. It was the early 1700s, and though I wasn’t a boy, I was not yet a man. You see, tragedy doesn’t make a man. It may end a childhood, but only learning to embrace responsibility of your own free

will makes a man. So far I had only been on the ride. Now I had to learn to do something with my pain and my experience. It helps to have an example, if not a teacher, for a young person to truly come of age. God was good enough to give me both in the years to come.

You might think of my story as tragic. I want you to know that I am grateful for the experience. It made me who I am, who I was to become. Heroes must pass through a trial of fire. In time I would pass through mine to become someone I loved and respected, someone, I hope, who brings joy to others. But once again, I wasn't there yet.

You may be curious about my mother and what became of her. I could tell you a story of a child frantically trying to dig into the frozen earth with hands and sticks. Or I could tell you about days of looking for rocks to pile, or of hands too frozen to light the smallest of fires.

In the end I laid my mother's body near the roadside, propping her head up gently with a mound of snow until it seemed she was at last peaceful in her eternal sleep. I remembered Garin's toy bear and retrieved it from the sleigh, placing it in my mother's arms as a reminder of the children she had planted along the road. I prayed that in time her body would be discovered and given a more fitting burial, which I could not do alone.

Eventually I realized that we had to move on and that I had decided to live.