

Saara's Passage Prologue and Chapter One

Prologue

"Leipä?"

"That one's easy, Mummu," I said, grinning from the old pine rocking chair in the corner of my greatgrandmother's bedroom. "It means 'bread.' "

"You're right, Aliisa," she said. "How about *kissa*?"

I giggled at the sound of the Finnish word. "It means 'play'—no, wait. It's 'cat.' "

Mummu nodded, her smile rearranging the wrinkles of her cheeks. She shifted in her recliner, pulling the multicoloured quilt higher over her legs. "I see you've been studying the vocabulary list I gave you."

Like a hug, the pride in her voice warmed me. "Ask me another one."

"*Yhdeksän*?"

Cringing, I silently counted up from one on my fingers. "Is it eight?"

"No, nine."

"Arrrg! Numbers are so *hard* to remember."

"Oh, Aliisa-*kulta*," said Mummu, shaking her head. "Now you remind me of Lila."

"Who's Lila?" asked Mom, entering the bedroom carrying a wooden tray. She set it down on a TV table. The tray was loaded with a steaming teapot, mugs, spoons, milk and sugar, and cardamom cookies.

"My friend Lila lived on the farm next to Uncle's homestead in North Branch. She and Mikko endured my first attempts at teaching. It was teaching English, believe it or not, and I was only twelve!"

"After the *Empress of Ireland* sank?" I asked, stirring a heaping teaspoon of sugar into my blackcurrant tea.

"Yes. My twelfth birthday was only two days after the sinking." Mummu wore a faraway look and sighed heavily. "I was still recovering in Quebec." Her eyes turned back to me and she smiled reassuringly. "But we celebrated properly later, at home."

Mom gingerly handed Mummu her mug, the one with the lilac design. Then she grabbed the rose mug and two cookies for herself. Nestling on the bed, she asked, "Did you live at your uncle's homestead that summer?"

A question popped up in my head, so I leaned forward and blurted, “Did you ever figure out *why* your life was spared?”

Mummu chuckled. “I’ll need to tell another whole story to answer those questions.”

My chair rocked back so far on its extra-long runners, I narrowly missed spilling my tea. “Go ahead, Mummu. I promise I won’t interrupt.”

Following a sip of milky tea, Mummu closed her eyes to concentrate. “It was June 28, 1914, when we celebrated so many happy things—my birthday, our surviving the sinking, and the arrival of my baby cousin. I had no inkling how much life would change overnight ...”

Chapter One

“Keep kicking!” I cried in panic. But my brother’s body went limp. The icy river sucked at us. Cold sliced through me.

The *Empress* had vanished. Would the river swallow us, too? I desperately kicked and clawed the black water. John’s weight dragged at me. I tightened my grip on his hair.

Is he still alive? “John, say something!” He didn’t speak, but he coughed. “Thank you, God,” I whispered.

Another cough. Could he hold on long enough to be rescued?

Cough. It wasn’t John’s deep bark. The freezing water binding my legs became tightly wrapped bedclothes.

Cough. Cough. Awake now, I knew that sound. It was the dry yet stubborn cough of my beloved Aunt Marja, trying ever so much not to disturb anyone.

I blinked in the dawn light that peeked around my curtains. Sipu purred and uncurled herself from my side. She stretched every part of her furry grey body. Heart still racing, I clutched my cat. We were home. John was safe. Sipu meowed and squirmed out of my grasp.

I knew it was only a dream, yet lingering fear clenched my insides. How could I shake off this horrible feeling? I had to focus on something happy ... like yesterday. Our family from the country and our city friends had gathered after church to celebrate my birthday and my new baby cousin, Sanni. I’d held her for the first time. Everyone had again exclaimed over the miracle that Mama, John, and I had survived the sinking of the *Empress of Ireland* in the St. Lawrence River the previous month. As I remembered the best part of the day, my heartbeat began to slow down. Papa had come to say good night and he’d sung to me his “Saara song.” He hadn’t done that in months, being so preoccupied with money worries and finding a steady job.

Humming my song, I could feel my stomach relax. I decided to surprise Mama. I'd light the fire in the wood stove and set the water to boil for coffee.

It worked! By the time Mama appeared, I had finished grinding the coffee beans in the mill, too.

"Excuse me, miss, where my Saara has gone?" asked Mama. She stood in the doorway, looking the perfect picture of a fine lady surprised to find a stranger in her kitchen. I giggled, and she struggled to keep a straight face. "Saara has long blond hair in braids, is tall for twelve, and avoids kitchen work like the plague," Mama continued, switching to her usual Finnish. "I don't know what's gotten into you this morning, Saara, but it certainly has my approval."

What had gotten into me—returned to me—was the joy-bubble that had grown bigger throughout the previous day. I smiled and gathered cutlery from the drawer.

"What woke you so early," asked Mama, "another nightmare?"

When I nodded, she took a breath as if to speak. I expected one of her Finnish proverbs. Instead she simply patted the back of my head.

Mama bustled about the kitchen with only a trace of a limp. That and two scars on her face remained from her shipwreck injuries. My worst injuries—memories and fears—were stowed away inside. They were invisible but would seize me without warning, day or night, tying my stomach in knots.

We loaded the breakfast table with dark rye bread, homemade white cheese that squeaked when chewed, and a bowl of *villi* for everyone. A cast-iron pan was heating on the stove for the eggs we would fry. Thanks to our relatives' visit, we didn't have to eat porridge for once.

The coffee's aroma must have reached the second storey. I heard voices and then footsteps on the stairs.

"Good morning," said Uncle Arvo, cradling eleven-day-old Sanni.

"May I please hold her?" I asked, reaching for my cousin.

"Sit down first."

Once I was seated he placed his tiny daughter in my arms. I carefully supported her head and stroked her strawberry-blond fuzz. I marvelled at her perfectly formed miniature fingers. She was a doll come to life.

"Good morning, Marja," said Mama to her sister as she entered the kitchen. "Did you get any sleep?"

Auntie's shoulders sagged and her eyes were darkly ringed. "A little. I never imagined how much one small baby could tire a grown woman." She coughed and draped Sanni's pink and yellow patchwork quilt over the back of the chair next to mine. When Auntie sat down, Sanni stopped behaving like a doll and began to fuss. I wanted to hand her to my aunt, but Auntie looked exhausted. Instead I shifted Sanni

upward with her head resting in the warm place between my shoulder and neck. Was that the right thing to do? She seemed more content, making snuffling noises against the collar of my dress.

While Mama circled the table pouring coffee into cups, John and Papa joined us. She replaced the enamel pot on the stove, looked at Papa, and asked, "Shall we say grace?"

My father attended church with us—each Sunday without fail since we'd returned from Quebec—but he never prayed out loud. Papa cleared his throat and said, "Arvo?"

Uncle closed his eyes. "Father in Heaven, we ask Thy blessing on this food and on those who prepared it. Amen."

Sanni whimpered. I jiggled her, hoping that would settle her. Before Auntie could swallow one spoonful of *villi*, Sanni began to cry. Mama must have seen the panic in my eyes because she offered to rock her.

Auntie sighed and shook her head. "Thank you for trying to soothe her, Saara. That's her hungry cry. Only her mother will do." She whisked Sanni from my arms, grabbed her quilt, and headed into the parlour to nurse her, coughing along the way.

Mama cracked eggs into the pan. Leaving them sizzling, she laid her hand on Uncle's arm and whispered, "You must persuade Marja to see Dr. Koljonen about her cough before you go home."

Papa set down his coffee. "Stop interfering. Your sister can look after herself."

"Don't fret, Emilia," said Uncle Arvo, helping himself to bread. "It's a summer cold. No wonder, with her being worn out from the birthing and caring for Sanni."

"How long has she had that cough?"

Uncle paused, staring at his meal. "Hmm ... I don't know for certain. I think it started a couple of weeks before Sanni was born. Maybe three."

Mama lowered her voice so I could barely hear. Her eyes pleaded intently. I nibbled my cheese while John shovelled *villi* into his mouth. Nudging his foot, I signalled him to mind his manners. He kept on shovelling, smacking his lips to annoy me.

"Are the eggs ready?" asked Papa, holding out his plate.

I jumped up, saying, "I'll get one for you." I didn't expect him to thank me, but he did give me a smile. Mama served Uncle, John, then me.

My uncle ignored his egg and smoothed back his reddish-blond hair, deep in thought. "Marja's had a few bad colds since Christmas."

Auntie appeared in the doorway. "Thank you for your concern. I'll be fine in no time, as soon as I get more sleep." Sanni's quilt slipped to the floor. Auntie bent over to retrieve it and staggered against the wall.

"Marja!" Mama rushed over to catch Sanni.

Uncle helped Auntie to her chair. She rubbed her forehead. "How strange. I saw stars and felt faint ..."

Her husband took her hand. "I think it *is* wise for you to see the doctor."

Mama nodded. "And you must see him today. Who knows when you'll be back in Port Arthur." Turning to me, she said, "Run down to the doctor's office and request a house call."

I swallowed the bit of rye bread in my mouth and drained my glass of milk. Outside, bees danced among the pink and white peonies. Writing the first entry in my new journal would have to wait. My best friend, Helena Pekkonen, had given the brown leather-bound journal to me at my birthday celebration. It was a duplicate of the one she'd given me for the trip to Finland, the adventure that ended before we left Canada ... the adventure that ended in tragedy. Mama, John, and I had boarded the *Empress of Ireland* heading to England. When a coal ship struck us in the night, the *Empress* sank. More than a thousand people perished.

The memory made my breathing quick and shallow, and my throat thickened as I crossed Second Street. The two blocks to Dr. Koljonen's office on Machar Avenue were jam-packed with confectioneries and laundries, barbers and liveries, as well as the huge Finnish Labour Temple, also known as the Big Finn Hall. I shared the sidewalk with half a dozen early shoppers. As I entered the doctor's office, the smell of iodine hit me full force. In a flash I was back at the Château Frontenac, a nurse bending over me to clean my wounds, the cold of the icy St. Lawrence River in my bones.

The panic I knew that dark night in the water washed over me afresh, and I had to push it back in order to see the Finnish doctor standing before me. Dr. Koljonen's white shirt sleeves were rolled up, and his necktie was loosened above his stethoscope. He asked, "How can I help you, Miss Mäki? Is Jussi sick again?"

"No, sir. My brother is well." I explained Aunt Marja's situation. "Will you be able to see her today?"

"I can come this afternoon. Tell Jussi to stay away from your aunt."

"Yes, sir. Thank you." The last thing John's weak lungs needed was a cold. I sped home.

After lunch, Auntie settled Sanni for her nap and decided to lie down until the doctor arrived. I went back outside to visit Uncle's workhorses in the shelter. Copper, the chestnut mare, and the black gelding called Ace were dozing. Each rested a hind leg, holding it on the point of the hoof. They looked

so peaceful, I didn't want to disturb them. I decided to go to Helena's for a short visit instead. I would still be back in time to see Baby Sanni before she returned to the homestead in North Branch.

Dust clouds puffed around my feet as I ran down the lane. Helena waved from the shady spot beside the rain barrel in their backyard. "Come help me with the rhubarb and then we can play hopscotch." Helena's family was Finnish, too, but she and I spoke English with each other. She was a year older than I was but had been set back a grade when she arrived from Finland.

"Do you want to wash or trim?" she asked, holding out a knife.

"You know knives don't agree with me, especially your mother's razor-sharp ones." I grabbed the longest stalk from the pile on the grass, dipped it in the basin of water, and rubbed off the dark earth. "In this heat I'd rather jump in the swimming pool at Current River Park than play hopscotch."

"That's a terrific idea. All we need are a couple of nickels for streetcar fare—"

"I need more than coins," I said, sighing and reaching for another reddish-green stalk. "I've outgrown my bathing suit and money is so tight I don't know when I'll get a new one."

"Cheer up, gloomy goose. You don't need a bathing suit to come to the Dominion Day events with us on Wednesday."

"Your father said yes? Hurrah!"

"We'll bring a picnic lunch, too." Helena sliced the big rubbery leaf off a rhubarb stalk. "I clipped a recipe from the Home Loving Hearts section in the *Free Press* for Perfect Picnic Sandwiches and we'll have devilled eggs and—"

I flung a handful of rainwater at Helena.

"Hey—what's that for?"

"You sound like an uppity English lady planning your '*Perfect Outing in the Park,*'" I said, using a British accent for the last phrase. "Don't forget we haven't grown up yet." Helena scooped water with both palms together and threw it at me. I gasped. She'd soaked the whole front of my light cotton dress. I returned the favour. Within seconds we were both drenched and collapsed on the grass, giggling.

"Are you ready for hopscotch now?" she asked.

Tilting my head and fluttering my eyelashes, I said, "I feel *perfectly* refreshed, my dear. It would be a *pleasure* to join you—" Helena aimed the water right at my mouth this time. I took the hint and stopped teasing. "Come on," I said, reaching for her hand. "After a game of hopscotch, let's practise for the Dominion Day foot races."

By the time I returned home, it was after four o'clock. Dr. Koljonen had come and gone. Auntie, Uncle, and Sanni had already left for the farm. *Drat.*

Mama kept unusually quiet throughout cooking supper. When we sat down to eat, John began chattering. “Fred got a set of Meccano and he let me play with it. Guess what we made? It was bully! We fastened the strips together with the nuts and bolts and made a train track from one end of his bedroom to—”

“Jussi, stop,” said Papa. “We’ve heard enough. Eat your food.” What was bothering Papa? He always wanted to hear about John’s day.

Later, as I stood at the sink, hands deep in steamy dishwater, Mama told Papa that Auntie might need to go to Toronto. Could I have heard right? Yes, she said it again. Why Toronto? It was almost a thousand miles from Port Arthur.

Toronto was where Mr. Blackwell lived. We’d met the Salvation Army soldier on the pier before boarding the *Empress of Ireland*. I’d become fast friends with his daughter, Lucy-Jane. We’d played in the third-class indoor children’s playground and planned to spend all our time on the voyage together. That evening we’d shared our single meal on the ship with the Blackwells.

I kept Mr. Blackwell’s letter in my top dresser drawer. The thought of its horrible news still made me shudder. Lucy-Jane had drowned when the *Empress* sank. I often reread the last part of her father’s letter, where he’d written these comforting words: *I believe there is a reason for all things. Sarah, your life has been spared for a purpose.*

I heaved a giant sigh. So far, the only purpose I could see for my life was washing dishes and peeling potatoes.

With Papa settled in the parlour to read the newspaper, I asked Mama, “What did you mean about Toronto?”

“Aunt Marja’s cough—”

“—is a summer cold, Uncle said. So why must she go so far away?”

“Saara, the doctor doesn’t believe it’s a cold.” Mama’s face looked as pale as winter cream. “He thinks it’s tuberculosis and she must be isolated. He’ll have the results of her sputum test tonight, but they couldn’t wait. The cows needed milking.”

“When will Auntie know?”

“Dr. Koljonen will tell her on Dominion Day. He had already planned to look at land in North Branch.”

“And if it is tuberculosis ...”

“Marja will be sent to the sanatorium in Toronto.”

In a hushed tone, I said, “I didn’t know Auntie had a liquor problem.”

Mama's jaw dropped. "She doesn't. Why—"

"Is it tobacco? Tuberculosis means the lungs are sick, doesn't it?"

"Well, yes, but why do you think Marja has a *tobacco* problem?"

My cheeks flared as if I were in a sauna. I swiped the back of my hand across my sweaty forehead. "I ... I thought a sanatorium was for curing liquor and tobacco habits ... you know, like the one on Nelson Street."

Mama thumped her hand against her chest. "Oh, Saara. That's a *sanitarium*. It's completely different." She half smiled at my embarrassment, then looked troubled once again.

"Why can't she go to the Isolation Hospital here?" I asked.

"That hospital is for scarlet fever, measles, and mumps. No, a sanatorium is where tuberculosis is treated." Mama's shoulders slumped. "If you can call it treatment. I hope and pray the doctor is mistaken."

Twinges of dread snaked through my stomach, but I told myself that Mama always worried far too much. It was impossible. Auntie didn't seem seriously ill at all.