

## **Second Watch Prologue and Chapter One**

### **Prologue**

“Mama, don’t leave me.”

The *Empress* listed. Panic shrank each breath.

“Papa, I need you,” I moaned.

Far away a girl called, “Mom! Mummu’s having a bad dream.”

A gentle hand touched my shoulder. “Wake up. It’s okay,” said the girl. My upper body jerked and my eyelids fluttered.

She sat on the edge of my bed. “It’s me. Aliisa. Do you want some water?”

My hands covered my face. “Icy water... pulling me down. The sound of... of...”

Startled by brisk footsteps, I looked up as a woman in jeans breezed into my bedroom. Who was she? Oh, yes, Susan. My granddaughter. Aliisa’s mother.

“Thanks, honey,” she said to Aliisa. Susan slid her arm under my shoulders to help me sit up. “Have a drink, Mummu.”

I swallowed some water. How odd to have such a vivid dream during my afternoon nap. I held out my age-spotted hand, the skin shrink-wrapped over greenish-blue veins. Undeniable proof that I was no longer a child. I put on my glasses, shed the multicoloured quilt, and eased my slippers to the floor. Susan supported my left side. I gripped my walker and slowly stood. Rolling it forward, I shuffled to the dresser. The upper drawer squeaked as I pulled the handle.

“This modern furniture always complains,” I muttered, tugging harder. “If my husband had built it, the drawers would slide smoothly.” I sighed heavily. “He had a magic touch with wood.” I reached under the embroidered handkerchiefs for the small leather case. The brown leather was worn and splotchy, and tied around the middle was a fraying ribbon so faded it was barely blue.

Turning to Aliisa, I said, “Before I die, I want to—”

“You’re not going to die for a long time, right?” Her sky-blue eyes grew enormous.

“Don’t worry. I plan to stick around a few more years,” I said, chuckling, “to see you light one hundred birthday candles without burning the house down.” That coaxed a smile from her.

Lowering myself into the recliner, I held out the case and said, “I want you to have this.”

Aliisa reached for the gift. “Thanks.” She plopped to the floor, cross-legged, with a puzzled expression on her face. “What is it?”

What was she picturing? A string of pearls? A gold bracelet?

“Open it.” I was certain I knew her well enough to predict she would cherish the contents.

Aliisa fumbled with the ribbon, working to untie the stubborn knot. Removing the lid, she unwrapped the cotton-batting cocoon to reveal the tarnished silver sugar spoon.

“Oh... it’s, um... old.”

Had I guessed wrong? She sounded so disappointed.

“Once it’s polished it’ll be quite beautiful,” said her mother. “Mummu, is this the spoon you had on the *Empress of Ireland*?”

“Yes.”

Aliisa ran a finger over the scalloped edges of the spoon’s shallow bowl and the stemmed rose that formed the handle. She flipped it over and studied the tiny hallmark of the silversmith stamped into the back.

I stroked the length of her hair. “Satin-smooth and the colour of sunshine. Aliisa-*kulta*... have I told you my papa called me Saara-*kulta*?” I stared at my parents’ wedding portrait on the bedside table. *It wasn’t always golden between us, was it, Papa?*

My great-granddaughter clasped my gnarled hand and smiled briefly. “I really want to know what happened to you on that ship. Please tell me your *Empress* story, Mummu. The *whole* story.”

I nodded, dabbing my eyes with a lilac-scented handkerchief. A few months after the *Empress* sank I had decided never to talk about it again. I had hoped that way my nightmares would stop. They did, until I read that anniversary article. Poking the newspaper beside me with its grainy photograph of the steamship *Empress of Ireland*, I said, “It’s more real than ever. I can picture every detail of that huge

ship." I could recall my early years better than what I had for dinner the night before. "I'll try to tell you everything."

"I'd like to hear this, too," said Susan, making herself comfortable on the bed.

"Hmm... to tell the *whole* story," I began, arching my eyebrows at my audience, "I need to start several months before the trip, in December, 1913."

Aliisa settled into the old pine rocking chair.

"Christmas was lonely in Port Arthur. When Mama persuaded Papa to take us to Uncle's homestead in North Branch for New Year's, I nearly burst with excitement."

"How far away was it?" asked Aliisa. My stories usually made her think of questions. "How'd you get there?"

"Fourteen miles or so. Papa hired a horse and sleigh from the livery."

"What colour was the horse?"

"Aliisa, stop interrupting. Let Mummu talk."

Aliisa leaned back, shut her eyes, and rocked the chair on its extra-long runners. She cradled her silver spoon and listened to me tell my story.

"He was black as coal and spirited as the wind. 'Faster, Papa!' I'd say. My brother was nervous, but not me. What a thrilling ride. The cold air stung my face..."

## **Chapter One**

*Crack!* Papa's whip snapped the coal-black horse. Chief snorted and plunged forward. The runners of the sleigh swished through the snowy ruts toward Auntie and Uncle's homestead in North Branch.

"Faster, Papa!" I said.

"Hang on tight, Saara!" He flapped the reins.

Cold wind stung my forehead but I grinned with delight. Frosted evergreens blurred as we flew past.

A quarter of a mile down the road Papa glanced back at me. "Fast enough for you, Saara?"

"Plenty fast," said John.

As Papa laughed and raised the whip again, one runner struck a high spot, slightly tilting the sleigh. John clutched the rail. "We're going to tip over!"

I glared at him. At eight, my brother shouldn't have been such a scaredy-cat anymore. I wanted so badly to say something mean to him. Not in Finnish, the language my family always used, but in English. Words formed in my head that I knew Mama wouldn't understand. Papa likely would, and I'd earn a scolding from him, so they stayed inside me to fester.

"Tauno, perhaps we should slow down," said Mama, reaching gloved hands to snug her fur hat over her ears.

Papa pulled the reins. The harness rattled, bells jangling, as the horse adjusted his pace to an easy trot. His heavy breathing produced clouds of steam around his nose and forelegs. I added my own steam with a gigantic sigh.

I scanned the snow for animal tracks. The bluish dotted lines punched into the white slopes reminded me of how the road would be drawn on a map. Imagining myself an eagle, I soared above my hometown, Port Arthur. There, below me, stood the castle-like grain elevators. They were planted along the shore of Lake Superior, guarding the hillside city. I swooped over the ice of Thunder Bay to the Sleeping Giant, the long, cliff-edged peninsula in the shape of an Indian brave lying on his back.

When the sun dipped behind a hill, the west wind made me shiver. Inside hand-knitted mittens, my icicle fingers curled stiffly around my thumbs. "I wish we lived closer to Auntie and Uncle."

"They won't move to the city," said Mama. "But if we bought land in North Branch..."

The words "I'd like that" were still a thought in my mind when Papa said, "Which we will never do." He gave Mama a hard look, his clean-shaven jaw rigid. "We belong in Port Arthur. Someday we'll buy our own house there."

I could once again hear Doris bragging on the last day of school, “Now that we own a big house, all twenty-six relatives are coming for Christmas dinner.” We had heaps of relatives, but not one had come to share the holiday with us. Everyone, except my aunt and uncle, lived half a world away, in Finland. I had never met my grandparents, my cousins, or anyone from there apart from Mama’s sister Marja. To travel across the Atlantic Ocean filled my dreams.

Last winter, my parents had been a week away from buying steamship tickets when Aunt Marja and Arvo announced their summer wedding date. Then, in November, John had come down with pneumonia and some of the trip savings were gobbled up by doctor’s bills. But ever since, Mama had been saving all of her earnings from sewing. Her little sister Aili would be married at Juhannus in June. Mama wanted her whole family to be at the wedding even though the trip would cost over four hundred dollars.

As we drew close to North Branch I pictured the farmhouse the next night packed with guests for the New Year’s Eve party. Aunt Marja’s invitation had said, “*The celebration will crown the year past and joyfully anticipate the future.*”

“Mama,” I said, crossing my fingers.

“What is it?”

“I hope *this* is the year we go to Finland!”

Papa turned to Mama and frowned. “Have you been making promises? We may not be able to spare the money.”

“But, Tauno,” said Mama, “the wedding...”

I couldn’t understand the expression on Papa’s face, but I wondered what could be more important than our trip.

Twilight’s yellow horizon framed the barn, outbuildings, and farmhouse when we arrived. Snow draped from each roof edge like a blanket sliding off a bed. Before the sleigh stopped, the door of the moss-chinked log house swung open.

“Hello,” called Uncle Arvo, pulling on his coat. “Come inside and thaw out. I’ll tend to the horse.”

I hopped down and patted Chief's warm, damp neck. He smelled of sweat. A haze of steam rose from his shaggy back. We filed along the trampled path to where Aunt Marja stood in the doorway, her arms spread wide. The delicious aroma of beef stew drifted from the kitchen.

"Emilia, how wonderful to see you." She embraced her sister. "Welcome, Tauno. Jussi, you've certainly grown." She ruffled John's light brown hair. "And Saara..." I rushed into her arms. The words whispered into my ear alone made me blush. "...I saved the best for last." Holding me at arm's length, she stroked my hair. "Satin-smooth and the colour of sunshine. Such a beautiful young lady." I laughed to myself. Me, beautiful?

That evening, my happiness swelled when Papa raved about my brilliant poetry recitation at the school Christmas concert. Like embers in a wood stove, I glowed inside when I blew out the coal oil lamp and crawled beneath the patchwork quilt at bedtime.

Early the next morning, air cold enough to freeze nose hairs blasted Aunt Marja and me when we stepped outside to fetch split birch logs from the woodpile. Bands of pale orange and pink stretched across the sky behind the grove of naked birch trees. The snow squeaked underfoot as we tramped back to the house. Inside, the scent of frothing yeast for *pulla* dough filled the room. Auntie removed her coat and tied on her flour-sack apron. She'd grown rounder in front. My baby cousin would be born when the lilacs bloomed.

Steam was rising from a large pot on the stove. Mama stirred oats into the boiling water. Aunt Marja began slicing a loaf of rye bread and said, "Saara, would you set the table for me, please?"

I cringed at how she pronounced my name: "Sawra." "Could you say 'Sarah'? That's what I'm called at school." Mama shook her head. I had given up trying to persuade my parents.

"You don't like your Finnish name?" asked Auntie.

"Yes... I mean, no," I said, my cheeks growing warm. "I prefer the Canadian way."

"When an Englishman says Marja it sounds awful." She and I giggled. Why was it so difficult for them to remember to say the *j* like a *y*?

"Are the Koskis coming to the party tonight?" I asked, setting out cups and spoons.

"Yes, and the rest of the neighbours as well."

I'd met eleven-year-old Lila Koski the previous summer while staying with Auntie and Uncle. When Lila and I had finished our morning chores, we would explore the forest and often swim in the Koskis' tiny lake.

Mama ladled the steaming cereal into bowls. Aunt Marja set one at each place as John and the men returned from the barn.

"Thank you for taking over my barn chores this morning," said Auntie.

"You're welcome," said Uncle Arvo, rubbing his chapped hands on his woollen mackinaw pants. He sat down and wrapped his fingers around his dish. "That feels better."

Papa harrumphed. "The only good thing about farming in this miserable cold is having no mosquitoes." He smoothed his rumpled dark brown hair from the side part downward. My hunger turned to dread. Our last visit had ended with him and Uncle loudly comparing city life and homesteading. To me, it sounded like arguing, but Mama called it "discussing."

Uncle raised his eyebrows, his mouth twitching as if to grin. He bowed his head and said grace. After Auntie poured the coffee, she perched on the stool by the wood stove.

"Jussi," said Uncle, "after breakfast you can set the ice lanterns along the path." John nodded, his mouth full. "Then you can work with us men again." My brother looked ridiculous smiling with dribbles of milk on his chin.

Papa frowned, making his moustache droop. "I planned to read my Finnish newspapers, but if you really need me—"

"I could take your place," I blurted. Chopping kindling, or even shovelling manure, was better than any job in the kitchen.

"Of course not, Saara," said Papa. "Girls belong inside."

I slumped on the bench. He didn't approve of my handling an axe or the workhorses, claiming it was too dangerous. But I'd had more injuries in a kitchen than a barn. The more careful I aimed to be doing inside chores, the more awkwardly I behaved. Mama had attempted to teach me to knit countless times without success, yet I'd swiftly learned to harness Uncle's workhorses.

John nudged my foot under the table and faked a look of sympathy. I wished for the six hundredth time I'd been born a boy. My brother never did kitchen work.

"I do need your help today, Saara."

"Yes, Auntie."

"And when the time comes, you can braid the *pulla*." She knew handling the warm stretchy dough with its cardamom scent was the one task I enjoyed.

On his way outdoors with the men, John smirked. I stuck out my tongue at him and grabbed a woven basket to carry potatoes from the root house built into the hill. I dawdled coming back, watching a chickadee who "dee-deed" from a nearby balsam. Uncle carried freshly cut evergreen boughs across the yard and dumped them by the door of the house.

"Uncle, don't forget about the predictions tonight."

"I don't need molten lead to tell me you're going to Finland. Your mother won't miss Aili's wedding for anything." He winked. "But I won't forget."

The kitchen buzzed with activity. Raw onion fumes overpowered the yeast scent. I set the basket of potatoes on the floor near Mama, who was peeling turnips over the slop pail. Grabbing a knife and the biggest potato, I sat beside her.

"*Oma tupa, oma lupa*," said Mama.

Her poetic phrase intrigued me. "I'm not sure what that saying means."

"When one owns his own place, he is his own boss." Mama sighed and looked at her sister. "I wish Tauno would come to his senses and buy farmland instead of renting a city house. We do save some money out of his pay packet from the lumber mill every week, but our backyard is hardly worth gardening."

"What if we got a cow instead of growing vegetables?" I asked, dropping the skinned potato in the bowl of water and rubbing my itchy nose with my earth-scented hand.

Mama shook her head. "Then we must pay a man to take her to pasture every day. No, as we say in the Old Country, 'we live as we can, not as we may wish.'" I wrinkled my still-itchy nose and wished that Mama wouldn't always be so sensible. The fire popped and crackled in the stove.

"Emilia, your husband is a hard worker." Auntie finished shaping meatballs and washed her hands. "And as long as we have a farm, you won't starve. Although you may get sick of potatoes and turnips."

At the window, she craned her neck, inspecting the small building nearby. "Is that smoke from the chimney? Yes. Arvo remembered to heat the sauna. Ahh... the steam will feel so good. I can wash away the smell of onions, clean to greet the New Year." She stretched her arms. "I wonder what nineteen hundred and fourteen will bring our way?"

"Will you be coming to Finland with us for the wedding?" I asked. Mama frowned, so I added, "If we go, that is."

"I..." Auntie began, then slowly sat at the table.

"I'm sorry. I forgot about the baby."

Mama signalled for me to hush.

Aunt Marja picked up her silver sugar spoon. "Mother's fare-thee-well gift." She traced the rose, leaves, and stem that formed the spoon's handle. "To remind me I'm as sweet as sugar to her. I kept this spoon in my handbag, Saara, when my first husband and I sailed on the *Titanic*. Everyone said the ship was unsinkable. But..." She wiped away a tear with her apron. "Now I get nervous in a rowboat on a pond, for heaven's sake."

How terrible to fear going on a ship. For me, it would be a dream come true.

"Enough talk about boats and trips," said Mama. "There's a party tonight and plenty of work left to do."

By sunset, the festive table was ready. The candles I had set in wooden holders stood in the middle of the linen tablecloth, surrounded by beet salad, raspberry preserves, and loaves of rye bread and cardamom-scented *pulla*.

After Mama, Auntie, and I took our turn in the sauna, I put on my green Sunday dress and Mama tied matching ribbons near the ends of my two thick braids. Mama and Auntie both wore their light brown hair swept up into a bun. I watched out the window for Lila. The ice lanterns made a cheery pathway through the snow. Before long, the silhouettes of skiers appeared. The Koski family and their hired men removed their skis, planting them tips up in the snow, then stomped their boots on the branch-mat before entering.

Once the Seppäläs and Lehtos arrived, Uncle Arvo said grace. Aunt Marja announced, “Everyone help yourselves while the food is hot.”

Lila and I claimed two stools in a corner, our plates heaping. She chuckled. “Look at us—we could pass as twins with our long blond hair and blue eyes, and both being tall for eleven.”

Between mouthfuls of *piirakka* and meatballs I told her about the recent school concert, and then described what had happened when a boarder from eastern Europe came to my best friend Helena’s house. “It was Christmas Eve. Helena’s mother was so busy she forgot to explain the sauna to him before he went to get cleaned up. From the backyard we heard him yelling. He had emptied half a bucket of water over the heated rocks on the stove.”

Pretending my stool was the sauna stove, I mimed upending a pail. I coughed and struggled to breathe in the thick steam. Stooping, I groped for the door and backed into the “red-hot stove,” knocking over my stool. Lila gasped.

“He scorched his hand on the doorknob getting out and shouted a flurry of words. The only English ones were curses.” We laughed so hard our eyes watered.

The sound of a violin being tuned interrupted us. Uncle Arvo rolled up the woven rag mats, revealing the smooth jack pine floor. The table, chairs, and benches were pushed against the walls. Mrs. Seppälä strummed her *kantele* and one of the hired men warmed up his mouth organ. It was time to dance.

“Tauno,” said Uncle Arvo, “who can last the longest?”

“There’s no contest,” bantered Papa, smiling.

They drew their wives into the centre of the room. The ladies’ long dresses billowed as their partners whirled them around in time with the lively tunes. Lila and I joined in. Our not-quite-so-long

dresses flared, while our braids took flight. Even the boys danced. Lila's cheeks soon matched her red woollen dress. If Auntie hadn't been expecting and feeling extra tired, she and Uncle would have outlasted even my parents. Mrs. Seppälä led us in singing two Finnish folk songs. Then Papa stood tall, becoming the storyteller of the ancient Kalevala. With a commanding presence, he spun a tale of struggle between good and evil. Nature sprang to life in the word pictures he painted.

"Saara-kulta," he called. Saara-gold. His special name for me.

"Yes, Papa?"

"As one of the next generation of poetry reciters, will you present 'The Sleeping Giant'?" My school concert piece—he wanted everyone to hear it. A thrill poured over me. I breathed deeply and closed my eyes to focus on Pauline Johnson's poem about the local rock formation. "*When did you sink to your dreamless sleep, out there in your thunder bed?*" I began. By the time I finished the fourth verse I felt weightless, soaring on winds of applause, both past and present. I sought out Auntie's eyes. She dabbed them with her handkerchief. Papa clapped the longest, as he had at the Christmas concert.

Midnight arrived. We toasted a welcome to the coming year.

Uncle Arvo said, "Who's ready for a prediction?" I chewed the end of one braid, waiting for someone else to go first. Mr. Koski stepped forward. Uncle melted a small piece of lead and plunged it into cold water to harden. I pressed closer to see what shape it had formed.

"A fortunate year for you, Eino. See the bulges? There's money coming your way."

For Aunt Marja the molten lead also revealed bumps. "Maybe that's not for wealth," said Mr. Lehto, "but for a big, healthy baby boy." He nudged Uncle Arvo.

I gulped. "May I have a turn?"

The metal hissed and sputtered when Uncle dropped it into the water. "That looks like a boat to me."

My heart skipped.

With a broad smile he said, "Saara, this will be a travelling year for you." He spoke with such certainty, it *had* to be true. I would finally meet my grandparents!

“Arvo, why do you bother with this nonsense? Only fools take this seriously,” said Papa, scowling, his bushy eyebrows almost meeting. “Some Old Country traditions have no place here in Canada.”

How I wanted to believe my fortune was true. But Papa had spoiled it.

Uncle studied the tiny ship. “Black spots...”

“What do they mean?” I asked.

“They are a sign of sadness, but no need to fret. They’re small and few.”