

Prologue

(Part One)

Juho Stranden was thirty years old. The farmer had the misfortune of being forced to leave Kitee, in Eastern Finland. He was leaving his home for Duluth, Minnesota, in the United States. Stranden was a bachelor. He had never been on the Atlantic Ocean, the body of water that loomed before the ocean liner entrusted to carry the Finnish farmer and sixty-two of his countrymen to America.

Slate-colored water rolled beneath the steel plates of the ship as the vessel left the docks of Southampton. Stranden and his companions had landed at Hull, on the eastern coast of England, following a three-day voyage from Helsinki aboard the tramp steamer, *Polaris*. Along the way, the unemployed farmer chanced to meet two beautiful Finnish girls.

Aina and Katriina Jussila were single women from Paavola, Oulu, a city located just inland from the Gulf of Bothnia on the West Coast of Finland. They had captivated and engaged Juho during *Polaris'* crossing of the North Sea. Both women were starkly fair and blond, with eyes the color of Arctic ice. Outwardly, there was little to differentiate Aina, the older of the siblings by merely a year, from her younger sister, but Juho Stranden saw something, some rare spark of originality about Katriina, which compelled his attention. Perhaps it was her laugh, a timid gasp that allowed for a moderate escape of air. Perhaps it was the engaging pose she took at the rail of the great liner whenever Juho approached.

The three of them had spent a day exploring Southampton after arriving from Hull on the train. None of them spoke English, but several of the other young Finns accompanying them through the narrow streets of the harbor town possessed sufficient rudimentary English to communicate with shopkeepers and tavern owners along the way.

These Finns were not undertaking a voluntary exodus from Europe; they were leaving Finland out of necessity. It was the beginning of the Twentieth Century. Czar Nicholas II of Russia, the monarch who had direct control over the lives and welfare of the indentured Finns, had ordered all Finnish men to participate in the Russian military draft. Most of the emigrating Finnish men were like Juho Stranden: poor tenant farmers who owned no land, no oxen, no implements, no property of substance.

Young Finnish women like the Jussila sisters, girls of marriageable age, flocked to the United States on the heels of the emigrating Finnish men. The women sought steady employment as domestic servants, biding their time until they connected with eligible Finnish bachelors in America.

In addition to the onset of Russian military conscription, the population of Finland had grown exponentially, applying even more pressure upon Finnish men and women to emigrate. By the end of the 19th Century there was not enough land for those who wanted to farm, and not enough jobs for those who wanted to work. Finland, though beautiful geographically, presented nothing less than a financial wasteland for its impoverished citizenry.

Politics also played a part in the mass exodus of the Finns. Many Finnish immigrants to the United States were Socialists. Czar Nicholas II, confronted with the demands of industrializing an agrarian economy and intent upon the Russification of the Finns, found himself unable to temper the discontent of the landless Finnish peasants. This discord manifested itself in outright defiance among the leftists. Marxism and less drastic forms of Socialism spread like noxious political weeds throughout the Russian Empire. Some of the sixty-three Finns on board the ship headed to America were not only leaving economic hardship and famine, but they were escaping political persecution by the Russian authorities.

The Jussila sisters were bound for New York City where, under the care of an uncle, a man who owned an employment agency, they expected to find work as housekeepers or nannies. For Juho Stranden, however, the future was far less clear.

Stranden's second cousin, Elin Gustaafson, lived in Duluth, along the shores of Lake Superior in Northeastern Minnesota. She had written to Juho about her friend, Anders Alhomaki. According to Elin, Anders knew how to secure jobs in the mines of the Vermilion Iron Range or along the wharves of Duluth's harbor. Elin's letter contained no promise of a job, no promise of a better life. Her letter contained only the promise of possibilities.

"Hello," Juho Stranden said, noting the appearance of the Jussila sisters in the vessel's third class dining hall.

Though the ocean liner's cheaper accommodations did not compare to the opulent upper realms of the ship, even the lowliest passengers aboard the vessel were afforded relative affluence. Juho carefully studied his surroundings as the ship steamed away from the Irish coast. Stranden came to the conclusion that it was his good fortune to have missed passage on *Lucarnia*, the original vessel he'd been booked on, and to have secured a third deck berth on the newest ship in the White Star Line.

"Hello, Mr. Stranden," Aina replied.

The woman's eyes darted to take in her younger sister's face, cognizant that affection simmered between the tall farmer with the uncharacteristically black hair and brown eyes, and her fair-skinned sibling.

"Please, have a seat. I was just going to order," Stranden replied, gesturing for the sisters to join him.

The women smiled and demurely claimed seats at the table. A waiter, a Lilliputian man with a manila cast to his skin, approached. The man addressed them in English, and so his words were completely lost upon the three Finns. Juho pointed to an overturned porcelain cup, indicating that he would start his morning meal with coffee. The two women gestured in similar fashion.

"Three coffees it is," the Englishman acknowledged through uneven teeth.

"Coffee, yes," Juho repeated in a thick accent, smiling brightly at his companions as he spoke English.

The waiter scurried away. Conversation at the table resumed in Finnish.

"Have you heard from your uncle in New York City?" the farmer asked.

Katriina nodded, but allowed her older sister to speak.

"Indeed we have. He's going to meet us at the dock when the ship arrives. I've been told we should get in sometime on the sixteenth," Aina said.

It was Sunday April 14th, 1912. They had left Southampton on the 10th.

"We've been making good time," Juho offered.

His face shone with excitement as he tried to subdue his enthusiasm for Katriina. He avoided making direct contact with her blue eyes. He concealed his admiration, limiting his glances in Katriina's direction.

The waiter returned and filled their cups with fresh coffee. All three of the passengers used their fingers to point out the items on adjoining tables that they were interested in. Juho ordered a muffin, two hard-boiled eggs, and English sausage. The women were content with marmalade and toast.

"Yes, very good time," Aina responded after the waiter had excused himself. "This ship is extremely fast."

"And safe; unsinkable, they say," Juho added.

Their meals came. Katriina took imperceptible bites of stale bread as Aina and Juho continued to converse. Katriina's eyes took in Juho Stranden's broad shoulders; his sinewy neck. Her mind

began to speculate about him in ways that were not particularly genteel. A slight blush encompassed her face, vanishing before either her sister or the farmer could detect the sudden onset of color.

"So, you are going to Minnesota?" Aina asked.

"Yes. My cousin Elin lives in Duluth, on Lake Superior. She has a friend, Anders Alhomaki, who says that there are plenty of jobs for strong and willing men like me in Northern Minnesota."

"Many of our people have gone to Minnesota," Katriina interjected, becoming more comfortable with the situation. "What is the attraction?"

Juho smiled as he addressed the young woman:

"I've been told that Minnesota looks like Finland. Long winters with much snow. Many lakes and rivers. Pine and spruce forests; forests being logged for timber. Alhomaki has worked in the iron mines of Minnesota and the copper mines of Michigan. He's also worked as a stevedore."

"Stevedore?" Katriina asked.

"Moving cargo from docks to warehouses. The longshoremen bring the cargo off the ships. The stevedores haul the cargo from the docks to storage or to waiting railroad cars."

"Sounds like physical work," Aina said, interrupting her younger sister, intending the intrusion as a caution against Katriina becoming too familiar with their male companion.

Katriina recognized the authority behind her sister's comment and resumed eating, but the younger sister's blue eyes remained riveted on Juho Stranden's handsome face as she swallowed toast.

"It is. But what choice does a man like me have? I could have stayed in Finland, ended up impressed into the Czar's army or navy, to be used as a pawn in the Empire's game of chess with its enemies. Or I can take a short voyage on an elegant ocean liner with two beautiful ladies in the hopes of finding a new beginning. I will be thirty-one years old on the twentieth of April. I have no home, no fortune, no wife or family to hold me down. My back is strong. I am smart enough to know when I'm being misled and quick enough in my thinking to avoid disaster. If the work in Minnesota doesn't suit me, there are many other places in America waiting to welcome Juho Stranden."

"Perhaps New York City," Katriina whispered.

Stranden's smile returned.

"Perhaps," he answered quietly, his brown eyes locking on the pewter irises of the younger Jussila sister.

Aina's lips fluttered artificially.

"That's enough mooning, you two. My sister is such a child sometimes," the elder sister sighed. "Mr. Stranden, I must ask that you not encourage her behavior. She's only twenty. She has little experience with gentlemen.."

Katriina chewed in exaggerated fashion, glared at her sister, and finished the last of her toast. There was no mistaking the stern rebuke etched across Aina Jussila's brow. The younger woman knew better than to issue a challenge to her sister in the company of a stranger.

"I'll try to remember that," the farmer murmured, downing his coffee. "But I'm not so sure your younger sister is as easily directed as you might believe, Miss Aina."

Katriina smirked and shielded her eyes. Stranden stood up, intent upon leaving.

"May I walk with the two of you later this evening; that is, if the sky relents? There'll be no moon, but I hear the stars over the North Atlantic are not to be missed."

Aina Jussila studied Juho Stranden. She considered stating a strenuous objection to the budding flirtation between the Finnish man and her younger sister, but there seemed to be no fault in the farmer, no basis upon which to raise such a protest.

"We'll consider your offer, Mr. Stranden. Come by our cabin around nine and I'll let you know."

Juho smiled. The gesture revealed that the farmer had retained nearly all of his own teeth, save for two molars that had broken on the odd piece of gristle or bone over the years. He was cleanly groomed, educated, and obviously intelligent. Katriina could do far worse, in Aina's estimation. Still, there was a large discrepancy in age between the farmer and the younger Jussila sister. And soon

there would be the entirety of the Eastern United States separating them. Aina set herself to weighing whether or not the girls should accompany Mr. Stranden for an evening stroll. There was much time to deliberate. There was ample time for contemplation. It was only morning.

"I'll do that. If you decide to go out, dress warmly. It will likely be quite cold," the farmer replied.

The women's eyes scrutinized Juho Stranden as he walked casually out of the dining hall. His berth, along with those of the other single men traveling in third class, was located in the bow of the ship.