

Kathleen Ernst
WRITING AT THE INTERSECTION OF PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THE PAST

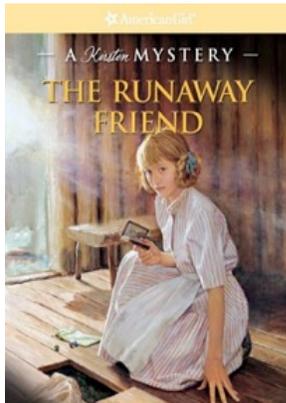


Preview of *The Runaway Friend*

A Kirsten Larson American Girl Mystery

Written by Kathleen Ernst

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Kirsten Larson has been living on the Minnesota frontier for only a few weeks when her neighbor and friend, Erik Sandahl, disappears.

Erik promised to help the Larsons at harvest time—and he owes Uncle Olav money. Has Erik run out on his promises? Everyone seems to think so—except Kirsten. Can she figure out what’s happened to her friend?

This story takes place in 1854. It includes a glossary of Swedish words and an illustrated “Looking Back” section to provide historical context.

The rider who emerged from the trees was a stranger, on a sand-colored horse. He wore dark trousers, and a dark wool vest over a white shirt now stained with sweat and dust. A silver badge glinted in the morning sunlight. Kirsten stepped closer to Mama.

The man reined up hard in front of the group, and said something in English. Kirsten recognized the words “Olav Larson.”

Uncle Olav frowned. “Ja?”

The man said something else. Kirsten watched Uncle Olav’s expression fade from wariness to dismay. He began to argue with the man.

“What’s this?” Papa asked. “Olav, what’s happening?”

The stranger pulled a piece of paper from his coat pocket. He held it out to Uncle Olav, pointing at something written near the bottom. Uncle Olav’s shoulders sagged.



Alarm was twisting knots in Kirsten's stomach, and she tugged at Lisbeth's sleeve. "What are they saying?" she hissed.

Lisbeth's gray eyes were wide. "It's the sheriff! He's come to take Starke and Fläckis away!"

Kirsten couldn't believe Lisbeth had understood correctly. "Take Starke and Fläckis away? Why?"

"It has something to do with Erik!" Lisbeth squeezed Kirsten's hand.

Kirsten felt more bewildered than ever. What did Erik have to do with the sheriff wanting their oxen?

Lars looked alarmed. "We need the oxen to harvest and clean our grain!"

Uncle Olav protested again, waving his arms at the fields, and Kirsten was sure he was making that same point to the sheriff. The sheriff looked unhappy, but he shook his head, tapping the paper one more time before folding it away. Finally Uncle Olav jerked his head toward the barn. The sheriff kned his horse and trotted in that direction.

"Olav, what's happening?" Papa demanded.

"There must be some mistake." Uncle Olav ran a hand over his hair. "Last spring, Erik needed money to get started on his own place. He'd been working here on the farm for me, and I knew he was trustworthy. I didn't have any cash to loan him, and the bankers in St. Paul wouldn't loan him money because he owned nothing of value. So I signed the loan paper with him. The bank wouldn't have given him the loan otherwise."

"I knew nothing of this loan," Papa said. His tone held a note of accusation. Kirsten edged even closer to Mama. She had never heard Papa cross with his brother before, and she hated that as much as she hated what the sheriff was doing.



"It took place before your family arrived," Uncle Olav said. "I saw no need to discuss it. Erik is a Swede, a hardworking young man who needed a little help to get started. If people hadn't helped me when I first arrived in America, I would not have been able to accomplish everything you see here."

"But Erik hasn't repaid the loan to the bank," Papa guessed grimly. "And now the sheriff is taking the oxen to satisfy the debt. Do I understand this correctly?"

"Ja," Uncle Olav admitted. "The sheriff said the team will be sold so the bank can get its money back. But—but this must be a mistake! Erik has been cutting wood on his land to earn the money he needed to make the payment."

"Why didn't the sheriff go talk to Erik?" Lars demanded. "He'll be able to explain everything."

"The sheriff said he arrived at the shanty at dawn," Uncle Olav said. "Erik wasn't there."

The sheriff rode out of the barn leading Starke and Fläckis. Kirsten felt tears stinging her eyes as she watched the oxen lumbering behind the sheriff's horse. Anna started to sniffle.

The sheriff paused by the group, and said something in a low tone to Uncle Olav. "He said he's sorry he has to do this," Lisbeth murmured. "And that he'll try to wait a couple of days before selling the team."

Then the sheriff rode away, with Starke and Fläckis plodding along behind.

"This must be a mistake," Uncle Olav said again, breaking the silence. He turned to Papa. "We need to find Erik, so he can explain what happened. Perhaps we can still get the oxen back."

Papa's face had settled into hard lines. "If a storm comes before we get the grain in..." He let his voice trail away.

"Let's go," Uncle Olav said. "Lars, you and Peter start on chores."

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Aunt Inger, who had been listening with arms folded across her chest, spoke.
"Perhaps Erik decided to spend the night with the Greens."

"We'll check there on our way," Papa said.

"Erik will be able to explain everything, Papa," Kirsten called. "I know he will!"

Papa raised a hand, showing her that he'd heard. But he didn't smile.

"[Includes] interesting historical notes describing what life was like for these early immigrants."

— ***School Library Journal***

"The plight of lonely women on the frontier is a key theme, as is the sad truth that pioneer living was not for everyone."

— ***Mystery Scene Magazine***

The Runaway Friend is available as a softcover book from independent bookstores as well as from Amazon, Barnes & Nobles and other major vendors. Signed and personalized copies of the book can be acquired directly from the author, Kathleen Ernst. For more information, click on http://www.kathleernerst.com/book_runaway_friend.php