

Homesteaders Series

Signe

Revised Edition

Book Six

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*For Paul and Dana,
and Elizabeth, Steven, Trevor,
Jacob, Hayra, and Johanna*



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Chapter One

Spring Term

March 31, 1872

Signe and Elna sat at the kitchen table. They were waiting for Signe's ride to come and take her to the small community of Boonesville, where she would be teaching for the months of April and May. Once she was gone, Signe's older brother Trygve would take Elna to the tiny community where she, too, had been hired as a teacher. The girls, not yet fifteen, had agreed to teach for both the fall and spring terms, which were only two months each. It was enough time to help homesteader children learn to read, write, and do basic arithmetic, as well as to help those whose families had immigrated from Norway—a large contingency in the Dakota Territory—learn English.

“Are you ready for this?” Elna asked Signe.

Signe frowned. “I don't know,” she said. “I look forward to seeing the children again, but I really disliked living with their families during the week. I felt like I had no privacy in their tiny sod houses with only a curtain between me and the rest of the family. It's always such a relief to come back here to our big house with our separate rooms on the second floor. And of course, I miss you. I miss the whole family.”

Elna nodded miserably. “I do, too,” she agreed. “I committed myself to teaching this term, but I’m not going to teach again after this. Trygve and I will get married this summer, and then I’ll spend my days being a homesteader’s wife, and hopefully a mother someday, instead of a teacher.”

“I’m still so happy that you’re marrying my brother!” Signe told her. “I can’t hardly believe it. And in only a few months!”

Elna’s frown turned into a smile. “I’m excited about it,” she said. “But it’s going to make being away for these two months even harder.”

“Which will make coming home that much better,” concluded Signe. “Besides, you don’t want to get married until you’re sixteen. That’s not until the end of June. Trygve will turn eighteen in May. You have to spend the time until then somehow, and it’ll be good for you to earn some money working so that when you start living on your own, the two of you will have more money saved to buy the things you need to set up your own home.”

“It’s going to be so strange not living in the big house with the rest of the family!” remarked Elna.

Signe smiled. “But you’ll be right next door. Everything is changing, but we’ll still be close. And,” she paused, “we’ll still be best friends.”

Just then they heard the creak of wagon wheels. Signe looked out the window and saw Mr. Jergensen’s wagon come to a stop in front of the house. “My ride is here,” she said. She stood up and picked up her basket, which held her belongings for the week. Elna picked up a stack of books

that were on the table. Signe was taking them to use at her school. The girls walked out of the house together and put the things in the back of the wagon.

Before Signe could turn around, four-year-old Carrie came running out the door calling, “Don’t go away, Signe! Don’t go! Don’t go!”

Signe knelt down before her little sister. “I’ll be back in five days,” she told her. “You know that I always come back.”

“But I don’t want you to go,” Carrie pouted.

“Come here,” said Signe, and she hugged the little girl. “I’ll see you on Friday.” Then she climbed up into the wagon. Mr. Jergensen flicked the reins, and the horses started walking north. Soon the path turned west, and they drove through the tall grass that swayed over the narrow trail.

Mr. Jergensen never talked when he was taking her to Boonesville, but Signe tried to make conversation anyway. “Winter went by so fast,” she said.

“It did,” he agreed.

“And it never got too cold for long,” she said. “That was a welcome change from last winter.” She waited for him to respond, but he only grunted, and Signe didn’t try again.

When they reached the Jergensen house, six-year-old Margo came running to out meet them. “Hello, Miss Ytterhorn!” the girl shouted.

“My, how you’ve grown!” said Signe as she got down from the wagon. “And look at you!” she added as Karl, who

had turned ten in December, came out to stand beside his little sister. Both children had grown taller during the winter.

Karl helped Signe gather her things from the wagon, and they went into the sod house together, where Karl and Margo's mother was putting supper on the table. Signe greeted Mrs. Jergensen. Then she put her basket next to the bed that the Jergensens had moved against the wall for her and asked, "Are there any new students this year?"

"No," answered Karl. "It's hard to start a homestead out here during the wintertime. There aren't any new families in Boonesville since we saw you in October, but I'm sure some will come this summer."

"But there's a new bachelor homesteader who took over an abandoned claim," Mrs. Jergensen told her.

"And David Jensen got married," said Margo as she slid onto the bench that sat on one side of the kitchen table. Signe slid in beside her, and Karl stepped over the bench and sat down between them.

Mr. Jergensen came into the house from putting the horses up. He washed his hands in the wash basin by the door, and then he and Mrs. Jergensen sat down on the bench opposite Margo, Karl, and Signe. They all bowed their heads while Mr. Jergensen said the table prayer. Then they raised their heads and resumed talking.

"David Jensen put an ad in the *St. Paul Dispatch* saying he was looking for a wife," explained Mrs. Jergensen.

"And a girl came up to Breckenridge on the train, and he went and picked her up and married her," said Margo. She was excited to have someone to share the gossip with.

“That’s good,” said Signe. “Now he won’t be pestering me anymore. I hope they’ll be happy.”

Margo looked surprised. “Why didn’t you like him?”

“He’s a bit of a braggart,” replied Signe. “Besides, I’m not ready to be married yet. And when I do marry, I want to marry someone I know and trust and love. I don’t want to marry a stranger.”

Mrs. Jergensen cast a quick look at her husband and said, “People who don’t know each other can grow to love each other, you know.”

“I know that,” replied Signe. “My stepmother, Rebekka, has married twice, and both times it was because she was needed; it was not for love. But now she and my stepfather are happy. They’ve grown to love each other. However, it doesn’t always work that way. I have a friend, Hattie, whose pa died, and her ma married a man she didn’t know well. That man was evil and abusive, and he terrorized her family. I don’t ever want to be in that situation.”

Karl’s eyebrows knitted together. “Wait, you have a stepmother and a stepfather both?” he asked. “How can that be?”

Signe took a deep breath and said, “My family came to America from Norway five years ago, but my ma died on the journey here. So my pa wrote to her best friend, who was still back in Norway. That’s Rebekka. Pa asked Rebekka to come to America and marry him and be our new ma, so she did. But then there was a smallpox epidemic, and Pa died.”

“I remember that epidemic,” said Mrs. Jergensen. “We weren’t in the Dakota Territory yet, but smallpox was all over the country then. Lots of people died.”

Signe nodded. “Our closest neighbors and best friends, the Olsens, had a death in their family, too. Anna Olsen died, leaving Nels a widower and their children without a mother. They were motherless, and we were fatherless. It only made sense to combine the families. Now Nels and Rebekka are happy. They even have their own baby together, which makes ten of us children all together. Plus, Nels’s mother, Grandmother Hulda, lives in our big house with us. The whole family is happy. We all love each other very much. In fact,” she paused, “my sister is going to marry my brother.”

“What?!” asked Mrs. Jergensen, shocked.

“But Elna is not my real sister,” explained Signe quickly. “She’s Nels’s daughter, so she’s not related to me or my brother by blood. But they’ve known each other for long enough to know that they love each other and can trust each other. They’ll just make the family that much stronger by creating a new bond within it. They’re getting married this summer.”

Margo spoke up. “I think that’s wonderful!”

Signe nodded. “I do, too,” she said.

Mr. Jergensen had stopped eating while he listened to Signe, but now he took another bite of food and said, “That’s certainly an interesting story.”

Signe turned toward Margo and Karl and changed the subject. “Have you been speaking in English this winter?”

Margo looked down, embarrassed. “Not really, Miss Ytterhorn. There’s no one for us to talk to,” she said.

“Sometimes we say a few words just for fun,” Karl told her.

“They do that when they don’t want us to know what they’re saying,” said Mrs. Jergensen, and Margo giggled.

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In the morning Signe packed her basket with the supplies she had brought for the school in it. She had a clock, a flag, a Bible, a notebook and pencils, and several school books for the students to study from. “This is too heavy to carry for a whole mile,” she said.

“I’ll carry the books,” offered Karl.

“Thank you,” said Signe.

Mrs. Jergensen had packed a small basket with their lunches in it, and Margo picked it up to carry it. Then the three of them left the house and started walking to the tiny soddy that served as a schoolhouse.

When they reached the school, Signe took the clock and the Bible from her basket and set them on the small table that she used as a desk. Then she placed the flag in the holder that Trygve had made for her. She arranged her notebook, her pencils, and the stack of textbooks and readers on her table and stood by the door to greet the students, while Karl and Margo took seats at the larger table that all five of her students shared.

Nine-year-old Gro Romstad was the first to arrive. She smiled at Signe and said, “Good morning, Miss Ytterhorn.”

Behind her was her brother Per, who had turned twelve and was already a foot taller than Signe. Signe had to look up to speak to him. “Welcome back to school,” she said warmly.

“*Velkommen,*” he replied.

“Speak English, please,” Signe insisted.

Per grinned sheepishly. “Welcome back,” he said.

Signe smiled her approval.

Last to arrive was Kirsten Svennson, who was six, the same as Margo. Kirsten’s face broke into a wide smile when she saw her teacher, and Signe was pleased to see the change in her. She remembered how shy the girl had been in the fall. Now she was an active participant in her studies and eager to learn.

When the students were arranged at the table, Signe went to the front of the classroom. She felt like a real teacher now. She was wearing her blue dress with tiny pink flowers on it and had her blonde hair tied back with a blue ribbon. She began class by having the students stand and recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and then Signe read the Twenty-Third Psalm from the Bible.

Just as she was ready to begin the first lessons of the season, the door opened, and Signe looked up to see a tall, slim man standing in the doorway. He looked younger than a parent, but he seemed too old to be a student. He held a notebook in his hand. “May I help you?” Signe asked him.

He didn't answer her, so she asked again in Norwegian.

"My name is Lars," the young man replied, also in Norwegian, "and I'm a new student."

"Oh?" said Signe, surprised. The Jergensens had said that there were no new families in Boonesville. Was this the bachelor homesteader Mrs. Jergensen had mentioned?

"I just came from Norway and claimed a homestead south of here," the young man explained, "and I don't know any English. I want to learn how to read and write English, but I don't have anyone to teach me."

"Well," said Signe, "come in." She considered for a long moment what to do with this new, unusual student. Finally she handed Per a first-grade reader and said, "Could you please help Lars? Take his notebook, and write down all of the vocabulary words in the back of this book in it and tell him what each word means. Then he can write down the Norwegian word for each one of them. That will help him learn English, but it'll also help you review what you did last fall. In fact," she paused, looking at the rest of the students, "let's all begin by reviewing the vocabulary we learned last year." She began passing out the readers she had brought. Even the children who were older were still only in the second-grade reader because they hadn't yet learned enough English to progress further.

Lars looked at the crowded table and asked, "Could we sit outside on the front step and do it?"

"Of course," answered Signe. So Lars and Per went outside and sat on the step. Per wrote down the first five words from the vocabulary list in Lars's notebook. Then

he translated them, and Lars wrote the Norwegian next to them.

An hour later, they stepped back inside the schoolhouse, and Per took his seat at the table. Lars said to Per and Signe, “Thank you very much. I’ll go now. But I’ll learn these words and come back tomorrow. Is that okay?”

“Certainly,” said Signe, and Lars was gone.

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The next day Lars was back. “I’ve learned all of the words and would like to study the reader and then try to read it,” he told her.

“That was fast,” praised Signe. She handed the first-grade reader to him, and he went outside with it. She looked at him as he sat on the front step with the book. His legs were so long that his bent knees were close to his ears. She sighed and thought, *If only all of my students were so eager to learn!*

She began the day listening to Per, Karl, and Gro take turns reading from the American history book. When they finished a chapter, she quizzed them on what they had read, but they all missed a few of the questions. “I’d like you to read the chapter again and try to understand who James Madison was,” she told them. “Why don’t you read to each other and discuss what you’re reading while I work with Margo and Kirsten.” She turned to the six-year-olds.

After a few hours, Signe could tell that the students were getting restless, so she announced, “Time for recess.” The

children all ran outside to play, and Signe sat down on the step next to Lars.

“They have a lot of energy,” commented Lars as they watched Per throw a ball to Karl and Margo chasing Kirsten.

“They certainly do,” Signe replied. Then she asked, “How are you doing with the reader?”

“I’m ready to read the first story,” he answered.

Signe’s eyebrows raised. “Already? That’s good! Okay, let’s hear it.”

Lars opened the reader and began reading out loud, speaking haltingly. He did a good job, although he mispronounced a few of the words. When he was finished, Signe said, “That was excellent! But let’s work on how you pronounce some of these words. We can do that while you learn some sentences to use in everyday conversation.”

“Yes, I need that,” said Lars.

“I’ll write the English in your notebook, and you can copy it,” Signe suggested, taking his notebook from him. “Then you can read it out loud, and we’ll talk about it.” She wrote in his notebook, “Hello, how are you?”

Lars copied the sentence and then read it aloud. His pronunciation was perfect.

Next Signe wrote, “I am fine, thank you.”

Lars copied the sentence and then asked, “How do you write *pretty* in English?”

Signe printed the word *pretty*, and he wrote, “You are pretty.”

Signe almost blushed. Did he mean that, or was he just writing sentences? “That’s enough for today,” she said. “You’ve done well. You’re picking up English very quickly.” She was pleased that he could put a sentence together in English, but she hoped he wouldn’t get to be a pest like David Jensen had been. She called the children in from recess and said goodbye to Lars.

By Friday Lars had read five stories and understood them all. He had also learned about twenty lines of conversation. That day Signe had him write, “How much does this cost?”

He answered her, “One dollar,” and he took a silver dollar from his pocket and put it in her hand. “It’s extra work for you to teach me, so I must pay you.”

“This is too much,” protested Signe.

“Write it in English for me,” requested Lars, so she wrote “This is too much” in his notebook.

Lars smiled. “Thank you very much,” he said. “You’re a good teacher, and you’ve earned every cent of it.”

“And thank you,” said Signe as she put the dollar in her pocket. “I didn’t expect you to pay me.”

“But what you’re doing means a great deal to me,” Lars explained. “Can I take this reader home for the weekend? By Monday I hope to be able to read the rest of the book.”

“Certainly,” answered Signe. “And I’ll bring a newspaper for you to try and read.”

“That would be nice,” he said, and he started walking south.