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HOMESTEADERS SERIES  
BOOK SIX

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Signe



Esther Allen Peterson

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# HOMESTEADERS SERIES

## Volume 6

Previous volumes in the Homesteaders Series:

*A Long Journey to a New Home*

*Will Spring Come?*

*The House that Cared*

*The Reformation of Grandmother Hulda*

*The Prairie Blooms*

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For Paul and Dana,  
and Elizabeth, Steven, Trevor, Jacob, Kyra, and Johanna

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## Spring Term

April 2, 1872

Signe and Elna sat at the kitchen table waiting for their rides to come and take them back to their schools. “I’m not ready for this,” said Elna.

“I’m not either,” said Signe. “But we committed ourselves to teaching for both the fall and spring terms.”

“I’m glad nobody will be expecting me to teach after this term when I am married,” said Elna, who was also sixteen years old. The ten-year-olds, Rolf and Mari, sat across the table. They didn’t look very happy.

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 announced.

Nels picked up Signe’s basket, and they went outside, with four-year-old Carrie running behind them saying, “Don’t go away and leave us. Don’t go. Don’t go.”

“I’ll be back in five days. You know that I always come back.”

“But I don’t want you to go,” she said as she pouted.

“I know you don’t. But I have to go,” said Signe as she climbed up into the wagon. Mr. Jergensen jiggled the reins, and the wagon started moving north, following the ruts that her pa and Trygve first made four years earlier. Soon the path turned west, and they rode through the tall grass that swayed over the narrow trail.

Mr. Jergensen never talked when he picked her up, but she tried to make conversation anyway. “Winter really went by fast.”



“It did,” he said.

“And it never got too cold for too long,” she said and waited for him to say something.

He grunted, and Signe didn’t try again. She just remembered. She remembered the events of the last five years: leaving Norway on the sail ship *The Franklin*, her ma dying after Carrie was born, living in Iowa with her pa’s cousins, her pa sending a letter to Norway asking Rebekka to come and take their ma’s place, and coming up to the Dakota Territory in their covered wagon. Then all of them except Rebekka got smallpox, and her pa died. Elna’s mother got the pox, too, and died from it two weeks later. Then Signe, Elna, and her younger sister Mari decided that it would be best if Elna’s pa and Rebekka got married, and they could all be one family and live in one house. They had talked to Tryve and Oscar, and they agreed. Nels Olson and Rebekka Ytterhorn did get married, and Elna’s pa and her brother Trygve built their house.

When they reached the Jergensen house, Signe picked up her basket and climbed down. Margo came running to meet her.

“My, how you’ve grown,” Signe said, and she noticed that Margo and her older brother Karl had grown taller during the winter. They went into their sod house, where Mrs. Jergensen was putting the supper on the table. Signe was glad it was not oatmeal. She figured Mr. Jergensen must have shot a deer, and Mrs. Jergensen had put potatoes, carrots, and onions in the pot with the venison.

Signe put her basket next to the bed she shared with Margo and asked, “Are there any new students this year?”

“No,” answered Karl, who had turned ten during the winter.

“David Jensen got married,” said Margo as she slid on to the bench that was attached to the table made of rough boards from an oak tree. Signe slid in very carefully beside her; last fall she had gotten a large sliver in her leg while getting up from the table.



“He put an ad in the *St. Paul Dispatch* saying he was looking for a wife,” said Mrs. Jergensen.

“And a girl came up to Breckenridge on the train, and he went and picked her up and married her,” said Margo.

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

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

“He just wasn’t my type, and I am not ready to be married yet.” Signe wanted the conversation to end.

But Mrs. Jergensen said, “There’s a new homesteader south of the Romstads.”

“That’s the third one to claim that piece of land,” said Mr. Jergensen as he closed the door. “Some people just aren’t cut out for homesteading.”

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

Margo blushed and looked down at the floor and said, “No, Miss Ytterhorn. There’s no one for us to talk to.”

Karl grinned and said, “We said a few words just for fun.”

“When they didn’t want us to know what they were saying,” said Mr. Jergensen, and Margo giggled.

“We haven’t learned much English yet,” said Mrs. Jergensen.



In the morning Signe picked up her basket with the clock, the flag, her tablet, five readers, two arithmetic books, a geography book, an American history book, two slates, and a new book to read to the students. She said, “This is too heavy to carry for a whole mile,” and she took out two readers, one arithmetic book, and the history book and put them on the table.

“I’ll help you carry it,” said Margo.

“I’ll carry it,” said Karl. “I’m strong.”



“Good,” said Signe, and Mrs. Jergensen put a box with their lunches on top of the basket. Signe picked up the four books from the table, and they started walking the mile on the path of trodden-down grass that led to the school.

When they reached the school, Signe took the clock out and put it on her table. Then she placed the flag in the holder that Trygve had made, and she put it on the students’ table. She placed the tablet and the books on her table and stood by the door to greet the students.

Six-year-old Gro Romstad was the first to arrive, and she looked up at Signe and smiled and said, “Good morning, Miss Ytterhorn.”

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

“*Velkommen*,” he said.

“Speak English, please,” said Signe.

“Uh, welcome back.”

Last to arrive was Kirsten. She stood in the doorway and smiled, and Signe remembered how shy she had been last fall when she came and how she had just stood and looked down at the floor.

Signe stood up in the front of the classroom. She wore her blue dress with tiny pink flowers on it and had her blonde hair tied back with a blue ribbon. She tried to look older than her sixteen years. When all of the students were in their places, they stood and saluted the flag and recited the Pledge of Allegiance, and Signe read the Twenty-third Psalm.

As they sat down again, Signe looked up and saw a tall man standing in the doorway. He looked younger than a parent, and he held a tablet in his hand.

She said in English, “May I help you?” He didn’t answer, so she asked in Norwegian.



“My name is Lars, and I’m a new student.”

“What?” said Signe.

“Yes. I just came from Norway and claimed a homestead south of here, and I don’t know any English. I want to learn how to read and write English, and I don’t have anyone to teach me.”

“Well,” said Signe. “Come in and sit down.”

Then she handed Per the first-grade reader and said, “I want you to help Lars. You can write down all of the vocabulary words in the back of the book and then tell him what each word means. Then he can write down the Norwegian for each word. This will help him gain a vocabulary.”

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

Signe nodded, and Lars and Per went outside and sat on the step. Per wrote down the first five words on the vocabulary list on Lars’s notebook. Then he translated them, and Lars wrote the Norwegian next to the words.

After an hour, they finished the vocabulary words, and Lars said to Per and Signe, “Thank you very much. I will go now. I will learn these words and come back tomorrow. Is that okay?”

Signe nodded, and Lars was gone.



The next day Lars was back. “I have learned all of the words and would like to study the reader and then try to read it.”

Signe handed the first-grade reader to him, and he went outside and sat on the step. She looked at him as he squatted on the step with the book. His legs were so long that his bent knees were close to his ears. She said to the students, “If only you were so eager to learn.”

She listened to Per and Karl take turns reading from the American history book and asked them the four questions at the end of the story. Karl got two wrong, and Signe said, “You read



the chapter again and try to understand who James Madison was.”

After she listened to Margo and Gro read a story from the first-grade reader, Signe said, “Time for recess.” She gave Per the ball, and they all ran out to play dodgeball. Then she sat down next to Lars.

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

“They certainly do,” she answered and smiled at him and asked, “How are you doing?”

“I am ready to read the first story.”

Signe answered, “Okay. Let’s hear it.” When he was through reading, she said, “Very good. This is a good way to learn words. However, you need to learn everyday conversation.”

“Yes, I need that,” said Lars.

“I will write the English on your notebook, and then you can write the Norwegian.”

She wrote on his tablet, *Hello, how are you?* He copied the Norwegian under it. Then she wrote, *I am fine, thank you.*

He copied it and then asked, “How do you write *pretty* in English?”

She printed the word *pretty*, and he wrote down, *You are pretty.*

“That’s enough for today,” she said. She was glad he could put a sentence together in English, but she hoped he wouldn’t get to be a pest like David.

By Friday Lars had read five stories and understood them. He had also learned 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 is extra work for you to teach me, so I must pay you.”





“That is too much,” protested Signe.

“Write it in English for me,” said Lars, and she wrote *That is too much* in his tablet.

“Thank you very much. You are a good teacher, and you have earned every cent of it.”

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

“It is extra work for you. When the children are playing, you could be taking a break instead of working with me.”

“I don’t mind,” said Signe, but she did like that he showed his appreciation.

“But it means a great deal to me. By Monday I hope to be able to read the rest of the book.”

“And I will bring a newspaper for you to try and read.”

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

## The Weekend

When Nels stopped the wagon in front of the schoolhouse, Signe put her basket on the back of the wagon before he could get out and help her.

“Looks like you are in a hurry,” said Nels.

Signe pulled her skirt close around her legs as she sat down and leaned against the backboard. “I’m more than ready to go home. It’s been a long week.”

They turned south on the trail and followed the ruts made through the rank prairie grass by settlers the past few years. Nels asked, “You have the same students as last year?”

“All five of them plus one more.”

“Oh?” he said as he turned his head to look at her.

“The new student is a man. His name is Lars, and I’d guess him to be about eighteen. He said he had just claimed a piece of land, and he wants to learn to read and write English.”

Nels raised his eyebrows and looked at her and said, “That’s interesting.”

“So far he’s real nice. He is very intent on learning, and today he gave me a dollar in payment for all my help.”

“Does he come for all day?” Nels asked as they passed through a rutted, swampy area with last year’s dead grass covering the trail.

“No, he just comes in the morning, and I have Per translate English words into Norwegian for him, and then I help him form sentences during recess.” Then she sneezed three times as they went by a long stretch of ragweed.



Nels waited until she was done and said, “He’s taking your time, so it’s only fair that he pays you.”

“I guess so.” She reached into the back of the wagon and pulled up a deerskin and covered her legs.

Nels turned his head toward Signe and asked with a curious look, “Does he have other interests besides learning?”

She looked at him and pointed at herself and asked, “Do you mean me?”

“Well, David was looking last fall.”

“David put an ad in the *St. Paul Dispatch* for a wife, and a girl came up and married him.”

Nels looked at her sideways and said, “Lars could be looking for a wife. Aren’t most homesteaders bachelors?”

“Lars hasn’t started pestering me that way. He did ask how to write and say the word *pretty*. Then he said I was pretty. Except for that he’s been okay. He really is intent on learning how to read and write and talk English.”

Before the wagon came to a stop in front of the house, Carrie was on the step saying, “Signe’s home. Signe’s home.” Rolf and Peter stood next to her.

“It sure is nice to be welcomed,” said Signe. She was so happy to be home.

That evening at the supper table, Elna said, “Perhaps we can go to McCauleyville tomorrow. Grandmother Hulda said she would like to start on my wedding dress, so I want to pick out some fabric.”

“I think Signe could use another dress, too,” said Grandmother Hulda. “I’d like to sew two dresses before summer is here. Then we will have to spend most of our time in the garden.”

“I will pick some fabric out, too,” said Signe. “And I would like to go to the school and get a third-grade reader because Per will soon be through with the second-grade book. I don’t



imagine he'll be coming to school next year because there isn't much more I can teach him. He says he is his pa's right arm, and he probably should be home helping his pa, but he wants to be able to read and write well before he quits. His ma says if a homesteader is going to be successful, he has to be smart."

"Yes," said Nels. "It's more than plowing, planting, and reaping."

"I want to get a copy of the *St. Paul Dispatch* at the hotel because Lars wants to learn to read newspapers."

"Sometimes they have newspapers from Chicago, too," suggested Trygve.

"I'll get whatever they have," said Signe as she began to clear the table. She took the dishpan off the nail where it was hanging and poured boiling water from the teakettle into it and poured more water into the kettle to heat for rinsing the dishes. She washed, Elna dried, and Mari put the dishes away. It felt good to be home and be part of the family.



That night while they were falling asleep, Elna asked Signe, "Do you like Lars?"

"He's alright," Signe answered and turned over on her side and faced the wall because she didn't want to talk about Lars.

But Elna persisted, "You know what I mean."

"I'm not ready for that yet," answered Signe and considered the subject closed.

However, Elna didn't give up easily. "If you were, would you be interested in him?"

Signe yawned and said, "Maybe. But I don't plan on that for a few years."



On Saturday after breakfast, Trygve brought the wagon in front of the house, and Signe, Elna, and Rebekka climbed up. Signe jiggled the reins, and they started for McCauleyville.



They were going to McCauleyville to get fabric. “We just got new dresses last year,” said Signe.

“You’ve grown two inches this past year, and yours is getting too small for you,” said Rebekka.

Signe looked down at the sleeves of her dress and noted that the sleeves were two inches shorter than they used to be, and she could feel that the waistline of the dress was above her waist. “I think I must be done growing,” said Signe.

“Probably,” said Rebekka as she looked at her.

“I was done growing two years ago,” said Elna.

“We all grow differently,” said Rebekka. “I never got any taller after I turned twelve.”

“Poor Mari,” said Signe. “She will never get a new dress because she only gets our hand-me-downs.”

“But she has three dresses, and you have never had more than two,” said Rebekka. “And two of her dresses are in very good condition.”

When they reached McCauleyville, Signe stopped the wagon in front of the mercantile, and they went inside. After they picked out the material for their dresses, Signe and Elna walked over to the hotel. Their friend Hattie had seen them and was already running on the wooden sidewalk to meet them.

When they opened the door, the aroma of fresh bread floated out. They walked into the kitchen, and Hattie’s ma was sitting on the stool next to the stove. Her abdomen was very large, and she looked tired, and her hair was plastered to her face from cooking in the hot kitchen. As they walked up the steps to Hattie’s room, Signe said, “She’s really getting large.”

“I think the baby is going to be born soon.” Hattie bit her lip and said, “And I’m worried about her.”

“I know,” said Signe. “My ma died after Carrie was born, and Brave Heart’s ma died when her baby was born.”

“And Katrina,” said Elna.



“Poor Katrina,” said Signe. “She suffered so much.”

“Why do so many women die having babies?” asked Hattie.

“I don’t know,” said Elna. “But more women die from having babies than anything else.”

Signe had a sober look on her face. “I’m not ever going to have a baby.”

Hattie looked worried and agreed, “I don’t think I will either.”

“Trygve and I will have babies,” declared Elna.

They stopped at the log schoolhouse. Signe noticed that there were two new students, making a total of eleven. Mr. Johnson smiled when he saw Signe and Elna and asked, “What can I do for you today?”

“I need a third-grade reader,” said Signe.

“Third grade?” asked Mr. Johnson.

“It’s for Per. This is his last year because he needs to spend more time helping his pa. But he wants to be able to read and write well.”

“He’s motivated,” said Mr. Johnson. “You must be doing a good job.”

“I hope so.” However, she didn’t feel so sure that she was.

“And how’s it going for you, Elna?”

“Two boys are very restless, but I’ll do the best I can and not worry about how it’s going because I’m getting married in June.”

The three girls walked back to the mercantile and found Rebekka looking at spices. “We’ll walk with you to the hotel,” said Signe to Hattie.

As they walked into the lobby, Hattie said, “Smells like Ma is making cookies. Let’s see.” When they went into the kitchen, Hattie’s ma was bent over the table, holding her stomach.

She looked at Hattie and said, “It’s time. Get the midwife.”



Hattie ran outside, with Signe and Elna behind her. Hattie said, “Mrs. Hendrickson lives two blocks from here.”

Hattie turned to run east, and Signe said, “We’d better go now.”

“We’ll be praying for your ma,” said Elna.

“And the baby,” added Signe.

When they got back to the mercantile, Rebekka was paying for the things she had bought. Signe said, “Hattie’s ma is having her baby.”