

## September 2, 1869

Trygve, Signe, Rolf, and Carrie Ytterhorn should have been orphans, but providence had intervened. Their ma had died on the sail ship on their way to America. Much to Trygve's distress, his pa had posted a letter back to Norway the same day that the ship had landed at Quebeck asking his ma's best friend, Rebekka, to come and marry him and be their mother. She came. That was while they were still at their Uncle Elmer's in Iowa.

Then they all came by covered wagon up to the Dakota Territory and broke the land and built a log house by a wooded area near a creek. But they wondered if they would live through the winter. Their pa contracted small-pox last February while working in McCauleyville, and he died. Everyone except Rebekka got it, and she took care of all of them and their neighbors, Nels and Anna Olson and their children, Elna, Oskar, Mari, and baby Noel. Rebekka had smallpox when she was a child so she was immune. They don't know what they would have done without her; perhaps they would all have died. The Olson ma, Anna, died, and so did Billy Smith.

That first awful winter was behind them and they had plowed and planted a lot of land. They had three teams of oxen; their team, the Olson oxen, and the starving oxen that Sam Smith had given them when Nels gave them a ride to catch the stage to take them to the train to go back to Illinois. Trygve, who was fourteen, and Oskar Olson, who was only eleven, drove the oxen from sun up to sun down alongside of Nels. They planted wheat and oats in the land that they plowed the past year, and they broke new land and planted trees on Sam's land. There were good rains and a bountiful

harvest, and now they would build a house from wooden boards. It would be half paid for, and they would pay it all off after next year's harvest.

But first there was going to be a wedding. After smallpox had taken Jon Ytterhorn and Anna Olson, the families relied on each other for their very survival, and it was Signe and Elna who came upon the idea that the Olson's pa and Rebekka should get married, and they would all be one family.

Just one year earlier there were three families homesteading just north and west of Fort Abercrombie. Then winter and smallpox came, and Sam Smith said, "We can't live in this Godforsaken country." He, the grandmother, and Bobby left and went back to Illinois.

Trygve moved over into the Olson sod house with Nels and his son Oskar. Elna, Mari, and baby Noel moved in with Rebekka, Signe, Rolf, Carrie, and baby Erik.

While Nels, Trygve, and Oskar did all of the plowing, planting, and reaping, Rebekka, Signe, and Elma who were both twelve years old, and Rolf and Mari who were almost seven, cooked, washed the clothes, cared for the babies and two-year-old Carrie, cleaned the house, planted a garden, milked the cow, and took care of the sheep and the chickens. They grieved together and shared the work, their joy, and their lives and became a family unit. It was only logical that Rebekka and Nels should marry, and that they would all live together in one house.

During the summer eight more families claimed land, built sod houses, and became their neighbors. Now they would all be gathering in the Ytterhorn yard for a wedding.

## The Wedding

Trygve and Oskar were clean. They had bathed in the creek and were wearing their Sunday best. The suit that Rebekka had sewed for Trygve at Christmas was already getting too small for him. The sleeves came up above his wrists, and the pants didn't reach his ankles. Oskar was wearing the suit that Trygve grew out of last year. They almost looked like they might be blood brothers with their yellow hair now bleached nearly white by the summer sun.

They carried the table that Trygve and his pa had made from split logs outside and placed it next to the two tables that had stood there all summer. One was the table that he had helped Oskar make, and the other one he had helped Billy and Bobby Smith make. The tables were the very first things settlers made after they claimed their land.

“The Norwegian minister is coming from McCauleyville for the wedding,” said Trygve.

“But first he's going to preach at our church service,” said Oskar.

“I liked it best when we used to have our church service with just our two families and the Smiths,” said Tyrygve. “Your pa led the singing with his violin, Rebekka said prayers, and your ma read from the Bible and other things. She was such a good reader.”

“Yes,” said Signe who had just come out of the house with Elna. “And she was so pretty.” Signe looked at Elna, and they both began to cry. Then Oskar's chin puckered, and tears spilled from his eyes.

Trygve remembered not just Anna, but when his own ma died and he turned his back away from the other so they wouldn't see his tears.

Rebekka came out of the cabin, followed by Mari carrying Noel, and Rolf carrying Erik, and Carrie toddling behind. "What's going on?" asked Rebekka.

"Nothing," answered Elna.

"We're just remembering," said Signe.

"We're remembering Anna, and pa, and our first ma," said Trygve.

Rebekka looked at the children. She stood still for a minute and then pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped at her own eyes. She said, "We've all lost so much, and it's good for us to remember." She gathered them into her arms and whispered, "And grieve."

We were remembering how Elna's ma did the readings," said Signe. "She was so kind and good."

"Now Mrs. Klemstad does the readings," said Oskar.

"And she thinks she's so much better than all the rest of us," said Trygve making a face.

"She's just trying to be helpful," said Rebekka.

"Well," said Trygve. "I'm glad we're having the minister coming today. I just hope he doesn't preach for two hours."

"Rolf, you and Mari go and pick some flowers for the tables," said Rebekka. They handed the babies to Signe and Elna and ran off. Rebekka filled a water pitcher from the water barrel. Soon Rolf and Mari were back with purple and white asters and some black-eyed Susans.

"Well, we are ready," said Oskar. Then Nels came walking over from his sod house. He was carrying his violin.

"I wonder how many people come to church just to hear your pa play his violin?" asked Signe.

"That's the only reason Sam and Billy ever came," said Elna. Nels took his violin out of the case and tucked it under his chin and played a few notes. He proceeded to tune it and then started to pull the bow over the strings, and the strains of

“Sweet Hour of Prayer” floated over the prairie, and one by one the families started coming.

The first ones to arrive were Delbert Dahlin and his two sons, Bjorn and Lief. Their mother had died on the way out to the Dakota Territory, and they buried her somewhere in Minnesota. Nine-year-old Bjorn and six-year-old Lief had to take care of themselves while their pa tried to break the land. Bjorn did all of the cooking, and they mostly ate oatmeal so whenever possible, Rebekka made extra and sent it over to the Dahlin soddie.

“It’s so sad,” said Signe watching the three coming towards them. As the three drew closer, Lief grinned. He came up to Rebekka, and she gave him a hug. It reminded her of Bobby Smith who always came for cookies and hugs. Rebekka was everybody’s mother. Signe knew that they were more than fortunate that she came after their ma died.

“Hi,” said Trygve.

Bjorn just looked at the ground and hardly more than whispered “Hi” back.

Trygve wondered why it was so hard for Bjorn to talk to him. He remembered two and a half years earlier when he and his family were the poorest people in their community in Norway. He wondered if it was because they were so poor, or if it was all about his ma dying, or what the people whispered about.

Mrs. Klemstad liked to gossip about how their pa would go to McCauleyville and get drunk, leaving the children at home alone. Rebekka had told her that none of us knows his situation and that we shouldn’t be judging people. But Mrs. Klemstad didn’t pay any attention. She said that Delbert Dahlin was certainly on his way to hell.

Next came the two sisters walking across the prairie. Laura Hanson and Astrid Gabrielson were followed by their husbands, Olaf and Gudman. Both of the women were pregnant with their first babies. When they first arrived in

June, Nels had taken Olaf and Gudman to McCauleyville with the team of horses to buy doors and windows for their sod houses, which they built across the trail from each other. The newly rutted trail had become the road in the new community, running north from the ox cart trail. Rebekka and the girls took eggs and milk and fresh bread to them when they first arrived.

Next came the Aune family with their six children and one more on the way. Trygve had wondered how they all fit in the small soddie that Mr. Aune had built. He found out a couple of weeks ago when he took them a leg of deer. There were three beds made from tree branches strung across cut logs that held straw and feather mattresses. They were lined up against the north wall and filled up half of the little sod house. The table and benches and the stove took up the other half of the house, and there was no room for anyone to move around. When Trygve was there, two of the children sat on the bench by the table, and the other four sat on the beds with their colorful quilts pulled around their shoulders.

From the north the two Eglund bachelors came strolling and Severt and Lena Klemstad and their three girls came walking along the ox cart trail that ran along the south edge of the new community on its way out west toward the mountains and the gold fields.

The worshippers sat at the tables, on the tables, and on the ground. They listened to Nels play the violin and sang hymns while they waited.

Finally, the Norwegian minister who came to McCauleyville once every month pulled up in his black, horse-drawn carriage. He climbed down and greeted Nels and Rebekka and then stood up in front of the settlers and said, "I know we have a wedding today. Are there any baptisms? If there are none, we'll begin the service."

Then in his preacher voice, which was a half tone higher than his regular speaking voice, he said, "We'll begin in the

name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.” While the minister droned on and on, Tryve looked over at the woods that hugged the edges of the creek that bubbled over some rocks and past their cabin on its way to the Red River. The sumac was already a deep reddish brown, and the trees were starting to turn. There were yellow edges on the cottonwood trees, and red splashing up against others. He saw a deer on the edge of the wood and thought that he could have had a good shot. So far, he had shot twenty-three deer and put meat on the tables of all the settlers.

Signe was lost in her own daydream. She was thinking about how she and Elna would be going to McCauleyville to school as soon as the harvest was over. How she missed going to school in the Olson soddie. Elna’s ma Anna had been such a good teacher. The new settlers were not interested in having school in any of their homes so they didn’t have any school. Maybe that was because now there were twelve school age children in their community. Both she and Elna wanted to be teachers.

Pastor Solheim preached for an hour and twenty minutes and then came the abrupt “Amen.” The men with faraway looks on their face were perhaps planning next year’s crop, and the women were maybe thinking about getting the dinner on the table. But they all suddenly woke up and returned to the awareness of the moment.

Then Pastor Solheim said, “Nels Olson has informed me that he and Rebekka Ytterhorn wish to be married.” He looked at them, and they each got up and walked to the front of the gathering of settlers and stood in front of the pastor.

Trygve looked at Rebekka. Her light brown hair that was always braided now hung loosely around her shoulders. She was wearing the same dress that she wore when she married his pa. She had a thin face and was not pretty like his ma and Anna. This was the second time she was getting married, and again it was not for love. She was needed.

Pastor Solheim had a solemn countenance as he said, "I so well remember the last time I came here. It was for the funerals of the wife of Nels Olson, the husband of Rebekka Ytterhorn, and a young man. We thank God that your families have survived so much tragedy and hardship. We ask the Lord Almighty to be present with these two families as they become one family. Now, Nels Olson do you take Rebekka to be your lawful wedded wife? To love her and cherish her until death doth you part?"

Signe thought about how this marriage wasn't about loving and cherishing. Just like Rebekka's marriage to her pa, it was a marriage of convenience. But she and her pa got along real well.

Nels answered "I do."

Pastor Solheim asked Rebekka, "Do you take Nels Olson to be your lawful wedded husband and to love and obey him until death doth you part?"

Rebekka answered, "I do."

Then the pastor said, "I pronounce you man and wife."

As they sang the closing hymn, Trygve and Oskar carried out the roasters full of turkey and a goose that Trygve had shot and after the last amen the women spread the bounty of their gardens, their breads, and cakes on the tables and a celebration of food began. Fathers, mothers, and girls and boys all lined up with their plates in their hands. Nels and Rebekka stood by the tables and accepted the well wishes of their neighbors.



## Building A House

The wedding was over. Nels and Rebekka were man and wife, but nothing changed. He still slept in the sod house with Oskar and Trygve. Rebekka shared her little bedroom behind the curtain in the log cabin with the babies, Erik and Noel.

“They’re married now,” said Elna. “I wonder why they don’t sleep together?”

“I don’t think they’re ready to be man and wife,” said Signe. “It’s only a half a year ago that your ma and my pa died.”

“Maybe after the house gets built,” said Elna. “Pa says they’re taking all three wagons to McCauleyville to get lumber tomorrow. Then on Saturday all the men and big boys are coming to help get it started.”

On Wednesday evening Nels, Trygve, and Oskar pulled the three wagon loads of lumber into the yard. First they unloaded the windows and doors in Sam’s sod house. Nels said, “Unless it rains really hard, these should stay dry in here.” Then they drove the teams of oxen north through the waist high, tasseled prairie grass and unhitched them next to the cellar that they had dug the week before. They spent Thursday and Friday working on the foundation.

On Saturday morning Signe and Elna sat at the table in front of the log cabin peeling a half a bushel of potatoes. They could hear the hammering of nails. Nels and Trygve and Oskar had started nailing the floor down just after sunrise. Now they could see the neighbors arriving. First came the Eglund brothers carrying a ladder they had made from tree branches. Goodman and Olaf brought a ladder, too.

Soon the pounding of many hammers echoed out across the prairie. Signe said, "Lief and Bjorn are helping Oskar carry boards."

"So are Toluf and Alf Aune. Herman, too," said Elna.

"I'm going to help carry boards," said Rolf as he ran out of the cabin.

By sunset the walls of the house were halfway up, and the pioneer neighbors were heading home. "We'll be back next week," said Gilbert Aune. Gib, they called him. Nels, Trygve and Oskar walked slowly back to the cabin.

"I'm so tired I can hardly walk," said Oskar.

"It's like we have to tell ourselves to pick up one foot and put it down," said Trygve.

"You boys worked hard today," said Nels. "We all did." He turned to Trygve and said, "You're a pretty good carpenter."

"I helped my dad a lot," said Trygve. "He was always a good carpenter."

"You are a natural," said Nels. "You know how to figure out things. I saw you showing Chet Eglund how to do the corner boards." He turned to Oskar and said, "And you kept the boards coming. We never had to put down our hammers to go get anything. I saw you showing the boys what they should carry to the men. We never had to stop to get nails or boards."

They went inside. Rebekka sat in the rocker nursing both of the babies while Signe sliced the bread, and Elna put the leftover venison, some cheese, and milk on the table. Rolf, Mari, and Carrie sat at the table waiting.

"You're exhausted," said Rebekka.

"So are you," said Nels. "That was quite a feast you put on."

"That was the least we could do," answered Rebekka.