

Homesteaders Series

Will Spring Come?

Revised Edition

Book Two

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*For Deborah, Chuck, Alex,
Jeremy, and Melissa*



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Chapter One
Not Alone Anymore

September 17, 1868

Trygve watched a doe eating yellow leaves from a shrub growing between bright red sumac bushes. As he lifted his rifle to shoot it, an arrow whizzed by his head and sank deep in the doe's neck. The deer dropped instantly. Trygve froze, then slowly turned and looked behind him.

A Native American boy grinned and ran past him to the slain deer. He pulled out the arrow and then took his knife from his belt. He ran the knife skillfully along the underside of the deer to gut it. Trygve joined him. The boy looked up at him briefly and smiled. Then he continued working on the deer.

Trygve helped hold up the dead animal while the boy made cuts around its neck. Together they pulled the skin from the deer. After they finished, the boy took his knife and carved away a hindquarter and handed it to Trygve.

"Thank you," said Trygve, and he reached his hand out to the boy. "I'm Trygve."

The boy shook Trygve's hand. He had a strong grip. Then he pointed to Trygve and said, "Trygve." Next he touched the middle of his own chest and said words that Trygve didn't understand. Trygve decided to call him Brave

Heart. Perhaps that was what his name meant in his own language.

The two boys walked together until they came to a fork in the trail. Brave Heart waved at Trygve, then went north along the creek, carrying the deer carcass over his shoulder and the skin under his arm. Although the Sioux had been ordered by the U.S. government to go west five years earlier, some families had remained. Brave Heart must have been from one of those families.

Four months earlier, when Trygve and his family had first arrived in Dakota, two Native American women had come to their homesite and had asked for two chickens, and Trygve's stepmother Rebekka had given them to them. The people in nearby McCauleyville had advised the new homesteaders to do as the natives asked to avoid any trouble, but Trygve had been worried that the women would come back and ask for more until Trygve's family didn't have enough for themselves. Fortunately that hadn't happened. Now Trygve wondered if Brave Heart was the son of one of the women who had taken the chickens.

One of the women had come by the homesite a few times that summer. Rebekka had served her fresh bread and milk, and the two women had become friendly with each other. The native woman knew a few English words, and Rebekka had said that it was good talking to another woman. It could get lonely at their homestead.

As Trygve walked toward the log cabin that he and his pa had just finished building, he thought about all that had happened in the last year and a half. So much had changed! Pa and Ma had made the decision to move to America, so

the family had journeyed from their home in Norway across the ocean on a sailing ship. But Ma had died on the ship after giving birth to baby Carrie, and Pa had sent a letter to Ma's best friend Rebekka asking her to come and join them. He and the children had arrived in Canada and had taken a train to Lake Huron, where they had gotten passage on a steamship across the Great Lakes. Then they'd taken a train from Milwaukee to Iowa, where they lived with Pa's cousin Elmer for almost a year while they gathered together what they needed to make the trek to the Dakota Territory. Rebekka had joined them in Iowa and had married Pa, and in April of 1868, Pa, Rebekka, Trygve, his younger sister Signe, his little brother Rolf, and baby Carrie had journeyed to Dakota in a covered wagon to claim 160 acres as part of the 1862 Homestead Act. The American government had passed the act to help settle the land in the middle of the country, and families like Trygve's were taking advantage of the opportunity to begin life anew on the Great Plains of the United States.

The family had planted a garden and some crops when they'd first staked their claim. The soil was fertile, and the weather had been good. They had managed to raise enough wheat to supply them with bread for the next year, and their small root cellar was full of potatoes, carrots, rutabagas, turnips, and onions. The lean-to near the house was full of hay for their cow, Viola, the oxen, and the sheep, and there was feed for the chickens. They were ready for winter.

Trygve left the woods and made his way up the deer trail that led through amber grass as high as his shoulders. When he reached the cabin, Rebekka was outside working at the table. When she heard him, she looked up. Trygve held out

the venison and said, “I brought supper,” and he told her about Brave Heart.

“That must have been Morning Star’s son,” said Rebekka. She wiped her hands on her apron and took the venison. She set it on the stump of a tree and poured water over it. “Get my knife and the roaster,” she said to Trygve.

Rebekka cut the meat in two, severed the bone, and washed it again. Then she placed the chunks of meat in the roaster and handed it to Trygve. “It’ll be good eating tonight,” she smiled. “Put it in the oven, please, and add wood to the fire.”

Trygve put the pan in the oven of the stove that still stood out in the yard alongside the table that Pa and Trygve had made on the first day they’d found their land. Rebekka had said that the stove would make their little cabin too hot, and she wanted Pa to sand the table smooth while it was still outside.

Trygve added three pieces of wood to the stove and asked, “What do you know about the Indian family?”

“Not much,” Rebekka replied. “There’s a man, a woman, and the boy. They’ve had other children who have died, and Morning Star is expecting another baby.” She patted her own bulging stomach. “She offered to come and help me when my time comes.”

“But why are they still here?” asked Trygve.

“I don’t know why they haven’t followed the rest of their people west,” said Rebekka. “There were two families when we arrived here. One has left, but they remain.”

Trygve frowned. “Are they waiting for someone or something, or do they just not want to go?”

“I don’t know,” answered Rebekka. “But it must be hard when the government tells you to leave the only life you’ve ever known.”

Trygve thought about that. “I’d like to see the boy again,” he said. “Maybe he would let me shoot his bow and arrow.”

“Who would you like to see again?” asked Signe, who was coming from the pasture on the other side of the cabin, where she had been milking Viola. Signe was twelve years old, two years younger than Trygve.

“An Indian about my age. I saw him in the woods, and he shot a deer with a bow and arrow and gave me a hindquarter.”

Just then five-year-old Rolf came from around the corner of the house carrying an armful of purple and white asters. Rebekka reached for a pitcher filled with wilted flowers that sat on the table and said, “Those are lovely, Rolf! Please get some water, Trygve.”

Trygve picked up two empty buckets and headed for the stream that fed into the creek in the woods. As he filled the buckets, he had the strange feeling that someone was watching him. He’d had that feeling many times before. When he looked up, he saw Brave Heart standing at the edge of the woods, watching him. Trygve waved to him, and Brave Heart waved back. He wondered if Brave Heart had been watching him all summer.

Trygve and Rolf spent the rest of the afternoon gathering wood for winter. Trygve sawed dead trees in short enough

lengths to drag to the house. Rolf picked up small branches and ran back and forth to the house with them, creating a pile as high as his head.

As Trygve worked, he heard the sound of unfamiliar voices. For four months the only voices he had heard were his family's. These new voices were speaking Norwegian, and Trygve had a sudden longing for someone to talk to in his own language. He and Rolf took one look at each other and ran as fast as they could to the cabin. When they reached the clearing, they saw a covered wagon stopped on the oxcart trail and a man and woman standing in front of their house, talking.

"Who is it?" asked Rolf.

"I don't know," answered Trygve. "But I hope they'll be our neighbors." They walked to the cabin.

Rebekka was saying, "We have venison for supper. You must stay and eat with us." She turned to Trygve. "Go find your pa. I think he's plowing the north field."

As he headed for the field, Trygve looked over at the wagon. A girl about Signe's age jumped down from it. A boy who looked to be about a year younger followed her, and a smaller girl climbed down after that. Signe and Rolf went to meet them.

Trygve ran toward the north field. "Pa, Pa!" he called. Pa was walking behind the plow. He stopped the oxen and looked up.

"We've got company!" yelled Trygve.

"What?" asked Pa, surprised.

“We’ve got company!” Trygve repeated. “There’s a covered wagon, and the people are talking to Rebekka right now. And they’ve got kids!”

Pa removed the yoke from the oxen, and he and Trygve led the animals to a fenced area. Then together they walked toward the cabin. Trygve took long steps, trying to stay even with Pa’s stride.

When they got to the cabin, Rebekka and the woman were already inside. Signe was holding Carrie and talking to the two girls, while the man and the boy were looking at the cabin and the lean-to where the animals were kept.

As they drew close, Pa wiped his hands on his overalls and reached out to shake the man’s hand. “I’m Jon Ytterhorn, and this is my son Trygve,” he said.

“Nels Olsen is my name,” said the man. “And this is my son Oskar. We’ve come to look for land.”

“You’ve come to the right place,” said Pa. “The earth here is good.”

“And we’d really like to have some neighbors,” added Trygve.

“How long have you been here?” asked Nels.

“Since May,” answered Pa. “It’s hard taming this prairie land, but it’s worth it. The grass roots grow thick and deep, but we managed to get in a small crop of wheat and vegetables—enough for winter. I’m trying to do two plowings on each field this fall and hope for plentiful crops next summer.”

Nels picked up a chunk of dirt. He crumbled it in his hand, and the black earth sifted through his fingers. “Sure feels like good earth,” he said. He scanned the horizon. “I don’t see any other settlers.”

“There aren’t any,” said Pa. “We’re the first ones. We’ve been waiting for more to come.”

“We’d really like to have some neighbors,” Trygve repeated.

“We certainly would,” said Pa. “Would you like to see the rest of my claim?” So the two men walked north toward the field that Pa had been plowing. Trygve and Oskar followed.

Nels said, “East of here, the talk is that the Dakota land is going to get taken fast, now that the Indians have moved west.”

“Is that so?” asked Pa.

“Yes,” said Nels. “So we decided to come now instead of waiting for spring. That way we can still get some choice land.”

“Well, nobody has taken the claim next to ours,” Pa told him. “The land hasn’t been surveyed yet, so you have to squat on it.”

“What’s that mean?” asked Oskar.

Trygve explained, “You put markers at the edge of the land you want and build a house and plant a crop. Then you go to the land office and file papers, and after you live on it for five years and it gets surveyed, it’ll be yours. You can also get 160 acres that you don’t have to live on for a dollar and a quarter.”

“I’ve marked off what I think is a 160-acre parcel for my family,” said Pa. They walked to a heap of rocks that were piled around a four-foot log sticking up out of the ground. Pa pointed to the log. “This is the edge of my claim.”

“Then I’ll claim the land south of yours,” said Nels. “We can build on the other side of the oxcart trail and be neighbors.”