



A Land to Call Home

by Lauraine Snelling

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Dakota Territory

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"Dear Hjelmer."

Penny Sjornson dipped the tip of her quill pen into the inkpot, then tapped the tiny black bead back into the bottle. What could she say to him that she hadn't already said many times over? Why did he never write back? He had promised he would. In that first and only letter, he had pleaded for her to wait for him.

She brushed a feathery strand of sun-gold hair back from her forehead, now wrinkled in thought. She stared up at the tendril of smoke rising from the chimney of the kerosene lamp. Behind her she could hear the sounds of children going to bed, the boys to the bunks in the lean-to and seven-year-old Anji to the bed she shared with her aunt Penny in the soddy.

Here it was the end of September, and Hjelmer had already been gone for two months—two of the longest months of her life. Granted, it wasn't terribly long compared to eternity, but then she wasn't one of the angels yet either. She studied the freckles on the back of her slender but work-worn hands. Kisses from God, her mother had called them. Penny thought so often of the mother who had died in childbirth the winter her eldest daughter reached ten. When their father disappeared not long afterward, the three children had been split up between the relatives. Penny wanted them all back together again someday almost as much as she wanted a letter from Hjelmer.

Her aunt Agnes Baard laid a gentle hand on the young woman's shoulder. "Having a hard time of it, eh?"

Penny nodded. "But I promised to write Hjelmer one letter a week, and Joseph said he is going to St. Andrew tomorrow and will mail it for me. Tante Agnes, why doesn't he write?"

Agnes settled wide hips on the chair at the end of the trestle table. "I wish I knew." She shook her head. "Never did trust that young man myself. Trouble seems to follow him like chickens will the corn."

"It's not his fault that Mary Ruth took it in her mind to—"

"To get that young man for her own, I know. But she must have had some reason to feel she could accuse him like that. I know he says he never even kissed her, but—" Agnes clamped her lips over the rest of the sentence.

"But what?" Penny leaned forward. "You've heard something and you didn't tell me?"

"Uff da. Me and my big mouth. You want a cup of coffee with Joseph and me before we go to bed?"

"Tante, you are changing the subject. What did you hear?" Penny could feel her jaw tighten. "I want to know. What did you hear?" She tamped down the urge to slam the table or shake her aunt. "I am not a child anymore to be kept in the dark and only told what is good for me to hear." She closed her eyes for a moment, then took a deep breath. "Please, Tante Agnes, tell me what you've heard."

"I don't hold with gossiping."

"Please."

The sigh heaved Agnes's ponderous bosom that swelled above the belly protruding under her apron. "Ingeborg said she saw Hjelmer kissing Mary Ruth Strand out behind the haystack. And you know as well as I do that Ingeborg don't make up stories."

Penny stared at the yellow-orange flame burning the edge of the wick in the lamp. Weeks earlier something inside had warned her to be ready for such a telling. She had ignored it then but could no longer. "He lied to me then?"

"Well, I heard tell of women kissing men, you know, and maybe them not wanting it but being too polite to push the hussy away," Agnes offered by way of comfort.

"She's a hussy all right, and that's being Christian charitable." Penny pushed the tip of the pen into the table so hard it broke off. She sighed. Now she'd have to sharpen the quill again, and it was already getting down to the finer part of the feather shaft. She pushed the cork into the inkpot and gently placed the precious piece of paper back in the carved wooden treasure box, one of the last things her father had given her. If paper didn't come so dear, she'd do what she wanted—crumple it up and throw it in the stove along with her promise to Hjelmer Ivan Bjorklund, that ... that ... She couldn't think of a name she dare utter aloud. But one of those she'd heard the threshing crew say would surely be useful right now.

Agnes heaved herself to her feet, grunting in the process.

"No, Tante, you sit down and I will get the coffee." Penny looked down at her aunt's feet, closely resembling sausages stuffed into a casing. Her elk-skin moccasins were already the only shoes she could wear. Penny didn't remember her aunt having trouble like this when she'd been in the family way before.

"There's a good girl." Agnes settled back into her chair with a sigh. She glanced over to see her husband, Joseph, in the rocker with his head rolled back, snores puffing from his open mouth. "Don't think he wants any, so just bring for you and me. Them sour cream cookies you baked today would taste right good now, don't you think?"

Penny used her apron for a hot pad to lift the blue granite coffeepot to the hot side of the stove. She lifted the iron stove lid with the coiled-handled lid lifter and dropped a couple pieces of kindling on top of the glowing coals. When those flared, she added bigger sticks that would burn quickly. She set the lid back in the hole and pulled the coffeepot over the now crackling fire. It wasn't cold enough yet to keep the fires burning at night, but before she went to bed, she would bank the larger coals in ashes to keep them for the morning. Going to the shelf, she fetched cookies from the jar and set them on the saucers with the cups. All the while, thoughts of Hjelmer leapfrogged through her mind.

Where was he? He had said he was going down to Fargo to get on with the railroad laying track to the west. He'd mailed his one half-page letter from there. "My dearest Penny," he had written and signed it "Yours, Hjelmer." She'd done what he said, sent her letters to the Fargo post office. He'd pick up any mail there. Had he even received any of her letters? Had he been injured after that and not able to write? She shuddered at the thought. Was he still alive? Death came easy on the unforgiving prairies of Dakota Territory, and she'd heard horror stories of terrible accidents. In the fall of 1884 the big push was on to web the country with railroad tracks.

"I'm sorry, child, to have brought that up," Agnes said when Penny sat back down. "Hjelmer just has some growing up to do, I think, and maybe this is God's way of making that happen. Sometimes men are still boys, only wearing bigger clothes, until God takes them by the suspenders and gives them a good shake. When He sets them back down, they've learned a thing or two and make fine men. If Hjelmer is half the man his brothers were, he'll be a good husband someday."

The two looked at each other in the lamplight, knowing they each thought of the terrible winter that took the lives of the two Bjorklund brothers, Roald and Carl, along with Carl's two little girls. Others in the area had died, too, from both influenza and the killing blizzards.

After she was finally in bed, Penny tucked the covers under her chin and stared into the dark. She could hear Joseph snoring in bed and Agnes puffing in the way she had lately. The seven-year-old beside her turned over and sighed in her sleep. "Dear heavenly Father," Penny whispered, "I can't believe the bad things I hear about Hjelmer, for if I do,

how will I manage? Please watch out for him and bring him safely home again. I want to do your will, dear Lord, and I always thought when Hjelmer came here from Norway that he was the one I would marry when I grew a bit older." She paused, the dog barking outside catching her attention.

What if it were Hjelmer coming now?

But when the barking stopped and the dog settled back down, she knew it was probably nothing more than a passing coyote or some such curious animal. "Please take care of Tante too. I'm so afraid something is wrong, no matter how much she tries to tell me she's fine. Thank you for our house and the farm, and thank you for your loving care for all of us. Amen." She turned on her side, the corn husks in the mattress rustling beneath her. The tightly strung ropes that held up the bed creaked, and she heard a clump of dirt drop from the sod roof. Joseph had hoped to build a house of wood this year, but it didn't look to happen now. They would probably just add another lean-to onto the soddy.

"No letter then, girl?" Her uncle, Joseph Baard, already had the horses harnessed and hitched to the wagon before the sun peeked over the horizon.

Penny shook her head as she loaded a box packed with eggs to trade at the Mercantile in St. Andrew. "It's not ready yet. Tante says for you to ask Kaaren and Ingeborg if they want to come over for some quilting on Saturday."

"That I will." Joseph turned and lifted one of the smoked elk haunches from the shelf in the smokehouse, nestling it into the straw that lined the wagon bed. "Agnes going to send any garden stuff?"

"I'm getting it now," Penny called over her shoulder on her way to the root cellar. "Come help me, Knute. There's butter to get out of the springhouse." Knute was her ten-year-old nephew. When she returned with a sack of carrots dug the day before, Penny slung it into the wagon, and Joseph settled it in the corner in the front. He'd be picking up more goods from the Bjorklunds, so he needed plenty of room.

With everything loaded, he entered the soddy to fetch the dinner Agnes was just finishing packing into a basket. "Surely does smell good in here." He inhaled a deep whiff. "Got any of that coffee left?"

"Ja, and I sugared some pancakes for you. They're rolled in a cloth on top so you can eat them midmorning." Agnes tucked a cloth over the top of the food. "Don't forget to pick up the mail."

He looked at her with sorrow lining his narrow face.

She playfully slapped his shoulder. "Now, don't try getting around me."

"Just because I forgot one time. You know MacDonald and I was talking, and—"

"And you just drove off, I know." Concern darkened her eyes. "You be careful now, you hear?"

Joseph shook his head. "Women, always worrying." He poured a cup of coffee and turned to leave. "Make sure those two rascallions of yours help Petar out in the field. They like to slack off when I'm not here."

"Uff da. Talk about women worrying. Don't forget to ask Kaaren and Ingeborg—"

"I know. Come for quilting. Those horses will be peaceful companions after all these instructions." He grinned at her, tipped his hat, and left.

Agnes joined Penny in the yard and watched her husband drive off. They could hear his whistle floating back over the jingle of the harnesses. The rooster crowed in the barn and a cow bellered. "Well, we better get to the chores," Agnes said. "Those animals all want feeding. I'll set the bread to rising while you milk the cows." They turned toward their respective duties, and the never ending daily work began.

Joseph returned after dusk had darkened to night. The dog barking at the jingling of harness heard long before human ears announced his return to the family. The boys burst out the door and ran up the dusty road to the east, shouting, "Far, far, glad you are home!"

Penny wanted to do the same. Two years earlier she would have, but now she kept reminding herself to practice being a woman beyond girlish ways. But the run up the road beckoned her. When she heard Joseph whoa the horses, she strolled out the door, her casual actions belying her tripping heart. Surely there would be a letter today.

"Sorry," Joseph said after handing a letter to Agnes. "That's all there was."

Penny blinked hard and waited for him to hand her something to carry. Why, oh why, hadn't she heard from Hjelmer? She thought of the letter she'd written that afternoon, planning to add more as the week progressed just like she usually did. As far as she knew, she'd never broken a promise—but she was surely tempted now. Tempted to throw the letter in the fire and forget all about that young, lazy, lying—handsome, laughing, loving Norwegian. She thumped the sack of flour down on the table. Prayer didn't seem to be helping, and her aunt Agnes assured her that swearing wouldn't either. But banging pans did.

"Mercy, child, whatever is going on?" Agnes laid a brown wrapped package on the shelf along the wall. One look at Penny's face and she nodded. "I understand. Sometimes churning butter is good for moments like these, or kneading bread. One time I cleaned all the manure out of two stalls in the barn, first time after the winter pileup. Stalls looked good and I felt better."

"It's not fair!" A smaller pot slammed into a larger. "I could ... I could tear all those blond curls off his head."

Agnes nodded, turning so Penny couldn't see her smile. Ah, the trials of young love. She didn't wish to ever go back to that time of life. Joseph, while not perfect, was a good God-fearing man who did his best for his family. One couldn't ask for much more. Praise be to God.

"Kaaren and Ingeborg said they'd be glad to come. They said perhaps the next time they would invite several others, like you did before." Joseph handed Penny a tablet of paper. "Thought you might like this."

Penny tried to blink the tears away, but one out-raced her effort and trickled down her cheek. "Thank you, Onkel Joseph. You are so good to me."

Joseph cleared his throat and nodded. "You are welcome, child. Little enough for all you do around here." He dug a sack out of his coat pocket. "Brought one of these for everybody. Thought maybe we all needed some sweetening up."

"Candy!" Anji grabbed the sack and started handing the red-and-white sticks around.

When everyone stuck theirs in their mouths, Agnes said with a chuckle, "All we need is a tree to make it look like Christmas."

"And thnow." Anji was having trouble with her s's, especially since she'd lost her left front tooth.

"That'll be here soon enough. We'll butcher on Monday if the temperature drops. Not normal to have such a warm fall." Joseph yawned and stretched his arms over his head. "Time for bed, everybody. We put in a long day."

On Saturday the quilters arrived before nine, with Thorliff and Baptiste leaping out of the wagon as soon as they saw Knute and Swen Baard. Eight-year-old Thorliff's porkpie hat hit the ground about the same time as his feet. He picked up the faded flat hat and clapped it back on his head with both hands, covering straight hair more white than gold from the bleaching of the long summer sun.

"You two behave yourselves now," Ingeborg Bjorklund called to the backs of four boys racing out of ear range as fast as possible.

"We will." She heard the faint answer. What she could hear well was three-year-old Andrew's wail from the back of the wagon.

"Go with Tor! Me go, Mor."

She turned in time to catch his skirts as he started to climb out of the wagon and onto the slowly turning wheel. "No, Andrew, sit down."

"There's no stopping him." Kaaren Knutson, Ingeborg's sister-in-law, turned in spite of her bulging stomach and snagged a flailing arm. "Come on, Andrew, come to Tante Kaaren."

"No-o-o!" His cry echoed across the flat-as-a-stove-top Red River Valley. High overhead in the bright blue sky, a prairie hawk screeched.

"Look, Andrew, a big bird." Grunting, Ingeborg lifted him to the seat beside her and tilted his chin up to see the hawk soaring on the rising air currents.

When the child followed the pointing of her finger, a smile instantly dried his tears. "Big bird."

"That's a hawk." Ingeborg kept him in the circle of her arm, knowing well he could still make a flying leap for the ground. Andrew was nothing if not brave. Keeping up to Thorliff made him try many things that should have been beyond his abilities, like sliding off the haystack and riding the mule. One day she had found him playing under the bellies of the harnessed horses. Thank God, Bob and Bell seemed to understand he was a young'un and watched out for him too.

"Hawk," he answered, laying his arm across his mother's shoulders. He turned to face her, a grin appling his cheeks. "Big bird." When she smiled back and tickled his tummy, he chortled with the most infectious laugh in all of Dakota Territory.

"Those boys are so brown, the only way to tell Baptiste apart is his dark hair." Kaaren shifted on the high wagon seat they had padded for her with a quilt. Although her baby wasn't due for another two months, she looked ready to deliver any minute. "Uff da," she murmured, using both hands to move her abdomen into a more comfortable position. Pointing to her ponderous belly, Kaaren asked, "Are you thinking this is twins as much as I am?"

"There were twins in the Bjorklund family. Bridget told me so a long time ago. She warned me in case it happened."

"I know. Carl always thought having twins would be a wonderful gift from God." A cloud flitted across her eyes at the memory of her first husband, who had died of flu one winter. She sighed. "Lars says two for one ain't a bad return."

"Ja, but he don't have to nurse and diaper them. Diapers for one baby is hard enough, especially in the winter. I remember taking them off the line frozen stiff and finishing the drying over the stove in the soddy."

"Not so long ago either. I've been hemming flannel and knitting soakers, but if I have twins, I won't have enough." They stopped the horses at the hitching post in front of the barn.

"You wait and I'll help you down." Ingeborg wrapped the reins around the brake handle and climbed over the side, using the spokes of the front wheel as a middle step. She lifted Andrew down and hung on to his hand to walk around the wagon. "Just you be patient, son. You cannot go after Thorliff. Remember, Gus is in the house waiting to play with you." She reached up to give Kaaren a hand.

"I'm going to have to sit back in the wagon bed from now on. This climbing up and down from the seat is getting to be too much." Kaaren gripped the wagon seat while she felt for the spoke with one foot. Ingeborg placed the searching foot on a spoke and reached to give leverage for Kaaren to sit against if she felt weak. Once they both had their feet on the ground, Kaaren shook her head. "Two more months. How will I ever manage?"

"Like women everywhere. One step at a time." Ingeborg slipped the bridles from the horses and tied the ropes from the hitching post to their halters. "Those boys better come back and take care of the horses or they'll get whatfor from both me and Agnes."

They retrieved their quilting baskets from the rear of the wagon and walked toward the soddy that lay dozing in the sun. The air wore the crisp dress of Autumn, with the sun valiantly trying to warm it. After a frost that blackened the gardens, Indian summer settled in for an extended visit.

"My land, I never even heard you drive up." Agnes bustled to the door at their knock. "Come in. Come in." She ushered them in, then stepped outside. "Knute, Swen, you two come take care of the horses now!" Her holler could be heard in the next township. "Boys!" She shook her head when she came back in the soddy. "How they can get that far away so fast is beyond me." She shook her head again when Kaaren removed her shawl. "Merciful God, please don't let her have that baby right here today." She clasped her hands against her bosom. "Are you sure you figured right?"

Kaaren nodded. "Lars thinks maybe I should go down to Grand Forks to the doctor there, but other than needing a wheelbarrow in front of me, I'm fine. He said we should take bets on whether there's one or two in here." She patted the huge bulge as she spoke. "If it's two, we'll need the money." With a sigh she sank into the rocker. "Maybe what I should do is put my rocker in the back of the wagon for traveling."

Ingeborg and Agnes exchanged looks. "What a wonderful idea. Why didn't we think of that earlier?" Ingeborg gave Andrew, who had buried himself in her skirt, a gentle push. "You and Gus go play now. See the blocks?"

"I fixed them up a pen in the back of the house with hog wire from the edge of the lean-to to the back of the soddy. That way they can dig in the dirt and not head out across the prairie." Agnes went to the door. "Penny!" She turned back to her guests. "She can leave off with the churning and help Anji get these little ones settled. We got something to discuss before she comes in to help with the quilting."

Penny wiped a strand of hair from her sweaty forehead with the back of her hand as she came through the door. She greeted the two women, took the hands of the little ones, and led them out the back door.

"Now, quick." Agnes seated herself in the chair she pulled away from the table, making a triangle of the two rockers and the chair. She leaned forward and dropped her voice to a whisper. "I thought maybe we could make the next quilt for Penny and Hjelmer."

"She's heard from him then?" Ingeborg asked.

Agnes shook her head. "No, only that one letter, and it is worrying her some awful. That scalawag. When I catch up with him, he's going to wish he'd been faithful about putting pen to paper. I keep telling myself it's only two months since he's been gone, but I got a bad feeling about this."

"We haven't heard either, and I'm sure he hasn't written home. His mother asked about him in her last letter."

"Be that as it may, and knowing how long it takes us to get something finished, I'd like to start a wedding ring pattern for them. Every bride needs that quilt on her wedding bed, and maybe the stitching of the quilt will bring Hjelmer home sooner."

"Fine with me. I just thought maybe we could quick piece up another baby quilt, just in case." Ingeborg nodded toward Kaaren. "We could work on that today while Penny is helping us. I'll ask around at Sunday meeting tomorrow and find out who else wants to join us."

"Good." Agnes nodded. "We could do the baby a nine patch or a four square and plain." She rose to go to her trunk under the window. "I have some scraps in here. We could do a crazy quilt."

Penny came in just as her aunt knelt in front of the chest. "Here, let me do that. You know Onkel Joseph said to—"

"Don't care what he said. A woman's got to get in her trunk now and again, and you can see I'm not climbing on anything." She tempered her words at her niece with a gentle smile. "You go ahead and pour us all a cup of coffee."

Penny started to say something, thought the better of it, and flashing a grin that asked "what to do with her?" went to the calico-skirted cupboard for cups.

Before long the women were taking turns cutting pieces, laying the squares out in a pleasing color pattern, and stitching them together. Their conversation flashed as fast as their needles. The fragrance of beans baking with salt pork and molasses, the laughter of the children outside, and the comfort of one another's company made the morning fly by. As soon as they'd served all the men and children, they ate quickly and returned to their

stitching. Penny washed up the two small children, tucked them into bed for a nap, and returned to the job at hand.

"I have some of the head and leg wool from the spring shearing carded for quilt batting," Ingeborg said, smoothing her latest square out on her knees. "There now. Don't that look nice?" They all admired their handiwork and kept on stitching. "Don't seem like we should wait a month to tie this. Might be needed before then."

"Inge!" Kaaren shifted in her chair, grateful for the footstool Penny had placed beneath her swollen feet. Sitting for more than a few minutes in one position was becoming increasingly difficult. "Uff da."

"What is it?" Ingeborg leaned forward, as if ready to leap out of her seat.

"Those little feet are beating a tattoo on my ribs. There must be more than one in there. Sometimes I think it's a whole army." She rubbed the upward curve of her belly. "Hush now, little one, hush."

"Ones." Ingeborg kept her gaze on her stitching, but everybody could see her mouth twitch.

With the squares of nine patch stitched together, Agnes sorted through her store of cloth. "I have blue for the solid squares or yellow. Which would you like?" She held up the cloth in the colors mentioned.

"I think the blue—no, the yellow." Kaaren shook her head. "Making up my mind even over little things is a big chore."

"The yellow it is." Agnes cut one square and used it as a pattern for the next. When Penny gently but firmly took the scissors from her hand, the older woman straightened and dug her fists into the curve of her back. "I don't remember being so stiff and tired with the others." She rubbed her back again. "Must be getting old."

Back in their chairs to finish the final seams, the women turned the talk to the new people who had moved into the area during the summer.

"I know someone who will be at the service tomorrow. Someone who's been asking after our Penny." Ingeborg nodded and winked at Agnes.

"Who could that be?" With innocent wide eyes and smiling mouth, Agnes looked up from her handiwork.

"That nice Mr. Clauson, that's who. He said he was looking for a wife, and when he saw Penny, he was sure he'd found the one."

"Of course. She's the only unattached female for five square miles," Kaaren added.

"Or ten." Ingeborg finished the sentence.

Penny could feel the heat staining her cheeks, making her wish for a cold wet cloth. "But you know I'm promised to Hjelmer. He's *your* brother-in-law, after all."

"Ja, well, who knows about Hjelmer, and Mr. Clauson is here with land of his own and an itching for feet to meet under his table. Not that I wouldn't mind being that woman, 'twere I but a few years younger."

"Tante Agnes!"

"Just teasing, my girl, but nonetheless, there's wisdom in those words."

But what about Hjelmer? Penny could hear the wail echoing and re-echoing in her mind.

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