



## Believing the Dream

by Lauraine Snelling

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Northfield, Minnesota

*November 1893*

Perhaps today there'd be a letter from home—from Anji.

Thorliff Bjorklund stared out at the snow-blanketed yard behind the office of the *Northfield News*. Yesterday the mud matched his mood, and today, well, how could anyone feel like burnt oatmeal when the world sported a new coat of white? He turned back to his room, made the bed, and grabbed his books off the desk. If he didn't hurry, they'd be late for school, and the teachers at St. Olaf College did not approve of tardiness.

With the red muffler around his neck that his little sister, Astrid, had knit for him, gloves knit by Bestemor Bridget, and a black wool coat sewn by his mother, he was a walking testimony to the love of the folks back home. He squinted his eyes against the sparkling world, eyes of such an intense shade of blue that many people who knew referred to them as "Bjorklund" eyes. So why didn't they write?

His breath formed white clouds in front of him as his long legs made short distance of the blocks to the Rogerses' house, home of his employer and benefactor, his wife, Annabelle, and his daughter, Elizabeth, Thorliff's constant sparring partner. If he said black, she said red. His jaw squared at the thought, and he shook his head. *Women, how do you understand them? Anji, how do I understand you?* One minute he wanted to write and pour out his love for her, the next he swore never to write again—not after the telegram he'd received from her.

More than a month had passed since she told him not to come home. She didn't want or need his help caring for her injured father.

He rang the doorbell, stamping his feet to remove the snow.

"Good morning, Thorliff. You're late." Elizabeth Rogers, her wavy hair bundled tight in a crocheted snood, beckoned him inside. "You can eat your breakfast on the way. Father

has gone to harness the horse to the sleigh.” Her gray eyes snapped with challenge, and a smile had yet to call the dimple in her right cheek out from hiding.

“Snow too deep for you?” He knew the barb would hit home.

“If you had to wear wool skirts and layers of petticoats, you wouldn’t ask such a silly question.” Her laughter said she knew the darkening red of his face was due to her offhand comment of her unmentionables. She led the way back to the kitchen, where Cook handed Thorliff a cup of steaming coffee.

“God dag.”

“Mange takk.” Thorliff had removed his gloves on the way down the hall and now cupped both hands around the hot mug. “This feels as good as it tastes.” Only with Cook did he ever speak Norwegian now, and that rarely. While there were classes at school still conducted in Norwegian, they had to do with the language, history, or literature of Norway. All else was taught in English.

“I made you a packet to go.” Tall and spare as the words she used, Cook handed him a cloth-wrapped package. “There’s enough there for your dinner too.”

At a shout from outside, Thorliff took a couple quick sips from his coffee cup and handed it back to her. “Takk.”

He held the door for Elizabeth and followed her out, flicking a wave to Cook as he closed it. The cold bit his nose as soon as he stepped off the porch.

“Good morning, Thorliff. I hope that cantankerous furnace kept you warm last night.” Phillip Rogers, his straight nose and high cheeks already red with cold, finished tucking the wool robe around his daughter’s legs. “Coldest we’ve had this year, and along with all this snow, I thought you two could use a ride up the hill this morning.” He climbed into the front seat of the sleigh, tucking his heavy wool greatcoat over his legs.

“Thank you, sir. I added coal to the furnace before I left and set the damper on half. The water was frozen in my pitcher this morning.”

The horse snorted, sending out a white cloud, and picked up a high-stepping trot that set the harness bells jingling.

The sound only reminded Thorliff of home. This morning everything reminded him of home, and here he thought he’d gotten over that. When they hit the grade going up to Manitou Heights and the college, the horse dug in, slowing to a walk so as not to slip.

“Good thing I had him shod last week. Put the winter calks on his shoes.” Phillip turned to smile at his riders. “You two sure are quiet this morning.”

“I have a philosophy recitation first period.” Elizabeth spoke from her nest in the rear seat. “I feel that if I don’t hold my head just right, all that I memorized will drain right out.”

Phillip laughed. “That’s my girl.” He turned to Thorliff. “And you, son, what about you?”

Thorliff half shrugged. Confessing that all his thoughts since rising had to do with home seemed extremely inappropriate. After all, the last thing he wanted to do was offend his host and employer. “I have an idea for a story for the paper.”

“Good, what’s that?”

“What if you ran a contest for a Christmas story, the winner or top three or some such being published Christmas week? I thought maybe you could have different divisions, according to age, you know.” He sent Mr. Rogers a sideways glance, hoping for some sign of approbation. When he received a nod, he continued. “I thought perhaps you could ask some teachers from Carleton and St. Olaf to be the judges.”

“And would there be prizes?”

“Isn’t being published enough?” Thorliff thought back to his first acceptance letter and to the excitement he’d felt the last couple of years after sending off stories. How he’d run all the way to the Baards’ farm to tell Anji. He jerked himself back to a sleigh in Minnesota, leaving thoughts of the summer fields of home in Blessing, North Dakota, behind.

Phillip nodded. “Maybe so, maybe so.”

“I checked the back issues. You’ve never done anything like this.”

“Got to hand it to you, young man, you are indeed thorough. That’s most important in a newspaperman.”

“Thank you, sir.” Thorliff dredged up a mite of courage. “I ... I could write up an article regarding the contest.” While writing for the paper was a dream for the future, he’d not expressed a desire to do so immediately. Perhaps Mr. Rogers didn’t see him as capable of that. Perhaps he was being too forward. Why hadn’t he just kept his idea to himself to use in his own paper someday?

Sleigh and harness bells jingled. The horse snorted as he reached the crest of the hill.

*Why didn’t I keep my mouth shut? Showing off, or what?* Thorliff swallowed a sigh.

“I think that’s a fine idea.” The voice from the backseat caught him totally by surprise. “So are you going to do it, Father?”

“Of course.” Phillip glanced over his shoulder. “I said I would.”

“No, you said that Mr. Bjorklund was thorough, which is fine and good, but you didn’t answer his question.”

Thorliff clapped his jaw shut. Elizabeth said all that ... for him? Would wonders never cease? And Mr. Rogers said “of course,” like, like ... Thorliff felt like leaping from the sleigh and bounding through the snow, bounding over those tall elm trees that bordered the street and perhaps even a building or two.

“Oh, well”—Phillip turned to Thorliff—“can you have the article ready for typesetting tomorrow? We’ll run it on the front page.”

“Ah, of course.”

“We’ll do a thirty-point title, and unless something momentous happens to bump it to the second page, take six to eight inches. That way you can cover all the rules.”

“Ah, rules. Yes, sir.” Thorliff gathered his things and stepped from the sleigh with a nod. “Thank you for the ride.”

“Elizabeth is good with rules. She’ll help you.”

“Yes, sir.” He turned to assist her, but she waved him off.

Elizabeth threw back the robe and stepped from the sleigh. “Good thing my recitation is in my first class this morning.” She retrieved her satchel of books. “Remember to contact Mrs. James regarding that ad. I wasn’t able to reach her. And remind her she has to pay for the last one.”

Phillip Rogers made some kind of noise, and the look he sent his daughter brought forth a peal of laughter. He touched the brim of his black Homburg, clucked the horse forward, and headed back down the hill.

As he did every school morning, Thorliff looked up to the imposing tower atop the mansard roof of the college. The entire red brick building, affectionately called Old Main, resembled a European fortress or castle, but in his mind the tower pointed to God himself.

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Excerpted from:

**Believing the Dream (RETURN TO RED RIVER, Book 2)** by Lauraine Snelling

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ISBN 0764223186, 0764226843

Published by [Bethany House Publishers](#)

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