



A New Day Rising

by Lauraine Snelling

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Minnesota north woods

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“Timber-r-r-r-r!”

Haakan Bjorklund shaded his eyes against the sun glinting off the snow-capped branches and watched as the ancient pine crashed to its death. Branches exploded from the trees around and beneath as the monolith fell, sending a shower of long green needles and resinous pitch that followed the plunging tree to a snowy grave. Silence followed, a tribute to the death. One last branch, snagged on a companion giant, tumbled to the snow beneath.

"All right, let's get those branches stripped," the boss yelled.

Two men with a crosscut saw nodded and sent Haakan and his partner, Swede, the go-ahead signal.

"We got da ting ready for you. See you do so good." The speaker smiled, his cracked lips showing a missing front tooth. He'd lost it in a discussion over a card played wrong the night before. His right eye, only half open, sported a purple swelling left by the contender's fist.

"Ja, like that would be hard. You fellows couldn't get started sawing if we didn't wedge 'em for you." Haakan hefted the heavy ax he wore across his shoulder as if it grew there naturally. He stepped to the first branch, and with three perfectly placed cuts, he severed a limb equal to the trunk of a small tree. As he worked his way up the trunk, he could hear the process repeated on felled trees all around him. The virgin north woods were being leveled, tree by tree. Swede worked the other side of the huge trunk, and when they reached the end of usable wood, they severed the tip and rolled the log to finish cutting the branches half buried in the snow.

Haakan felt his muscles loosen, and despite the near zero air, sweat trickled down under his arms and the middle of his back. As the rhythm of heft and slam continued, his mind

wandered back to the cookshack and the widow woman who ran it. She served pancakes so light the men nearly had to hold them down with a fork lest they float away. But it wasn't only her pancakes that drew Haakan's attention. Trading pleasantries with her at mealtimes had become the high point of his day. And when he could bring crinkles to the edges of her warm brown eyes and a smile followed by a laugh that even sourpuss Johnson couldn't resist, Haakan felt like he could defeat the entire crew single-handedly.

"Hey, Bjorklund, you gonna daydream all morning?"

Haakan snapped the last limb off by stepping on it and raised his ax to his shoulder. As they made their way to the next marked tree, he removed his whetstone from his pocket and honed the edges of his double-bitted friend. His father had always said dull axes caused more accidents than sharp ones, and this son had no intention of losing wages due to an injury.

As soon as he had enough money saved, he planned to propose to Mrs. Mary Landsverk and suggest they take their earnings and head west to homestead some land of their own. After fifteen years routing about the country, he was ready to tap into that dream of free land and a strong, happy family. The fact she had two small sons only added to her value, far as he could see.

When the steam whistle blew for dinner, he followed the rest of the crew over to the sledge and climbed aboard. While the others jawed and teased one another, he worked at the bits of his ax with his whetstone. It was about due for a real sharpening on the grindstone.

"Hey, Bjorklund, there's a letter for you." Cappy, a logger until he lost an arm on the ripping saw and now a bookkeeper in the office, passed down the rows of benches handing out letters to those fortunate enough to have relatives who wrote. "You got a girl hid somewhere we don't know about?"

Haakan thanked him with a smile that reached the edges of eyes blue as the fjords of his homeland. The Bjorklunds were known for the blue of their eyes and jaws squared with determination. He recognized his mother's handwriting. "Ja sure, this one, she's known me all my life." He stuck the letter in his pocket to be read in private. He hadn't heard from home for a long while. When he looked at the postmark, he knew why. This one had been mailed three months earlier.

He looked up to catch the smile of the young boy who refilled the platters of beef and bowls of potatoes for the hungry crew.

"More coffee, Mr. Bjorklund?"

"Ja, Charlie." Haakan held up his cup. "Mange takk." Over the top of the cup he caught Mrs. Landsverk looking his way. He raised the now full cup in a toast of gratitude and returned to his plate. He knew if he didn't hurry, he wouldn't get enough to fill his belly

before they returned to the woods. As the men finished eating, the noise level rose accordingly.

Curses split the air over at the next table, causing everyone else to stop talking and listen.

"Not again." Haakan dropped his knife and fork and turned to see who'd started the commotion. But he knew without looking. Swede and Jacob were at it again.

Haakan got to his feet, cut his way between the stomping and cheering men the fight had drawn, and exited the building through the door nearest the kitchen. The shoveled path led to the outhouse. At least out here he wouldn't be forced to break up another fight. Just because he stood half-a-head above most of the men and could reach farther than any of them, he'd been deemed the peacemaker. He wore a cut lip to prove it.

Once he'd finished his business, he returned to the cookshack porch and drew his letter from his pocket.

"My dear Haakan," his mother wrote. "I hope and pray this letter finds its way to your hands and that you are well. Your far and I watch the mail for a message from you, but so long, now, we have been disappointed." Haakan sighed. He hated writing letters. What could he say to them? How many trees were cut, who beat whom in cards, and that two men were caught by a tree that fell wrong? One died and the other wished he had. Life in the north woods took all a man had to give and then bled him again.

"I pray that you have found a church where you can hear God's Holy Word and draw near to the foot of the cross." His mor had no idea how far and wide this land of America stretched and how many were the miles between towns. No minister came to this logging camp or to the mill downriver, and the farm where he worked one summer lay ten miles from the nearest town. No, a church he hadn't seen for more than a year or two.

After giving him the news of the family at home, she continued. "You remember your cousins twice removed, Roald and Carl? Both of them died in the terrible blizzard and flu epidemic last winter in Dakota Territory. I would have told you sooner, but I just learned of the dreadful tragedy myself. I believe you could be of help to their families and perhaps could spend Christmas at their farm. You are the closest family to those two poor grieving widows who are so young to suffer like this, and I know they would be beholden."

Haakan swung his arms to warm himself. He shook his head. Mor talked like he could ski right over to the cousins' houses and help them do the chores of an evening. He checked the date at the top of the precious paper. Sure enough, early November. Besides being so far away, he had steady work here. And if Mrs. Landsverk agreed with him, he'd soon have a family of his own. Perhaps they'd stop by the Bjorklunds on their way west.

The blast of the steam whistle forced him to stuff the letter in his shirt pocket and return to the front of the cookshack, where he loaded on to the sledge along with the others.

Ignoring their banter, he thought about what it would be like to have a family of his own—a fine wife, sturdy sons to help in the fields, and golden-haired daughters who laughed like their mother. Fifteen years he'd been in America, and while he'd seen a lot of the country and worked anywhere at whatever he found, he was no closer to the dream of owning land than when he left home.

"Hey, Bjorklund, you going to Hansen's tonight?" The sledge driver threw the words over his shoulder. Everyone stopped talking to hear the answer.

"Nei, I got better things to do with my money than fill Hansen's pockets."

"Ah, that ain't it. He's hoping to spend a bit of time with Miz Landsverk. Widow woman like her needs a man. Why else you tink she come to da logging camp?"

"Ja, but you better get a push on. I heerd she done got a beau."

Haakan felt like someone slugged him in the back with a tree trunk. He forced himself to turn slowly and look at the last man who spoke. Raising one eyebrow, Haakan waited for an answer to the question he kept himself from asking. Ears, so named for the appendages that nearly waved in the breeze but for their frostbitten tips, nodded. "Dat's vat I hear."

Haakan shrugged as if it meant nothing to him. He knew they'd never let up if he showed any reaction at all. Keeping secrets was well nigh impossible when twelve men bunked in a ten-by-twelve room.

"Ah, he yoost repair tings for her 'cause he got nothing else to do." Swede, his partner and best friend, managed to stick up for him as usual.

Haakan had found the best way to get along was to keep his mouth shut and his fists ready. He used them rarely, only in emergencies, but everyone knew that when he started swinging, he meant business. He shut down many a brewing brawl on his reputation alone.

At each stop, more men bailed off and headed for the marked trees to be downed and stripped that day. As those felling the trees moved on, teams of horses skidded the logs to the clearing where they would be loaded onto sledges and hauled to the bank of the river. After the ice left the river in the spring, they'd be floated down to the main sawmill. Keeping the logs from jamming up took another kind of skill and daring as the logrollers jumped from one floating log to another, using their peavey, a pronged spike, to break things up. While he had good balance, Haakan had chosen instead to work in the mill itself, feeding logs into the buzz saws. The noise alone fair to deafened a man, but at least he didn't have to worry about a dunking in the frigid water.

Haakan, Swede, and Huey swung off the sledge at the end of the track. The three were known as the best team in camp. They wedged the trees for the sawmen, then stripped the

huge pines with greater speed and fewer accidents than anyone in this logging camp or the three surrounding it.

Haakan paused and sniffed the air. "Snow coming."

Huey shook his grizzled head. "You be better'n anyone I ever met for knowing the weather like you do. Yoost smells cold to me."

"And piney."

The three slogged through the drifts to the next tree, marked with a notch about chest high. Within a few strokes they were back to their natural rhythm, and the blows of the axes fell precisely on beat. Haakan resolutely kept his mind on the task at hand. With the letter burning a hole in his chest and the nagging voice that said he'd lost the woman he loved, he maintained a speed with the rise and fall of his ax that would have felled a lesser man.

"Enough, man. What you tryin' to do? Kill us off?" Swede stepped back to watch the tree drop to the ground and mopped sweat off his forehead with a frost-encrusted sleeve.

Haakan looked at the third member of the crew to see him nodding and puffing hard. Plumes of steam rose and frosted his bushy eyebrows.

"Sorry." Haakan leaned on his ax handle, only then realizing his lungs were pumping like bellows. He looked up to see the first snowflakes drifting in the stillness. A last branch broke through the ice-crusting snow with a pop, while in the distance another tree crashed to its death. The forest wore that peculiar silver-blue look of winter's early dusk, when the sun has fallen beyond the trees but not yet fully set. Directly above, a gray cloud sent more snowflakes drifting downward.

"We should be able to down another before the team arrives."

"If they can find us. We got so far ahead."

"Even that lazy driver we got should be able to follow the felled trees." Haakan slapped Swede on the back. "Come on, I promise to let up on you."

That night in the warmth of the cookshack, Haakan tried to catch Mrs. Landsverk's gaze. Was she deliberately not looking at him? The thought made the possibility of the gossip being right even more worrisome.

As half the men shouted and shoved their way out to the straw-filled wagon for the hour-long ride to Hansen's saloon, Haakan bided his time, counting on her to come by again with coffee refills for those few who still lined the benches. Instead, Charlie, her young helper, carried the pot around.

"More coffee, Mr. Bjorklund?"

Haakan held out his cup. "There isn't, by chance, more of that dried apple pie in the back, is there?"

The boy's cheeky grin split his face. "For you, there just might be." He took the pot with him and hurried to the kitchen, leaving the man sitting farther down the table unattended.

With one finger, Haakan traced the red lines in the checkered oilcloth covering the table. Should he try to talk to her tonight or wait till morning? With it being Sunday tomorrow and half the camp hung over from their carousing the night before, breakfast was always served later and then dinner in the middle of the afternoon so the kitchen help had part of the day off.

"Here you go, sir." The boy leaned closer. "I din't tell her who it was fer. Herself's not in too good a mood."

Haakan thought of asking Charlie what was happening with Mrs. Landsverk, but a shout from the other logger stopped him. Besides, he'd never been one to ask a boy to do a man's job.

"Hey, boy, bring some of that coffee down here. You want I should have to fetch it myself?"

"No, sir." Charlie scooted off, but only after a wink at Haakan.

Haakan took his time over his pie, removing the letter from his pocket and reading it again under the light from the overhead kerosene lamp. The words hadn't changed. His mother surely did expect him to head for Dakota Territory immediately. And on skis no less, as if he'd had any time to make skis. He thought of the long hours he'd spent playing cards with the other loggers. Skis hadn't seemed important. Where would he go anyway? Deeper into the woods?

He scraped the last of the rich pie juice off the plate. He knew he should write his mother a letter. Since her letter had taken so long to arrive, she believed he was already there. Wherever *there* was. Surely she understood he had a life of his own to lead. As the eldest son, he'd always taken care of the younger ones, especially after his father died in a fishing boat accident when he was ten. Only after his mother remarried did he feel he could leave Norway for the new land. And now she expected him to run save the wives of two of his cousins, cousins so far removed he'd only met them once and their wives never.

A guilty conscience weighing him for not writing in so long, Haakan headed for the bunkhouse to get paper and pencil. Since the light was better in the cookshack, he returned and took his place again on the long plank bench. Besides, if he remained in the cookshack, he might get a chance to talk with the woman he'd been dreaming of.

"Dear Far and Mor and all my family, I am as well as can be expected and still logging in the north woods of Minnesota. I am sorry to tell you that I cannot leave here right now—your letter took three months to find me—as my boss depends on me in many ways. Perhaps I can travel west in the spring if they don't hire me on at the mill." He stopped and chewed the end of the pencil. What was there to tell them? He knew they didn't want to hear of the fights and drinking, the accidents, and the frostbite. What they wanted to hear was that he was married and raising a family. A shame it was, because deep down he really did like the logging life. He signed the letter "With love from your son, Haakan," and addressed the envelope, sticking the last stamp he owned up in the corner. The room had grown too quiet.

He stared at the now darkened kitchen. Mrs. Landsverk hadn't come to join him for a last cup of coffee like she usually did. He shook his head. There was trouble in the hen house for sure.

In spite of his concern, when Haakan fell on the rough bunk, sleep hit him on the way down. He heard the carousers return sometime in the wee hours, but since no fight erupted, he slept on. When he awoke, it was with the determination to confront Mrs. Landsverk, tell her he loved her, and ask her to marry him. The sooner the better. He crossed his hands over his broad chest and stared at the rafters above. Is this really what he wanted?

"Ja, it is!" He leaped to the floor with a thud, slapped Swede on the shoulder to wake him, and, still in his long red underwear, rattled the grate and added fresh wood to the nearly dead fire.

"Hey, keep the noise down over there!" The man in the corner added a few pungent words to the first, and the grunts from the others said they agreed.

"If you'd been sleepin' rather than drinkin', you'd be ready to greet this glorious new day." Haakan slammed the lids down on the stove with more than necessary vigor. He broke the ice in the top of the drinking bucket and ladled water into the kettle to set on the stove. Today he would wash and shave to greet his beloved looking his best. He dug out his last clean shirt, whistling a tune and dreaming of what was to come.

When Haakan entered the cookshack with his corn-silk golden hair still darkened by the water he'd used to make it lie flat against his head, a strange man in a black wool suit sat at the end of the bench closest to the kitchen. With one hand on his shoulder, Mrs. Landsverk was refilling the man's coffee cup. His hand covered hers and he was looking up at her with eyes brimming with love. The man certainly didn't look old enough to be her father. Where on earth had he come from?

Haakan tried to take a deep breath, but the ax that split his breastbone wouldn't allow it. He started to turn, but she caught his movement and, with a smile to dim a summer sun, said, "Come, Mr. Bjorklund, I want you to meet a very good friend of mine from home. We lived on neighboring farms growing up."

Feeling as if his life's blood were running down his shirt, Haakan did as she asked. After the introduction and a stiff handshake, which took every ounce of civility he possessed, he shook his head at her offer of coffee.

"Then I will tell you my wonderful news. Since his wife died, Reverend Jorge has been looking high and low for me, and now that he found me, we will be married next week in Duluth. Isn't that wonderful?"

The axhead drove deeper into his heart. Haakan dipped his head in the briefest of nods. "I am very happy for the two of you. Now, if you will excuse me ..." He turned and forced his legs to walk, not run, to the outside door, and he straight-armed it open. The resounding bang sent ice and snow crashing from the roof to the stoop. He headed out one of the skid roads, his long legs covering twice the ground as usual. When he was out of sight of the camp, he broke into a run, his corked boots spurting snow behind him.

By the time he returned to camp, he was no longer calling himself every kind of fool. His legs had cramped and forced him to stop more than once to stretch them out, but his breathing had returned to normal. No one could see the sweat still soaking his long johns. He looked like a man who'd been out for a Sunday stroll, but for the set of his jaw and the ice in his eyes.

It was his own fault, he knew, which didn't make it any easier. If only he'd spoken earlier ...

The coming nuptials were the talk of the camp. One logger began collecting donations from each of the men so they could buy a present or give the newlyweds the money. Heaven only knew that preachers didn't make much. Haakan tossed in a dollar.

The night they left he won every hand at the poker table. No one dared argue with him.

By the end of the week, he had all but put Mrs. Mary Landsverk and the wedding out of his mind. Or so he thought. When the new cook—a man who closely resembled a potbellied stove—drove up with the supply sledge, Haakan said not a word. But then the few he'd uttered all week didn't equal the fingers of one hand.

Life in the logging camp continued at the same steady pace. A blizzard kept everyone confined to camp for three days, and by the end of the third, Haakan had ignored three bloody fights.

"What's with you, man?" the foreman asked.

"Nothing, why?" Haakan cocked one eyebrow.

"I counted on you to keep order around here. Now I got one man with a broken arm and ta other with cracked ribs. They was kickin' the life out of him, and you sat back and did nothin'."

Haakan crossed his arms across his chest. "I wasn't hired to be peacemaker." He didn't add, *And if you'd been sober instead of drunk on your bunk, you could have broken up the fights yourself.* But he must have thought it plenty loud because the foreman glowered back at him.

"The men respect you."

"Ja."

The foreman slammed his hands on the desk. "Don't expect no favors from me when it comes time to hire at the mill. You know they go on my say-so."

Haakan felt his muscles tense. Grabbing the man by the checkered shirt front and slamming him against the wall would only relieve the anger burning in his belly for now. It wouldn't solve anything. He'd come so close to joining in the brawl last night, he'd had to leave the bunkhouse.

In spite of his best efforts, thoughts of Mrs. Landsverk, now Mrs. Jorge, tormented him night and day. He hadn't realized he loved her this much or had so counted on her going west with him in the spring. If he'd had the sense of a mosquito, he'd have spoken sooner.

One day toward the end of March, he heard his name called above the din of men eating. Another letter. He rose to get the paper square and returned to his place on the bench. Two letters so close together. What could have happened at home?

He slit the envelope carefully and drew out the paper. Perusing it quickly, his heart sank. His mother sent another request for him to help save the widows. Surely there were plenty of men in Dakota Territory who wouldn't mind meeting up with a widow woman and working her land for her. He shook his head. It wasn't for him. He liked the logging life, and lumbering liked him.

Two days later, he woke up prone and found himself being hauled back to camp in the middle of the afternoon on the sledge.

"What happened?" He could hardly speak around the vise that held his head in a grip that continued to tighten.

"You was struck by a widow-maker." The driver spit a blob of tobacco into the snowbank. "You was lucky. Two inches closer and you wouldn't know nothing ever again."

Haakan gritted his teeth against the movements of the sledge, each one cranking on the vise handle, intensifying the pain. "Swede?"

"Just scratched up some. He had a sense of it and drove you forward with his shoulder. I seen it. That one was close."

Haakan lifted his hand to his head and drew it away covered in blood.

"Not to worry. That cookie, he'll stitch you up good as new. You Norwegians got good hard heads."

Four men hauled Haakan off the sledge and carried him into the cookshack to lay him on one of the ten-foot tables. He closed his eyes against the agony, stemming the nausea rising in his throat.

"Easy, son, you'll be good as new when I'm done with you." Cookie pressed around the gash with gentle fingers. "Don't seem to be nothing broken, fer as I can tell. 'Course a crack in that solid skull of your'n could cause plenty problems too. Seen men go blind and deaf after something like this."

Haakan clamped his hands around the edge of the table. "Just get on with it."

"Better go get the whiskey. This sure do call for it." The grizzled man's fingers continued their probing. When the driver arrived back from the kitchen with the amber-filled bottle, the cook took a slug himself and then poured some into the wound. The fire burning Haakan's head jackknifed him near upright.

He finally opened his eyes again to see Cookie waving the bottle in front of him.

"Drink up."

He'd never tried drinking lying flat on his back.

"Here, let me help." The driver worked his arm under Haakan's shoulders and lifted him carefully. With his other hand he propped the bottle at the injured man's lips. "Drink quick."

Haakan started to refuse, but when the cook ordered him to drink, he did. The liquid burned like wildfire clear to his gullet. He took a few more swallows, doing his best not to cough at the heat. It wasn't that he had never drunk, but nursing a drink through an evening of cards and chugging it down were two different things. He'd never seen any sense in being pie-eyed and sicker'n a dog the next day.

Right now he didn't care. He'd do anything to dull the vicious pain squeezing his head.

He passed out about the third stitch. From then on he would have a permanent part on the right side of his head. It wasn't perfectly straight, but then cracked heads rarely are. He woke up two days later to see Cookie peering into his eyes.

"Hey, son, dat's good." Cookie leaned back in the chair he'd pulled up to the lower bunk where they'd made the injured man comfortable. "You gonna feel right better soon. I ain't never lost a man I stitched up. Know your name?"

Haakan closed his eyes against the dancing firelight. Someone must have left the door open on the stove. His name? Of course he knew his name. Nothing came to mind, however.

"I see. Know where you're at?"

Haakan looked at the rough-sawn boards overhead, the patchwork quilt covering his body. Moving his head set the anvil to pounding again. He closed his eyes and let the questions lie.

When he woke again, he remembered everything. His name, the logging camp, and the swoosh of a falling widow-maker. That branch had done its best to kill him, but here he was.

Sleeping, waking, and finally clear headed, he found thoughts of Mrs. Landsverk always drifting through. He should have made his intentions known sooner, before that Reverend Jorge had found her.

It took two weeks before he could rejoin his crew, and by then, much of the snow had melted in the first of the spring thaws.

"So, what you gonna do next?" Swede asked one day. "They already chose up the men to go work the mills. Didn't see your name on the list."

"I know." Haakan thought back to the scene with the foreman that night weeks ago. The man had a long memory. He rubbed at the scar on his head that glowed pink in the sunlight. "I think I'm heading west. I got some relatives who be needing a hand in Dakota Territory, and after I get them straight, I'll keep on going. I heard there's some mighty big trees in Oregon Territory and an ocean with fjords beside. What about you?"

Their axes continued the rhythm of branch-stripping as they talked.

"Ah, you know that neighbor to the west of the dairy farm where I worked the last two summers?"

"Ja."

"Well, she be needing some help, too. I'm tinkin' I might stay on there, if she needs me, a' course."

"Just don't waste too much time before you ask her." Haakan swung and cut clear through a six-inch branch. He pushed it to the side with his axhead. "If you care for her, just ask her right out."

"M-marryin', ya mean?" Swede stuttered over the words.

"If that's what you want."

"Ja, ja. That it is." Swede leaned his ax against a branch and wiped his forehead with a faded red bandanna. "I tink I may like felling trees better, you know?"

The two men looked at each other and shook their heads. Their laughter rang high, accompanied by the sharp ring of ax on wood.

Early one morning a few days later, Swede joined the men on the final wagon going to town. "You find your land, you write to me, ya hear?" he called as the driver slapped the reins on the backs of the two teams. "You know what town I be near."

"Ja, I will." Haakan waved a last time at the hooting and hollering men. *Should I be with them?* He shook his head and bent down to pick up his pack. It contained all his worldly goods, a knife, cooking pot, cup and small utensils, a change of clothes, extra socks, the Bible his mor insisted he take, fishing line and hooks, flint and tinder, and some food he'd begged from the kitchen. He'd topped it all with a quilt and a blanket all wrapped in a tarp he bought off the owner of the lumbering outfit. He shoved his arms into the ropes he'd fashioned, and with his ax firmly anchored to his belt, he started walking west.

A hundred paces or so up the drag road he turned and looked back. Shutters covered the windows. The buildings were all set on logs carved with up-turned ends to make pulling them easier. Soon teams would hitch up and drag the camp farther north to where prime trees still blotted out the sun. Would he make it in the west, or would he be back here again next fall just before snow-fly and asking for his job back? Or, just as they had hammered shut the doors of the buildings, was he slamming shut a time of his life?

"Widows Bjorklund, here I come. If I can find you."

The morning sun shone over his shoulder, casting his shadow ahead of him and leading the way to the western territories.