



A Promise for Ellie

by Lauraine Snelling

Excerpt provided courtesy of LauraineSnelling.com

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Blessing. *I'm going home to Blessing. Home to Andrew.*

"Ellie, you daydreaming again? I asked you to take this over to your pa." Her mother, Goodie Wold, peeked around the doorframe, a handled water jug in her hand. "Uff da, look at you. One would think you're pie-eyed or some such."

"Pie-eyed?" Ellie turned from holding her graduation dress in front of her to see in the mirror. A lock of wavy golden hair lay over one shoulder. Concern wrinkled her wide forehead until she saw the teasing glint in her mother's eyes. "Pie-eyed?"

"You know, mooning over that young man of yours. Here we've been gone from Blessing for two years, and you ignored every suitor who has come to call. Now take that handsome Mr.—"

"No, you take him and send him elsewhere. Andrew Bjorklund is the only man for me, and he always has been." She swung back and drew the waistline of the baby blue lawn dress against her slim middle and, with the other hand, held the bodice to her chest. "This turned out well, don't you think?"

"Of course it did, you silly child. Everything you sew turns out beautiful." Goodie sat down on the edge of the four-poster, the lovingly turned posts a tribute to Ellie's adoptive father, Olaf Wold, who made the most beautiful furniture west of the Mississippi. Right now he was working on a table and six chairs for Ellie and Andrew's wedding present.

"Perhaps I should have made this in white and used the same dress for both graduation and my wedding. That would have been more practical."

"Ah, Ellie, dear heart, you are always so practical. This is a good time for you to be at least a little bit impractical. Besides, I think we can afford a few extra yards of dress goods."

Ellie finished studying the dress and glanced at the smiling face above it. Dreamy might be a good word to apply to her. Her father said she looked like an angel, but she knew too well the streak of stubbornness that ran like double-strength whalebone up her spine. While some might say she was persistent, she knew it went beyond that. Bullheaded, more likely, although she managed to cover it with sweet smiles and soft words. Andrew likened her hair to golden wheat flowing down her back, so for him she kept it long; although she'd been tempted to follow the new trends and cut it shorter when some of her friends did. Short hair on her forehead might cover the marks that remained from her bout of chicken pox as a small child.

One thing bothered her—her eyes. They were gray and slightly tipped up at the outer edges and always reflected the color she wore. Toby Valders had once called her Cat Eyes when she was wearing a green dress. She shuddered at the memory. Andrew had nearly beaten him into the ground for that and had later promised her he would never fight again.

Andrew, whom she hadn't seen since Christmas, when the entire family took the train back to Blessing. Andrew, who'd been her protector since the day she was carried into the Bjorklund home, ill and half starved. Her whole family would have died had it not been for Hjelmer Bjorklund, who had stopped by their soddy on his way home all those years ago. Andrew, whom she'd had to leave behind when Olaf decided to move his family out of the flood plain of the Red River Valley and settle in Grafton. Not that far away from Blessing yet more than half a day's journey by buggy or horse.

She'd be forever grateful that Reverend Solberg said she could come home to graduate with her class—the friends she'd grown up with.

"Tante Goodie?" her young cousin Rachel Anderson said from the doorway. "Onkel Olaf says he needs you." Rachel had come to stay with them the year before, when her mother died. The little girl was the only member of the family to survive cholera.

"Tell him I'll be right there." Goodie stood with a bit of a groan.

"I will." Rachel dashed off, never walking when she could run.

"Your knee still bothering you?" Ellie asked as she hung her dress on a padded hanger and then on the bar in the clothespress.

"Some, but mostly when I get up. Falling like I did ..." Goodie shook her head. "Enough about me. When Rachel gets back, you two go get the mail, would you please?" She smiled at the delight bursting on Ellie's face. "I know. Most likely there's another letter from Andrew, but the rest of us get mail now and then too. Poor Rachel, she is already feeling sad that you'll be leaving us."

"Mor, I won't be gone, just a ways away. Besides, the wedding isn't until the end of June. We have to get our house built first."

Soon after Rachel returned they headed out to pick up the mail. Ellie swung her cousin's hand as they strolled the four blocks to the post office.

"I don't want you to go away." Rachel stared at Ellie from under the wide brim of her straw hat—the same hat Ellie had worn the year before.

Today Ellie wore a new straw hat, this one with a narrower brim and a more rigid crown. A pink rose centered the white ribbon with strings down the back.

"Who will listen to me in the middle of the night when I have a bad dream?"

Ellie smiled at her young cousin. At ten, Rachel looked more like a bundle of sticks walking than the lovely young woman she promised to become. She would rather fish and chase with the neighbor boys than worry about keeping her nose from freckling. But her silky eyelashes and curly hair were the envy of all the budding girls at their church. Rachel just didn't recognize such things yet. "You haven't had a bad dream in a long time. I think you are over them."

"But who will braid my hair so it doesn't fly all over the place?"

Her pleading glance near to broke Ellie's heart.

"Tante don't braid—"

"Doesn't."

"You know what I mean."

"I know, but you have to speak properly, otherwise you sound slow and stupid."

"I'll never be like you."

"Ah, Rachel, you don't want to be like me. You want to be the best you that you can be. God made you special in His eyes, and He has a plan for you that only you can fill."

"How come He don't ... er ... doesn't tell me?"

"He often doesn't, just gives glimpses and peeks sometimes. But look at your feet." They both stopped and looked down. "Now step with your right foot." They both did. *Oh, Lord, how to explain this?* "See, until you took one step and then one with the other foot, you couldn't take the second with the first. Some things you just can't know ahead." They looked at each other, and Rachel shook her head.

"Hmm. I see what you mean." She stepped one foot at a time again. "So if I just keep walking, God will guide my footsteps?"

"He said so. But you have to read your Bible to hear His instructions."

Rachel groaned.

"I know you think it doesn't make sense sometimes, but some things are very clear. Every story in the Bible is there to teach us something."

"Like David and Goliath? I like that one." Rachel made a whirling motion with her hand. "Three little pebbles from his sling, and bam, the giant fell."

"So, what's the lesson in that story?" They were nearly at the post office.

"Learn to use a sling real good. I've been practicing but don't get it yet."

"*Well*, not good. Food tastes good. We do things well."

"See, you go away, and who's going to teach me to speak proper?"

"You might listen in school instead of writing notes to Elspeth." She opened the door of the post office, and they both stepped inside.

"Wold mail, please," Ellie said to the man behind the counter. He turned to the rows of boxes and pulled out a packet, then handed it to her.

As soon as she saw Andrew's handwriting on an envelope, Ellie wanted to find a quiet spot and read it, hugging all his words to herself, letting them soak in and join all the others she had stored away in her heart.

Rachel groaned and rolled her eyes. "Andrew is a buttinsky."

"What a thing to say." Ellie tucked Andrew's letter into her pocket and sorted through the remainder of the mail to make sure nothing that didn't belong to them had made its way into their box. The day before she'd had to bring back something belonging in the post office box next to theirs. The young woman putting out the mail was in love, and even if the whole town collapsed, she'd never notice. Pie-eyed, for certain.

Good thing I'm not that way, she said to herself. *But does that mean I'm not really in love with Andrew?* The thought stopped her short. What if she'd loved him for so long that she was not in *love* love but in brotherly love? Like the way Astrid loved her brother. *Lord, do I know the difference?*

"Come on, let's hurry. I'm going over to play with Elspeth after we get home."

"You go on ahead. I'll be along shortly."

"Give me the rest of the mail, then, so you can go mooning over Saint Andrew's letter."

Ellie gave her the mail and a swat on the bottom. "Someday you'll be in love, and then I'll get even." She arched her eyebrows. "Why, Mr. Whatchamacallit, did you know that Rachel used to chew her fingernails and her braids too? Why, I remember when ..."

Rachel hooted and took off up the street. "Ellie and Andrew sitting in a tree, K-i-S-s-I-n-G."

Ellie shook her head. Why not let the whole world know their private business? She took the envelope from her pocket and stared at the handwriting. Andrew, so big and strong yet gentle and kind. A warmth started in her middle and curled lazily up to set her heart to thudding. She'd not been running, but she felt like she might have been. Surely one didn't feel this way about a brother. Surely this was love so true as to be ready for marriage. The length of their love only strengthened it.

She sat down on one of the benches by the town park and carefully slit the drop of wax free from the paper. Andrew had drawn a small heart in the wax. She caught it in her skirt, picked it up, and slid it into the envelope. One more thing that Andrew had done especially for her. She unfolded the paper.

"Ellie, Ellie?"

Only Maydell would call like that from half a block away. Ellie sighed and tucked her letter into her reticule. She watched her best friend in Grafton come dancing across the grass, holding her hat with one hand and, of all things, a fan in the other. Now what scheme was she concocting to attract poor Mr. Farnsworth, the new choir director at their church? In a pink dress matching her cheeks made more pink by the run, Maydell was as short and round as Ellie was tall and slender. They were matched in determination.

"I was afraid I wouldn't see you before you left." Maydell sank down on the bench beside Ellie and unfurled her fan to cool her face.

"When did you start carrying a fan?"

"Well, I've been reading about how to attract a man by use of a fan." She fluttered it close to her face, her dark eyes dancing above the beribboned fan edge. "Doesn't this make me look more mysterious? Men like mystery in a woman, you know."

Ellie shook her head. "No, I wouldn't know."

"But you should learn, perhaps teach Andrew a thing or two. Make him wild for you."

"Maydell, what have you been reading?" The thought of some of the things Andrew had said in his letters unfurled the warmth in her middle again.

"About romance, silly. Ah, remember reading Romeo and Juliet? How Romeo called beneath her window? Now that is romance."

"But they both died. Remember?"

"And Juliet is the sun...." Maydell fluttered her fan and gave a good imitation of pie-eyed. "Here." She snapped the fan shut and pulled the string from her wrist, then thrust it at Ellie. "Now you try it, so I can see what it looks like. Although I have to admit I've spent time in front of the mirror practicing."

"Oh ..." Ellie took the fan and, when trying to open it, dropped it in her skirt. She looked at her friend, and they both chuckled. Maydell repositioned Ellie's fingers and showed her how to spread the fan wide, then hold it open using her thumb against her fingers. She fluttered it close to her face and stared deep into Maydell's eyes. This way she could hide the twitch of her lips behind the fan. Her voice deepened and grew husky. "Ah, my dear, you are so ravishing."

Maydell clutched her clasped hands to her throat. "Ah yes."

Ellie snapped the fan closed. "Yes? What kind of answer is that? Someone says you are ravishing, and you say 'yes'? What happened to thank you or tell me more?" She shook her head again. "I don't need a fan when I go see Andrew. I need extra aprons because we're going to be building our house and barn." *That is, if the house arrives anytime soon.*

"Well, if you are sure." Maydell stood and raised her attention to the rustling leaves of the elm tree above them, trying for a dramatic pose.

"I'm sure." *At least I think I'm sure.* This was love she felt, the kind of love she saw between her ma and pa. "I hope graduation exercises go well for you."

"Mr. Farnsworth will be playing the organ."

"Try to pay attention to the ceremony. I wouldn't want you fainting or something, but then, you'll have your fan, right?"

Maydell leaned over and gave her a hug. "I'll see you again before the wedding?"

"Yes. I'll be back to get my things."

"You could take extra hankies to drop."

"Go practice your fan." Ellie shooed her away, laughing at the pout Maydell half hid behind the fan. "Very good. That one should get him." As soon as her friend was on her way home, Ellie took out the letter again, unfolded the page, and began to read.

May 13, 1900
Dearest Ellie,

Her heart skipped a beat as she heard his voice in the reading.

I am counting the days, nay the hours, until I see you again. I am supposed to be writing my final essay, but I couldn't quit thinking of you, so I am writing this instead. I will be like Thorliff used to be, burning the midnight oil to finish my lessons. Only he went on to college, and in spite of Mor's encouragement, I do not plan to do that, as you know. She would like me to go to Grand Forks to the agricultural school, but I will learn all I need to learn about new farming ideas from the magazines, newspapers, and books that Thorliff makes sure find their way into our house.

Besides, we couldn't get married if I went off to college.

The whole family is excited about Thorliff and Elizabeth's baby coming soon. The women think men shouldn't discuss such happenings, but you know me. I think that is downright stupid. Having babies is as ordinary as cows having calves. Except that calves are cuter. Now don't go getting riled up. You know I am only teasing you.

She stared up at the branches over her head. Andrew did love to tease, but he was never malicious about it like Toby Valders had been when they were in school together. Toby most likely would be at the graduation, but surely she was beyond letting him bother her any longer. Maybe he had changed.

Leave it to Andrew to talk so easily about having babies. But then he'd not been there when her mother nearly died in childbirth and the baby was born blue and waxlike. No matter that she'd been so young. She still remembered that day. The thought of suffering like her mother had for hours and hours had dug a hole down inside her and filled it brimful with fear—a ripping, tearing fear that infected her joy when she allowed herself to think on it. Something that was happening more often as the wedding date drew near.

She returned to her letter, the sun having dimmed slightly even though no cloud crossed the sky.

Pastor Solberg said to send you his greetings and to say that he is happy you are coming back to graduate with the rest of us. I asked him if he would conduct our wedding, and he said he thought I'd never ask. And if someone else came to do that, he'd have to do battle with him. Isn't that typical of our Pastor Solberg?

Astrid has written a letter, and I will include it with mine. Don't believe everything she says about the way I've been acting.

Your loving Andrew

Ellie read the letter again and put it back into the envelope. Maybe seeing Andrew would allay her fears. But what if it didn't?

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