

Homesteaders Series

The Prairie Blooms

Revised Edition

Book Five

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*For Paul and Dana,
and Elizabeth, Steven, Trevor,
Jacob, Hayra, and Johanna*



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Chapter One
McCauleyville

May 16, 1871

Signe and Elna made the beds on the second floor of the hotel. They worked quickly, not taking time to talk. There were twenty-three beds to be made before school started, and the girls were hurrying to get them done. Their job was to make the upstairs beds, clean the rooms, and help prepare the evening meal for the hotel customers in return for their room and board so they could go to school in McCauleyville.

The girls finished their tasks and went to the kitchen, where the hotel owner's wife and another girl were making breakfast. Mrs. Boyle looked up at them when they entered. "Finished?" she asked.

"Yes ma'am," replied Signe as she and Elna began packing lunches for themselves.

Mrs. Boyle nodded and turned back to the breakfast.

Signe and Elna arrived at the school a few minutes before their teacher came out to ring the bell. As they waited, they watched a girl come out of the mercantile across the street and make her way to the school. "It looks like there's a new girl," remarked Signe.

“Yes,” Elna agreed. “And she looks like she might be close to our age. Maybe she’ll be in the older group with us.”

“Maybe not,” said Signe. “A year and a half ago, when I came here to school, they put me with the younger group because my English was so poor.”

“I wonder if she’s Norwegian,” mused Elna.

“I don’t care if she isn’t,” said Signe. “At lunchtime we should ask her to sit with us because I remember how it felt when nobody would sit with me.”

“Of course,” Elna smiled. “We’ll make her feel as welcome as we would want to feel.”

Soon their teacher, Mr. Johnson, stepped outside and rang the bell for school to begin. He used his left hand to ring it because he had lost his right arm in the Civil War. His shirt sleeve was tied in a knot just below his stub.

Signe and Elna went into the school, put their things in the cloakroom, and sat down at their desks. The new girl spoke with Mr. Johnson, who showed her to an empty desk. Then Mr. Johnson went to the front of the room and wrote the girl’s name on the blackboard: *Hattie Elgin*.

“That’s not a Norwegian name,” Elna whispered to Signe.

Signe nodded. “Maybe it’s English. But it doesn’t matter. We’ll be friends with her anyway.”

The day started with history class, and Signe paid close attention as the new girl stood to read from the American history book. English was Hattie’s first language, Signe decided, because she didn’t have to think about the words

when she read them. Signe also decided that Hattie hadn't come from the best of circumstances. She noticed that the girl's blue dress was faded, the sleeves were frayed at the elbows, and her shoes were scuffed and badly worn. "I think she's poor," she whispered to Elna.

"But we'll still be friends with her," Elna whispered back.

"Of course we will be," said Signe.

When the morning classes were over, it was time for lunch. Signe and Elna went to the cloakroom and got the basket with their lunches in it. They saw that Hattie was sitting alone at her desk, so Signe approached her and asked, "Would you like to eat lunch with us? You can share my desk with me."

Hattie smiled. "Sure," she said. "Thank you for asking. I was afraid I'd have to eat alone."

Hattie stood up, and the girls arranged themselves around Signe's desk. While Elna unpacked the basket, Hattie opened up a napkin. All that was in it was a single piece of bread. Signe glanced at Elna, who frowned.

"I'm Signe," introduced Signe, "and this is Elna."

"I'm Hattie," said the girl. "Where are you from? You speak with an accent."

"We're from Norway originally," Elna explained. "Now our family lives in Jonstown, about an hour and a half away from here."

"I know where it is," said Hattie. "That town is growing a lot, isn't it? I've heard people talk about it."

“Yes, it is,” replied Signe. “It’s named for my pa, Jon Ytterhorn. My family was the first ones to settle there. Now it seems like everyone wants to live there. But you can’t blame them. It’s good, fertile land that the government is giving away. We’ve done well there.”

“Wait a minute,” said Hattie. “You said ‘my pa’ and ‘my family.’ You two aren’t sisters?” She pointed at Elna. “I just assumed you were. You seem so much alike.”

Elna smiled. “Well, yes and no. We weren’t born sisters, but we are now. And we’re best friends, so we’re lucky to have each other.” When she saw the confusion in Hattie’s eyes, she went on to explain. “Signe’s family came to the Dakota Territory in the spring of 1868 and set up the first homestead in the area. My family, the Olsens, came later that year and homesteaded next to them. We depended on each other for everything, and we all became best friends with one another. But then there was a smallpox epidemic, and both my ma and Signe’s pa died.”

Hattie’s eyes grew wide. “I’m so sorry!” she said.

“Thank you,” said Signe. “It was the hardest time of our lives. But my pa wasn’t even the first parent I lost. My ma died on the journey to America. She never even got to see this country.”

“So you became an orphan?” asked Hattie. She looked as if she was ready to cry.

“No,” Signe assured her. “No, when Ma died, Pa wrote to her best friend Rebekka back in Norway, and Rebekka agreed to come here and marry Pa and be our new ma. And

it's a good thing she did because if she hadn't, then we really would have been orphans when Pa died."

Elna continued, "But the smallpox epidemic left Rebekka with five children and my pa with four children to raise alone, which nobody could do out on the prairie, of course. So it was only natural that our families would combine. My pa married Rebekka, and now they have a baby of their own."

"Peter was just born in February," Signe added.

"A new baby? And you were both still able to come to school?" asked Hattie. "Doesn't Rebekka need you to help out at home?"

Elna shook her head. "Well, Peter being born makes ten of us children all together. And even though some of the children are little, not all of us are, and the older ones are helping out so we can be here. Plus, my grandmother is living with us now. We've only been coming here for a month and a half, but it's important to our families that we have this opportunity so we can have a good future. That's why we moved here all the way from Norway, after all."

"That's right," said Signe. "We were poor in Norway. We often didn't have enough to eat." She glanced at Hattie's piece of bread. "There was no future for us there. Here we have the opportunity to be something better, and Nels and Rebekka want to make sure we get to experience that. So here we are."

"It's a big family, and we all love each other," added Elna. "We feel truly blessed that things have worked out the way they have."

Hattie's frown had turned to a smile. "That's so nice!" she said. "I can't imagine how wonderful it would be to have a sister to share things with."

"So you don't have any sisters," said Signe, "but do you have any brothers?"

"One," answered Hattie. "A little brother. But we lost our pa, too. He died in the war, and my ma married another man, but we're not as lucky as you are. My stepfather is not a nice man. He hasn't treated me like his own. In fact, when I left home to come to school, I thought I'd have twenty-five dollars. I'd been saving for a whole year, but my stepfather took it. He said I owed it to him because he'd been feeding me for the last two years."

"How awful," said Elna.

"But he didn't know that the woman I'd been working for hadn't paid me for more than two months," continued Hattie. "So right before I came here, I asked her to pay me, and she gave me ten dollars. I left before he could get it."

"Does your ma know you're here?" asked Signe.

"Yes," Hattie nodded. "I told her, and she said she wouldn't tell him until after I was gone. Anyway, I rented a room here in town for five dollars, and I have to make the other five dollars last until I get paid at the mercantile. I clean there every night after they close."

"We clean at the hotel," Elna told her, "and we have to help with supper every night. The owner doesn't pay us, but we get our room and board, so at least we have a place to sleep and food to eat."

They watched Hattie slowly eat her piece of bread. Signe broke her pork sandwich in half and said, “In fact, they feed us too much sometimes. I’m not that hungry now. Would you like part of my sandwich?”

“Why, thank you,” said Hattie, and she accepted the sandwich from Signe.

Elna added, “We did eat too much for breakfast, and I don’t think I can eat this piece of gingerbread.” She handed it to Hattie.

“Thank you,” said Hattie, and she blushed.

After school let out for the evening, Signe and Elna walked out with Hattie. “Do you want to come up to my room?” Hattie asked them.

“Sure. We don’t have to peel potatoes for another half hour,” Elna told her.

So Signe and Elna followed Hattie across the street and climbed the stairs of the mercantile to the second floor. At the third doorway down the hall, Hattie took a key out of her pocket and unlocked the door. Inside, the room was almost bare. There wasn’t anything in it except a small wood stove, Hattie’s suitcase, and two crates from the store. It looked like Hattie must have been using one of the crates for a desk. The other one sat under the window. In it was an old doll and a tattered quilt. On the windowsill was a small, framed picture.

Hattie pointed to the picture and said, “That’s a picture of my ma and pa. They had it taken right before my pa went off to fight in the war.”

“You don’t have any furniture,” remarked Elna.

“I couldn’t find a furnished room, so I had to take this one,” said Hattie as she sat down on her suitcase. Signe and Elna sat on the floor.

“How old are you?” asked Signe.

“Twelve.”

“And you’re living all on your own?”

Hattie nodded. “I needed to get away from my stepfather, and I really wanted to come to school here. I had to walk four miles to my school back in my hometown, and sometimes when I got there, there wasn’t any school. Then I would have to turn around and walk back home. That was really hard in the wintertime when it was cold.”

“That’s awful,” said Elna.

“It was,” agreed Hattie. “I wasn’t learning enough, not just because there wasn’t school every day but also because the teacher was a first-year teacher, and I didn’t think I could learn enough from her to take the test when I turn sixteen. I want to be a teacher or a nurse in a hospital. I don’t ever want to depend on a man like my mother has to. If I don’t go to school, then I have to get married, clean houses, or cook for a living. But I want more out of life.”

“We’re going to take the test, too,” said Signe. “In just over a year, when we turn sixteen, we can be teachers if we can get schools. That’s why we’re here. Our teacher back in Jonstown is nice, but we need to learn more to pass the test.”

“Speaking of being here,” said Elna, “it’s probably time for us to go to the hotel and start working.”

“I think they’re going to be looking for another girl to work at the hotel soon,” Signe told Hattie. “Do you want us to ask Mrs. Boyle about you working there? We could do that.”

“That would be so kind of you,” replied Hattie. “It would be nice to have a bed to sleep on and some more food to eat.”

“Then we’ll ask today,” said Elna. She and Signe stood up to leave.

“Thank you,” said Hattie, and she closed the door behind them.

When they were back on the street, Elna turned to Signe and said, “I feel bad for Hattie. We’ve had a lot of heartache in our lives, but so has she, and at least we have each other. She doesn’t have anyone.”

“Well, she does now,” said Signe. “I like her.”

“I do, too,” agreed Elna. “And I’m going to help her as much as I can.”

Signe nodded. “We’ll start by trying to improve her situation right now.”

They went into the hotel, and Signe walked right up to Mrs. Boyle. “Could you use another girl?” she asked. “There’s a new girl at our school who would like to work here. She won’t be going home on the weekends like we do.”

“That would be good,” said Mrs. Boyle. “Mary is leaving next week. The new girl can have her room. She can make the downstairs beds and clean on the weekends.”

She thought for a moment. “Yes, that will work out nicely. Tell her to come on Monday.”

Signe and Elna beamed at each other. “Thank you,” said Signe, and she and Elna went to their rooms to put down their things. Then they returned to the kitchen to begin peeling potatoes.