

Hardscrabble

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by

SANDRA DALLAS



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For Forrest and his cousin, the amazing Magnolia Marie Cole.



CHAPTER ONE

Coming to Colorado



“Where’s Papa?” Belle Martin asked, looking around the train station.

Carrie shook her head. “Hush,” she whispered.

Belle frowned. Was Carrie suggesting that if she hadn’t asked about Papa, Mama wouldn’t have noticed he wasn’t there to meet them?

Belle searched the depot, hoping to spot her father. Perhaps he was lost in the crowd of people milling about. She saw men removing farm equipment that had come in on the train and putting it into wagons. A boy helped his father lift bags of seeds out of one of the cars and stack them on the depot platform. A woman wearing a worn shawl over

her head tried to hold on to half a dozen children, talking to them in a language Belle didn't understand. Carrie had told her they were immigrants, people who had come to America from other countries hoping for a better life. They expected to farm in Colorado. Women got off the train and stood on the metal platform and searched the crowd for their husbands, then smiled when they found them.

Belle watched one woman as she hugged a man. As his face turned red, he removed her arms. But she would have none of it. "Six months since I've seen you, and I've the right to a little affection," she said.

But there was no Papa.

One by one, as their husbands claimed them, the women left the platform, a few getting into automobiles or trucks but most into wagons. The immigrants, too, crowded into rickety wagons and drove off across the brown prairie, leaving only the Martins. A few people glanced at Mama, who looked frail and sick and leaned against Carrie for support. But they didn't ask what was wrong or offer to help. And nobody paid attention to Belle, who stood at the edge of the rough boards, holding the hands of two little girls, Sarah, age four, and Becky, two. Belle's brother Frank, eleven, sat on

one of their trunks with another brother, Gully, five. Beside them were boxes and barrels of dishes and pots and pans and sacks of flour and sugar. There were containers of salt and spices and dozens of other items Mama thought they would need on a farm.

“We haven’t seen Papa for six months, either. Where is he, Belle? Is he coming?” Frank asked.

“He’ll be here. He expects us. He promised to meet us.” Then she added, “Maybe he got the day wrong. This is June 11, 1910, isn’t it? And this is Mingo, Colorado, isn’t it?”

Frank shrugged in a *How would I know?* gesture.

Belle tried not to think of the conversation she had overheard on the train. A man had been talking about a woman who had arrived in Mingo just a week earlier to meet her husband, only to discover he wasn’t there at all. He was supposed to have left the East to file for a homestead near Mingo, but instead he’d taken their money and run off. So there she was, no husband and not enough money to buy a ticket back to where she’d come from. Belle half expected to see the woman standing on the platform still, but, of course, she was gone.

The Martins, too, didn’t have the money for return

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*B*elle jumped off Catsup and stood a moment, trying to catch her breath. She saw Papa staring at her apron, and glanced down to see the red stains from the tomatoes. “Hail,” she said quickly. “There was terrible hail. It ruined the corn.”

“Hail,” he said.

“I never saw the like, Papa. Some of the hail was the size of pigeon eggs. It dented the bucket in the yard and tore off part of the roof over the well.” She paused. “The corn’s ruined. It stripped the ears right off the stalks.”

Papa stared off toward the cornfield, then closed his eyes. Then he dropped his head. “Hail!” he said. When he looked up, Belle saw the despair in his face. “What next?”

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