

## Chapter One

Mattie Cameron finished her long division and sat up straight at her desk. Her brown braid felt heavy between her shoulder blades, and she pulled it forward before copying the next problem from the board. She stretched, then bent again to her task.

Golden light filled the schoolroom. It illuminated the motes of chalk dust floating in the air, and gleamed off the round stove sitting cold in the corner. A fly buzzed and thumped against a window pane seeking exit to the red clay fields beyond the rippled glass. Thirty children scratched away at their slates.

Mr. MacDonald peered over shoulders, offering advice and correction. The dry smell of chalk dust went with him. Twenty-three years of teaching had begun to tell on his face, although this was a labour of love more than an obligation. His first duty was to his church and its congregation of Scottish settlers.

“Two minutes,” he said in English. He clicked open his watch to check the time.

A sigh went up from some of the slower students. Eight-year-old Callum MacLeod licked his finger and rubbed at his work. Mattie looked up from her problem. Callum’s freckled face was red with the effort of learning to add three columns of numbers. Mattie tore her slate rag in half and handed it across the aisle. There’ll not be much left of this rag soon. This is the second time this week, she thought.

She gazed out the window at the red fields already shadowed with the green of new oats. The grove of maple trees at the back of the schoolyard, bright with young leaves, had not yet darkened into the mature green of summer. From a branch a swing swayed in the breeze from the Northumberland Strait.

I hope there’s more blueberries this year, she thought. There weren’t many last year and they were kind of small. Momma said she’d teach me to make jam this summer. Maybe she’ll show me how to make jelly, too.

In the autumn, jars of jam lined the shelves in the cool, clay cellar at Mattie’s house. There were always purple blueberry, scarlet raspberry, with its little flecks of yellow seed and rich strawberry, thick with fruit. A barrel of apples stood in one corner of the cellar and a keg of molasses opposite. In the darkness of the farthest corner potatoes, carrots, turnips and parsnips were heaped.

Mattie thought of the apple juice dripping pinkly clear through the jelly cloth, the smell of boiling sugar, the first taste of new jelly hot off the wooden spoon. Her mouth watered. She licked her lips.

A sense of being watched took her attention. Mr. MacDonald stared at her from his desk. His great brown moustache, streaked with grey, hid most of the expression around his mouth. A queer shiver went down Mattie’s spine, and she bent her head over her slate, even though she had already finished her problem.

Mr. MacDonald cleared his throat. “Pass your work forward, please.” The clatter of slates passing from hand to hand filled the room.

“Class dismissed. Mattie. I want to see you.”

Mattie jumped at the sound of her name. “Yes, Mr. MacDonald?” The soft sibilants of her ‘s’ were more in evidence with her unease. She rose from her seat and went forward to stand in front of his desk, her hands folded in front of her.

“How old are you, Mattie?”

“Fourteen, sir.” Her voice was no more than a whisper. “Fifteen this month,” she said more loudly. He knows that already, she thought, he baptized me.

“You’ll be finished school in a few weeks?” It was more a statement of fact than a question.

“Yes, sir.”

“What will you do then?”

Mattie looked at him blankly. “Help Momma.” What else is there to do, and why is he asking me these questions?

Mr. MacDonald stared at Mattie. A trickle of sweat ran down her back. She hunched her shoulders. The classroom seemed too hot for May. It seemed much smaller, and Mr. MacDonald much larger than he had a few moments ago.

He sat for several minutes stroking his side whiskers.

Mattie found it difficult to hold his gaze. I wish he wouldn’t stare so. Her eyes would not stay focused on his face. She gave up and began gazing at her bare toes peeping out from beneath her homespun skirt. The silence deepened. “May I go now, sir?” she quavered at last.

He nodded, then rose from his chair. “Tell your father and mother that David Matheson will be calling on them soon.”

Mattie picked up her shawl and hurried from the classroom.

“What’d he want?” asked Cora, waiting for her in the shade of the maple tree by the gate. Although Cora was a year behind Mattie in school, having started a year later, they were the same age. It seemed as if they had been friends since the beginning of time.

“I don’t know,” replied Mattie, lapsing into Gaelic. “He just asked me how old I was, and what was I going to do when I finished *sgoil*.”

“Maybe he wants to give you job.” Cora spoke in Gaelic as well. “I heard him say to Poppa the other day that he really needed help with the little ones; there’re so many of them.”

“No, I don’t think so. He said to tell Momma and Poppa that David Matheson would be coming to call soon.”

Cora’s dark blue eyes brightened. “Maybe he wants to come courting,” she teased. She danced along the narrow track beside Mattie. “Oh, wouldn’t that be exciting.”

“Indeed, it would not. I don’t even know the man.”

“Well, you know who he is.”

Mattie shook her head.

“Yes, you do. He was in church at the last sacrament. He was the one who came and sat with Rachel’s father. Remember?”

“The one you said was so handsome?”

“That’s him. His father’s from here, but his mother’s from England. She was staying with family in Charlottetown for a year, and they came out here to visit and he married her, but she couldn’t stand to live away from town. So after Mr. Matheson was born they moved to Charlottetown, and now he has his teaching certificate and he was given the school in Orwell Cove two years ago.”

“How do you know so much?”

“I listen. I heard Momma tell Isabella MacQueen all about him when he was here last summer. Don’t you think he’s handsome?”

Mattie only vaguely remembered him. She had seen him just once. “He’s all eyes and beard,” she replied.

Cora tossed her head. “Well, I think he’s handsome, and I’d be that pleased to have him come courting me, and so should you be.”

“Och, he’s far too old for me, and besides ...” Her voice trailed away. She scuffed her bare feet through the sand of the roadside sending up little puffs of pink dust.

“He’s only twenty-three, and besides what?”

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore.” Mattie quickened her pace.

“C’mon, besides what?”

“Besides, that’s all.” Mattie walked faster.

“If the wind changes, your face’ll stay that way.”

Mattie tried to smooth out her features.

“So, besides, you’re afraid, aren’t you,” said Cora.

“Yes, I am, so now you know.” Mattie slung her shawl over her shoulder and stomped toward home, her bonnet bouncing between her shoulders.

Cora hurried after her. “What’s there to be afraid of, for heaven’s sake?”

“Nothing. Everything.” Mattie stomped on, passing Cora’s gate in a small cloud of dust.

“Will you slow down!” Cora panted. Her short, legs had all they could do to keep up with Mattie’s stride. Her cheeks were red with the effort, her dark hair escaped from her braid and clouded around her face.

Mattie came to a halt, and Cora bumped into her.

“So what’s there to be afraid of?” Cora licked her fingers and brushed the hair from her eyes.

Mattie wrapped her arms around herself. "He's too old for me, that's all."

"Well, you'll be fifteen in a few more weeks, and that'll be plenty old." She propped her hands on her hips. "My sister had her first baby when she was fifteen, and she'd already been married for almost a year."

"She was nearly sixteen when she had James." Mattie fell silent thinking of the mysterious business of having babies.

"She had a hard time, too, so Momma said."

"What kind of a hard time?"

"Oh, you know." Cora brushed at the *streeels* of hair in her eyes. "The baby was a long time coming because my sister was small inside. Momma said she was like all the women in our family, too narrow in the hips for having babies."

"Oh," said Mattie. The May sun on her bare head made her dizzy. She shook her head to clear it, her braid swung behind, making her head ache with its weight. I should have put my bonnet on, she thought.

"You have lots of brothers and sisters. Don't you know about having babies and how hard it is sometimes?" Cora watched Mattie's face. Her cheeks twitched in an effort to hide a smile of triumph.

Mattie pulled her shawl tightly over her small bosom and watched the progress of an ant carrying dirt to his anthill at the edge of the track. "Momma always sent us over to Mrs. MacNeil's, and when we came home the next day, there was the new baby."

"And she never told you about having babies?"

"No, but I suppose you're going to."

Cora stuck her lower lip out in a sulk. "Only if you want to know."

"Maybe I don't want to know." Mattie stood in the narrow roadway with her fists on her slender hips.

"You'll be sorry," said Cora in a sing-song voice. "You won't know what's happening to you when you start being sick in the morning; and when the pains come, all you'll be able to do is scream in agony." She turned to go.

Mattie thought back to the day when Johnnie had been born. I don't remember Momma screaming in agony. She just hustled us out the door and told us to go to Mrs. MacNeil's until Poppa came for us. She grunted once and she looked so angry I thought maybe I'd been a bad girl again. She closed the door behind us, and put the lock on. When Poppa came to get us the next day he told us we had a new baby brother.

Mattie's stance in the middle of the track lost its aggressiveness. "Wait then. What do you know about having babies?" She watched Cora suppress a smile of satisfaction.

“Momma told me that it hurts, and that if you’re too small the baby gets stuck inside and it can’t come out and you die. She says the pain goes on for hours, and that it’s awful, and there’s nothing you can do about it. It feels like you’re ripping apart inside.”

Mattie looked at Cora in horror. “I don’t believe you. I don’t believe you! You’re a liar, Cora Smith! Don’t you ever speak to me again!”

She turned and began to run down the road, oblivious to the pebbles beneath her feet. The two miles of red track fell away in minutes. She climbed over the rail fence, leaving a tuft of her only shawl decorating the top rail like a tiny brown flag. Mr. West’s bull held no terror for her. She passed her younger brothers as they chased minnows in the brook in the shadows of the over-hanging trees, their hands and feet white with the cold of the water.

“Come and play, Mattie,” called William, but Mattie didn’t hear him. Her feet were driven. Momma! Babies! Ripping apart?! She could feel her own flesh giving way to the grasping, pushing hands and feet of her imaginary infant. Her bones seemed to crack in the effort to deliver this child. She continued her race toward home.

She ran through the spruce woods and across the hay field, the stubble of last year’s hay sharp among the soft growth of new grass. In their own small cow pasture she startled the cows into a lumbering run. From long acquaintance with the pasture path, her feet avoided the worst of the thistles.

I suppose I’ve spoiled their milk for today. Momma’ll be cross again. Opening the pasture gate a crack, she squeezed through, stopping just long enough to close it behind herself. She was gasping for breath as she entered the kitchen, allowing the door to bang behind her. “I don’t believe her!” she exploded, then lapsed into silence at the sight of their next door neighbour.

“Matilda Cameron! Have some manners!” Her mother spoke with more than her customary sharpness. “Excuse yourself to Mrs. MacNeil.”

Mattie blushed and focused her attention on her mother’s friend. “I beg your pardon, Mrs. MacNeil.”

“Pardon granted,” replied Mrs. MacNeil. “I can see you have a lot on your mind, dearie, so I must be going. It’s nearly time to start supper for Himself anyway.” She heaved herself out of the rocking chair, and put on her bonnet. “I’ll look out that recipe for you this evening, Mary. You can pick it up the next time you’re over.”

The porch door shut behind Mrs. MacNeil. Mattie’s mother bustled back into the kitchen, her long skirts swishing. “What do you mean by bursting into the house like a *hoyden*?”

“I’m sorry Momma,” she whispered.

Her mother began preparations for supper. “Set the table.” She swung the stew pot away from the fire and lifted the lid. “A fine thing it is when I can’t even have a cup of tea in peace in my own kitchen. What was so important anyway?” She gave the stew a vigorous stir sending droplets of it flying into the fire where they hissed on the logs.

“Nothing, Momma.” Mattie picked up the cutlery basket and kept her eyes on her task.

“Nothing? It must have been something to bring you charging in here like a bull in a china shop. And get that hair out of your face or the next thing you know we’ll be having hair in our supper.”

“I’m sorry, Momma.” Mattie swung her braid back over her shoulder and brushed the loose strands away from her face.

“Well? I’m waiting.”

“It was Cora.” Mattie’s voice was barely a whisper.

“That lass has about twice too much to say for herself. If she were one of mine ...” Mrs. Cameron returned the lid to the stew pot with a clang. “Well, what did she do that has you so upset?”

“She said that it hurts to have babies and that I might die. It’s not true, is it, Momma?”

Mrs. Cameron looked away. “Just because them Smiths can’t bear children without making a big to-do about it, they think no one else can either.”

“But does it hurt?” asked Mattie. “Can you really die?”

Mrs. Cameron looked at her oldest daughter, and she remembered the birth of each of her children. Her voice gentled. “It hurts some, and some women die from it, but it’s our lot in life. The Bible says that in sorrow ye shall bring forth children. It’s our payment for having been the ones to have brought sin into the world.”

“Does it feel like you’re ripping apart inside?” Mattie was almost crying.

“What in the world did that young imp tell you? Of course it doesn’t. I suppose that’s what her mother told her.”

“She said that her sister had a hard time having James, and that’s what it felt like.”

“Them Smiths always did like to be dramatic.” Mrs. Cameron pursed her lips in disapproval. “I won’t tell you it doesn’t hurt, because it does some, and it’s hard work. Probably the hardest work you’ll ever do. As for dying, some women do, but they’re like that skinny sister of Cora’s, too small in the hips to carry properly, and sickly besides. You have to be strong to have babies.”

“Are my hips big enough, Momma?”

“You’re a Cameron, aren’t you? Cameron women never had trouble having babies.”