

CHAPTER ONE

She couldn't breathe. Sweat pooled under the weight of her long hair, soaking her lace collar. The thin gold ring she always wore on her right hand strangled her swelling index finger. She tried twisting it, but it was stuck.

"Stop fidgeting, Maud," her grandmother whispered as she discreetly nudged Maud's grandfather, who was dozing through Reverend Archibald's sermon on the prodigal son. Grandfather grunted awake. "Honestly, I'm surprised at the both of you. This is no way for a Macneill to behave in church." Grandfather sat straighter, and Maud cleared her throat so she wouldn't laugh.

Of course the heat did not fuss Grandma Macneill. Just like the black net that hid her graying hair, she was able to hide her emotions: an ability Grandma was always reminding Maud she sorely lacked. Grandma said Maud was too sensitive, wearing her feelings on the surface like the red sand on the Island shore. And Grandma was most likely right. She was right about everything.

Maud muttered an apology, taking a quick look back at the rest of the congregation at Cavendish's Presbyterian Church from their pew, always second from the front on the left-hand side. The Clarks, Simpsons, and Macneills were all present, as they were

every Sunday, to give thanks—and also to take note of who was present, who was absent, and who was caught sleeping during the reverend’s sermon. Maud loved to think about how she might describe them if she put them in one of her stories.

They were most definitely watching her—particularly the clan matriarchs, Mrs. Elvira Simpson and Mrs. Matilda Clark. Maud had seen them stare at her when she had followed her grandparents into church that morning.

Maud knew what they were thinking. Hadn’t she left Cavendish rather suddenly over some business with that schoolteacher Miss “Izzie” Robinson six months ago? It was certainly no surprise the flighty, overly sensitive (and frankly queer) child of the dearly departed Clara Macneill and her irresponsible husband, Hugh John Montgomery, would act that way. There was no escaping it; it was in her blood.

It was true that Maud had left six months ago to live with her Aunt Emily and Uncle John Malcolm Montgomery in Malpeque and then with her Aunt Annie and Uncle John Campbell in Park Corner. What wasn’t true were the particular circumstances people believed—and there was nothing she could do about it.

Now Maud was back with her Grandma and Grandfather Macneill, her mother’s parents, on their farm in Cavendish, Prince Edward Island, a small village of about forty families, on the North Shore, where everyone knew everyone’s business. She had spent the summer with her merry Campbell cousins, but now was back to Grandma’s lectures, uncomfortable dresses, and a new school year with a new teacher.

Maud stared ahead at a straw hat of lush summer flowers sitting on top of a mound of curly blond hair. Underneath it was her best friend, Mollie, who had the privilege of sitting in her parents’ pew in the front row with the new teacher. Miss Gordon appeared to be listening attentively to the reverend’s sermon. She

had just arrived in Cavendish that week, after the last teacher, Miss Robinson, had finally left during the summer. Maud hoped she would get a chance to prove herself to the new teacher. Even though her grandfather had strong feelings about women teachers (“another confounded female teacher,” Maud had heard him mutter as they passed Miss Gordon on the way into the church that morning), a teacher still held an important place in the community: people respected your opinion—something Maud had learned the hard way earlier that year.

Mollie turned her head discreetly to catch Maud’s eye and, in her typical overdramatic fashion, mimed fanning herself. Maud returned the action with an overly dramatic grin, earning a firm tsk from her grandmother. Maud stifled a giggle and gazed out the window, which overlooked the slope of the western hill, and tried to imagine a cool breeze blowing through the chapel, clearing away the judgment. She longed to run down to the red sandy shore, strip off her stockings—she didn’t even want to think about what was happening to her poor black stockings—and jump into the Gulf. The air was as stifling as what awaited her when she got home: an afternoon of reading the Bible in quiet contemplation and the arrival of her mother’s brother, Uncle John Franklin, and his family for supper—although at least her cousin Lu would be there.

Maud turned her attention to the front. She had no idea what Reverend Archibald was talking about; her thoughts drifted back to what Mollie had said before church—that she had news. Mollie always had the best news.

Resisting the urge to tap her best friend on the shoulder, Maud quickly looked over at her cousin Pensie, sitting in the pew across the aisle. At sixteen, Pensie could wear her wavy auburn hair in the latest fashion on top of her head, and she sported fringe bangs that accentuated her long chin and big brown eyes. Alas, being only fourteen, Maud wasn’t allowed to put her hair up, and she

was forced to live under the weight of it. Thankfully, Grandma had allowed her to tie it in two little ribbons clipped behind her head so it was off her face.

At long last, the service came to an end. Had her grandmother not been there, Maud would have pushed through the congregation and raced down the stairs, where there was space to breathe. As it was Sunday—and Grandma was there—Maud walked with what she hoped was graceful civility, as befitted a child of the Macneill clan, to the cemetery in front of the church, managing to find the welcome shade of a tree while she waited for her friends . . . and Mollie's news.

Maud leaned her head against the coarse bark and closed her eyes, trying to shut out the murmurs of people filing their way out of the church, but she couldn't help but overhear the talk around her.

"I heard she had hysterics in the schoolyard," Mrs. Simpson said. "That's what my daughter Mamie told me."

Of course Mamie would tell her mother some falsehood. She was one of the girls that followed Maud's nemesis, Clemmie Macneill.

"I'm not surprised, given . . . everything," Mrs. Clark said. "I hope that new school teacher knows how to handle an emotional child like Maud Montgomery."

"It's the Montgomery side, I'm sure," Mrs. Simpson said.

Maud scraped at the tree. How dare they speak about Father when he wasn't here to defend himself! She was both a Montgomery and a Macneill, which was why she would not lower herself by marching over to those women and telling them to mind their own business. No. She would pretend to ignore them.

"You certainly got out quickly," a familiar voice said.

Maud opened her eyes and sighed. "That heat was unbearable, Pensie. I couldn't stand it any longer."

“That’s not a dignified way to behave,” Pensie said, in a perfect imitation of Maud’s grandmother, right down to the very stern look, but they couldn’t keep straight faces for very long and started giggling.

Close cousins who lived only a few minutes’ walk from each other, Maud and Pensie had been friends their whole lives, sometimes writing letters more than twice a day, which Maud kept in the small trunk at the foot of her bed. But since Maud had been away, and Pensie was no longer attending school, the letters were becoming less frequent. They rarely quarreled, but Maud wondered if anything was wrong. Just now, though, Pensie was behaving the same as she always had. Everything would go back to normal now that she was back, Maud reassured herself.

“I was beginning to think that the reverend was going to keep us cooped up in that heat all day.” Maud looked past her cousin’s shoulder to see Mollie smiling at her as she walked up toward them. “Oh, look—there’s Mollie,” and she smiled back. She and Mollie had been sitting together at school since they were eight years old; right before Maud had been sent to Malpeque, they’d made a solemn vow of friendship. Mollie’s real name was Amanda, but they had nicknamed each other last fall when they formed a secret club with Jack Laird and the Baptist minister’s stepson, Nate Spurr. Maud was Pollie and Jack and Nate were Snap and Snip.

“Maudie!” Mollie cried out and reached around Pensie to give Maud a hug. Maud hugged her friend back, and tried to suppress a stab of jealousy when she felt the small bustle at the back of Mollie’s summer dress. Maud had read in the *Young Ladies’ Journal* that the big bustle—a separate piece of clothing that attached to one’s waistband from the back, giving it extra flare—had become stylish again. Maud would have loved to have one on her dress, but according to Grandma, bustles were wasteful—“all that material.”

“When are you going to give up those juvenile nicknames?” Pensie said, when they had pulled apart.

Mollie puffed under her plush hat.

Ever since Pensie had started wearing a corset the previous year, she had begun to put on airs like she knew everything. It was confusing because sometimes Pensie seemed like the girl Maud grew up with, and then other times it was as if she was entering into that great divide where all she cared about was finding a husband. But it was too hot for quarrels.

“Never!” Maud said. “We love them, don’t we, Mollie?” In response, Mollie hugged her again, even more fiercely. Maud couldn’t help but wonder if Mollie was doing it more for Pensie’s benefit than hers.

“Why don’t I have a nickname?” Maud’s cousin Lu said, coming up behind Mollie.

“You do, my dear cousin. Your full name is Lucy and I call you Lu,” Maud said.

Lu beamed.

“Did you see Jack Laird?” Mollie asked, taking Maud’s hand. Pensie frowned down at their hands, and Maud discreetly let go. It was too hot to hold hands anyway. “He looks nice today.”

“Amanda Macneill,” Pensie said, using Mollie’s given name. “You’re terrible.”

“You’re not much better,” Maud teased. “Your mother informed Grandma when she last came for tea that Quill Rollings is calling.”

Pensie flushed. “He was asking after Mother.”

Maud and Mollie exchanged a smile.

“I don’t know why you all care,” Lu said. Being only almost-twelve, Lu didn’t find boys all that interesting.

Mollie tried to smoothly change the subject. “The new teacher is so lovely. She has big plans for our class and is nothing like that stuck-up Miss Robinson. Oh, I’m sorry Maud . . .”

Heat tickled Maud's cheeks—and it wasn't from the weather. "It will be all right, Maudie," Pensie said, putting her arm around Maud's shoulders. This time Mollie frowned, but Maud didn't move. "I suspect the school board would not have hired her if they didn't think her suitable."

But they had hired the last one too.

"Mother is giving me the signal," Lu said and waved goodbye. "I'll see you this afternoon."

"Good, now I can give you this." Mollie opened her Bible and pulled out a folded piece of paper—a letter! This must have been the "news" she was talking about.

Pensie moved over to Maud's left to block any possible prying eyes. "You need to be careful," she whispered. Maud suppressed the urge to sigh. She wished her old friend could just be curious about the letter's contents, and not so proper.

"That's why I waited for Lu to go," Mollie said.

They all loved Lu, but she was known to accidentally allow things to slip, and then her father would tell Maud's grandparents. Uncle John Franklin was her mother's older brother, but he treated Maud like she was a poor country cousin, dependent upon them for the rest of her life. During family gatherings he either ignored her, or insulted her. Neither was tolerable. But seeing the familiar handwriting of the sender, Maud forgot all about that and was overcome with a fluttery feeling. Thank goodness Mollie had waited.

Maud shoved the letter into her Bible.

More people were beginning to head home for Sunday dinner. Uncle John Franklin, Lu, and the rest of the family would be over at the homestead soon enough and then the long, dull afternoon would begin.

"Maud," Grandma called from the church steps, Grandfather plodding down behind her. "Don't be too long."

“Yes, Grandma,” Maud said.

“That’s what I’m talking about. I’m just as curious as you are about that letter, but you need to be careful that your grandmother doesn’t see it, Maudie,” Pensie said. “I already had to be away from you this summer. I would hate for you to be sent away again.”

Pensie had missed her! Maud embraced her. “I don’t want to be away from you ever again. I promise to be careful,” she said.

Pensie took a step back and seemed to be looking around for someone. Maud pushed away the feeling that her dearest cousin didn’t want to return her embrace, but then Pensie said, “There’s Mother. She’ll be expecting me. I’ll see you for our walk tomorrow and you can tell me about school.” By the way she said “school,” Maud knew exactly what (or who) Pensie was talking about—the precious secret of who had authored the letter now in Maud’s Bible. Maud expected Pensie to hug her again, but she didn’t. Maybe she was just hot.

Mollie and Maud walked through the cemetery’s grassy path toward Cavendish’s main road. Mollie lived down the hill, near the hollow.

“Thank you for being the messenger,” Maud said.

“He gave it to Jack to give to me,” Mollie said. “Jack said that he was adamant you receive it before school begins.”

“The intrigue,” Maud said, making sure the letter was still safely tucked in her Bible.

Mollie giggled. “I tried to get Jack to at least hint, but he was silent as the morning sunrise.” Mollie liked to talk in metaphors.

They stopped at the edge of the cemetery.

Maud loved it here at the crossroads, where she could see much of Cavendish. The spot overlooked the red road south to the North Shore and the other one east, connecting her home. Down the hill, facing west past the hollow and Mollie’s home, was Laird’s Hill, the Cavendish Hall and Baptist church.

“Sadly, it will have to wait,” Maud said, her gazing floating upon a particular tombstone.

Mollie held Maud’s hand. “Have you visited since you returned?”

Maud nodded. “It was the first thing I did. But you know how I love my little rituals.”

“It is why I adore you.” They hugged, and then Mollie said, “The first day of school promises to be interesting.”

“It certainly does,” Maud murmured, watching Mollie walk down the hill.