

Chapter One

“Mommy, I’m scared!”

Maggie looked at the little girl in the mirror while she was brushing the child’s long dark hair. It surprised her to see tears in Charity’s pretty brown eyes. “What are you scared of, honey?” Maggie asked as she expertly divided Maggie’s hair into two sections so she could make braids for Charity’s first day of school. “You enjoy being with other children.”

“What if I’m stupid and the teacher yells at me?” she asked.

“Then I will march into that school and yell at the teacher!” Maggie’s redheaded temper took control of her mouth, and she was instantly sorry. “Oh, honey, you are *not* stupid and the teacher isn’t going to yell at you.”

“Are you sure? I can’t read or do many sums...”

“And that is why you are going to school in the first place, Charity. School is where you go to learn all those things. The teacher will know this is your first day of school ever, and I’m sure that you won’t be expected to know anything except maybe your alphabet, and you know that.”

“Okay, Mommy. I love you.”

“Oh, I love you, too. With all my heart.”

“What if the other children want to know why I don’t have a daddy like they do?”

“You simply tell them your daddy died during a bank robbery.”

“Okay. I’m ready now. Do you think I look pretty in the new dress you made for me?”

“Yes, young lady, I do! The pink makes your cheeks look rosy. Don’t forget your lunch pail,” Charity reminded the excited youngster. “Will you miss me today?” Charity asked as they went out the door and started walking toward the school that was located at the edge of town.

“Now, don’t you go worrying about me, Missy. I’ll be just fine. Remember, I have a lot of work to get done.”

“Why does Mrs. Porter need so many dresses, Mommy?” Charity never ran out of questions. “Is it because she’s getting fatter?”

“That’s not nice, young lady!” Maggie scolded, but the effect of the words was lost when she smiled. Mrs. Porter was one very heavy woman, and she did keep outgrowing her dresses,

which was a good thing given that sewing was Maggie's occupation. Without Mrs. Porter, she wouldn't make nearly enough to support herself and Charity.

"Are we the first ones here?" Charity asked, suddenly shy again. She grabbed for Maggie's hand and held on tight.

"No, I see the new teacher taking Karen inside. You like to play with Karen, don't you?"

"Yes."

"We'll go and meet the teacher, and you can see who else is in the first grade." Maggie didn't try to pull her hand from Charity's. She wasn't so old that she couldn't recall *her* very first day of school! They walked up the steps and inside the schoolhouse.

"Hello there!" the teacher called to them, walking over to where they stood. "I am Mrs. Williams, and you are?" She looked at Charity questioningly.

"My name is Charity, and Mommy says I'm not stupid, but I can't read yet," Charity said solemnly, getting her fears out in the open right away.

"Oh, I can see you aren't a bit stupid, Charity," Mrs. Williams said with a smile, offering reassurance. "No one knows how to read when they first come to school."

"Good," Charity whispered. "I know my alphabet."

"Well, good! You can help the other first graders learn. You can take your lunch pail to that shelf over there, and then sit at the desk with Karen. Do you already know her?" she asked, noticing the two girls smiling at each other and waving.

"Yes, she is my friend, and we like to play together when our Mommies say we can."

"That's wonderful, Charity. You put away your lunch and take your seat while I speak to your mother." She smiled at Maggie. "I don't believe we've met, Mrs.?"

"I'm Maggie Sheldon, Mrs. Williams."

"Oh yes! You own the dress shop in town."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You may be sure that I will take very good care of Charity. I raised three children of my own, and came back to teaching after I lost my husband. I'm looking forward to this school year."

"If there is ever anything I can do for you, please don't hesitate to ask," Maggie offered.

"I will recall that, Mrs. Sheldon."

"Oh, please, call me Maggie."

“Thank you, Maggie.” She had to excuse herself to greet more new students and their mothers, so with a final wave at Charity, Maggie left the building and hurried on home. She was soon crying and felt like an idiot. Her baby was in school now, and it just didn’t seem possible! Where had the time gone? It seemed just like yesterday that she was taking care of an infant.

Maggie’s mind slipped back in time to the day she became a substitute mommy. A man she didn’t know forced his way inside her home, a gun in one hand and a baby in his other arm. He thrust the child at her and then said, “Her Mama died havin’ her and I just killed a man tryin’ to rob the bank. You take her and raise her like your own. I’m trustin’ you, girl. I’m beggin’ you. Please.” He swallowed hard as he heard the sheriff and those joining in his posse coming closer to the small house. “Her name is Charity, and she’s two months old. Do I have your word, Miss?”

Maggie didn’t know what to say. She was all alone in the world since her parents died of influenza during the last winter. “I don’t know, I’m not married!” she pointed out.

“You look like a decent woman and I know you’ll raise her right. Please give me your word!” he begged, and she found herself nodding in agreement. He gave his daughter a gentle kiss on her soft cheek, and then ran out of the house, only to be gunned down.

The sheriff ran inside the house to see if Maggie was all right, and when she told him the story, his lip curled in disgust and he told her to take the baby to an orphanage. “I gave my word to raise her, John.” She realized then that it was pointless to spend any more time allowing the sheriff to court her. He would never accept baby Charity as his daughter, and she’d given her word. Maggie packed up, sold the house her parents left to her, and moved far enough away that the facts of Charity’s birth wouldn’t be known. That worked until someone from home moved to town and spread vicious rumors. Maggie moved again, vowing to protect Charity, and so far, no one realized that little Charity wasn’t her natural daughter. Maggie did everything within her power to give Charity a good life, but she dreaded the day she would have to tell her the truth. Resolutely, she got to her feet and ran a feather duster over her storefront, and then she got to work sewing on the new dresses that Mrs. Porter ordered. She wanted the woman to be happy so she would recommend her to the other ladies in town. Maggie was far from poor, thanks to her parents’ will, but she wanted to live within her means. She intended to set a good example for her daughter, and teach her the value of working for a living.

When it was finally time for school to let out, Maggie walked to the school to walk little Charity home. She knew that most people allowed their children to walk by themselves, but Maggie was very protective of the child she loved so much. In every way that mattered, Charity was her daughter, and she would do everything in her power to give her a good childhood, filled with affection. Little Charity also was disciplined when it was necessary, even though Maggie was positive it hurt her much more than the little girl.

“Mommy!” She heard Charity call as she ran down the steps. “School was lots of fun. Mrs. Williams is very nice!” she announced. “I’m hungry; can I have a snack?” Charity asked hopefully.

“*May* I have a snack?” Maggie corrected.

“Sure, Mommy. We’ll have some cookies and milk,” the child answered innocently, and Maggie heard a deep chuckle right behind them.

She turned to see who it was, and her breath caught in her throat. The man standing there was handsome as could be. He had dark wavy hair, and the bluest eyes she’d ever seen. He tipped his hat and said, “I’m Nathaniel Williams.”

“I’m Maggie Sheldon,” she replied, wondering if her cheeks were as flushed as they felt. She’d never reacted this strongly to a man before, and she asked herself why this particular man affected her so. Her nipples were tingling and hard against her camisole, and her drawers were damp! Maggie hadn’t seen anyone since she broke up with Sheriff John; her priority was little Charity; but she hadn’t felt such a physical reaction to a man before now. Not even when John kissed her! It had been pleasant, but she’d had no trouble at all pushing him away and sending him on home. Maggie wasn’t so sure she could do that with this man. And that was after just looking at him one time!

“Your little girl is sweet as can be,” Nat said with a big smile for Charity.

“Thank you,” Charity politely answered. “Are you Mrs. Williams’ daddy?” She wanted to know.

“No,” he replied with another chuckle. “Your teacher is my mother. I came to walk her home from school, and to see how her first day teaching went. Probably like your mommy is doing with you?” His blue eyes returned to Maggie’s pretty face.

“Yes, I wanted to walk Charity home,” Maggie answered pleasantly, feeling tongue-tied. “You have a good day,” she added, taking Charity’s hand and leading her away before she could say something even more foolish!

“Nathaniel! What are you doing here?” Jane Williams greeted her son with a smile.

“I came to check on my Mama and make sure the kiddies all behaved and treated you with respect.” His blue eyes studied her face for any sign of stress.

“Silly! I can hold my own in a schoolroom of children, dear!”

“Did you have a good day?” he asked, taking her stack of books from her arms to carry them for her.

“I had a wonderful day. The first graders are all so cute!” she answered enthusiastically.

“I met one of them a few moments ago, Charity Sheldon.” He related the cookie story to his mother, knowing she would get a laugh from Charity’s grammar mistake, her mother correcting her, and Charity’s innocence in thinking her mother was asking for a cookie, too!

“There is something secretive about Charity’s mama,” Jane said quietly. “She does not want to be addressed as ‘Mrs.’ and I am sure her marriage wasn’t a happy one. Charity’s father is dead; I overheard her telling a couple of other children.”

“Oh!” Nat replied, not a bit pleased with himself for being so happy to hear the lovely redhead was a widow.

“How did *your* day go, dear?”

“Pretty well. I finally talked that elderly miser into selling me the building I’ve had my eyes on, and bought it before he could change his mind! It’s right between a dress shop and the restaurant we like so much. The back room is large enough to hold the printing press, and the front will make a nice office. It does need a bit of work done, but it won’t take me long to have it ready to go. The living quarters are small, but I’ll try to add a second story when I can afford it so you’ll be more comfortable. The main thing is to get the newspaper up and running so we get some income coming in. I’ll need to speak to all the business owners in town and see about advertising.”

“Are you going to start with a weekly edition like you’ve been saying?” Jane asked him.

“I think so, Ma. Do you think it a good idea?” He really wanted her opinion. He’d worked on newspapers for a few years now, but this would be his first time opening his own office.

“Well, yes. I believe you will be able to sell more papers in the beginning if you only publish once a week. When will you print the first edition?” she asked as they reached the boarding house where they were living temporarily.

“I’m hoping to be ready within two weeks’ time,” he answered.

“Hello!” Minnie Morgan greeted them cheerfully. “How was your first day of school, Jane? Did Nathaniel tell you he bought a building downtown? I’m going to hate it when you two move out!” Minnie was known for speaking fast and running her sentences together.

“Minnie, we will still be friends,” Jane said softly.

“This is so true. You will still be here in town, and that makes me so happy!” Minnie was a cheerful person.

It was quiet right now, but the noises coming from next door were driving her crazy and making it impossible for Maggie to concentrate! What could be going on that was making so much racket? She decided to make herself a cup of tea, but as she was walking to her stove, she heard a loud crash next door, and without giving it a second thought, she took off running, positive that someone had to be hurt! She didn’t give a thought to knocking, but pushed through the door to see a ladder lying on its side on the floor, and a man lying on his back, with a spilled paint bucket on top of him!

“Are you alright?” she asked, rushing to lift the bucket from his chest. She took off the apron she was wearing and started wiping the paint from his face, especially from around his eyes. She was startled when his eyes opened and she found herself drowning in their blue intensity. It was *him*! Nathaniel Williams. She felt the same reaction as the first time she set eyes on him, and he wasn’t colored in light brown paint then. She told herself that her initial reaction to the handsome man was just a fluke, but several days later, it was just the same!

“It’s my own stupid fault! I tried to reach too far, and the ladder tipped over,” Nat growled, disgusted with himself. “Now I have one hell of a mess to clean up!” he added.

“The first thing you need to do is get out of these clothes and wash the paint off of yourself. I’m afraid your clothing is ruined.”

Nat looked at the young widow and smiled at where his thoughts took him. She was the picture of innocence, however. “I can’t go back to the boarding house dripping paint all over. Mrs. Morgan would have my hide!”

“I agree. You can wash up out back, and I’ll go to the boarding house and get clean clothing for you, if you agree?” she offered.

“Thank you, Mrs. Sheldon. I appreciate the help.”

“Call me Maggie, please, and I’ll go and get you a bar of soap and a towel.” She rushed out the door, headed to her apartment and then grabbed what she needed and brought the items back. While she was gone Nathaniel had removed his paint soaked shirt. His chest was magnificent, and she felt her face burn in embarrassment, as she looked at him in obvious admiration.

“Thank you, Maggie. Do you own the dress shop next door?” he asked curiously, hoping it was true. He would love to have the pretty woman as his neighbor.

“Yes, I do. I’ll hurry on to Mrs. Morgan’s now and ask her help in getting clean clothing for you.” She turned to go.

“Maggie?”

“Yes?” She turned to face him

“Thank you.” He flashed her a smile that made her giggle.

“You need to wash your face, Mr. Williams!”

“Call me Nat, please.” He used the same words she had earlier, and he saw her nod in acknowledgement before she left to get him some clean clothing.

Minnie Morgan answered the door and looked at Maggie questioningly, but greeted her politely. Maggie explained the situation, and Minnie was very helpful in showing her to Nat’s room. She even helped her pick out some clothing, and even though Maggie didn’t ask, the older woman offered plenty of cleaning rags and another bucket, along with a bottle of turpentine to clean up the paint spill. “It’s certainly a good thing you heard the crash and went to help Nathaniel, Maggie. He and his mother are such nice people. I’m going to hate it when they move out! I feel as though Jane is a dear sister to me,” she confessed.

“My little girl loves her as a teacher, too,” Maggie said.

“That is so good to hear. This is Charity’s first year, right?”

“Yes, it is, and Mrs. Williams put her at ease right away.” Maggie thanked Minnie for her help, and then hurried back to the store right next to hers. Once she arrived she didn’t know what to do. If she barged in, she might find him completely stripped down, but how was he to

get his clean clothing if she didn't go inside? Finally, Maggie opened the door a crack. "Nat? Are you decent?" she called loudly.

"No," he answered truthfully. "If you put the clothes on the shelf on the back wall, I'll reach around and get them."

"Okay." Maggie crossed the room, making a wide berth around the spilled paint, and put the clothing on the shelf. "I'll step outside while you get dressed, and when you are finished, you can let me know, and I'll help you clean up the mess. Mrs. Morgan sent supplies."

"Thank goodness. It won't take me long to dress, Maggie." And it didn't. He opened the door within a couple of minutes and eyed the rags and bucket and the bottle of turpentine in appreciation. "You're the best, Maggie. I don't want you to think I'm being forward, but I would love to give you a big hug."

"I would want someone to help me if I fell off of a ladder," she replied, but she made no move to hug the handsome man. Just the idea was making her lower regions heat up with pleasure/pain! She didn't understand that at all. She just knew that she was treading dangerous ground for her and she needed to keep her head and not allow her emotions to get the best of her.

"Mrs. Morgan told us last night at dinner that you haven't lived in town too long; has it been an easy adjustment from where you lived before?" he asked, determined to learn about the pretty redhead. She seemed so shy for a woman who had already been married and had a child, and he was anxious to know more about her.

"We've been made to feel welcome. My business has been growing steadily, and so far I've made enough money to support Charity and myself. What kind of business are you opening?" she asked, trying to change the subject.