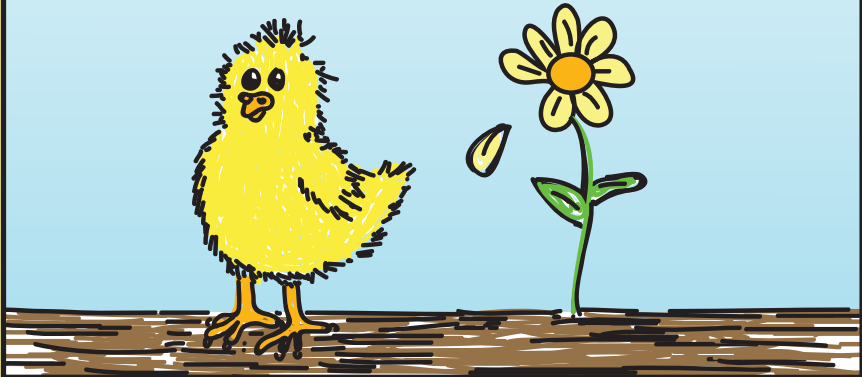


Growing Up Mabel



Written & Illustrated by
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Happy reading!

CHAPTER 1

When Pigs Fly

Mabel stood at the edge of the barn roof, a flapping chicken in each hand. She scanned the yard. A large pile of straw lay on the ground below her. Other chickens, safely on the ground, clucked as they bobbed and pecked in the straw. One or two cocked their head in Mabel's direction, watching their barnyard companions squawk and flail in Mabel's stern grip sixteen feet above.

Mabel stared up at the sky. It was a clear, sunny day. A light breeze blew strands of brown hair into her face. The weather was in perfect condition to test her theory. She had mustered up the courage to follow through with her plan. Holding tight to each chicken, she raised her arms high into the air.

"Mabel, don't you do it," cried Anna. She had been Mabel's friend since they were both in diapers. Anna was a worrier, and

rightfully so, as it wasn't uncommon for Mabel to get them both into trouble. In 1954, there wasn't much a headstrong girl like Mabel *could* do that wouldn't lead to some kind of mess...

Anna had witnessed scads of Mabel's crazy schemes, but this time the urgency in her voice was fierce.

"Your pa's gonna whup you, he will!"

"Never you mind about my pa," Mabel retorted, dropping the chickens to her sides. A chicken's legs burst loose from her grip, kicking and scratching at her hand. "Now looky here, Anna, you made me almost lose my chicken," she hollered.

She swung her arm around the struggling bird. The two chickens, now in close contact, pecked at one another while Mabel struggled to secure her grip again.

Planting her feet firmly on the roof she shouted to Anna, "I've thought long and hard about this and I'm jus' sure it'll work." Anna covered her eyes with both hands. "Now stand aside 'cause here I go!"

Mabel took a deep breath, raised the chickens above her head and inched to the very edge of the rusty, tin roof. She closed her eyes. Ignoring the pounding in her heart and the wave of heat that rushed to her face, she lifted one leg and stepped forward into open air.

She pushed her arms up and down and up and down again as fast as she could. The chickens squawked and flapped, feathers flew

everywhere as Mabel flung them about. Even with all the flapping of both Mabel and the chickens, down they fell like three balloons filled with water, landing with a heavy THUD in the straw.

The chickens in the yard scattered. Mabel still clung to her chickens as they continued to flail, scattering straw and feathers into the air. One chicken scrambled free from Mabel's grip and scurried away while the other tugged and pecked at Mabel's hand.

"Oh my lands!" Anna cried, running to the commotion in the pile of straw. She dug around in the straw until she saw Mabel's scratched and bleeding hand holding tight to the squirming hen.

"Mabel, say something!" she blubbered as she unburied Mabel's head. "Sweet Lord, she's gone and killed herself! MABEL!" she hollered, slapping Mabel's pale, straw-covered cheeks.

"Don't you be slappin' me," Mabel bellowed as she swung the still struggling chicken at Anna.

"You're lucky I ain't stranglin' you," Anna shouted as her blue eyes blazed at Mabel. "Now unhand that chicken 'fore you kill it dead. You'll be lucky enough if yer pa don't beat you for jumpin' off that roof, never mind if you kill one'a his chick'ns. Now leave go!" She shook Mabel's wrist until the chicken came loose and toppled down the pile of straw.

"Do you know how long it took me to catch that chicken?" Mabel sniffled, upset by her loss. "What if I need it again?"

“Miss smarty pants Mabel,” Anna retorted with a firm voice, “If you even think about jumpin’ off’a that roof again, I’m gonna beat you alongside with yer pa!”

“Jus’ cause it didn’t work this time,” Mabel protested, “doesn’t mean it won’t. I gotta try again. Now help me catch four more chickens.”

Anna huffed and climbed out of the straw. “I ain’t helpin’ you catch nothing. Now git out’a that straw ‘fore your folks find out what you been doin’ to their chickens,” she demanded, hands on her hips. “Really, Mabel, thinkin’ you could fly like that. They ought’a lock you away.” She rolled her eyes. “I’d tell ‘em so if I didn’t think they’d lock me up, too, jus’ for lettin’ you try!”

“You worry too much, Anna,” Mabel grunted as she tumbled out of the straw, brushing dust off her flower-printed, brown dress. “B’sides, I didn’t even get hurt,” she added, pulling a clump of straw from her apron pocket.

Anna frowned. “You sure look a mess. And it’a served you right if you had. You scared them poor chickens half to death, too. They won’t be no good for layin’ eggs now. You’ve gone and ruined ‘em.”

“That’s rubbish,” Mabel protested. “They’ll be layin’ eggs jus’ fine in the mornin’.”

“You jus’ wait and see, missy. My pa says chickens ain’t no

good once they've had the life scared out'a them. That's why he's always keeping the dogs out'a the pen, that's why. He don't want any'a our chickens goin' bad." Anna crossed her arms and gave Mabel a 'so there' look.

Mabel stared back at her with equal stubbornness. "That's fine. If they don't lay eggs no more, we'll just have 'em for dinner," she declared.

"They won't be no good for eatin' neither," Anna retorted. "Scared chickens is always tough. We done butchered a chicken that had been scared by a coyot' last fall and ma had to throw it out it was so tough. Couldn't even bite into it." She shook her head, "Yep, your pa's gonna be plenty mad at you."

Mabel twisted her apron in her hands. "What if I wasn't the first one to scare 'em?" she questioned, staring at the ground.

"Well, I won't tell if you don't," Anna promised, pouting as she inspected Mabel.

"Honest?" Mabel's eyes lit up.

"Honest," Anna paused. "But if you ever try flyin' with chickens again, I'll be the first to run to your pa to snitch, you hear?"

Mabel grinned from ear to ear. "I almost did it though," she bragged.

Anna rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Mabel, you'll be flyin' when pigs do."

Both girls jumped at the sound of the front door banging shut. Mabel's mother stood on the porch with a spoon in her hand. Her dark brown hair was tied in a loose bun. A few graying strands hung across her forehead.

"Mabel," her mother glared at the girls with burning eyes, "what in heaven have you been doin' to make yerself such a mess? Didn't I tell you to gather the eggs and bring 'em inside?" she exploded.

Mabel was terrified. "Yes, ma'am," she stammered, hiding her hands behind her back.

"Well? I ain't got all day. Have you even done what I asked yet?" she asked, shaking the spoon in Mabel's direction.

"Yes, ma'am," she answered, staring at the ground. "We jus' got to playin' is all. Right, Anna?" she added, hoping Anna would go along with her little white lie.

Anna glared at Mabel before turning a sweet smile to Mabel's mother. "We're awful sorry, Mrs. Campbell. We was jus' about to bring 'em in."

Mabel's mother pursed her lips. "An' jus' where are them eggs, young lady?"

Mabel pointed to the edge of the porch. Her mother's eyes caught sight of Mabel's bleeding hand.

"Lands, child! Whatever happened to your hand?" she

questioned, eyes large as she stared at the scratches that covered Mabel's hand.

Mabel looked to Anna. Anna looked back. Open mouthed, she stammered, "Well, you see, Mrs. Campbell, Mabel was gatherin' eggs, an' one o' them chickens wasn't gonna let her take 'em from the nest, so I told her to pick it up an' I'd get the eggs. But the chicken was plenty mad, so it pecked her!" Anna shook her head and crossed her arms.

Wide-eyed, Mabel stared at Anna who never, ever told a fib, but seeing how she did it to save Mabel from a keen lashing, Mabel shook her head to confirm the story to her mother.

"An' how do you explain the mess in yer hair, child?" Mabel's mother questioned suspiciously, looking from Mabel to Anna.

Anna felt through her long, blond hair and pulled out a few strands of straw. She looked at Mabel who shrugged as if she didn't notice that Anna, too, was a mess.

"We... we got so scared of the chicken," Anna stuttered, "that we ran as fast as we could out'a the hen house and landed right in this here pile o' straw," she gushed, pointing to the side of the barn.

"I ain't gonna be to blame for you gettin' dirty," Mabel's mother said, accepting Anna's explanation, though she was still puzzled. "Now both of you git to playin' somewhere else." She picked up the basket of eggs from the edge of the porch, pausing

before entering the house to give one final reminder to the girls.

“I mean it. You go make a mess somewhere else. Now git!” she admonished, shaking the spoon in their direction.

Mabel and Anna didn't wait for a third warning. They clutched the corners of their aprons and ran into the wheat field, giggling at their own cleverness and thankful to have avoided a harsh lashing from Mabel's mother.

CHAPTER 2

The Naked Truth

Mabel and Anna trudged through the wheat field. They had planned to do some extra chores at Anna's house in anticipation that her pa would take them into town to Mr. Albertson's corner store where they might get a few sweets for all their hard work.

It was early summer and the chores were already piling up. It was not out of the ordinary for the two friends to help each other with their daily responsibilities so that they would have more time to play each afternoon. They were both fast workers and, more often than not, were ready to run off and play long before lunch.

That morning was different, though. As Anna and Mabel approached the stream that ran halfway between their houses, they spotted something that neither of them were prepared to see. Splashing in the shallow waters of the stream was a boy, and he was

naked!

Anna immediately covered her eyes and turned her back to the dripping-wet figure. Mabel, however, stared wide-eyed and open-mouthed as though she had never before seen a boy.

His back was to the girls. He was squatting in the water, studying a crayfish he had captured. The sun beat against him causing his whole body to glisten. Mabel could see the outline of his spine and ribs as he breathed deep and let out a strong exhale.

He stood and turned toward Mabel, his attention still focused on his catch. He might not have noticed the girls if it weren't for Mabel's sudden giggle fit. She covered her mouth to stifle the giggles, hoping not to be noticed, but it was too late.

The boy looked up. Much to Mabel's surprise, he didn't seem angry or embarrassed. On the contrary, he stood tall and proud with a strange grin on his face. He was lean, but muscular for his age.

Anna peeked out from beneath her trembling fingers. She caught only a quick glance of the boy in all his glory before slapping a hand over Mabel's eyes as well.

Mabel continued to giggle.

"You ought to be ashamed o' yourself. Whatever gave you the idea to go splashin' around in that stream with no clothes on?" Anna chastised, her hands still covering both her own and Mabel's faces.

"You nearly spoiled our eyes!"

The boy released the crayfish and put his hands on his hips.

There was nothing shy about him!

“Nobody told me no girls would be comin’ by. How was I to know?”

“Course nobody told you! There ain’t no one could have known but us,” Anna argued.

“Then I can’t see how it’s my fault you two come an seen me here in this stream.” He crossed his arms, smirking.

Mabel sniggered.

“Don’t you be encouragin’ him, Mabel. Lands! It’s bad enough you looked at him long as you did!” Anna was working herself into a fluster.

“I don’ mind if she looks,” he teased. “Ain’t nothin’ to me that God didn’t give.”

“Now looky here,” Anna started, shaking her finger at the boy. She caught another glimpse of him still standing in the stream, beads of glistening water streaming down his arms and chest. She wasted no time clapping her hand over her eyes again. She spun around, forcing Mabel’s back to the boy as well. “For heaven’s sake, boy, put your clothes on so that we can pass through here!”

He rolled his eyes. “My name is Robbie, Robbie Nelson,” he announced as he made his way over to the bank of the stream where his clothes lay. He wiped off the remaining water that clung to his

body before slipping into his beat up overalls.

“I know that name,” Anna said as though someone told her she was having cooked spinach for breakfast. “You ‘n yer folks jus’ took up in that ol’ farm house cross the way.” She turned toward him, but remained faithful to her shielded eyes. “My pa says...”

“You can uncover your eyes now,” he interrupted. “I have my clothes on.”

Anna hesitated, but Mabel turned, prying Anna’s hand off of her eyes. “It’s true, Anna,” Mabel confirmed. “He ain’t fibbin’.”

Anna removed her hand from her eyes and looked at him with a severe stare. Robbie’s sopping, red hair dripped water onto his face.

“You’re still a sore sight,” Anna insulted. “Come along, Mabel. We got chores to tend to, an’ forgiveness to ask, all ‘cause of this boy!”

“Robbie,” he reminded.

“I heard you the first time,” Anna spat. “We’ll pay you no mind from here on out.” Anna threw her nose into the air and strutted down the stream to a shallower crossing.

Mabel stayed put for a moment, eyeing Robbie as he shook his hair free of water. Its copper hue shimmered under the beating sun. The ends curled like little half smiles all giggling at Mabel.

“You’d better get along ‘fore she comes back an’ hollers some more,” he told Mabel. “I ain’t much for the hollerin’ type,” he added,

glaring at Anna who tip-toed through the bubbling stream.

“She ain’t always hollerin’,” Mabel defended. “Jus’ when she thinks yer up to no good.”

“Do you holler, too?” he questioned with a raised brow.

“Oh, me?” Mabel asked, blushing. “No, I’m usually the one up to no good.”

Anna reached the opposite side of the stream. “Mabel Campbell, you best be gittin’ over here ‘fore your pa finds out we done run into that boy!” She put her hands on her hips and stomped her foot.

“There she goes hollerin’ again,” Robbie mumbled.

“I better do as she says or I’ll never hear the end,” Mabel admitted. “She’s right though. You oughn’t be swimmin’ naked where you ain’t sure who might be comin.” She bit her lip and turned to follow Anna.

Anna stood tapping her foot, glaring at Robbie as Mabel made her way across the stream. Robbie stared back. As Mabel’s back was turned, he stuck his tongue out at Anna.

“We never should’a even spoke to that boy,” Anna murmured through gritted teeth as Mabel jumped onto the bank beside her.

“Ain’t nothin’ but trouble, that boy.”

Mabel rolled her eyes. “We don’t even know him.”

“Anyone who goes rompin’ in no clothes is up to nothin’ but

no good,” she snapped. “Now, if I’s you I’d forgit we ever set eyes on that boy. He ain’t nothin’ but trouble.”

Mabel marched behind Anna without another word. She tried to put Robbie out of her mind, but every time she thought of something else, somehow Robbie entered the picture. If she thought about milking cows, suddenly Robbie was milking them, too. If she thought about cooking lunch, Robbie was at the table waiting. If she thought about playing in the wheat field, there was Robbie Nelson, buck-naked! She covered her eyes as though that might help get Robbie out of her mind, but it didn’t seem to do any good. All she managed to do was bump right into Anna.

“Mind where yer goin’, clumsy,” Anna reprimanded. “You ain’t losin’ your eyes are you?” She squinted at Mabel. “I knew it! Seein’ that boy has gone an’ made you blind! My pa said God’d take your sight if you ever seen something you shouldn’ta.” She inspected Mabel’s deep brown eyes.

“I ain’t losin’ my sight, Anna.” Mabel swatted at Anna’s hands. “I’s jus’ rubin’ them, that’s all.”

“You better be prayin’ God doesn’t punish you for gawkin’ at that boy. If I was God, soon as you looked, I’d turn you blind.” Anna always had a way of making her point.

“I wasn’t gawkin’, and I didn’t look at ‘im on purpose. He jus’ showed up out’a nowhere!” Mabel crossed her arms, hurt that Anna

didn't stop to consider she, herself, saw as much of Robbie as Mabel.

"An' no you wouldn't make me blind."

"I sure would," Anna assured. "Gotta teach you somehow."

"An' what about you? Ain't God gonna make you jus' as blind?"

"Not one bit," Anna retorted. "I covered my eyes." She untied her bonnet from her apron and placed it neatly on her head before nodding to Mabel with a 'know it all' gesture.

Mabel had no argument. Had she thought to cover her eyes, too, she might have been spared Anna's lecture. At least she knew better for next time.

Next time? she thought. *Would there be a next time?*

She pictured herself with Anna marching between houses, and sure enough, there was Robbie Nelson in the stream. Mabel huffed and shook her head, resuming her walk. She was determined to forget about it.

Just as she thought she had succeeded in putting that whole morning aside, she felt a rough tug on her braids. Startled, she screamed and turned to find Robbie standing behind her with a large grin on his face.

Dumbfounded, Mabel stared at him. She bit her lip, wondering what he could possibly want from her.

Before her mind was even made up, Mabel's legs began to

move. She was running and Robbie was quick on her trail. She didn't know where she was going, but knew that the last thing she could do was let herself get caught by the hands of that boy. Oh, the lecture she would get from Anna!

She pushed herself as fast as she could go, but Robbie was catching up. Almost as suddenly as he had grabbed her braids, he snatched hold of her hand and down she tumbled, into the tall wheat surrounding them.

She scurried away from his grip and bounced back to her feet. That time, she didn't run. She put her hands on her hips and stood firm, glaring at the panting boy in front of her.

"Whatever now?" she questioned, squinting her eyes. The response she got was not at all what she expected.

CHAPTER 3

Twenty Babies

Mabel clutched the edge of her apron and squeezed her eyes shut. Any minute it would be over. Her stomach flopped and a rush of heat flooded her face. She pulled away, avoiding the glimmering, green eyes of the neighbor boy.

The corners of Mabel's mouth curled. She fought the instinct to laugh. Robbie stuffed his hands in his pockets and stared at her. Mabel glanced up. He displayed a big, toothy grin in her direction before he turned and dashed back through the wheat field toward home.

Mabel covered her face with both hands. "Did I really do it? Did I really just kiss Robbie Nelson?" She tugged at her braids and shook her head. She licked her lips. The salty taste of Robbie's sweat bit her tongue. She let out a loud "Yack!" wiping the back of her hand

across her mouth. Her eyes twinkled.

“Mabel,” she heard Anna’s voice call in the distance. “Mabel, where are you?”

Mabel turned to see a bouncing, blue bonnet headed in her direction. Anna was barely taller than the blades of wheat that surrounded her. She huffed and puffed as she made her way toward Mabel.

“Why did you run off like that? You know I can’t keep up with you!” she chastised. Her pink cheeks drooped as she frowned in Mabel’s direction. She tossed her windblown hair over her shoulders and planted both fists firmly on her hips. “You shoudn’ta run off with that boy neither! He’s a no-gooder, my pa says!”

Mabel couldn’t help but smile. “Well, he was chasin’ me. What was I supposed to do?”

“Run straight home. That’s what I’da done.” She looked grimly at Mabel. “An’ where is that boy now, I wonder?” she said, glancing around the field. “Gone to tell all the other boys he’d just been chasin’ Mabel, I bet. Who knows what other stories he might be tellin’.” Anna covered her mouth. “You better watch, I bet he’ll be tellin’ them other boys he’s been kissin’ on you!”

Mabel tried desperately not to giggle, but she couldn’t hide her cherry face.

Anna gasped, her eyes bulging. “He has been kissin’ on you!”

Oh, Mabel, don't you know anything?" she groaned.

Mabel's smile faded only a little. "I didn't mean to. It jus' happened."

Anna shook her head. "I'm sure your pa will be plenty mad now that you're gonna be having babies! You think about that now, Mabel Campbell," Anna crossed her arms and nodded.

"What do you mean, havin' babies?" Mabel's smile disappeared.

"That's what my sister, Lucy, told me. That kissin' boys means you're gonna have babies." Anna pointed her finger at Mabel. "Lots of 'em."

Mabel's heart dropped into her stomach. "She's fibbin'. I seen your sister kissin' on plenty of boys, and she ain't got no babies."

"Just you wait. God's gonna be plenty mad at you for kissin' that boy. He's gonna give you twenty babies, all of them to look jus' like Robbie Nelson!" Anna pursed her lips.

Mabel's mouth fell open. "You hush your mouth! God would do no such thing, would he?" she added with a small whimper.

"I bet he will. You'll be learned then. My pa says God is always punishin' those that done bad things." Anna pulled her bonnet down over her ears. "Now I'll be sayin' good-bye to you, missy. An' don't come calling at my house when you have all them babies at your heels!" She stomped away.

Mabel's legs felt weak. She lowered herself into the thicket of the wheat field. "What have I done? Twenty babies, all for kissin' one boy!" Her cheeks went numb. "There ain't no way that's true," she whispered, tears welling in her eyes. "An' I'm gonna prove it!" Mabel got up, wiped her eyes and marched straight home.

Her stomach tied in knots as she drew closer to the porch. She stopped and stared at the door. The paint was peeling off of the edges and there were a few small holes in the screen. She knew her mother would be inside.

Mabel hesitated asking her mother, but she had to know if what Anna said was true.

Mabel marched up the steps and pulled the screen door open. It creaked and squealed. The smell of boiled potatoes filled the kitchen. Mabel walked in and released the door. It banged against the frame. The clatter got her mother's attention.

"What have I told you about slammin' that door?" she reprimanded as she turned from the stove to see Mabel standing in the doorway.

Mabel wasn't listening. "How are babies made?" she asked.

Her mother froze. Her hands shook. The half-peeled potato she had been working on fell to the floor with a dull thud. She stared at Mabel as though she had never before seen her.

"What did you say?" her mother squeaked.

“I said,” Mabel stated, ignoring her mother’s strange expression, “How are babies made?”

“Heaven’s child,” her mother gasped as she fumbled with the potato on the floor. “Where did you, how could you... why would you even ask such a thing?” She wiped the potato off on her apron and dropped it into the stew pot.

“Anna said that her sister said that God would give you twenty babies if you kissed a boy,” Mabel explained.

Her mother turned to the stove and shook her head. “What next with this child?” she wailed to the ceiling as she plopped three more unpeeled potatoes into the pot. She turned to face Mabel. Her eyes were stern. “You haven’t been kissin’ no boys, have you?”

Mabel’s blood ran cold. She looked nearly as frightened as her mother did. “No, mama! I swear,” she lied. Mabel thought for sure that God would give her two or three more babies on top of it all for lying. But a few more babies would be nothing compared to a keen lickin’ if her mother found out she had kissed a boy. “We seen Lucy kissin’ a boy,” she stuttered, “an’ Anna said kissin’ boys...”

“You pay no mind to what Lucy does, you hear! Kissin’ boys at her age. I hope that’s all she’s doin’,” she stammered, then shook her finger at Mabel, “I don’t never want to hear about you kissin’ no boys!” She wiped her hands on her apron. “Honestly, you’re only twelve years old, child,” she muttered as she turned back to her pile of

potatoes. “Askin’ about babies. Wait ‘til your pa hears about this...” she continued to grumble to herself.

Mabel watched her mother peel a potato, slice it and drop the chunks into the pot. She would occasionally shake her head and mutter something under her breath. A few more potatoes went into the pot unpeeled.

Mabel bit her lip. “Mama,” she whispered, “but where *do* babies come from?”

Her mother spun around. “Mabel, you git up to yer room and don’t come down again ‘til yer married!” She grabbed a wooden spoon and shook it at Mabel.

Mabel raced out of the kitchen. Her mother was close on her heels, the spoon in one hand and a half-peeled potato in the other.

“An’ don’t you never ask me that again ‘til you are!” she hollered.

Mabel dashed into her room and slammed the door.

“An’ don’t you be slammin’ no doors!” her mother howled. She heaved a sigh and leaned against the wall. “Sweet Lord,” her mother moaned to the ceiling. “Don’t you never give me another child like that! Babies...” she groaned. “What ever could be next?”

CHAPTER 4

How to Ask a Simple Question?

Mabel did stay in her room all afternoon, not even coming out for lunch. Her mind raced hour after hour.

How did I get myself into such a mess? First I'm gonna go blind for seein' Robbie Nelson naked, and now I'm supposed to have twenty babies all because he had to go and kiss me? I don't even want to think about what'll happen for the fibs I told. Will all my babies be blind, too, just to teach me a lesson?

Her stomach ached as question after question plagued her.

She tried to make sense of the words her mother spoke, *kissin' ... I hope that's all she's doin'.*

“If kissin’ makes people have babies, why would mama hope that’s all Lucy was doin’?” Mabel wondered. “Is there more to it all than just kissin’? Or is kissin’ all it takes?”

The more she thought about it, the more upset her stomach became. She flopped down on her bed and swore that if God would forgive her just this once, she would never kiss another boy, or fib about anything else, ever again!

Mabel couldn't tell how long she had been in her room, but come dinnertime, she was sure glad when her mother told her to come out and set the table.

"There's a surprise waitin'," her mother said, beaming.

Mabel loved surprises, but could not imagine what she deserved after a day like that. She turned the corner into the kitchen. Much to her horror, sitting on the table was a baby basket. Inside was a small bundle wrapped in blankets. Mabel, eyes glued to the mass of wriggling cloth, approached the basket with caution.

Hands shaking, Mabel lifted the blanket. A small, wrinkled baby with barely a tuft of hair on top of its shiny, bald head, smiled up at her and winked.

"But, mama," Mabel protested with a shaky voice, "I ain't ready to take care o' no babies."

"No one's askin' you to babysit, Mabel," her mother hushed, "Now mind your manners!"

Mabel was confused. She thought for sure this baby was one of the twenty babies God was going to give her as punishment for kissing Robbie.

“We’re havin’ company, so set four extra places,” her mother added, pushing Mabel toward the cupboard. “Lands, I thought you’d be excited to see the neighbor’s new baby,” Mabel heard her mother grumble as she moved to the stove.

Mabel looked around the kitchen. She had been so distracted by the baby she didn’t even notice that Mr. and Mrs. Feltch, along with their son and new daughter-in-law, were sitting at the table. Cindy, Peter Feltch, Jr.’s new wife, went over to the basket. She picked up the baby and cradled it in her arms. She wrinkled her petite nose as she touched it to the baby’s face. The baby gurgled and cooed. Cindy turned her attention to Mabel.

“You can hold her if you want to, Mabel,” she offered sweetly. “This is the first time you’ve gotten to see her, isn’t it?”

Mabel forced a smile. “I’d better set the table, like ma asked.” She didn’t want to seem rude, but at that point, the last thing she wanted to do was hold a baby. “Maybe after dinner.”

Cindy nodded and made funny faces and noises at the baby. Mabel turned to the cupboard. She could hear the baby squeal as she took down a stack of cream-colored plates. She set them on the table, trying to avoid eye contact with everyone in the room.

“My, my, Mabel, I haven’t seen you since Pete and Cindy’s wedding,” Mrs. Feltch spoke up. “You sure are growing like a weed.”

“It’s been almost a year,” Mr. Feltch added.

Mrs. Feltch seemed embarrassed. “With the marriage, and the new baby, well, it’s been hard to keep up with our neighbors.” She sat up straighter in her chair and adjusted the hem of her dress. It was a lot nicer than any of Mabel’s mother’s dresses. “We do appreciate the invite, Sarah,” she said to Mabel’s mother. Mrs. Feltch touched the back of her perfectly arranged hair and stared at the plate as Mabel set it before her.

“It’s nice we could finally make it,” Mr. Feltch added, giving a strange look to his wife.

“It ain’t nothin’,” Mabel’s mother replied, wiping her hands on her apron. “We know what it’s like with a new baby an’ all.” She gestured toward Cindy whose attention was still on the squirming baby. Mabel’s mother continued, “We won’t never forgit all the help you lent me and Art when we first had Mabel. We’d like to have never gotten our heads together if it weren’t for you.”

There was an awkward silence. Mabel’s mother continued to wipe her hands on her apron. She looked at the floor. Mabel brought napkins and spoons to the table. The silence made her uneasy.

Finally, Mr. Feltch spoke. “Well, it certainly smells good, whatever you’re cooking.” He removed a pair of glasses from his nose and polished them with the napkin Mabel set in front of him. Mabel hoped he didn’t notice the small hole forming in the corner.

“Potato stew and corn muffins,” Mabel’s mother responded,

turning her attention to the stove. “It’s Art’s favorite.”

Mabel’s father was not home from work yet. The summer days were still short, but when Mabel’s father wasn’t home by dark, her mother worried.

Mr. Feltch noticed. “Is he still tending to the Mason’s fields as well?”

Mabel’s mother lowered her head. “Our fields still ain’t doin’ so well. But it’s jus’ until we can get our crops together. Then we’ll have our farm running like it should and he won’t have to work for the Mason’s no more.”

“I see,” replied Mr. Feltch with a sympathetic look.

Mabel finished setting the table. Her stomach growled. “Ma, when are we gonna eat?” Mabel knew better than to ask under normal circumstances. They always waited for her father to get home before either one of them took a single bite. But with company like the Feltch’s, Mabel wondered if the same rules applied.

“Well, I suppose it’d be rude to keep our company waitin’,” her mother answered, blushing.

“Nonsense,” interrupted Mr. Feltch. “We’ll be fine until Arthur gets home.”

Lucky for Mabel, who was so hungry she could have eaten a horse, her father arrived a few minutes later. He greeted the Feltch’s and patted Mabel on the shoulder.

With everyone seated, Mabel's mother put the corn muffins on the table and dished out the stew. Mabel saw her blush and fumble a few times as she tried to avoid the unpeeled potatoes that bobbed on the stew's surface.

Once plates were filled, Mabel paid little attention to the small talk that floated around the table. She kept her mouth full and her eyes on that baby. If it even looked at her, she wrinkled her nose at it, making plenty sure it understood she had no intentions of raising babies of her own any time soon.

After dinner, Mabel helped clean the kitchen while her parents offered coffee to the Felch's.

"None for me," refused Cindy, "It's bad for the baby. I'll stay in here and keep Mabel company."

Once everyone had settled in the living room, Cindy whispered to Mabel, "Tell you the truth, I can't stand the smell of coffee. Makes my stomach hurt just thinkin' about it."

"Why do suppose it does that?" Mabel asked as she wiped the tabletop.

"I'm not sure, but I think it's because of the baby. When I was first expecting, the baby, that is, I had awful stomach-aches. My mama tried to give me coffee to sooth it, but it just made it worse!"

Mabel thought of her own stomach-ache earlier that day. It made her nervous to hear that Cindy, too, had stomach-aches because

of her baby. “Do babies always cause stomach-aches?”

Cindy shook her head yes. “Mama called it morning sickness,” she explained.

Mabel was relieved when she recalled that her stomach-ache occurred well into the afternoon.

“But,” Cindy continued, “sometimes, I even got sick in the afternoon.”

Mabel’s heart flopped. She had to find out all she could from Cindy while the finding was good.

Mabel eased herself into the chair across from Cindy. The baby was asleep. Mabel recalled her mother’s reaction to being asked where babies come from and knew if she wanted any real answers, she had to be careful how she brought up the subject to Cindy.

Mabel stared at the white tuft of hair on the baby’s head. “How come she’s got white hair?” she opened the conversation. “Pete, Jr.’s got black hair, and yers is mostly brown,” she observed as Cindy’s chestnut locks slipped over her shoulder.

“My mama said I had blond hair when I was a baby, too,” she responded with a giggle. “Sometimes I wish it was still blond.”

“Oh, but your hair is sure pretty,” Mabel complimented, hoping to butter up Cindy. “I bet the baby’s hair will be, too.”

“I’m sure it will,” Cindy agreed. She brushed the baby’s hair softly with her hand and stared adoringly at its small features.

“Did you want this baby?” Mabel asked, trying to ease the conversation in a more informative direction.

“Oh, yes, very much,” Cindy assured.

“How did you know that you were expectin’?”

“Well, there are ways you can tell, I guess, but I didn’t know any of them ‘til it all happened,” she tilted her head and looked at Mabel.

“And how did it happen?” Mabel bit her lip. She thought she did a good job of casually bringing her question into the conversation, but would Cindy be willing to tell her?

“How did what happen?” Cindy asked with blank eyes.

“The baby,” Mabel whispered, “How did you get the baby?”

Cindy smiled. Her blue eyes twinkled. “She was a gift from God.”

That was not what Mabel wanted to hear. Cindy wanted her baby, so sure it was a gift to her. But Mabel didn’t want any. Thinking of a baby as a gift was hard for Mabel to do. But it still didn’t explain how they came to be. She had to be bold.

“Did God give you that baby for kissin’ Pete, Jr.?” She held her breath.

Cindy shifted in her chair. “God gave me this baby because I love Pete and we got married so we could raise a family.”

“But did the baby come because you kissed Pete? Or any other

boys?” Mabel shouldn’t have asked.

Cindy’s mouth fell open. “I have not been kissing other boys. I love Pete and he’s the only man I’ll ever kiss!” Her face turned red as she glared at Mabel.

“No, I didn’t mean...” Mabel stuttered.

“I don’t want to know what you meant, Mabel. But I think I’m ready to have some coffee now!” Cindy got up from the table. “And little Audrey is bound to have black hair, just like her daddy!” she added before hurrying into the living room.

It wasn’t long after Cindy left the kitchen that the Felch’s decided they had had enough coffee and it was time to go. Mabel felt terrible that she offended Cindy, but at least she learned a little more about why God would give someone a baby. Mabel wasn’t married yet, and didn’t want to raise a family, so maybe God would spare her all those babies until she was ready. Either way, Mabel had hope. As far as she could tell, there seemed to be more to having babies than just kissing.

CHAPTER 5

Egg Beating

Three whole days had passed since Mabel kissed Robbie, and three whole days went by without a single sign of Anna. Mabel labored through her chores alone, which gave her plenty of time to think.

She had not talked to anyone since they had dinner with the Feltch's. Mabel's mother seemed to know it was Mabel's fault that the Feltch's left so abruptly. She had sent her to bed early that night and gave her extra chores to do over the next few mornings. She regretted not having Anna there, but having more to do helped the days pass quickly.

All the same, Mabel's head was still buzzing with questions about kissing boys, and even worse, babies.

Mabel slouched in the doorway of the henhouse. She stared

blank-eyed at a chicken huddled in her nest. An empty basket hung in Mabel's loose grip. She swung it back and forth, humming a dull tune under her breath. The hens clucked and scuttled loudly. Mabel heard footsteps scrape in the dirt behind her.

"I'm gettin' to it," she huffed, turning to face who she thought would be her mother.

"If you don' want my help, jus' say so an' I'll march straight home, Mabel." Anna frowned and crossed her arms.

Mabel looked at her with suspicion. "What're you doin' here?"

"I've come to help you with yer chores. What else would I be doin' here this early?" Anna grabbed the basket from Mabel's hand and ducked into the henhouse.

"I thought you was done bein' my friend," Mabel stated in a cold tone.

Anna stood with her back to Mabel. She sighed and let her arms drop to her side. The basket caught the corner of her apron, tugging at it as she lowered the basket to the ground. Anna put her hands on her hips and spun around.

"Well, I can't let no one who's expectin' babies do all her chores by herself."

Mabel rolled her eyes. "Would you quit with that rubbish? I ain't gonna have no babies. Not now anyway." She stomped past Anna, snatching the basket as she moved to the nests. "An' if you say

one more thing about it, you can go home. I won't be stoppin' you."

Anna's face was red. "You best be careful, Mabel. My pa says..."

"I don' care what your pa says!" Mabel spat. "I learnt my lesson plenty, now you can jus' stop tellin' your fibs." She grabbed an egg and tossed it into the basket.

Anna's mouth fell open. "I ain't fibbin'!"

"Well you certainly ain't tellin' the truth." Mabel grabbed another egg and threw it into the basket. It hit the other egg and cracked.

"Mabel Campbell, you're gonna ruin them eggs!" Anna grabbed the basket handle and tugged.

"Leave go!" Mabel insisted. "They're my eggs. I can break 'em if I want to!" She pulled the basket toward her.

"And your ma's gonna whup a switch on yer behind if you don't hand over that basket and quit throwin' eggs," Anna argued.

"I'll break an egg on you if you don't leave go!" Mabel grabbed another egg from the hen's nest and held it in her fist, ready to throw.

"You wouldn't dare! Now put that egg down or I'll..." Anna scanned the nest. She grabbed the last egg and held it up. "...Or I'll crack this egg on your head!"

Mabel didn't hesitate. Just as soon as Anna's threat left her

mouth, Mabel drew back her arm and heaved the egg at Anna. It hit her in the chest, cracking on impact. Mixtures of clear and yellow goo oozed down the front of her bright green dress. Anna's eyes widened as she stared in disbelief at Mabel. Mabel chuckled to herself.

“Now I told you I'd do it,” Mabel defended. “You should'a jus'...”

Before Mabel could finish her thought, Anna reared up and smashed the egg she had been holding right on top of Mabel's head. Bits of shell stuck to Anna's slimy hand. The rest of the egg dripped down Mabel's forehead.

They stared at each other, red-faced. Mabel clenched her jaw. Anna tightened her fists. As though a bell sounded giving them the signal, the girls grabbed at the nearest eggs and smashed and smeared them all over one another.

The basket tipped over. The few eggs inside broke. Fistfuls of straw were plunged down dress fronts and in hair. Mabel snatched a chicken by the leg, ready to throw it at Anna.

“Mabel! Anna! What in heaven are you two doin' to my eggs!” Mabel's mother's voice cracked and her hands flew into the air.

Mabel and Anna froze. They looked at each other with terrified eyes. Anna put down the egg in her hand and tipped the basket up right. She looked to Mabel and then to Mabel's mother.

Mabel could see Anna's mind quick at work. She watched her,

too scared to move a muscle.

Mabel's mother made several gestures trying to scold them, but nothing came out of her mouth. All she could do was look at the egg and straw covered girls. She crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows, waiting for an explanation.

Anna turned to Mabel. "Are you alright?" Anna asked Mabel in a concerned voice. "You really ought to be more careful, Mabel. Honestly, trippin' over the basket."

Anna's eyes pleaded with Mabel. Mabel scowled. "Well, if you hadn'ta scared me like that..." Mabel got to her knees and stood up, wiping slime and dirt from her dress.

Mabel's mother stared at them in disbelief. "You mean to tell me all this mess is from Mabel fallin' over the basket?" She tapped her foot and glared from one girl to the next.

"Yes, ma'am," Anna answered in a honey-sweet voice. "How else could it'a happened?"

"I was gatherin' the eggs, like you told me to, mama," Mabel explained, "when all of a sudden I turned to see somebody crouchin' in the door there, and, well, I wasn't expectin' Anna, so it startled me, and I turned to run, and tripped right here over this basket."

Mabel's mother pursed her lips. "And how did you come to be covered in eggs, too, Anna?"

"Oh, well," she looked to Mabel and then the basket. "You

see, I came running over to see if Mabel was alright. But she didn't recognize me on account of hittin' her head there on the nest box." She pointed to the crate in which a disheveled nest lay among a few scattered eggshells. "She was so confused, she started throwing eggs at me." Mabel elbowed Anna. Anna looked with shifting eyes at Mabel's mother. "It's a mighty good thing you came along when you did. Who knows what might'a happened if you didn't." Anna bit her lip.

Mabel stared at the ground. She felt her mother's eyes burning into her very soul.

Mabel's mother wrung her hands, looking like she might beat both girls on the spot. Mabel was sure her mother would send her and Anna to fetch a whipping switch. Instead, her mother threw up her hands in frustration.

She shook her head. "Finish gatherin' the eggs," Mabel's mother sighed. "Then march straight inside to wash, you hear!" she added, pointing to Mabel. Still shaking her head, she turned and went back to the house.

When she was sure her mother was gone, Mabel whispered to Anna, "That was a close one!"

Anna turned and slapped Mabel's hand.

"Ouch! What was that for?" Mabel questioned rubbing her pink wrist.

“That’s for makin’ me fib to your ma twice in one week!”

Anna glared at Mabel. “Now let’s get these eggs gathered ‘fore I hit you again.” Anna picked up the basket and filled it from the row of nests. Mabel joined her, but neither spoke a word.

Once the eggs were gathered, Mabel took the basket to the porch and set it beside the door. She turned to face Anna.

“I suppose you’ll be wantin’ help with your chores?”

Anna shrugged. “If you want to.”

“I gotta clean up first, but I promise just as soon as I am, I’ll come straight over.”

Anna nodded. “Alright. I’ll see you in a little while then.”

Mabel giggled. “You might wanna clean up yourself, you know.”

Anna lifted the skirt of her dress and inspected the fabric. “I’ll jus’ stop at the stream on the way home. I’ve already been gone long enough. I don’ have time to wash my dress properly. B’sides, it’ll be easier to explain why I’m wet than why I’m late.” She turned and headed toward the wheat field.

Mabel watched her go. She was glad that Anna had come over, even if they did cover each other in eggs. Mabel vowed never to let anything come between her and Anna again.

CHAPTER 6

Mud Pie

Mabel hated taking baths. It wasn't so much the bathing part as the time it took to do it. The water was never warm enough and she didn't like the smell of the soap. She usually just splashed around and dunked her head under to make her mother think she had washed from head to toe.

That day, though, there would be no hiding from a full scrub down. By the time the water was drawn to Mabel's satisfaction, the eggs had already begun to dry in her hair. It was knotted and rough and worst of all, painful to clean.

After what seemed like forever, Mabel was free to join Anna at her house to help with chores. Mabel could only imagine the trouble Anna had at the stream trying to wash the egg from her hair. She didn't even have soap!

Mabel figured that if she hurried, she might still find Anna there and could help her get the dried yolk knots out of her golden locks. She was half way to the stream when she thought to bring soap, but it was too late to turn back. Mabel wasn't sure if Anna would even be there anyway.

Mabel trudged through the tall blades of wheat until she arrived at the stream. She scanned the water's edge up and down, with no sign that Anna was nearby. It was probably for the best because Anna was very particular about her hair. Mabel was sure that pulling knots out of it would have led to another fight. With that in mind, she moved down stream to the shallow crossing.

A movement further down caught Mabel's attention. Looking up she spotted a figure in the distance. The glossy, red hair was unmistakable. Robbie Nelson was playing, not a hundred yards from where Mabel stood in the middle of the stream.

Water soaked into her shoes without her noticing. Her heart beat fast with mixed emotions. Part of her wanted to run up the stream to meet Robbie, but she'd never be able to explain to Anna that she had met up with Robbie Nelson again. She didn't want another lecture from Anna, nor to fight with her again. Anna's chores were far more grueling than Mabel's, and there was no telling what they would find to throw at each other. Mabel thought of the horse stalls and winced.

One bath was enough for her!

She gave into friendship rather than the boy and made up her mind to march straight to Anna's house, until she heard a giggle. Mabel's heart skipped a beat. Face flushed, she held her breath, hoping she was mistaken.

She listened hard. Sure enough, a sickening, sweet giggle echoed over the stream. Mabel's insides boiled.

"Is Robbie with another girl?" she wondered out loud. "Could he be *kissing* her?"

Mabel stood frozen in the stream, feet soaked, face red. Worst of all, Mabel was jealous. She had never felt that way before. She didn't know whether to cry or scream.

"Just wait 'til I tell Anna," she muttered. "But what will Anna say?" *'I told you he was a no-gooder,'* Mabel imagined Anna's gloating response. She couldn't tell Anna. She'd never understand. Mabel sure didn't want to admit to anyone that she even liked that boy, especially to Anna.

There was just one thing to do. Mabel would march right up to Robbie and tell him off. She'd also tell his new girlfriend she'd better watch out, because it was a well known fact that kissing boys meant that she would be having babies!

Mabel's jealousy fueled her as she stomped through the water toward the sound of giggling, hoping to get a good look at the girl so she could tell everyone who she saw kissing on Robbie Nelson.

The giggling stopped. Mabel wondered if they had run off. She was relieved to think she might never know who the other girl was, but at the same time she was angry that she wouldn't have the chance to give Robbie a piece of her mind.

She crouched in the wheat, listening. The giggling had certainly stopped, but was replaced by an even worse sound. Kissing! Mabel's temper flared! She was determined to see once and for all who was with Robbie. She stood, ready to shout whatever came to mind. Her eyes locked on Robbie. He stood toward Mabel with his face pressed against that of another girl. The wheat was tall. Mabel had trouble seeing the back of the girl's head.

Mabel was furious. She was consumed with burning curiosity. Her temper boiled! She had to know who the girl was. She tiptoed close, waiting for that endless kiss to be over. She stuck her tongue out at the thought of her own kiss with Robbie. She wanted to throw up. After what seemed like forever, the two love birds parted. Robbie gave the girl the same toothy grin he had given Mabel and turned like a triumphant weasel to run and tell all his friends he'd just kissed two girls in three days!

Mabel wanted to chase him down and beat him like the dirty cheat he was. But even more, Mabel wanted to know who her competition was. She eyed the girl who stood dreamily in the field staring after Robbie's fleeing image. Mabel stewed.

With Robbie out of sight, the girl turned toward the stream. She must have been standing on tiptoes to kiss Robbie, because she all but disappeared in the wheat as she headed toward the water. Mabel crawled toward the stream, wanting to get a good look at the mystery girl.

The girl squatted at the stream, head tipped upside down, swishing her hair in the water. Her bright green dress was smeared with goo and dirt. Mabel couldn't believe what she was seeing. The girl sitting at the stream, who not a minute ago was locking lips with her Robbie, the girl who now owned all of Mabel's deepest resentment, was none other than Anna!

Mabel was crushed. *How could Anna do this to me? Doesn't she know I like Robbie? Wasn't it Anna who called him a no-gooder, and wasn't it Anna that told me what happens when a girl kisses a boy?* Mabel felt betrayed. Even more, she felt like a fool. Anna was her best friend, and she had to go ruin it by puckering her lips where they didn't belong!

Mabel had lots of questions for Anna! *Maybe Anna hadn't recognized Robbie? Maybe she thought he was someone else? Maybe Anna didn't mean to do it? Maybe...maybe...maybe...* She tried to be reasonable; but no matter what she thought, her conclusion was that Anna did it on purpose, just to hurt her.

Mabel stood, intending to push Anna into the water, but

queasiness swept over her. She longed to run and tell Anna's pa what she just saw. She wanted to hear Anna's yelps as her pa whuped her. Mabel wanted revenge! But how? She didn't really want to hurt Anna. No bruises or eggshells. She just wanted Anna to feel as rotten as she did.

Anna got up from the stream and ran home. Mabel didn't have the energy to chase her. She felt miserable, like everything good in her life had disappeared. She gritted her teeth as a sour taste filled her mouth.

Mabel sank into the wheat. She stared at the stream's current as it bubbled by without a care in the world. Mabel leaned forward, ready to fall into the water and disappear downstream with the rest of the dirt and mud.

"MUD!" Mabel jerked back from the stream. That was it! Mabel would make Anna eat mud! Then she would know how Mabel felt! It was a rotten thing to do, but what better revenge than tricking Anna into eating MUD?

"How can I trick her? Think, think, Mabel," she told herself. "What is Anna's favorite thing to eat?" Mabel and Anna both liked sweets, especially chocolate.

Mabel scooped up a handful of mud from the bottom of the stream. It slopped through the cracks in her fingers and plopped into the water. That mud was too slippery to trick anyone into thinking it

was chocolate. Maybe she could tell Anna it was fudge? But what would she put it on? Ice cream would melt before Mabel had the chance to deliver it. She thought about using it as frosting for a cake, but mud would be too heavy. The cake would be sure to go flat.

Mabel's eyes lit up. "Mud pie! Brilliant! Mud pie!" she sang as she splashed through the stream toward home. She paused, composed herself and held her hands out in front of her as though presenting the pie to Anna. "I made it just for you," she mocked. "I felt awful bad I couldn't get here in time to help with chores." Mabel curled her lips. "I'll teach you to go kissin' boys behind Mabel Campbell's back!" she gloated as she ran toward home.

CHAPTER 7

With Sprinkles on Top

Mabel swiped a pie pan from the cupboard without her mother noticing. She planned out what she would need, then gathered everything together and ran back to the stream. Her mother didn't even know she had come home.

Mabel carried the pan, a small bag of flour and candy sprinkles, wrapped in the folds of her apron, careful not to let any of it fall from her grasp as she scurried through the wheat field.

At the stream, Mabel wasted no time in digging through the sand to reach the murky slop beneath it. Using both hands to scoop the mud out of the water, she let it drain then dropped it into the pan. When the pie pan was filled, Mabel took care to clean the edges of any extra mud. It had to look good or Anna would never fall for it.

Mabel frowned at the mushy mess. A pool of water lay on top of the "pie." She tried to drain it off, but spilled half of the mud.

Frustrated, but determined, Mabel scooped more mud out of the stream, careful to let as much water drain out before adding it to the pan.

She cleaned the edges again and inspected her work. It still looked awful, and worse, it smelled like rotten fish. There was no way Anna would eat something that looked and smelled so terrible. Mabel let it dry a little before adding the flour coating and candy sprinkles, then set it on a flat rock by the stream to bake in the mid-day sun.

Mabel snorted to herself thinking about the expression on Anna's face when she took a big bite of homemade mud pie. She couldn't wait.

"That'll learn ya," she snickered.

"Learn who?" asked a voice from behind.

Mabel shot up as if she was sitting on a fireant hill as she turned to face the intruder. Much to her loathing, it was Robbie Nelson. He blushed as he waved at her.

Mabel's face turned red with anger. "Never you mind, you dirty weasel! Now, turn yourself around and git right back to where you came from," she growled.

"Whoa there, Mabel." Surprised, he held up his hands and backed away. "I didn't mean anythin' by pryin'." He kept his eyes glued to her.

"Oh, I'm sure you never mean to do nothin'," Mabel spat. She

crossed her arms and glared at him. “Now go home!”

“You girls are strange people, I’ll tell you,” he said shaking his head. “I’ll go if you want me to, but I only wanted to say hello.”

“You’ve said all I care to hear, mister. Now leave me be ‘fore I learn you, too!” Mabel shouted, thrusting her fist in his direction.

“Fine,” he retorted, looking grim as he stuffed his hands into his pockets and turned to go. “Tell your friend I said hello to her, too,” he added.

As Robbie walked away, Mabel’s temper got the best of her. “You must think I’m stupid,” she yelled.

He turned with a lost expression. “No, just weird.”

“That’s it, Robbie!” Mabel hollered as she headed to the pie pan by the stream. “I was making this for Anna, but I think you deserve it even more!”

Puzzled, Robbie moved in her direction to see what she had made. Mabel wheeled around and before Robbie knew what hit him, he was covered in mud.

“That’s for kissin’ me,” Mabel huffed. She tore open the bag of flour and threw it at him, “An’ that’s for kissin’ Anna!” As a final touch, she added the sprinkles to his already messy clothes and hair.

Robbie’s mouth hung open as he looked at Mabel with startled eyes. “I ain’t ever kissed Anna!”

“Fibber! And now the whole world will see what a dirty, rotten

person you really are!”

“You are crazy,” he snapped, wiping clumps of mud off his overalls. “I’m gonna get in trouble ‘cause of you. My ma jus’ washed these!”

“I hope you get such a whupin’ you can’t sit for a week!” Mabel’s temper faded as she watched Robbie shake mud, flour and sprinkles from his clothes and hair. She was puzzled, too, because it seemed like he was really confused by what she was saying.

“You’d better think twice before ever messin’ with Mabel Campbell,” she warned.

Robbie glared at her. Mabel thought for sure he would say something. Instead he shook his head and walked away, stopping just once to look back at her. Mabel swore she saw tears in his eyes.

She watched him until he was out of sight. “How dare he make me feel guilty! It’s his fault I’m upset in the first place.”

She put him out of her mind, picked up the pie pan and empty flour bag. Mabel’s blood ran hot when she realized she had thrown the whole bag of flour at him.

“Mama’s gonna whup me,” she whimpered, glaring after Robbie’s trail. Getting in trouble because of him made her hate him even more.

Mabel stewed all the way home. “How am I going to get myself out of trouble with mama? I took the flour without askin’, and

now I'm gonna have to pay for my mistake." She shivered thinking about the severe lashing she was about to get!

She was certain her mother would send her out to find the thinnest switch to whip her with. Mabel learned early on that thinner switches left the most painful stings and biggest welts!

Mabel arrived home just before suppertime. She set the empty bag of flour on the porch, rinsed the left over mud out of the pie pan at the barn spigot, then went inside, prepared for punishment.

Her mother was in the living room knitting. Mabel stood in the doorway.

"Mama," she interrupted quietly. "I've got something to tell you."

Her mother put down her yarn and looked at Mabel. She seemed tired and Mabel felt extra bad to have to upset her.

"What is it, Mabel?" her mother asked with a sigh.

Mabel looked at the floor. "Well, I accidentally spilled all the flour," she paused, "outside by the stream." She swallowed hard, expecting the worst.

Her mother looked at her for a long time before leaning back in her chair, resuming her knitting. Mabel crept into the living room.

"Mama, did you hear me?" she asked.

"I heard you, Mabel," she answered. "And what do you think we ought to do about it?"

Mabel looked up. She was ready for a whipping, not questions.

“Um, I, uh, suppose I ought to pay for some more?” she stammered, hoping her mother would agree.

“Do you have any money?” her mother asked, watching her needles twist and knot the yarn together.

“No, ma’am,” Mabel replied. She knew that switch was waiting for her. “But I could do extra chores to earn it, couldn’t I?”

Her mother paused her knitting. She stared at the small loops and stitches as though they would tell her whether or not it was a good offer to accept. She rocked in the chair.

“Yes, I reckon that would be fine.”

Mabel was shocked. Her mother usually got to hollering and grabbing spoons when Mabel did something wrong. Mabel was worried.

“Mama,” she whispered. “Is everything alright?”

“Oh fine, Mabel. Now go fetch a pot of water to boil on the stove. I have to get supper started.”

CHAPTER 8

An Awful Invitation

Mabel finished setting the table just as her father arrived. He patted Mabel on the head. He was tired, but in a good mood. Mabel couldn't understand why her parents were acting so unusual.

Half way through dinner, her father made an announcement. "Mama, Mabel, we've been invited to dinner over at the neighbor's house tomorrow evenin'. I accepted the invitation on our behalf." He turned to Mabel. "I want you to help your ma make some biscuits. I'll stop by ol' Furguson's farm and get some honey."

"Honey?" Mabel coughed through a mouthful of food. Honey was an expensive treat that her father only bought on rare and special occasions. "Who's house're we goin' to?"

"A new family moved into that ol' farm house across the way." He turned his attention to Mabel's mother. "They seen me workin' at the Mason's farm an' offered me a job tendin' to their

fields instead.” He took a large bite of green beans. “I told ‘em I was plenty fine where I was, but then he started talkin’ money. Offered to have us over for dinner, the whole family, so as we could give it some thought.” He swallowed hard. “Sarah, they’re offerin’ to pay a dollar fifty an hour!”

Mabel’s mother’s eyes lit up. “Art, that’s great!” she rejoiced. Tears welled in her eyes. “Just in time, too, wouldn’t you know it.” She sighed and took another helping of potatoes from the bowl.

Mabel looked at them, shaking her head. Dread consumed her. “You ain’t talking about the Nelson farm, are you?” She didn’t really want an answer.

Her father looked at her surprised. “You know of them?”

Mabel shifted in her chair. “Well, Anna’s pa mentioned that a family moved into the ol’ farm house jus’ off from theirs.”

“Well, sure enough. That’s them all right. They have a couple o’ kids your age, Mabel. You might make yerself a few more friends.”

Mabel forced a smile. “How nice,” she lied.

When her father resumed his conversation with her mother, she sank into her chair. *How am I gonna face Robbie Nelson through an entire dinner, especially after what I did to him?* Another thought struck Mabel. *What if he told his pa about me and they decide not to offer my pa the job?* Her stomach knotted with pain.

She poked at her beans and potatoes through the rest of dinner

before her mother finally excused her to go wash before bed.

Mabel was glad to be alone in her room. Not that she could sleep, but at least no one would be suspicious of any odd behavior. After several hours of tossing and turning, Mabel was tired enough to fall asleep, secretly hoping she'd sleep all the way through the next day.

CHAPTER 9

Two and Two Alike

Mabel spent all day dreading the upcoming evening's events. She was already working extra chores to pay for another bag of flour, and on top of it all, Anna didn't come over to help. Mabel was glad because she was still angry with Anna for kissing Robbie.

The day passed quickly because of the additional chores. Late in the afternoon, Mabel's mother called Mabel in to clean up and get ready for dinner at the Nelson's.

A lot of time was spent fussing over Mabel's hair. Simple braids would not do for a young lady at dinner. Her mother pulled the top half of Mabel's hair back and secured it with a small bow. Mabel wiggled into the freshly washed and pressed yellow dress. She felt like a sunflower! She did not want to go, but knew better than say anything. The three of them piled into her father's old pick-up and headed to the Nelson's.

One the way, Mabel got her hand slapped several times for tugging her hair.

“But, mama, it’s too tight,” she complained.

“Mabel, you’ll leave your hair alone or I’ll pull it even tighter,” her mother warned. “An’ I want you on your best behavior. No talkin’ with yer mouth full and no funny faces if you don’t like the cookin’.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Mabel grumbled.

Her father leaned over and whispered, “Ma did a fine job on yer hair. You look nice.”

Mabel blushed, but didn’t fuss with her hair anymore.

When they arrived at the farm, Mabel grabbed the plate of biscuits. Her father carried the jar of honey in one hand, and escorted her mother with the other. Mabel laughed to herself.

All this show just for the silly Nelson’s.

Mabel’s father took a moment to glance at the fields. “There’ll sure be plenty of work to keep me busy.” He took a deep breath and knocked on the door. Each rap of his knuckles against the wood sent chills down Mabel’s spine. Her father stepped back and whispered, “Stand up straight now, you hear?”

Mabel adjusted her shoulders and held the plate of biscuits in front of her.

Mrs. Nelson answered the door. She was a slender, healthy woman. She wore a bright, rose-colored dress that accented the hint of

rouge on her cheeks. Her scarlet colored hair was twisted in the back and held in place by a small, silver barrette.

“You must be the Campbell’s.” Her voice was warm and soothing. Mabel liked her at once.

“It’s lovely to meet you,” replied Mabel’s mother. Mabel could tell she was trying to impress Mrs. Nelson.

“Come in.” She looked at Mabel. “And what do you have?” she asked, bending over to Mabel’s level.

“Biscuits, ma’am. I helped mama make them jus’ today.” Mabel curtsied. She couldn’t help but want to impress Mrs. Nelson, too.

“How about I take them into the kitchen?” she asked. Mabel nodded and handed her the plate.

“I brought some honey to go with ‘em,” Mabel’s father announced, holding the honey out for all to see.

Mrs. Nelson looked surprised. “Well, won’t that be a treat. My boys love honey.”

Mabel laughed to herself as she thought of Robbie covered in honey instead of mud. She bit her lips and lowered her eyes, ashamed that she was already having nasty thoughts.

“Don’t think you’ll be able to keep their hands outta the jar,” Mrs. Nelson continued. “And where are those boys anyhow?” she muttered to herself, looking around the entryway. “Well, I’m

sure they'll be 'round in no time. Please, have a seat," she offered, gesturing to the living room sofa. "I'll tell Bob you're here."

Mabel and her parents moved into the living room and sat down. The house seemed nice enough to Mabel, who was nosing around at things in the living room.

The solid wood floor was cracked and stained with dirt. It probably looked nice when it was first laid down, but the years of wear and tear were evident. Small rugs made paths where people walked the most. There was an old fireplace that hadn't been used in a long time. On the mantle were a few pictures that were fading with time. A small vase of wild flowers stood in the center of the display. The setting sun gave the room a warm glow that made Mabel sleepy.

Mrs. Nelson entered the room. "Bob is puttin' up the horses, but will be in right quick." She was motioning for someone else to come in.

Robbie slid through the door. Mabel bit her tongue and tried her best not to sneer in his direction.

"I'd like to introduce one of my boys. This is David," Mrs. Nelson introduced, patting the boy on the shoulder. "I haven't found the other two, yet, but they're around."

David? Mabel thought. *David?* She questioned herself again. Mabel stared for a long time at the boy. His floppy, red hair curled slightly at the ends. His green eyes shone with mischief. He stuffed

his hands in his pockets and gave everyone a big, toothy grin. No, Mabel was sure it was Robbie. She boiled at the notion that he even lied about his name.

“Nice to meet ya,” David responded with a short wave of his hand.

“Nice to meet you,” replied Mabel’s parents in unison. Mabel’s mother elbowed her in the side.

“Hi,” Mabel mumbled.

David looked at his mother and whispered, “Can I go now?”

Mabel’s mother was embarrassed. “Mabel, why don’t you offer Mrs. Nelson some help in the kitchen?”

“I’d love some help settin’ the table. Are you good at settin’ the table, Mabel?”

Mabel nodded. She squeezed herself out from between her parents and followed Mrs. Nelson into the kitchen.

“Don’t mind the lanterns, Mabel,” she insisted, gesturing to the lights on the table and counter. “We’ve had trouble with the electricity working properly since we’ve been here.”

Mabel tried not to show that she knew Mrs. Nelson was flustered. “I like ‘em,” she complimented.

“Aren’t you sweet,” Mrs. Nelson cooed. “But I hope to be rid of them in another week’s time. Plates are over here, and flatware is in that drawer,” she said, pointing to various areas of the kitchen.

Mabel found the plates easy enough. “How many places should I set?”

Mrs. Nelson tallied people silently on her fingers before answering, “Eight. That means I’ll need one more chair. Excuse me, Mabel,” she said as she left the kitchen.

Mabel grabbed eight plates and set them on the table. She moved over to the drawers and opened the ones she thought the spoons and forks might be in. After two wrong drawers, she reached for a third.

“The forks are in the top drawer to the left.” Mabel looked over to see David standing in the back door. He gave her a quick, uneasy glance.

Mabel glared at him. “Thanks, *David*,” she spat. She yanked the drawer open sending the silverware catapulting to the front of the drawer. She grabbed a spoon as it flew out. David moved as if to help her, but hesitated to get any closer.

Mrs. Nelson entered the kitchen holding a chair. “Don’t worry, Mabel, that drawer sticks on me, too.” She turned to face her son. “Robbie, will you help her set the table?”

Mabel froze. *Did she just call him, Robbie?* She looked at Mrs. Nelson and then to Robbie with a lost look on her face.

“I’m sorry, Mabel,” Mrs. Nelson chuckled, “I just assumed he had introduced himself.” She gave Robbie a disapproving look.

“Allow me,” she offered. “Mabel, this is one of my sons, Robbie. Robbie, this is...”

“...Mabel,” Robbie interrupted with a weak smile.

Mabel was confused. She had just been introduced to him as David! Mabel looked at Robbie with earnest eyes.

“Robbie and David are twins, Mabel,” Mrs. Nelson explained, still chuckling. “Oh heavens, child, you must have thought we were crazy. I’m sorry, I should have told you sooner. I’d better go tell your folks before they become as confused as you are.” She continued to laugh as she left the room.

Mabel stared at Robbie, not knowing what to say. Flashes of the previous day haunted her. Robbie kissing Anna, Robbie covered in mud... *was it really David who Anna kissed? Was Robbie really hurt when I lashed out at him? How am I to ever know the truth?*

Laughter erupted in the living room. Mabel blushed. She turned her gaze from Robbie to the silverware and began picking through the mess she had made.

“Can I help?” Robbie offered.

Mabel nodded her head and stepped aside. Robbie sorted through the jumble of forks and spoons until he had eight of each. He handed them to Mabel. “Want me to get the cups and napkins?” he asked. Again, Mabel shook her head.

Mabel laid out the plates, and with Robbie’s help, set the rest

of the table in silence. When they were finished, Mabel stared at the place settings, too nervous and confused to try to talk.

Robbie stood next to her. "I didn't know you'd be comin' for dinner."

"Pa just told us las' night."

"Did you know it was my house?" he asked, looking at her.

"Yeah," she answered, still looking at the table.

"Are you mad at me?" Robbie asked her, inching closer.

"I don' know."

"Is it even me you're mad at?"

Mabel turned and glared at him. Robbie stepped away. "You could have told me you had a twin, you know."

"If I had known what you were gonna do, I might have!"

Robbie retorted. "B'sides, I didn't know what you heard from that friend of yours."

"Anna!" Mabel reminded defensively.

Robbie lowered his gaze. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I guess I didn't think you'd believe me." He stuffed his hands in his pockets and stared at the floor. Mabel sighed.

After an awkward moment of silence, Robbie grinned and looked at Mabel. "Look on the bright side, 'least you didn't give that pie to Anna."

Mabel's mouth opened as if to reply, but Robbie was right. If

Anna didn't kiss Robbie, and knew it wasn't Robbie, then she never would have forgiven Mabel if she had made her eat mud! Mabel's face turned bright red.

Unable to hold back laughter, she exclaimed, "Can you imagine the look on her face eatin' mud pie?"

"Can you imagine the hollerin' you would have gotten?" Robbie added. Both giggled at the damage Mabel's revenge could have caused.

Mabel covered her mouth and got serious. "You didn't get in trouble for comin' home all muddy, did you? I feel jus' awful what I said about hopin' you'd get whuped. You didn't, did you?"

Robbie looked sullen for a moment, and then laughed. "No, but I would have if David hadn't come home covered in eggs. He had a time of it tryin' to explain how that happened."

Mabel giggled more, knowing very well that he had to have gotten covered in eggs while he was kissing Anna.

"Did he tell you how it happened?" Mabel asked between giggles.

"No. He jus' said to mind my own business."

"Wanna know how it happened?" Mabel asked with a devious look in her eye. "I was at the stream, ready to help Anna clean up. You see, we had gotten into a terrible egg fight earlier, and boy, was she covered! Well, when I got there, I saw Anna kissin' you, or you

kissin' her, at least I thought it was you, but I guess it was really David. I betcha anythin' that was how he got covered in egg! I suppose he got off easy, though, compared to you." Mabel twisted her fingers and blushed. "See, when I thought it was you kissin' Anna, I got really mad- at both of you! So I cooked up a plan to get back at her- even though she was my best friend, and still is, mind you," she added, pointing a finger at Robbie. "But then you came up behind me and, well, you know the rest." Mabel took a deep breath, releasing it with much relief.

"So that's why you were so mad! I thought you'd lost your mind!" Robbie laughed.

"I'm jus' glad you know the whole story and forgive me. I really feel silly about it." Mabel blushed.

Robbie stared at Mabel. She blinked a few times trying to hide her smile, but couldn't. David entered the kitchen, which caused them both to break into fits of laughter.

"What?" David asked harshly.

"Nothing," they responded together, continuing to laugh.

CHAPTER 10

The Job Offer

The grown-ups spent a long time talking in the living room. Mabel and Robbie stayed in the kitchen snacking on cheese and crackers. David was sent to fetch the youngest of the brothers, who was playing in the barn while his father put up the horses.

It was dark outside by the time Mrs. Nelson served dinner. The lanterns gave the kitchen a charming glow, making Mabel feel like she was at a fancy dinner party.

Mabel sat on the long side of the table next to her mother. Robbie was across from her. He would occasionally nudge her with his foot, which made Mabel giggle. Mabel's mother would elbow her to shush the giggling, which only made Mabel, and Robbie, giggle more.

The youngest boy, Tommy, was the spitting image of his father. Thick, black hair fell into his eyes. He was quiet and well behaved,

but Mabel knew he'd grow up to be just as devilish as his brothers. All the same, she liked him. Half way through the meal, Mabel was convinced that Tommy had a crush on her. He kept peeking at her and offered her seconds of everything on the table. If he weren't seven, Mabel would have been very flattered.

Mabel tried her best to behave the rest of the meal. She was the first to offer biscuits and honey to Mr. Nelson. Mabel's mother was glad enough for her manners that she let Mabel have two biscuits. Mrs. Nelson made some coffee and excused the boys to go play while Mr. Nelson and Mabel's father went out to the barn to discuss business.

Mabel, without being asked, cleared the table of empty dishes and food.

"Why, Mabel, you are just the handiest thing to have around. What I wouldn't give to have a girl of my own," Mrs. Nelson beamed.

Mabel smiled and continued to clear the table. She even brought her mother a cup of coffee.

"You want I should wash these, Mrs. Nelson," Mabel offered sweetly, gesturing to the pile of dishes in the sink.

"Mabel," Mrs. Nelson interrupted, "why don't you come have a seat with us ladies. I have an offer I'd like to discuss with you and yer ma." She winked at Mabel's mother.

Mabel wiped her hands on a towel and eased her way into a

chair. She took another biscuit from the plate and chewed on it while Mrs. Nelson spoke.

“Now, as you can see, this ol’ farm house could use a lot of work. It does us just fine for now,” she added, blushing when she saw that Mabel’s mother seemed to think it was a dandy of a house. “To be honest with you, I’m not used to farm livin’, and it would sure be a help if I might,” she paused and looked from Mabel to her mother, “if I might borrow Mabel for some help this summer.”

Mabel’s eyes got big. Her mother stuttered, “Oh, well, she is a big help...”

Mrs. Nelson interrupted, “I wouldn’t take her away from her chores at home. I know with your husband working our fields, you need all the help you can get, but I would pay her for her work, and it wouldn’t be but a few hours every day.”

Mabel swallowed the bite of biscuit she had been chewing and looked excitedly to her mother. Her mother studied Mabel for a moment, looked down at the table and then to Mrs. Nelson.

“It’d be up to Mabel,” she concluded. “If she don’ mind extra chores on top of her own, I’m sure the money would come in handy.”

Mrs. Nelson directed her attention to Mabel. “I would expect you to finish all your chores at home before comin’ over. And you don’ have to come over every day, just when you have time.” She nodded at Mabel’s mother who appreciated the reassurance.

“How much do you reckon I’ll make?” Mabel asked. She never had a money-paying job before.

“Well, I suppose we could start you at ten cents an hour. Why, who knows, Mabel,” Mrs. Nelson spoke with excitement, “You could make up to a whole dollar every week!”

Mabel could hardly contain her excitement. “Mama, I’ll be able to buy you flour every day!”

Mabel’s mother blushed. “You jus’ have to pay for the flour you spilled. The rest is yours. But you best think long and hard ‘bout how you want to spend it. There’re more important things than sweets and soda pops.”

“Yes ma’am,” Mabel squeaked with excitement. “When do you reckon I can start?” she asked Mrs. Nelson with eager eyes.

“If you’re ready, you can come by tomorrow. I’ll have plenty for you to do by then.”

“Yes ma’am!” Mabel squirmed in her chair, hardly able to contain herself.

“You run along and play now,” Mrs. Nelson suggested. “Won’t be much time for playing after this evenin’.”

Mabel scurried out of her chair and ran off to find Robbie. She couldn’t wait to tell him the good news.

CHAPTER 11

Kiss and Tell

The next morning, Mabel leapt out of bed. The sun was coming up as she dressed to start her chores. She raced to the barnyard and grabbed a bucket to milk Rosie. Rosie sensed Mabel's hurry and kicked at her to remind her to be gentle.

"Sorry, Rosie," Mabel apologized. "I'll be careful from now on."

Once the bucket was full, Mabel set it aside. She put a scoop of chicken feed into another bucket and raced to the hen house. She fed the chickens, gathered eggs, picked the ripe strawberries from the patch and fed and watered the goats, all before breakfast.

The smell of eggs and toast beckoned Mabel from her duties. She carried the eggs into the house and set them on the counter for her mother.

"Take a seat at the table," her mother offered. "Breakfast is

almost ready.” She looked at Mabel with a strange expression. Mabel knew it wasn’t bad, but wasn’t sure it was good either. “You sure got up early. You finished with your chores?” her mother questioned, eyeing her with suspicion.

“No, ma’am. I still got to pull weeds from the garden and get a bucket o’ coal for the oven, but then I’ll be finished.” Her mother shook her head and turned back to the stove. “Can I go to the Nelson’s farm after that?”

“If you want to.” She turned to face Mabel. “I’m glad you’re lookin’ forward to workin’, Mabel, but I don’ want you wearin’ yerself out.” She bit her lip and wiped her forehead. “We jus’ can’t afford you gettin’ sick, is all.”

“Don’ worry ‘bout me, mama. I’ll be fine,” Mabel reassured.

“Jus’ pace yerself, Mabel. The day is plenty long.”

Once chores were finished, Mabel dashed toward the stream. It was the quickest way to the Nelson’s. Remembering her mother’s warning, she slowed her pace.

“Can’t afford to get sick,” she told herself, although she wanted to race to the Nelson’s farm.

Half way to the stream, Mabel looked up to see Anna walking toward her. Her palms became sweaty. She hadn’t seen or talked to Anna since they fought over the eggs, not even to tell her why she hadn’t come to help with chores. Mabel was sure Anna would be

upset with her. She swallowed hard and tried to act normal.

Anna spotted her, stopped, planted her hands on her hips and waited while Mabel approached. They stood in silence, Mabel looking around while Anna stared right at her.

“You sure are out early,” Anna stated.

“I finished my chores,” Mabel responded, avoiding Anna’s eyes.

“Were you comin’ to my house?” Anna asked hopeful.

“I was gonna,” Mabel lied, “But not ‘til later.” Anna dropped her eyes. Mabel continued, “I didn’t expect you’d be comin’.”

“Pa wouldn’t let me come yesterday. He was awful mad that I came home all messy an’ stuff. Said I couldn’t come to yer house anymore if I’s gonna come home dirty.” Anna pursed her lips.

“I’m awful sorry I didn’t come help with yer chores. I’ve had to do extra chores at my house. Gotta pay for a new bag o’ flour,” Mabel explained.

“Flour?” Anna questioned. “Whatever for?”

Mabel felt her face turning red. She tried to think of an excuse.

“Well, I tried to make a pie, but got mad and spilled all the flour by accident.” Mabel put her hands behind her back and looked away.

“Oh.” Anna glanced around the field.

Mabel was surprised that Anna didn’t holler or chastise her

for making pies without help, and not letting her know that she was too busy to help with chores. She wondered if Anna was hiding something.

Of course, Mabel thought, she still don't know I saw her kissin' David. I bet she feels guilty!

“If you want, I’ll come by your house to help with chores later,” Mabel offered, “but first, I have to go help over at the Nelson’s farm.” Mabel watched with glee as Anna’s face turned bright red.

“The Nelson’s farm?” Anna exclaimed as though she didn’t hear Mabel right.

“That’s right. Mrs. Nelson done offered me a job.” Mabel smirked, enjoying Anna’s reaction to her news.

“But how did that happen?” Anna questioned, feeling left out.

“Mr. Nelson offered my pa a job tendin’ his fields and had us over for dinner las’ night. I was such a big help, she offered to pay me to help her o’er the summer.” Mabel watched Anna’s mouth drop open. “That’s right,” Mabel continued, “I’ll be makin’ real money!”

Anna didn’t respond. She looked dumbfounded as Mabel continued, “Oh, did you know their boy, Robbie, has a twin?” Mabel crossed her arms, waiting for Anna to say something.

Anna clutched the corners of her apron. Her face turned pale.

“Imagine that,” she stuttered. “I hope he’s nicer than that Robbie,” Anna added, trying to compose herself.

“Oh, I didn’t care for him much,” teased Mabel. She enjoyed watching Anna squirm.

“Why not?” Anna asked defensively.

Mabel shrugged. “Don’ know. Jus’ seemed like an extra no-gooder,” she snubbed.

Anna frowned. “Oh, well, I wouldn’t know,” she lied.

“No?” Mabel questioned, raising her eyebrows. “He seemed to know you.”

“I wouldn’t know how,” Anna spat, all flustered.

“Said to tell you he can’t wait to see you again,” Mabel lied.

Anna turned on her heels. “Mabel Campbell, I don’t know what yer talkin’ about.”

Mabel chased after her. “He said he misses you, and that he loves you...”

“Mabel you quit yer fibbin’,” Anna protested.

“...and that he can’t wait to kiss you again!” Mabel’s words rang out over the wheat field.

Anna stopped dead in her tracks. “What did you say?” Her voice was quiet.

Mabel got close to her ear. “I saw you kissin’ on David Nelson.”

Mabel stepped back, eyeing Anna. Anna, cheeks red and eyes burning, turned to face her.

Mabel smirked. “Thought you could hide it from me, did ya?”

Without a word, Anna burst into tears. She threw herself on the ground, sobbing. Mabel watched, surprised at Anna’s reaction. Mabel didn’t know what to do. Anna’s hair fell over her shoulder as she buried her face in her hands.

Mabel knelt next to her, patting Anna’s arm to console her. “It ain’t that bad, Anna. I was just teasin’ you. David never said any o’ those things.”

“But it’s true, Mabel,” she sobbed, “I did kiss that boy. I was jus’ mindin’ my own business, cleanin’ up in the stream when outta nowhere that mean ol’ Robbie Nelson showed up. He started teasin’ me, sayin’ I oughtn’t to be bathin’ in the stream when I didn’t know who might walk by.”

“But you had your dress on, didn’t you?” Mabel asked, putting her hand to her mouth.

“Course I did,” Anna snapped. “But I was soppin’ wet. So I hollered at him, sayin’ that no respectable boy goes peekin’ around at girls cleanin’ up an’ that he ought to just march right home.”

“Did he?” Mabel asked.

“No. He jus’ crossed his arms and laughed at me. Mabel, he laughed at me!” More tears rolled down her cheeks. “Then, jus’ as quick as Robbie had appeared, there he was again! I was lookin’ at two Robbie Nelson’s. I thought I was goin’ mad!”

Mabel held back a snicker, recalling her own confusion at meeting the twins.

“Only the second Robbie didn’t laugh at me,” Anna continued. “He scolded the first one and sent him on his way home.” Anna sniffled. “He even said he was sorry that Robbie had been so mean. I asked his name and he told me it was David. He took my hand and helped me out’a the water.” She looked at Mabel with pleading eyes. “I don’ know what came over me, but I was so charmed by him that I kissed him.”

Mabel’s mouth fell open. It was one thing for David to kiss Anna, but another thing entirely for Anna to start the kissing.

“It was jus’ on his cheek,” Anna continued, “but when I turned to go back to the water, he grabbed my hand and kissed me right on the mouth! Oh, Mabel, I’ve gone and kissed a boy!” She wept even louder.

“I know, but really, it ain’t that bad,” Mabel consoled.

Anna wiped her tears, leaving dirt streaks on her wet cheeks. “Don’t you listen to anythin’ I say? Now that I’ve gone an’ kissed him, I’m gonna have babies, too!” she wailed.

Mabel rolled her eyes. “Now you listen here, Anna. There ain’t no way kissin’ a boy is gonna give you babies.”

“But how do you know?” Anna blubbered. “Lucy sa...says...”

“Lucy’s jus’ tryin’ to scare you,” Mabel reassured, although

she, too, wasn't real sure that Lucy wasn't telling the truth.

"You think so?" Anna whimpered, wiping her eyes again.

"There's only one thing we can do, Anna."

"What's that?" Anna sniffed.

"We gotta find out where babies come from if it's the last thing we do!"

"But how?"

"Come with me," Mabel instructed. "We're goin' to the Nelson's."

CHAPTER 12

Life's Little Questions

Anna didn't argue as Mabel pulled her to her feet and steered her toward the Nelson's farm. Anna tried to talk, but Mabel gave her little chance to speak.

When they arrived at the Nelson's, Mabel knocked on the door. Mrs. Nelson was surprised to see two girls, but welcomed them inside.

"Anna always helps me with chores," Mabel explained, "so I thought if you needed that much help, you wouldn't mind having her around, too. I don't mind splittin' my earnin's with her."

"Oh that won't be necessary, Mabel," Mrs. Nelson reassured, "There's plenty for both of you to do. She'll earn her keep."

Once introductions were out of the way, Mrs. Nelson put both girls to work. First they brought in water to wash dishes from the night before.

"Indoor plummin' isn't hooked up yet," Mrs. Nelson explained.

“This ol’ farm house was empty for such a long time,” she huffed, shaking her head.

The girls didn’t mind doing things the old fashion way. It wasn’t that long ago that Mabel’s house got indoor plumbing. Before that, she had to fetch water in a bucket, too. Running to the spigot outside gave them the chance to see a little more of the farm. It was a lot bigger than both Mabel and Anna’s farms put together. It was no wonder Mr. Nelson needed help with it.

Robbie and David were working with their father in the fields, so the girls had little distraction while they tended to the tasks Mrs. Nelson gave them.

Once they were done washing the dishes, Mrs. Nelson sent them out to the barn to gather eggs and feed the pigs. Neither Mabel nor Anna wanted to carry the slop, so they agreed to both do it. It was a heavy load and Mabel was glad to have Anna there to help.

While gathering eggs, Anna questioned Mabel.

“Jus’ how is this supposed to get us any answers?”

“I’m workin’ on it, Anna. Be patient.”

Mabel wasn’t sure how to approach the subject with Mrs. Nelson. She had failed twice to find out about babies while managing to upset both her mother and Cindy Felch in the process. She didn’t want to upset Mrs. Nelson and risk losing her new job, but she and Anna were desperate.

The day carried on until Anna had to leave. Her father didn't know she had gone to the Nelson's and she was likely to get into trouble if she didn't tend to her own chores. Mabel worked out an arrangement with Mrs. Nelson that once both her and Anna's chores were done at home, they'd head right over to start the work she had waiting for them. Mrs. Nelson agreed and let the girls go.

For the next few weeks, Mabel got up early, and, with Anna's help, finished her chores in no time. Then they went to Anna's, and as soon as her chores were completed they went straight to the Nelson's farm.

The girls had little interaction with the Nelson boys. The crops were coming up and Mr. Nelson needed their help tending to them. Mabel was glad for that because whenever she and Anna did see Robbie and David, it was hard to get any chores done. Mrs. Nelson had to chase the boys off once or twice for pestering the girls while they carried slop to the pigs. Anna came close to tears when the bucket tipped and spilled slop all over her favorite apron.

When chores were finished Mrs. Nelson gave Mabel and Anna each twenty cents. She always insisted that Robbie and David walk the girls part way home to make sure they were safe.

"You treat them girls nice, you hear," Mrs. Nelson would warn. "I won't hear nothin' of you teasin' them."

Mabel sniggered when Mrs. Nelson chastised the boys,

because they were always sweet as pie on their walks home. Mabel enjoyed that time the most. Robbie had even dared to hold her hand a few times. David would sneer and stick out his tongue, but Anna confessed to Mabel that David held her hand, too.

The summer passed quickly. Mabel and Anna still had not had the courage to ask Mrs. Nelson about babies. Anna was getting hysterical every day on the way to the farm, not knowing if babies came from kissing.

“Holdin’ hands is jus’ as bad, and we’ve both held hands at least a dozen times now,” Anna cried. Mabel reassured her that holding hands was nowhere near as bad as kissing.

On a hot, summer afternoon in mid-July, Mabel and Anna, while gathering eggs from Mrs. Nelson’s hens, heard a chorus of sharp peep, peep, peeping. As they rounded a corner in the barn they came upon a batch of newly hatched chicks, wobbly, fluffy and cute as could be.

“I wonder how a little bitty chick can grow right out of this here egg,” Anna marveled, holding up one of the eggs she had gathered from the other hens.

“I don’ know,” Mabel answered. “Seems strange, though, that we eat eggs like the ones in our basket, but these others’ grow into chicks.” She studied the eggs in the basket for a moment. “I mean, how do they know the difference?”

A thought struck Mabel like a bolt of lightning. Without a word to Anna, she grabbed the basket of eggs in one hand and Anna's hand in the other and raced back to the house.

"Mrs. Nelson," Mabel hollered.

Mrs. Nelson came out of the house, wiping her hand on a towel. "What is it, girls?"

"We was in the barn gatherin' eggs," Mabel explained, "an' we found some chicks that jus' hatched!"

Mrs. Nelson beamed. "Well, that's precious."

Mabel continued, "Well, sure it is, but what me an' Anna wanted to know is, how can you tell the difference between an' eatin' egg, and an egg with a chick in it?"

Mrs. Nelson twisted her lips and put her hands on her hips. "Well, now. That's a good question." She thought for a moment then explained, "At this farm, we separate the hens we want to lay eatin' eggs from the ones we want to raise chicks."

"Is that why them others were in a different coup?" Anna asked.

"It sure is," Mrs. Nelson replied.

"But how do you know they'll lay eggs with chicks in 'em?" Mabel questioned.

"Those are the hens we put the rooster with most often," Mrs. Nelson responded in a matter of fact tone.

“Well, how does the rooster know if the eggs have chicks?”

Mabel continued.

Mrs. Nelson put her hand to her face and stared at the girls.

Mabel and Anna’s faces beamed with curiosity.

“Why don’t you two take a break,” Mrs. Nelson offered. “I’ve jus’ made sun tea. I bet a large glass would be nice.” She motioned Mabel and Anna inside. She took down three glasses from the cupboard and poured the freshly brewed tea over ice. Mrs. Nelson was extra happy to have the ice. Her electricity had finally been turned on. Since then, she always kept a bowl of ice in the freezer.

She set glasses in front of Mabel and Anna and took a seat across from them at the table. She sipped her tea slowly. Mabel and Anna gulped theirs and stared at Mrs. Nelson.

“You see, girls,” Mrs. Nelson stated, “baby chicks come from bigger chickens. But it takes two chickens, one boy chicken, and one girl chicken to make one little chick. If the girl chicken doesn’t have a boy chicken in her coup, then she won’t make eggs with chicks.”

Mabel and Anna listened intently as she spoke. Their eyes fixed on her every move.

Mrs. Nelson continued, “That’s how we know which eggs are for eatin’, and which ones are goin’ to hatch chicks.” She took another sip of tea and fanned herself.

Mabel looked to Anna and then to Mrs. Nelson. “Mrs. Nelson,

how are the baby chicks made?”

Mrs. Nelson sat up straight and put down her glass of tea.

“Well,” she cleared her throat, “the boy chicken has to fertilize the egg.”

Mabel and Anna exchanged confused glances.

“You see,” Mrs. Nelson continued with a heavy sigh, “if you want something to grow, you have to fertilize it, like the corn in the field. If you want the corn to grow, you have to use fertilizer. The same goes with chickens, only you have to use chicken fertilizer, and that comes from the boy chicken.” She coughed and took another sip of tea, avoiding the wide eyes of Mabel and Anna.

Mabel took a deep breath. “Is it the same with people, too?”

Mrs. Nelson’s eyes got large and her face flushed. “Yes, I suppose it is.”

“Mrs. Nelson?”

“Yes, Mabel?” she answered. Her voice was shaky.

“How do the boy chickens fertilize the eggs?” Mabel squeaked.

Mrs. Nelson sighed. “Mabel, dear, I think these are questions you best save for your ma.” She drained the last of her tea and stood from the table. “Come on now. Break time is over. Have to get back to work.”

Mabel and Anna slid out of their chairs and took their glasses

to the sink.

“If you’re finished with the eggs, you can drop a bail of hay to the horses,” Mrs. Nelson said. “Then you’re free to go for today.” She handed each girl fifteen cents and scooted them out of the kitchen.

Mabel and Anna raced to the barn. Once they reached the hayloft Mabel turned to Anna.

“See, I told you babies don’t come from kissin’.”

“How do you know? Mrs. Nelson never did tell us!”

“No, but it can’t be from kissin’, ‘cause chickens ain’t got no lips.” Mabel nodded, feeling very sure of her logic.

“I don’t know. What if it’s different with people?” Anna doubted.

“I asked her. She said it was the same with people, too.”

“I sure hope you’re right, Mabel.”

“I’m jus’ positive I am.”

With that, the girls cut a bail of hay loose and tossed it down to the horse pen below. They climbed down the ladder and headed home. They didn’t even wait for Robbie and David to walk with them.

CHAPTER 13

Movie Magic

Mabel stayed one evening to help Mrs. Nelson can peaches. By the time they finished it was dusk. Mabel's father finished his work as Mabel was ready to leave.

"Well, if your daddy's headin' home, I suppose I won't have to take you," Mrs. Nelson said with a touch of disappointment in her voice. "I do like to drive, you know," she whispered to Mabel. "Maybe some other time."

Mabel hopped into the cab of her father's truck and waited for him to say good-bye to the Nelson's.

"You sure have been workin' hard, Mabel," noticed her father. "You must be earnin' nearly what I make," he teased.

"I've been keepin' count, pa, and I have four dollars and thirty-five cents countin' the fifty cents I got today!" Mabel beamed. She had never had that much money before in her life.

“We ought to celebrate,” her father suggested with an unusual smile.

“Celebrate? How?” Mabel asked with wide eyes.

“How would you like to go to a picture show? I’ve been wantin’ to take yer ma for so long, and I know you’ve never been to one. What do ya say?”

Mabel’s heart leapt. “A real picture show! With popcorn and candy and lights and people?”

“That’s right.”

“Oh papa! I’d love to go! Can we go tonight? Can I bring Anna?” Mabel was nearly standing in her seat with excitement.

“Tell you what,” he started. “We’ll stop by Anna’s farm on the way home an’ see if her folks’ll let her come along. You two will have to ride in the back, but if you don’ mind, then I’d be happy to take you.”

Mabel squealed with delight.

When they reached Anna’s house, Mabel leaped out of the truck and flew to the door. She didn’t even say hello to Anna’s mother before spitting out, “Pa’s takin’ me to a picture show and I want Anna to come, too!” She raced past Anna’s mother straight to Anna.

“You have to get yer best dress. We’re goin’ to the movies!”

Mabel’s father tried his best to ignore the girls’ head-splitting squeals and giggles. They chattered about what it would be like and

all the candy they'd have to pick from.

Anna wore her favorite blue dress with white lace at the bottom and a little pocket in the skirt where she kept just enough money to get into the movie and buy one or two candy items.

Mabel and Anna raced to Mabel's room as soon as they got to Mabel's house. Mabel didn't have many nice dresses but knew exactly the one she wanted to wear, the bright yellow dress she had worn to the Nelson's for dinner. Her father had told her she looked nice in that dress. She wanted to make him feel proud of her tonight.

"Mama," Mabel gulped between heavy breaths. "Can you tie my hair up like you did before?" Her eyes twinkled. "I want to look real pretty for the movie." She spun around in her dress, making the skirt billow out like an umbrella.

Her mother looked at her, surprised. "I sure will, if you'd like."

When everyone was changed and cleaned up, they piled into the truck. Mabel and Anna, with bonnets tied over their hair to keep the wind from messing it up, climbed into the back. The sun had set, leaving deep red streaks along the horizon. Mabel was looking forward to a magical night.

The lights from town sparkled overhead. Anna and Mabel laughed, pointing at lit-up signs and the people that passed by dressed up as nice as they were. Neither of them had been to town after dark

so it was a special sight to see.

Mabel's father pulled up to the curb at the theater. He came around the truck and opened the door for Mabel's mother. Mabel watched as her mother stepped out of the cab, looking just like a movie star in her dark green dress and black shoes.

Mabel's father stepped up to the bed of the truck and lifted Mabel and Anna out, one at a time. The girls skipped to the ticket stand, hand in hand. They giggled as the ticket attendant asked how many tickets they needed.

"Four," Mabel's father responded.

"That'll be two dollars," announced the ticket attendant, holding out four tickets.

Mabel's father paid and opened the door for the girls. Mabel and Anna stared wide-eyed at the sight before them. Red carpet covered the floor. Long, wavy curtains lined the walls. Lights shone above them giving the whole room an elegant appearance. The smell of popcorn filled the air.

"Now," her father pointed out, "the candy counter is over there. Don't get carried away, though."

Mabel and Anna skipped to the counter and eyed the candies that lay behind the glass window. There were candy bars, roasted peanuts, chocolate covered raisins, jellybeans, gum, tootsie rolls, necco wafers and more.

Mabel could not decide. Her mouth watered for the ooey-gooey sweetness of chocolate and caramel, but the smell of popcorn gripped her senses, leaving her in want of its buttery, popped kernels.

“Let’s get some of everything and share,” Anna suggested.

Mabel nodded her head. “We’ll have one of those,” she said, pointing at the candy bars, “and some of those.” She pointed to the roasted nuts.

“And some of those, too,” Anna added, pointing to the chocolate covered raisins.

“And popcorn,” Mabel finished.

The man behind the counter grinned at them and set their items on the counter.

“Would you like cokes to drink?”

Both girls shook their head, yes. The man got each a drink, adding them to the other items.

“That’ll be sixty cents,” he told them.

Mabel and Anna sorted through their change, each putting thirty cents on the counter.

“Thank you, ladies,” the man replied. Mabel and Anna giggled.

“He called us ladies,” Mabel whispered to Anna as she took her coke and candy off the counter.

Mabel’s father stood behind them. “I’d like a popcorn and two

cokes,” he ordered.

Mabel’s mother turned to him. “This means a lot to the girls, and to me,” she said, slipping her hand around his arm.

Mabel’s father paid for the snacks and escorted them all into the picture room. An usher led them down the dark isles with a flashlight. Mabel and Anna wanted to sit in the very front row, but Mabel’s mother insisted they sit closer to the middle where she could better keep an eye on the girls.

Mabel and Anna snuggled into the red, velvet seats and waited anxiously for the movie to begin. They sipped their cokes and nibbled on popcorn while talking about how magnificent the theater was.

Before they knew it, the ushers all moved to the back. The theater became silent and the large, velvet curtain drew back to reveal a white screen in front of them. The movie was about to start.

Mabel and Anna were in awe at the sudden, loud music that surrounded their ears. It gave Mabel goose bumps. She took Anna’s hand as the movie screen lit up. They shrank back in their seats, watching brief commercials for tobacco and nylon stockings. Mabel had seen print ads and heard radio spots for those items, but never thought them to be as glamorous as they appeared to be in the theater. Mabel silently wished she was old enough to wear nylons.

The picture began. It was so real; they felt like they were a part of all the action. Mabel and Anna sat in wonder as they watched

the story of beautiful Penny Star begging for help from washed-up detective, Ray Robertson, to solve the mysterious disappearance of her husband. They booed at the villains and cheered for the heroes, cried when Penny found out her husband was dead and giggled when she shared a passionate kiss with detective Robertson.

Their eyes stayed glued to the screen. Mabel didn't even notice the ushers as they walked up and down the aisles. The girls munched on candies and popcorn, swapping snacks back and forth until the movie was over and the ushers escorted people from the theater.

"That was amazing!" Mabel cheered as her father lifted her back into the truck.

"I can't wait to tell Lucy what she missed," Anna gloated. "Thank you, Mr. And Mrs. Campbell, for the best night ever!"

"You're welcome, girls," Mabel's father winked. "It was long overdue."

CHAPTER 14

No Longer a Child

The nights grew warmer as summer continued. By the beginning of August, it was so hot Mabel slept without a blanket. One particular night, she went to bed earlier than usual complaining that she was sick to her stomach and her back was hurting. Her mother fussed and worried that Mabel was getting sick. She insisted Mabel take a cold bath to prevent any fever from setting in.

Mabel found it hard to sleep. She squirmed and tossed, putting her feet on the wall or tucking her legs in her arms until her stomach finally stopped aching. She fell asleep well after her parents had gone to bed, but her aching stomach did not allow her to rest.

Mabel woke up in the middle of the night with a strange feeling. She sat up as a wave of pain swept through her stomach, causing her to whimper. Putting her hand on the bed to steady her swaying body, she felt something hot and wet under her fingers. The

sensation made her want to vomit.

With the little strength she had, Mabel crawled to the bathroom, turned on the light and saw red stuff smeared all over her hand! She stared at it, confused, then glanced down at her nightgown. She saw that it had a red stain on it as well and felt something warm trickle down her leg.

“Mama! Mama!” Mabel hollered not knowing what to do. “Mama help me!” She heard both parents stumble out of bed. “Mama, in here,” she cried.

Her mother and father rushed into the bathroom to find Mabel covered in blood.

“Lands child! What happened? Are you alright?” Her mother was frantic.

“I woke up with stabbin’ pains in my stomach, like I was gonna throw up. I had to crawl in here and, look, mama, look! What’s happenin’?” she sobbed, holding up her bloody hand.

“Sarah,” Mabel’s father interrupted, “I best let you handle this.” He yawned and went back to bed.

“Mama,” Mabel whimpered, “I don’ wanna die!”

Mabel’s mother knelt beside her. “It’s alright, child. It’s nothin’ to worry about. Yer jus’ becomin’ a lady, tha’s all.” She took a washcloth from the cabinet, wet it with warm water and cleaned Mabel’s hand.

“Finish cleanin’ yerself,” Mabel’s mother instructed. She handed her the washcloth. “I’ll git you another nightgown and panties.” She left the bathroom and returned shortly with clean clothes for Mabel. She put them on the toilet and got something out of the upper cabinet. She unfolded a large, rectangular cloth-like object. “Put this in your underwear. There are little straps to help it stay put.” She fidgeted with the straps, staring at the item as though it was foreign to her as well. She took several, shaky breaths, adjusting the straps before stuffing the cloth into Mabel’s hands. “It’s gonna be uncomfortable, but it’ll catch the blood. When yer finished, I’ll be waitin’ for you in the kitchen with some coffee.”

Tears welled in Mabel’s eyes as she looked at the strange contraption her mother had given her. She put it with her nightgown, undressed and washed herself. Remembering her mother’s instructions, she put the strange cloth in her underwear. It was so uncomfortable. It was bunched and awkward and made Mabel walk funny. She wasn’t even sure she had put it on right.

Tears rolled down Mabel’s cheeks. *What did she mean I’m becomin’ a lady?* She studied her face in the mirror. She didn’t look any different. Still had brown hair. Her hair was still tucked into braids. Three freckles still showed on her face. Mabel was really confused.

She smelled the coffee brewing, wiped her eyes and turned off

the light.

Her mother waited at the table. Mabel noticed she had messy hair and tired eyes, but she smiled as Mabel entered the room. Mabel sat down. The thing in her underwear shifted and felt even more uncomfortable than before. She frowned in discomfort.

“You’ll get used to it,” her mother encouraged, pushing a steaming cup of coffee in Mabel’s direction.

Mabel was not usually allowed to have coffee. She wondered if drinking coffee was a part of becoming a lady, too. She took a sip, staring blankly at the spotted, blue mug, trying not to cry.

“Mabel, what happened tonight is you got yer period,” her mother explained. “It’s somethin’ all girls get when they turn the right age. Some get it early, some don’ get it ‘til later, but every girl gets it.”

“When will it go away?” Mabel asked.

“Maybe in a few days, maybe a week. Everybody’s different.”

“I hope this never happens again,” Mabel pouted, feeling uncomfortable and out of sorts.

“I wish I could tell you it wouldn’t, but you’ll get it every month from here on.” Her mother looked at her with sympathetic eyes.

Mabel’s mouth fell open. “Every month? But why?” She wailed, not fighting tears anymore.

“It’s jus’ the way things are. It’s part of life.”

“I don’ want it to be part of my life!”

Mabel’s mother looked down at the table. “I remember when I firs’ got mine,” she chuckled. “I was a little older than you. I was thirteen. My mama hadn’t told me nothin’ about it either. I was even more scared than you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about it?” Mabel questioned with hurtful eyes.

“I intended to. I jus’ didn’t expect you to get one for a while more.” Her face drooped. “I’m awful sorry, Mabel. I wanted to prepare you for it, I really did.”

Mabel wished she had known it was coming, but wasn’t sure she would have accepted it any more if she had known.

“It’s alright, mama.” She took another sip of coffee. She didn’t want it, but it helped keep her mind off of the things happening to her body. “But why does this have to happen?” she asked her mother.

“It’s a part of becomin’ a woman, Mabel. Yer growin’ up. There are things in life that happen when you grow up. This is one of them.”

“But why? What’s it for? How come it’s gonna happen once a month?”

Her mother took a deep breath. “Once a month, your body makes an egg.”

Mabel's eyes got big. "Like a chicken's egg?"

Her mother laughed. "Sorta, only this one's really, really tiny. Can't even see it."

"Oh thank goodness," Mabel sighed.

"If that egg met," she paused for a moment, "a seed," she swallowed hard, "it would make a baby, and that baby would grow inside you. The blood is there to help keep the baby safe and healthy. If nothin' happens to that egg, your body gets rid of it an' all the blood that kept the egg safe."

Mabel thought hard about what her mother said. "Does the seed come from boys?"

Mabel's mother's face got red. She took a deep breath and tried not to look at Mabel.

"Yes, Mabel, it does."

"How do they give you the seeds?" Mabel asked.

Again, her mother became flustered, but tried her best not to let it show. "He has to put it where the egg is."

Mabel's face wrinkled and she stuck out her tongue. "Ick! How on earth do you get a seed in there?"

"Mabel," her mother hesitated, "if you don' mind, I'd like to wait until you start datin' boys to tell you that." She took a deep breath. "You jus' make sure no boys go nosin' around under yer skirt and you'll be fine," she added sternly.

“You don’ have to worry ‘bout that, mama. I ain’t lettin’ no boys near me ever again.”

“That’s a good girl,” her mother sighed. She took another sip of her coffee and sighed again.

“Mama?” Mabel asked, “jus’ to make sure,” she hesitated, “you know, on account o’ Anna’s sister, boys can’t give you no seeds by kissin’ you, can they?” Mabel’s stomach flopped.

Her mother looked at her and laughed. “No, Mabel. They can’t.” Continuing to laugh, she added, “That Lucy’d be in a lot o’ trouble if they could.” She shook her head.

Mabel sighed. “I didn’t think so.” Mabel felt a flood of relief wash over her knowing once and for all that babies don’t come from kissing boys.

“Mabel,” her mother continued after a long silence. “What we’ve jus’ talked about,” she paused, looking uneasy. “Well, it ain’t somthin’ ladies discuss a lot. You best keep it to yerself.”

Mabel felt trapped. “You mean I can’t even tell Anna?”

Her mother twisted her lips. “You can tell Anna. Jus’ don’t go talkin’ about it in public, or around boys! Boys especially, they jus’ don’t understand.”

Mabel couldn’t understand why everything had to be such a secret, but was tired and didn’t want to question her mother further.

“If you don’ mind, mama, I think I’d like to go back to bed.”

“That’s fine.”

Mabel put her coffee cup in the sink and headed toward her room.

“Mabel,” her mother stopped her. “I have somethin’ to tell you.” Mabel turned to face her mother. “I was gonna wait, but now seems like a good time.” She stood and put her hands on her belly. “You’re gonna be a big sister.”

CHAPTER 15

Just Mabel

The next morning, Mabel's mother eased up on her work. She also told Mrs. Nelson that Mabel wouldn't be able to help at the farm that week. Mabel was embarrassed that her mother talked to Mrs. Nelson about Mabel getting her period, but if anybody else had to know, she was glad it was Mrs. Nelson.

Anna came over as usual in the morning. Mabel didn't want to tell her about getting a period, but knew she'd have to sooner or later.

"It ain't that bad really," Mabel confessed, "once you get used to it. But I still don' like it."

She told Anna everything about the conversation she had with her mother, too. Mabel never saw Anna so relieved when she found out for sure that babies don't come from kissing boys.

"I ought to pound Lucy for tellin' fibs," Anna grumbled hotly.

"But if it weren't for her fibs, we might never have found out

the truth.”

“I suppose yer right,” Anna huffed. “But I’m still awful mad at her for scarin’ me like that. An’ imagine, yer gonna have a new baby brother or sister! I hope it’s a girl,” Anna added. “Girls are much easier than boys.”

“I agree,” said Mabel with a heavy nod. “Boys are too much trouble. ‘cept for little Tommy Nelson, but he’s rare.”

Lucky for Mabel, Anna understood well enough why she didn’t want to leave the house over the next few days. Anna even used some of the money she earned from Mrs. Nelson to buy Mabel a chocolate bar from Mr. Albertson’s corner store.

Five days after Mabel got her period it stopped. Mabel was relieved to get rid of those awful sanitary napkins.

Free again, Mabel and Anna rushed through their chores then hurried to the Nelson’s farm. Mabel apologized to Mrs. Nelson, but there was no need. She understood. Mrs. Nelson baked a fresh batch of cookies that morning and let Anna and Mabel eat some before starting their chores.

“It’s not everyday a girl becomes a woman,” she sang as she poured Mabel a tall glass of milk. “It’s times like these I wish I had a girl of my own,” she sighed. “At least I have you two. And don’t worry, Mabel,” Mrs. Nelson added with a wink, “this’ll be our little secret. Just us girls.”

Once Mabel and Anna finished chores, Mrs. Nelson packed up the rest of the cookies in a towel and sent them home with Mabel.

“What are those for?” asked Robbie as he walked her home. Anna and David had wandered farther ahead.

“Suppose it’s jus’ for bein’ so sweet. That’s why you didn’t get none,” she joked. He nudged her and reached for a cookie. Mabel snatched them away. “Where’re yer manners? Didn’t even offer you one yet.” She stuck out her tongue.

“Well, are you goin’ to?” Robbie asked, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

“What’ll you give me in return?” Mabel taunted.

“How about a kiss?”

Mabel unwrapped a cookie and stuffed it into Robbie’s mouth. “You can keep your kiss. I have plenty of cookies for the both of us,” she giggled.

Robbie took the cookie out of his mouth and grinned. “So I get more than one?”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Mabel teased.

Robbie took a bite of his cookie, leaned over toward Mabel and gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

“What was that for?” Mabel inquired, rubbing her face.

“That’s for bein’ my girl.”

“I ain’t no girl,” Mabel taunted. “I’m a lady!”

Robbie laughed. “Well then,” he took her hand and looked her in the eyes, “this is for bein’ my lady.” He closed his eyes and gave her a gentle kiss on the lips.

Mabel’s heart raced. His lips were soft. She could smell the cookie on his breath. She closed her eyes and let herself get lost in the moment until they finally pulled apart. She looked at Robbie, who looked back at her. She took his hand.

“You still ain’t gettin’ another cookie,” she cooed.

Robbie blushed.

They walked to the crossing at the stream where they usually said good-bye. Mabel handed Robbie another cookie, gave him a kiss on the cheek and ran home.

When she got to her porch, the sun was setting and the air was warm. The front door was open. Mabel smelled corn muffins baking in the oven. Her mother stood at the sink, humming a tune. Mabel watched her move toward the stove to check the muffins and thought of the joy and wonder a new baby would bring to the house.

A light breeze lifted Mabel’s hair bringing the familiar scent of autumn in its waft. School would be starting in a few weeks. She wondered how different things would be then.

She sat on the porch step, taking in all the fields, the farm buildings, the trees, her home. So much had happened over the summer, and so much more was still to come. She sighed and stood to

go in the house.

“Mabel,” she heard her father call. Mabel could see his tall figure emerge from the barn. “What are you doin’ out here?”

“Jus’ thinkin’,” she answered.

He put his hand on her shoulder. “Whatcha thinkin’ about?”

Mabel stared inside at her mother. “About the baby.”

Her father looked inside and asked, “What do you think about the baby?”

Mabel looked at her father. “I can’t wait to see what he’s like.”

Her father looked at her in surprise. “He?”

“Yeah! An’ I have a good feelin’ ‘bout this one.”

Her father knelt down in front of her. “You sure have grown up this summer. I feel like I’ve all but missed it.” He looked her in the eyes. “You’ve made me proud, Mabel. You’re turning out to be a fine lady.”

Mabel hugged him long and hard.

A fine lady... She laughed to herself thinking, *Maybe someday.*

But now, I’m just Mabel.

The End

Growing up is the last thing on Mabel's mind. It's summer-time and once daily chores are out of the way, Mabel cares only about what trouble she can get into next. That is, until Mabel and her best friend, Anna, stumble upon the new neighbor boy, Robbie Nelson. After Mabel experiences her first kiss, a world of questions haunt her. Anna tells her that kissing boys means she going to have babies (and lots of them)! Terrified of the possibility, Mabel is determined to learn exactly where babies come from.

Join Mabel through the summer that takes her from being a mischievous little girl, to a young lady as she learns about life's responsibilities and what it means to grow up.

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