

CHAPTER 1



Keeley stared hard at the strange-looking bird on the hat of the woman in front of them. Every time the train bobbed, the bird bobbed with it.

“Pop, is that bird real?” She tugged at her father’s sleeve to make him look.

Keeley and her father were standing in the aisle of the train, squished in with the others who were not lucky enough to get seats. Pop didn’t answer her. He was busy listening to the Company man standing at the front of the car, making a speech. The Company man shouted to

be heard over the chug-chug of the train.

Keeley began to feel queasy from staring so hard at the bobbing bird. She switched her stare to the precious bundle on the luggage rack above the seats, the one that held her mother's paintings. It was safe, but Keeley still felt wobbly. She closed her eyes and tried to pay attention to the speech.

"You will witness the birth of a brand-new town," the man from the Canadian-American Coal and Coke Company boomed out dramatically. "And for this event, special trains are bringing you from the great cities of Lethbridge and Cranbrook, trains laid on by the Canadian Pacific Railway out of the goodness of their hearts."

"And their desire for coal," a woman behind Keeley said. Keeley tried to find the source of the voice, but the people around her were too tall.

"We encourage you all to enjoy yourselves, to take full advantage of all the pleasures offered at this, the biggest birthday celebration in the history of the Dominion of Canada."

At the word *birthday*, Keeley grinned. September 10 was her birthday, too. Only, she was born in 1892, not 1901. She was nine years old today.

I'm older than a town, she thought. She imagined being the big sister to a whole town. "Eat your vegetables!" she could say to the entire town, and "Stop annoying me!" The whole town would have to obey.

Keeley laughed out loud at that thought. Unfortunately her laugh came at the same moment the Company man paused for a breath. Her laugh was heard by everyone in the carriage.

The woman with the funny-bird hat turned and frowned at Keeley. The woman's sour face did not match her bright hat.

Keeley looked up at her father. Pop was smiling down at her. She smiled back. The sour-faced lady faced the front again. The bird on her hat bobbed and swayed.

The Company man kept talking: "You may be asking, Why are we doing this? Why are we

throwing such a big party with free food, free entertainment, and free tours of the mine? The answer is simple. Because we are looking for people to join our happy Frank family.”

Keeley already knew that. So did everyone else on the train. Jobs were being offered in the new town of Frank, and Keeley’s father was hoping to get one of those jobs.

If he did, it would mean they could move out of Keeley’s grandparents’ house in Lethbridge, where they’d been living for the past two years since Keeley’s mother died. They had been staying in Winnipeg before that. Most of the time, Keeley had lived alone with her grandparents. Pop was usually away, trying to find work.

“I’ll get a job in Frank.” Pop was certain. “I’m an experienced coal miner. They’ll need men with experience.”

He was so certain that he and Keeley had packed up their few belongings and brought everything with them to Frank. It was packed in

the rack above the train seats. There wasn't much. What they had before, they'd sold to pay for doctors and medicine for Keeley's mother.

The trip to Frank was Keeley's birthday present. If Pop got a job, they could stay together, and her present would last forever. Her grandparents were nice, but very old, and when they weren't falling asleep in their chairs, they were telling her to be quiet.

"You need not be afraid of uprooting your families," the Company man shouted. "You can plant them here and watch them grow. Turtle Mountain is loaded with coal, coal the Dominion needs to warm its homes, run its factories—"

"And fill your pockets," said the woman behind Keeley.

Keeley spun around. This time she saw who made the comment. Other people were looking at her disapprovingly, too, but the woman didn't seem to mind. She was dressed more plainly than the other carefully groomed women. She wore a black broad-brimmed hat, and a strand of hair

hung in her face as though she had been too busy to tie it back properly.

Keeley thought she looked interesting. Most interesting of all was the way she scribbled in a notebook.

Keeley had known other scribblers back in Winnipeg. Mostly, they were poets, like her father, although they also had to do other things besides write poetry. “We can always stretch the soup,” her mom would say, laughing, whenever one of the scribbling people showed up at dinnertime. Her mother had painting friends; her father had scribbling friends. They were always kind to her, and they made life interesting.

She hadn’t seen any painters or scribblers in Lethbridge. It made her feel good to see the broad-hatted woman scribbling.

Then people moved and blocked Keeley’s view.

Keeley was tired of standing. It had been fun for a while, keeping her balance while the train jostled, but now her feet were getting sore, and

she was tired of looking at other people's chests and hats. If only she could see out a window.

A short while later, the train began to slow down. They had arrived!

Keeley had to see what the world was like outside the train. She bent down low, trying to see outside the window. She wasn't alone in doing this. Everyone was eager to see the new town.

By standing on one foot and twisting a little to the side, Keeley had a few inches of clear view. It wasn't enough. All she could see were parts of things, but she couldn't tell what they were parts of.

She leaned over a bit more, hovering slightly over the hat with the strange bird. This close, Keeley could tell that the bird was a fake, but that wasn't what interested her at the moment.

The window-greedy woman who was blocking Keeley's view moved slightly to say something to her neighbour. For a brief moment, Keeley had a clear view of the world.

The train lurched. Keeley lurched with it.

The leg she was balancing on slipped, and she fell headfirst over the funny-bird hat and into the sour-faced woman's lap.

For a long, horrible moment, Keeley's legs waved in the air. Her hands grabbed out blindly to find something she could use to steady herself. Her fingers closed around something soft and furry.

"A rat!" she screamed, throwing it as far as she could, given her ridiculous posture.

Shrieks and screams filled the train car, drowning out the Company man. Keeley could feel the crowd in the aisle pushing and shoving around her in a panic to get away from the rat.

Strong hands lifted her off the sour-faced woman's lap and stood her upright among the shoving, shrieking throng. Pop held on to her tightly so she wouldn't get swept away.

"Everybody calm down!" the Company man shouted even louder than the screeching. "There is no rat! Look—no rat!"

He held up the sour-faced woman's funny-

bird hat. Attached to it was a clump of hair that Keeley hoped was a wig.

Silence dropped on the train liked a boulder. Then the laughter started as titters, and soon everybody in the train was laughing, except Keeley, her father, the Company man, and the sour-faced woman.

The Company man kept a straight face as he made his way through the train car, carrying the hat with the hair attached to it as if it were King Edward's crown. The crowd scrunched aside to let him through. Bowing slightly, he handed the hat to the woman who owned it. She nodded her thanks.

The train came to a complete stop. The Company man held out his arm, and the sour-faced lady, holding her hairy hat, walked in front of him through the car and out of the train, her back straight and her head high.

The show over, people gathered their belongings and moved to the exit like cattle through a corral gate.

Keeley and her father were among the last to leave the train.

“I sure hope she’s not moving to Frank,” Keeley said.

Keeley’s pop laughed loud and hard, and swooped Keeley up in one of his famous hugs. Then they took down their belongings from the luggage rack. Pop let Keeley carry the bundle of her mother’s paintings. She wrapped her arms around it and followed her father out of the train.