

CHAPTER ONE

2000

Bay Gillis shovelled compost out of her ancient wheelbarrow and scattered it between the rows of vegetables in the garden at the back of the house. Her neighbour Flo hung sheets out to dry in the next yard. At the sound of tires squealing, Flo shook her head.

"Teenagers. They'll be the death of me yet."

Bay smiled to herself. Everything was going to be the death of Flo, but nothing in her sixty-five years had succeeded yet.

Bay became aware of the ache in her lower back and put down the shovel. She reached behind, placed her hands above her hips, and had a stretch before wiping her brow with the sleeve of her shirt. She surveyed her work. Bright green sprouts of cucumber and beans and peas popped out of the dark soil.

Flo headed for her back door with the laundry basket. "You've got a nice garden this year, Bay."

"My luck, the slugs will eat everything."

"Put plates of beer around and that will be the end of the slugs."

"I can't. Merlin gets drunk when I do that."

At the sound of his name, Merlin raised his shaggy head and tilted it to look at Bay. She reached down and gave the top of his head a pat. "Don't you, you silly dog."

"It's not Merlin who drinks the stuff. It's that no-good drunk I'm married to." Flo threw open the door and marched inside her house.

Nothing ever changed. Bay remembered Flo complaining about poor Ira when she was a young girl. Bay's mother used to roll her eyes whenever Flo came across the yard with that look in her eye, the one that said she was going to kill him.

At the thought of her mother, Bay's heart ached. Even a year later, Bay couldn't believe she was dead. Her mother had loved this garden.

Bay used to take a cup of tea out to her in the early morning, so they could sit together on the swing and decide where to stake the tomatoes and how many pumpkins they might need for the fall fair.

This was the first planting without her.

Bay looked past the garden and Flo's flapping sheets to the water in the harbour beyond, but the noonday sun made it hard to see, so she raised her hand to shield her eyes. Seagulls circled the lobster boats as they returned to the Louisbourg wharf, but she didn't hear their sharp cries, as the wind was blowing out to sea. She thought of the many times she and her mother had watched from this vantage point, waiting for her father's boat to come back to shore loaded with catch.

And seared in her memory was the day he and Bobby died out there on the water.

Her reverie was interrupted by the sound of the phone ringing through the open kitchen window. She hurried to the back steps, but Merlin got there first. When she opened the screen door, he charged in ahead of her. She made it to the phone on the fourth ring.

"Hello?"

"Bay, its Ruth." Matt's mother.

"Hi, Ruth. What are you up to?"

"Trying to track down my son. Is he there?"

"No. Ashley's still asleep."

"Well, where is he? He practically lives at your house. He yelled that he was taking the car and jumped in it before I could tell him I need it to go to a funeral in Sydney this afternoon."

"I'll ask Ashley and see if she knows. It's time she was up anyway."

"Thanks."

Bay put down the phone and raced up the stairs. She knocked lightly on the bedroom door and then pushed it open. The usual chaos greeted her. How on earth did that child sleep in a bed piled high with clothes, wet towels, magazines, and stuffed animals? She approached the lump underneath the duvet.

"Honey." Bay reached out to put her hand on what she thought was her daughter. When the soft covers gave way, Bay was startled for a moment. She picked up the duvet. There was nothing there except the

huge panda bear Matt had won for Ashley at the circus.

"That little minx." Bay threw the covers back on the bed and rushed to the phone.

"She's not here either."

She heard Ruth sigh. "This is getting out of hand, Bay. They're only seventeen. It frightens me how attached they are to each other."

Bay held up her forehead with her hand. "I know. Lately she's become such a handful. I try and talk to her, but she tunes me out. It's almost as if I don't matter anymore. What do you think we should do?"

"I know one thing," Ruth said. "I've scrimped and saved to get that boy to university, and he's damn well going. I'm not going to let Ashley or any girl ruin his future."

Bay sat up in her chair. "Well, excuse me, but I can say the same thing. Do I need some boy getting her pregnant? It's worse for a girl, Ruth. She'd be the one left with a baby."

"Then I suggest you put her on birth control."

"And I suggest you tell your son to keep his pants zipped."

"If you told your daughter to stop wearing clothes that are so tight you can see everything God gave her, then maybe he wouldn't be sniffing around."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

"And here I was going to offer you the use of my car. Well, you can damn well walk into Sydney."

Bay hung up the phone in Ruth's ear and covered her face with her hands. Why wasn't her mother here? How was she supposed to raise Ashley without her? She felt a soft wet nose press against her thigh. She looked down at Merlin. He always knew when she was unhappy. She reached out to ruffle his ears.

"What would I do without you, eh?"

Merlin put his head on her lap.



"Are you sure we can find our way back?"

Ashley sat between Matt's legs, nestled against his chest, his arms around her as they both leaned against a tree and looked out over

a small cove neither of them had seen before. Privacy was hard to find, even in a small town surrounded by miles of fir trees, so they'd ventured off the road and walked down an unfamiliar path towards the water.

Matt kissed the back of her head. "I don't care if we ever go back."

Ashley smiled and snuggled against him. "Me neither."

She was happy. She hadn't thought she'd be happy again, after finding her grandmother on the kitchen floor with an oven mitt still on her hand, tea biscuits scattered around her. The shock had been so great; she didn't speak for days, even when her mother begged her to. Ashley knew that if she opened her mouth, she wouldn't be able to stop screaming.

It was Matt who broke her silence. Day after day she went to school and day after day her friends steered clear of her, unsure whether to approach her or not. Ashley knew Matt but didn't normally hang around with his cool crowd, so when he came up to her one day as she waited for the school bus, she was startled.

And then he put his arm around her.

"I know your grandmother died, Ashley, and I know how sad you are. It kills me to see you look so sad, but I know how it feels. My grandmother died too."

Her eyes filled with tears and she didn't want him to see. She looked away and bit her lower lip hard to keep herself from feeling anything. He reached out and touched her cheek, making her look at him.

"It was awful to find her like that, wasn't it?"

She couldn't breathe. When she tried to get away from him, he kept his grip on her shoulder. "Tell me, Ashley. Tell me how awful it was."

Ashley hit him. She pounded on his chest and he let her. Tears scalded her eyes and she tried to keep it in but finally had to open her mouth, because she couldn't catch her breath. And when she did, a guttural sound escaped from deep inside. She didn't recognize it as her own voice and it frightened her. But Matt was there, and when she had no energy left and started to sink to her knees, he pulled her up and let her cry into his sweater. He held her close and muffled those horrible sounds, so she didn't have to be frightened anymore.

That was last summer. They'd been inseparable since.

Ashley took her index finger traced the words *I love you* in the palm of Matt's hand.

"I love you too," he said quietly.

She swivelled a little so she could see his face. "I'm never afraid when I'm with you."

"That's an odd thing to say. Are you usually afraid?"

She looked away again. "Yes."

"Of what?"

"Everything."

"Why?"

"What if my mom dies?"

"She's not going to die. She's too young to die."

"My dad died when he was twenty-two."

"God, that's my brother's age. He drowned, right?"

"Yeah, with my grandfather."

"You never knew them, did you?"

"No. I was born about six months later."

"That must have been awful for your mom, and your grandmother."

"Nana used to tell me about my grandfather and the silly things he did. I have a picture of him in his boat. But Mom doesn't talk about my dad very much. Whenever I ask, she says he was sweet and he had big hands and the world's best smile. Then she usually walks out of the room and goes outside to sit on the swing. I always see her looking out over the water and she looks lonely. I don't want to be alone. Ever."

"You're never going to be alone. I'm here."

She held his hands in a vice grip. "What if you die?"

"Silly girl, I'm going to live forever and be the greatest hockey player the world has ever seen."

"Oh yeah, I forgot," she laughed.

"Besides, you must have some other relatives kicking around. Everyone does."

"My mom has a younger sister, but I've never met her. Well, I met her once when I was three, but I don't remember. She could be in Outer Mongolia for all I know."

"You've never met her? Didn't she come home for your grandmother's funeral?"

"No." There was nothing else she could say.

Matt filled in the silence. "We have a family reunion every year and I get pinched and prodded and kissed by all my old aunts. It's horrible."

Ashley laughed and turned right around so she could face him. "It's horrible to be kissed, is it? Well, how about I make you feel downright miserable?"

She put her arms around his neck and kissed him hard as he pushed her back into the soft moss and lay on top of her. She wanted to stay there until the stars came out, one by one.

"Don't ever leave me, Matt," she whispered against his skin as his hand pushed up her shirt and encircled her ribs.

"Never, ever." And then he kissed her until she was dizzy.



Bay was waiting for her when Ashley finally walked into the kitchen. It was almost suppertime.

"I'm starved. What's for dinner?"

Bay folded her arms across her chest and leaned against the sink. "Where were you?"

"Out."

"You'll have to do better than that."

Ashley threw her jacket on the table. "Aren't I getting a little old for this? Everyone else I know is allowed to go out with their friends without getting the third degree."

"It's only common courtesy to let me know your plans. You should've told me."

"I couldn't find you."

Bay pushed herself away from the sink. "You didn't try very hard then, did you? I was only in the garden." She sat at the kitchen table. "I want you to sit down. I need to talk to you."

Ashley rolled her eyes and opened the fridge. "We're always talking. I'm sick of talking." She reached out and grabbed a wrapped cheese slice.

"Sit down."

Ashley sighed and plunked into the chair on the other side of the table. She busied herself opening the cheese wrapper.

It gave Bay a chance to look at her, and when she did, a chill ran up her spine. She'd seen that face before.

"You were with Matt, weren't you?"

Ashley shrugged. "So?"

"Matt's mother was on the phone and she was fit to be tied because he took off with her car."

"She's always fit to be tied. She's nuts."

"No. She's a worried mother, like I am. We think you and Matt are spending much too much time together, and it's not healthy."

Ashley looked up at her. "Not healthy? What's that supposed to mean?" She started to rise and when she did, Bay tapped the table-top.

"Sit down, young lady. I'm not finished talking to you."

Ashley stayed standing and threw the cheese to Merlin. "Well, I'm finished talking to you. I'm not seven years old, Mom. I'm seventeen, and I love Matt, and if I want to be with him I will. He's the only one around here who knows me."

"I know you—"

"No, Mom. Nana knew me, not you." And with that Ashley turned on her heel and stormed out of the kitchen.

Bay sat very still and listened to the clock tick. There was no other sound. She should get up, but what for? She wouldn't see Ashley for the rest of the night. She'd prefer to hole up in her room to punish her mother. Going to bed hungry was preferable to coming downstairs and chancing another meeting.

Bay had never felt so alone in her life. She went outside and sat on the garden swing. She heard her neighbours go about their business getting supper ready. There were six houses on their side of the lane, and the backyards all melted into each other. For the most part, shrubs and clotheslines and garages marked the property borders. The bottom of the lawns met the farmer's field, which was covered with wildflowers at this time of year. Beyond that, alders grew close to the rocky shoreline. There was no sand to speak of, and the drop-off was so steep that none of the kids in the neighbourhood used it as a beach.

The wind was still up and Bay could taste salt in the air. On top of that, the fog that blanketed the coast rolled in and made her shoulder-length wavy hair completely unruly. She felt the tiny dew-like drops cover her head like a veil, as the grey mist crept over the house.

She thought she should get up and tell Flo to take her sheets in before they became too damp. Just then, Flo threw open her back door and hurried down the steps.

"Bloody weather," Flo grumped. "It'll be the death of me yet."

Bay stood up and gave her a hand, starting at one end while Flo took the other. They worked in silence until they neared one another.

"A little birdie told me you're seeing Dermot Fraser," Flo smirked. "Now there's a fine man. You could do worse."

"I'm not seeing him." Bay passed her a folded sheet. "He's a friend."

"Ain't they all, until ya marry the buggers. You need to get out more, Bay. You're only a young woman. Your Ma wouldn't want you moping away forever."

Bay didn't want to talk about it.

Flo pointed across the yard. "Speak of the devil, isn't that him now?"

Bay looked and saw Dermot walk around the back of her house. He never came to the front door. Most people didn't. It was the village way.

"I'm over here, Dermot."

Dermot stopped and waved. Bay knew he wouldn't venture over to Flo's yard. He was a little afraid of Flo, but then so were a lot of people.

"You go now, child," Flo said cheerfully. "Thanks for your help."

Bay passed her the last of the sheets. "See you tomorrow."

"Maybe. Maybe not. I could die in my sleep."

Bay walked over to her own yard, where Dermot stood and waited for her. He was a little taller than she was, with a hard, compact body and a mop of dark hair. He had an interesting, rugged face, with an intense gaze that unnerved her at times. He didn't smile often, but he was kind.

"Hi, Dermot."

"Hi, Bay."

She stopped in front of him. "Have you had your supper?"

He nodded. "I wouldn't say no to a cup of tea."

"Sure, come on in."

They went into the kitchen and Dermot sat down as Bay put the kettle on. Dermot and Merlin had a great reunion. Merlin flopped on the floor and exposed his belly so Dermot could scratch it.

Bay straightened up a little, aware that the countertops were filled with her junk and Ashley's. She couldn't seem to keep the house tidy. At least not since her mom died.

"You'll have to excuse the mess. Teenage daughters are not conducive to clean homes."

"It looks better than my place." Dermot lived in a rambling old farmhouse his father had left him. It was in desperate need of a coat of paint, but the bones were still good. Everyone in town said the only thing it needed was a woman's touch, but so far Dermot remained a bachelor. Naturally there was speculation in some corners that he was gay, but most pooh-poohed that idea. As Flo said, no fairy she'd ever come across knew how to fix a car engine, and since Dermot was a mechanic who ran the only gas station in town, that let him off the hook.

"You look tired, Bay. Are you all right?"

She brushed her bangs out of her face with a sweep of her hand and took a quick glance in the mirror that hung by the kitchen sink. Her lovely hazel eyes had dark circles under them. She was only thirty-six, but felt fifty. She pretended otherwise.

"I'm fine." She made the tea and brought it to the table. "I didn't bake today. Would you settle for an Oreo?"

"Nothing, thanks." Dermot sipped his tea. "I was wondering if you were up to going to the show on Friday night?"

Bay sipped her tea so she didn't have to answer him right away. A part of her wanted to go badly, but another part couldn't be bothered. She just didn't want to hurt his feelings. When she looked down at his hands she knew he'd gone to a lot of trouble to get the grease from underneath his fingernails before he came over. It made her feel worse.

She put down her teacup. "I'll have to see what Ashley is doing. Can I get back to you?"

Dermot didn't answer and his silence bothered her. "I'm sorry, okay? What do you want from me?" She got up quickly and took her cup to the sink. Dermot rose from his chair and stood behind her.

"You know what I want. I've told you long enough, but you put up roadblocks whenever I come near you. I've just about had it."

She spun around. "You've had it? What are you talking about?"

Dermot grabbed her shoulders. "You know how I feel about you, Bay. Everyone in this damn town knows how I feel about you. I've waited and waited and I don't know how much longer I can wait."

She lowered her head. "I'm sorry, Dermot. I don't feel anything anymore. Not for you, not for anyone."

"Let me show you." He held her face in his hands and kissed her. She resisted at first, but suddenly didn't care anymore. She didn't have the strength to object.

He raised his head and looked into her eyes. "Let me help you, Bay. You don't have to be alone."

"I'm not alone. I have Ashley."

"You need a man to love you. Let me be that man."

She felt his warm body against her and it was tempting to let him take her. His lips found hers again and she began to lean against him. When he kissed the hollow of her throat she gave a little gasp.

That's when Ashley cleared her throat.

Bay pushed Dermot away. He looked confused and then realized Ashley was in the room.

"Honey, I—"

"Don't bother, Mom. You're such a hypocrite. You don't want anyone to love me, but you let anyone who walks in off the street kiss you. At least Matt and I have the decency to go somewhere private. He doesn't do me in the kitchen."

Dermot raised his voice. "How dare you speak to your mother like that?"

"Dermot, please."

"Your mother is the most decent woman I've ever met and you have no right to upset her."

"Why should I listen to you?" Ashley yelled at him. "Who are you to me? You're the greasy guy who runs the gas station. Why don't you take her out for dinner before you take her to bed?"

Bay walked up to Ashley and slapped her across the face.

Ashley gasped and covered her cheek. "I hate you. Why didn't you die instead of Nana? Why wasn't it you?" She turned and ran out the front door.

Bay went after her. "Wait, Ashley. Come back!"

But Ashley didn't stop. She ran up the street and disappeared.

Bay stood in the front porch and covered her face. She rocked back and forth, not knowing what to do. Then she felt Dermot's hand on her arm.

"Bay..."

She didn't look at him. "Please go. Just go."

"I want to help you."

She uncovered her face then. "You've done enough, thank you very much. I don't want your help. I don't need anyone's help. Now leave me alone!"

And with that she ran up the stairs and disappeared behind her bedroom door.