

Chapter One



I WAS THE ONE WHO found the first note. My friend Amy and I had just been dropped off from the school bus and were dawdling along the road to my house when I had to take a short trip into the woods to answer nature's call. The sun shone on the new leaves of alder trees, and on the way back to Amy, I stopped to smell the freshness of the spring air.

There it was, partially tucked under a flat rock, a small piece of white paper torn from a notepad and folded in half. It couldn't have been there long because the paper wasn't wet, and it had stopped raining only half an hour before.

I read it quickly and called to Amy as I came out to the road.

“You’ll never guess what I found!”

Amy Miller and I were the only two girls living in the Landing. We went to high school by bus to the next village up the coast. Once school was out, and we were back home, we had only each other to rely on for company. Amy and I were both seventeen and in grade eleven.

Amy knew all about clothes and makeup. She looked like Hedy Lamarr, except she was blonde. She had the same gorgeous figure: a small waist and high, rounded breasts that made all the men in the village stop and follow her with their eyes. The women frowned.

Ever since the summer before, when Amy had moved to the Landing, we had seen each other every day. She was a good listener, and I could talk to her about anything. The very worst thing that I could imagine would be to lose Amy as my friend.

I read aloud the note I’d found. “What happened to you yesterday? I waited as long as I could. R.”

“Let me see, Meg,” said Amy, her face clouding. “It sounds like a love note.”

“Could be.” I gave her the note. “Do you recognize the handwriting? I think it looks like a man’s. Heavy scrawl and messy, just like my brother, Sam’s.” Sam was my oldest brother and away in the war. He had joined the Air Force in 1940, soon after Canada had declared war on Germany.

Amy’s face crumpled, and she looked ready to cry. She kept smoothing the note over and over with her right index

finger, as if she were trying to erase the words. I couldn't understand why she was upset.

"It could be Rob Pryce," she said. "He gave my mother a card on April Fool's day. He wrote on it, 'Just for fun.' The writing looked like this."

"I don't like him," I said. "I hate the way he looks at me, as if he's taking off all my clothes."

Robert Pryce. He and his family had moved to the Landing just after Christmas. We thought they must be rich. No one in their family seemed to work, and they had the nicest house in the village. A creek ran the length of the property, right down to the beach, and their view went all the way out to the Gap, and beyond, to Vancouver Island. Rob had a pretty wife, a little younger. She was from a prominent Toronto family. Some said that Rob was a writer, or an artist, or maybe both. Others said he was a Communist. He was the handsomest man on the peninsula in an Errol Flynn sort of way. He had brothers who visited occasionally, and they were all good-looking. There was a sister, too, but the good looks didn't work as well on her. Everyone on the peninsula took note of the Pryce men.

Robert Pryce reminded me of my own father, who was away in the Air Force on the East Coast. Dad had always had an eye for the women. Mild flirtations going on whenever a chance presented itself. I had long ago decided I didn't like men like that.

"I could check under the rock every time I go by here," I

said now to Amy. "It's close to my house. And I'll keep a lookout for whoever is walking this way."

"I wonder who it could be? But maybe it doesn't mean anything." Amy's face relaxed at the thought.

"Probably not."

"Let's keep the note anyway, Meg. Just to see what happens."

"You keep it," I said. "My mother's always looking through my things, and she'd find this. She would throw a fit."

"No, you keep it."

I looked at her in surprise. "Why?"

But she wouldn't tell me, and I let it go.

As soon as I got home, I put the note in my new hiding place, under a loose floorboard in my bedroom.

Neither of us expected to find a second note the very next day. We'd missed the school bus because of basketball practice and had to walk home, so we were later than usual. Only a corner of white paper showed from under the rock.

"It looks like it's been torn from the same notebook," said Amy.

We read it out loud together. "S, please get in touch."

"Maybe he knows someone took his first note," I said.

"No initial 'R' this time," said Amy. "Is that an 'S' or a '5'?"

"Who would start a note with a '5'? Can you think of a female within walking distance whose first name starts with 'S'?"

Amy shook her head.

Ours was a small fishing village along the B.C. coast, and it

didn't take long to think of all the women under the age of fifty whose name started with "S." We came up with three. All of them were married.

"Let's watch them," said Amy. "See where they go out walking. Are they buying new clothes? Wearing more makeup than usual?"

"Sylvia Ballard," we both said.

"Did I tell you that last week Mrs. Ballard was wearing Evening in Paris perfume in the store?" said Amy. "As if she were going on a date afterwards. Maybe it was a date with Robert Pryce."

"How was she dressed?"

"You know that red angora sweater she has, the turtle-neck?" Amy said. "Someone should tell her that she's too old to wear that colour. Too bright. Makes her look haggard. She'd be better off with a soft coral. It's more becoming to all ages."

"I think red's okay for evening," I said. "The last time I saw her wear it was when she went out to the movies with her husband, and I was babysitting. I thought she looked okay."

"If we take this note, he probably won't leave any more," Amy said. "Should we leave it?"

"Leave it," I said.

"No, I have an idea," said Amy. "This one I'll keep."

The next morning on the school bus, Amy seemed upset. She was scowling and kept twisting her hair around her finger.

“Guess who was at my house after I left you yesterday?” she said. “Robert Pryce. It seems he’s always there. Said he was helping my mother fill out some forms for the government. Why couldn’t she wait for my dad to help her? He’ll be up this weekend. Anyway, I checked out Robert Pryce’s handwriting on the forms, and it’s the very same handwriting that’s on the notes.”

“Have you noticed how he’s always super helpful to all the women?” I said. “Anyway, when Robert Pryce sees your dad is home, he might back off. At least, you know that ‘S’ isn’t your mother, not with a name like Norma. Once we find out who ‘S’ is, maybe we can do something about it and show Robert Pryce up for the creep he is.”

After school that day, I came home to find my mother sitting at the kitchen table reading the first note Amy and I had found.

“What’s this all about?” she said. “It must be important for you to hide it away. I want to know every detail, don’t leave anything out. And by the way, it wouldn’t hurt you to mop under your bed.”

“Mom!”

“I would never have found it if the cat hadn’t been sneezing with all the dust under your bed. Thick as a blanket. The floorboard was loose.”

“Amy and I found the note in the woods, and we’ve been trying to figure out who ‘S’ is.”

“It’s nothing for you to involve yourself in, Meg. You or Amy.” She glanced at the note again. “But it does make you wonder.” Her eyes sharpened. “I have half a notion it has something to do with one of the Pryce men. I’ve never liked their looks. Half the women in the village are acting dotty because of them. I hope you’ll take this as a warning and not let yourself be one of them.”

When the *Lady Alexandra* docked at the Landing that Friday night, crowded with the usual weekenders from the city, I spotted Amy’s father among them. I’d met him before — he came to the Landing about twice a month — and once again I was struck by how much alike he and Amy looked. They both had thick blonde hair, the same dark, arching eyebrows and eyes blue as the mountains on a September morning. As soon as Mr. Miller stepped off the gangplank, he hugged Amy. Amy’s mother wasn’t there to meet the boat, but that wasn’t surprising. Amy had told me the first time we met that her mother had high blood pressure and didn’t go out much.

She’d said, “It’s really the reason we moved here. The doctors said she needed to be out of the stress of the city.”

Amy’s face was bright with happiness as she and her father walked up the wharf together. I knew that she loved her father almost to the point of worship, but seeing her face now, so radiant with love, made me swallow hard. Even though I didn’t like the way my father acted around other women, I missed him. Most of the time, I was able to push the feeling down to a dull ache.