

Chapter One

Beth Lord scrubbed at the worn wooden floor as if she were vanquishing an enemy. Always hungry, hungry, hungry. Her thoughts jabbed at her heart. Wanting, wanting wanting. I don't know why I am always so hungry. Her thoughts ran on despite her efforts to stop them. Be quiet. Don't complain. Don't need so much. Stuff the anger. Stuff the sadness. Don't cry. Disappear.

I wish I could run away, she thought. She paused in her labour and rummaged in her apron pocket for her hanky. She looked at the embroidery on the corner of it. Momma gave me this just before she died. It's the only thing I have of hers and I wouldn't have that if Poppa and sister Jessie had had their way. They sold off everything of value that was my mother's and what they couldn't sell, Jessie kept or Poppa burnt. The tears she had been trying to contain spilled over and ran down her cheeks. "Oh, Momma, I miss you," she whispered. She patted at the fresh flow of tears from her eyes. I wish I could just run away.

She entertained this idea as if it were new, but it had been with her for at least a year. If I could only just disappear and never come back, or stop living for just a little while. I'm so tired. She swabbed at her tears. It's no use thinking like this, I guess I'd better get supper started. She brushed back the dark brown hair that had escaped from its tidy bun and surveyed the contents of the pantry and found nothing in enough quantity to satisfy her father and brothers. It's leftovers tonight, like it or not, she thought. At least they'll be better than they were the first time round. Jessie never could cook a bird. And the pie, oh dear. She thought back to Sunday dinner and the look on Samuel's face when he bit into the cranberry tart. She laughed in spite of herself. "Serves you right," she said to herself. I've never seen anyone so greedy. I didn't leave the sugar out on purpose. She chuckled again. It was so sour even the pigs wouldn't eat it.

She continued to mull over the events on Sunday as she set the table. Poppa gave me a good scolding about waste not, want not. As if I didn't know better. I felt like a child. I guess I am only a child in spirit. At least that's what Jessie keeps telling me. How can she say that? It was me who kept things going around here when Momma died. She thought back over the last fifteen years. She was so sick in the end, and the doctor couldn't find a cure. I was eighteen and seeing James. We were going to be married, but when Momma died, Poppa put an end to it. He said he needed me to keep house, but that's not all he wanted me for. She felt the bitterness and anger rise into her throat. Filthy old scut. James was shattered. He married Amanda soon afterward. Her thoughts were interrupted by the banging of the storm door on its hinges. Presently the kitchen resounded to the loud voices of her father and her brothers.

"Leftovers again?" her father said. "I told you a twenty-five pound turkey was too big for the few of us."

"It was Jessie's turkey," said Beth. "I had nothing to do with it." She closed her mouth firmly and began serving the hash.

“By the way, Walter stopped by this afternoon with a note from Caroline for you.” Her father pushed aside his untidy grey beard and rummaged in his vest pocket for the crumpled note. He handed it to Beth. “And, no, you can’t go, and that’s that.” He dug into the hash on his plate.

“You opened it!” said Beth. “You opened my letter!”

“There’ll be no secrets in this house,” he said around a mouthful of mashed potatoes and gravy. A dribble of gravy ran down his beard.

Beth swallowed hard against her anger and her tears. She bent over her plate of the despised leftovers and found them as tasteless as her life.

She lay awake until nearly midnight reading her note over and over and wishing she could accept Caroline’s invitation. She imagined a whole week with nothing to do except help Caroline with her new baby and visit. And the peace! A whole week of keeping herself to herself. The idea gleamed in her mind. Why shouldn’t I go to stay with Caroline for a few days? I miss her so. She’s more of a sister to me than Jessie ever was. I’m thirty-two years old. Why can’t I go? Just because Poppa said I couldn’t? She felt excitement rising in her chest. It’s my chance to run away even if it is only for a week. I’ll probably pay for it when I get back, but I don’t care. She began to plan. I’d have to sneak out when Poppa and the boys are out in the barn. I couldn’t take much with me, it’s a long way to Charlottetown and I couldn’t carry a heavy suitcase that far. Besides, I don’t have very much.

She woke the next morning with the feeling of excitement still tickling in her stomach. She reviewed the plan that had come to her in the night. It’ll work if I put on two layers of clothes and only carry a small bundle. That way they shouldn’t notice. I can walk along the shore path instead of the main path. It’ll be less direct, but I can do it. I’ll cook some things ahead. That should satisfy them for a little while.

Two days later the pantry was well stocked, and Beth surveyed the results of her industry with satisfaction. That should keep them happy, at least for a day or two. She hastened upstairs to dress for her journey. She donned two dresses and two petticoats, stuffed her underwear in the pockets and pushed her toothbrush and comb into the sleeve of her sweater. There, that should do it, she thought. She modelled her bulky appearance in front of the wavery looking glass. Now if I can only get out of sight on the shore path before anyone sees me, I’ll get away. She hurried downstairs, scribbled a note and left it on the table. Ten minutes later she was out of sight on the shore path. She looked back once but could only see the chimney through the trees and that only when the wind blew.

She strode along the shore path with a lightened heart. Soon she began to hum and then to sing. “Oh, ye’ll tak’ the high road and I’ll tak’ the low road, and I’ll be in Scotland afore ye, an’ me an’ my true love will never meet again, on the bonny, bonny banks o’ Loch Lomond.” The song further lightened her mood, and she sang another. In an hour and a half, she was halfway to Charlottetown and still singing.

She sat down to rest on a piece of red sandstone that stuck out of the earth just above the high tide line. This is a longer walk than I remember, she thought. The last time I walked it, I was only a wee , and Momma carried me when I got tired. She thought back to her one and only trip to

Charlottetown. It was such fun. Momma left the boys home with Poppa, and just the two of us went. We stopped and visited along the way so it didn't seem quite so long.

I wonder how Momma got Poppa to let her go to the city. I guess he wasn't as bad as he is now. Vague memories of the quarrels between her parents echoed in her mind. Maybe he didn't "let" her go. Maybe she just went. A cooler gust of wind made her skin crawl, and she shivered. She wondered at the cold. Maybe it's the memories, she thought.

She sat a moment longer then stood up and stretched and continued on her way. To her left, the water of the Northumberland Strait gleamed a steely grey in the afternoon light, what little light there was. Overhead, a seagull dipped and floated on the breeze watching for his supper. Far away over the strait, she could see the purple outline of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. I wonder what it's like to live over there, she thought. I wonder if I'll ever go there. Probably not. I'd never have reason to leave the Island. The wind picked up, and she shivered. Nor money either. Another gust as the breeze became a wind. Beth pulled her cloak closer to her neck then slipped her hands back inside to keep them warm. She looked up at the scudding clouds that suddenly seemed darker than they had before. I wonder if we'll get rain out of this, she thought. Maybe even snow. She picked up her pace. Another hour of walking brought her to the ferry across the Hillsborough River.

The ferry was just ready to slip its moorings with a horse and a cart filled to overflowing with potatoes on board. Beth gave the ferryman her ten cents and perched on a barrel in the lee of the wheel house. It felt good to get out of the wind for a little while. Soon they were bumping and jostling their way into the berth on the other side. Beth jumped down from her barrel and wriggled past the horse and cart. "G'day sir," she said to the ferryman and was soon on her way up the muddy street to the general store.

She stepped into the store, and the wind slammed the door behind her. "I'm sorry," she said to the clerk, "the wind took it."

"Aye, 'tis windy alright." The clerk turned back to rearranging the dry goods according to colour and weight. "What can I do for you, miss?"

"D'you know Caroline MacDonald?"

"John MacDonald's wife?"

"Yes, that'd be her. D'you know where I might find her?"

"When you go out the door take a right, go up the street to the end and turn right, then take the first right and her house is the one with the two big horse chestnuts in the front garden. It's not far." The clerk stopped what he was doing and began pawing through the parcels of filled orders. "Since you're going that way, you might take this parcel to her. I had to order it for her last week, and it just came today. It's dress material so it's not heavy." He handed Beth the parcel. "She can pay for it the next time she's in."

Beth tucked the parcel under her arm, said good day to the clerk and was soon nearing the end of the street according to his directions. In ten minutes, she was rapping on Caroline's kitchen door.

“C’mon in, whoever you are,” called Caroline from the interior of the house. “I’ll be with you in a moment. Help yourself to the tea; I just put it down.”

Beth stepped into Caroline’s kitchen. Even though the day was gloomy and cold, the kitchen seemed to sparkle with Caroline’s spirit. The tall windows were framed with yellow, dimity curtains. The white woodwork gleamed in the chilly light of the late afternoon. The floor was freshly sanded and swept. The kettle wheezed and sang to itself on the wood stove, and the full teapot on the back of the stove shone brightly from many polishings.

Beth pulled off her cloak and hung it on the coat hook behind the stove, then went to survey the contents of Caroline’s pantry. Through the glass doors, she could see the heavy, white mugs with their cheery yellow flowers on the sides. It’s just like Caroline to have everything matching, she thought. Her lips curved into a soft smile as she remembered how Caroline would always say: “Just because we don’t have a lot of money doesn’t mean we can’t have things that match. It’s all a matter of perspective. If you’re buying dishes and your curtains are green, buy dishes that have a bit of green on them. It’s good for the disposition.”

Beth filled a mug from the shiny teapot and sat down at the table with its yellow tablecloth that matched the yellow in the curtains. It felt good to sit down after her long walk. She sipped at her tea and warmed her hands on the mug. Presently, she heard Caroline’s footsteps on the stairs. She was singing a lullaby that changed to a delighted shriek when she saw Beth. The drowsy baby was startled awake and began to wail.

“Oops, sorry Catherine, I didn’t mean to scare you. Beth, what in the world are you doing here?” She gathered Beth into a warm hug.

“You did invite me,” said Beth.

“Yes, I did, but I wasn’t expecting you so soon.”

“The boys and Poppa were getting on my nerves so I thought: no time like the present.”

“How are your brothers? Your Poppa too?”

Beth made a face. “Much the same only worse. At least, I’m minding it more. Jessie is her usual meddlesome self, of course. When they all get together, I try to stay out of the way.”

“That bad, huh?” Caroline did a little rocking dance in the middle of the kitchen floor to quiet the baby.

Beth nodded. “Aye, that bad. The boys are rude, but Poppa is just plain cruel.” She thrust the sudden remembrance of her father’s last encounter with her into the recesses of her mind. His matted grey beard had made her gag, and he had smacked her for it. If she looked at her cheek in the mirror closely enough, she could still see the faint outline of his fingers—and it had been two days.

“You’ve put on a bit of weight?”

Beth chuckled. “Not really. I wore two sets of clothing so I wouldn’t have to carry a suitcase.”

“That bad.” Caroline pursed her lips. “But you did get away without them seeing you?”

Beth sighed. "Aye, I did. I left them a note."

"Your Poppa must be savage by now. It's a wonder he didn't send one of the boys out after you." Caroline retrieved a mug from the pantry. She cradled the now sleeping baby in one arm while she poured tea for herself. "More tea?" She waved the pot in Beth's direction.

Beth held out her cup. "I expect they're only finding it about now. They were out back repairing fences." Beth chuckled. "The old bull broke out last week, and they had a hard time getting him back in. You should see the mess of Sandy's garden."

"It's a good thing it's late in the year."

"That's not the whole story." Beth took the teapot from Caroline and poured herself another cup. "The bull took to running and ran through the widow MacKenzie's washing on the line. He was draped with various unmentionables, and he ran almost to the smithy's before they could get him turned around."

"That must have been a sight." Caroline suppressed a laugh so as not to waken Catherine. She sat down in the rocker and began gently rocking and crooning to the baby.

"They couldn't get him into the barn. I watched awhile and then went out and had a talk with Bobby. He was my bull when he was a calf. I called him Bobby, and I've never thought of him any other way. We had a brief discussion while I pulled Mrs. MacKenzie's underwear off his horns; then I took him by an ear and he followed me into the barn as gentle as a lamb. Poppa said: 'I don't know how you do that' and stomped off across the yard."

"You could always talk to the animals," said Caroline. She shifted the baby to the other arm. "I should put you in your basket. I'll have you spoilt before you're a month old."

"Aye, but isn't it lovely to cuddle your own?" The longing was heavy in Beth's voice.

Caroline looked across at her friend. "D'you ever think of James?"

Beth glanced away from Caroline's inquisitive gaze. "I try not to. After all, it has been fifteen years, and he is a married man."

"Not anymore, he isn't."

"He's not?" Beth's heart leapt in her chest and she felt as if someone were squeezing the air from her lungs. "What happened?"

"She died this spring from the pneumonia. She went quick. She was a terrible lazy housekeeper. And James couldn't trust her to go to the store with a dollar for molasses but she'd spend it on herself and declare that the store was out of molasses. He finally started going himself just to keep control of the money."

Beth rose to refill her cup. The cold in her bones was finally giving way to the warmth of the tea and the companionship of her friend. "I didn't hear that. I just knew she was lazy." Beth sniffed. "But that's

old news. She was like that when she was in school. Don't you remember? She'd do somersaults rather than do any work."

Caroline rose and settled the baby in its basket. "I used to wonder how she ever got through school."

"I overheard the schoolmaster talking to Momma once. He admitted that he just passed her to get rid of her. Poor man! Momma was about the only one he ever talked to. She was as safe as the bank and minded her own business."

"She took a lot of information with her to the grave," said Caroline. She picked up her cup. "Are you warm enough now? I have to start supper, for John will be home and as hungry as a bear."

"It'll be nice to see John again. I haven't seen either of you since your wedding."

They sat up late talking and reminiscing. About midnight, they wandered up the steep stairs still laughing and trying to be quiet so as not to wake John. Beth tumbled into bed, pulled the blankets up to her chin and fell into a dreamless restorative sleep. She awoke at eight confused and disoriented as to her surroundings. Oh! I'm at Caroline's, she thought. She squinted at the clock. It's late. I'm always up at six with breakfast on the table. She stretched and snuggled into her blankets a moment longer, enjoying the coziness of their warmth. She luxuriated for a moment, then she got up, dressed and went downstairs.

"Good morning, you slug," teased Caroline. "I've been up for an hour."

"I am a slug, aren't I. I don't remember the last time I slept so late. I feel so good. It's wonderful to feel rested for a change." A frown whispered across her face, and the old fear knotted itself in her stomach again. It was the only night she would sleep well at Caroline's.

"You don't get a lot of rest at your house, do you?"

"No, there's always someone who wants something he could very well get for himself." Beth's mouth turned down at the corners. "I remember once Danny came and got me out of bed to go and get him a glass of milk."

"And he was how old?"

"He was in his teens."

"And I suppose you got up and fetched it."

"What else could I do?" Beth thought back to the event. "I knew he wouldn't leave me alone until I did, so it was as easy to do it first as last."

Caroline shook her head. "I don't know how you put up with it all these years."

"Believe me, I am hard pressed to do it day in day out and with not so much as a thank you. I've been wishing more and more that I could just run away."

"Why don't you?"

Beth shrugged. "Where would I go? How would I support myself?"

“You could go to work at the Charlottetown Hotel as a maid.”

“They’d only come and fetch me.”

“You could hire out as a lady’s maid for some rich sea captain’s wife. That way you’d at least have a half day off every week and some spending money.”

“I could, couldn’t I?” Beth’s voice took on an excited lilt, then dropped again. “They wouldn’t stop until they found me and made me come home again, and with Jessie living in town there’d be no escape.”

“I guess you’re stuck.” Caroline checked Catherine’s diaper and found it wet. She picked her up. “Come baby cat, it’s time to change you.”

“What are you going to put in your garden this year?” asked Beth. She leafed through a seed catalogue that had been in the magazine rack by the wood box.

“I haven’t decided yet beyond the staples.” Caroline spoke around a mouthful of safety pins. I can’t make it too big for I won’t be able to keep it.” She fastened Catherine’s diaper, then said more clearly, “I was thinking that I would try some of those zucchini squash. They look kind of interesting, though I don’t know what I’d do with them.”

Beth leafed through the catalogue. “Oh, here they are. Odd looking things aren’t they.”

“They look like cucumbers; that’s what I thought they were at first. It says you can eat them raw or cook them. There’s a pamphlet comes with them with a recipe in it for a cake. Though I don’t know that I’d like a cake made of vegetables.”

“It’d be worth the experiment to grow a few,” said Beth.

The days passed much too swiftly for Beth and Caroline. Beth was grateful for a rest from her father’s scowling demands and her brothers’ temper tantrums. She cuddled Catherine as often as she could and wished with all her heart that she didn’t have to go back home. Caroline was quick to observe her sagging spirits.

“You’re not looking forward to going home are you?”

“No, I’m not. Not even a little bit.” Tears filled her eyes. “I don’t know how I’ll do it after seeing you and John in your peaceful house with your beautiful baby.” Several tears spilled over. She wiped at them with her handkerchief. “It’s my home. I shouldn’t dread it so much. But Poppa ...” Beth’s voice trailed away.

Caroline looked at her with narrowed eyes. “I don’t know why not. I would, given the circumstances.” Caroline was rolling cookie dough. She brandished the rolling pin. “I’d whack them over the head if I were in your shoes.”

The image of gentle Caroline whacking anyone with anything made Beth laugh. “No, you wouldn’t.”

“I’d like to.” Caroline began cutting cookies. “It’s a shame you gave in to them when your mother died.”

“I try not to think of the ‘might-have-beens.’ In any case, I had little choice. It was that or run away with James. You know he wanted me to.”

Caroline nodded. “I know. You told me that then.” She grabbed a yellow potholder and wrenched open the oven door, then shoved the tray of cookies in to bake. “But wouldn’t that have been better than the misery you’re in now?”

Beth sighed. “Of course, it would have been. But I was brought up to obey, and I had never defied my father before.”

“Unlike me.” Caroline rolled out the next pan of cookies.

“Unlike you.” Beth propped her chin in her hand and watched Caroline’s deft movements. “I don’t know where you got the courage to do that.”

“I’m not as forbearing as you are, and when Poppa told me that I couldn’t get married to John, that I was too young, I defied him and ran off with John anyway. When I stayed away overnight, Poppa declared that I was ‘defiled’ and didn’t speak to me for more than a year. Of course, I didn’t mind that too much. What I minded most was being on the outs with Momma. Poppa forbade her seeing me.”

“I remember how hard it was on your Momma.” Beth pinched off a piece of cookie dough and popped it into her mouth. “I went to see her just after you left, and she was so sad. She told me to obey Poppa, that it was too hard on the family to do such a divisive thing as run away. I didn’t think it would ever come to that, but Momma died soon after and Poppa laid the law down when I said that James and I were going to be married.”

“I didn’t know that you went to see Momma.” Caroline tested the cookies for doneness, then pulled the first pan from the oven. They were thick and gingery the way that Beth’s mother used to make them.

“She didn’t tell you?” Beth tried to pick up a hot cookie and scorched her fingers. She dropped the cookie.

“You’d better let them cool a little.” Caroline began greasing the pan for the second tray. “Momma never told me. She sneaked away a couple of times to see me. But Poppa caught her the last time, and she never came again.”

“That’s so sad.” Beth continued to blow on her burnt fingers. “Did you ever reconcile with your poppa?”

“When Momma died, he sent one of the boys to let me know, and that’s all the contact he ever made with me. I don’t know what he’ll do now that we have Catherine. She’s his first grandchild.” Caroline fell silent. Then she said, “Would you elope now if you had a chance?”

Beth thought it over, then said, "If I had the right offer, I might."

"Is there anything I can do for you, Caroline?"

"You're getting restless, are you?" Caroline was mending one of John's socks, her lap piled high with mending to be done. "You could go to the store for me. I'll give you a list, and while you're there, you can give them the money I owe."

Beth felt her spirits lift. "It's a lovely day out there and not too cold, and I haven't been outside since I got here. A short excursion will be just the ticket."

"Hand me that paper, and I'll make a list for you. I don't need too much so the load won't be heavy." Caroline made her list then sat reviewing it. She tapped the pencil against her front teeth as she made a mental trip through her pantry. "I think that's all." She handed Beth the list. "Thanks. It'll save me a lot of steps. I find that having a new baby slows me down considerably. I usually get John to pick up what we need on his way home from work."

Beth pulled on her coat, warm and cozy from having hung behind the stove. She pulled on her mittens, then stuck the money that Caroline gave her inside the palm. She was soon on her way to the store. It was a brisk walk and just long enough to refresh her. She looked out over the harbour at the sun sparkling on the water and gleaming off the folded sails of the big ocean-going ships and the stubby smokestacks of the harbour tugs. The men loading them for their trip down the coast to the Boston States looked like June bugs from this distance. Beth stood for a moment watching until the chilly breeze reminded her that it was late autumn. She picked up her pace again and was soon climbing the few steps to the store.

"Good morning, sir," said Beth. The clerk was perched high on a ladder, dusting the top shelves with a feather duster.

"Good morning, miss, what can I get you this morning?" He climbed down from his roost in the rafters. "You found John MacDonald's, then?"

"Oh, aye, you gave me excellent directions. As a matter of fact, I'm running errands for Caroline this morning. She's kind of tied down with the new baby." She handed the clerk the list.

"They're doing well?" He scanned down the items. "John dropped in a few days ago. He'll be needing new buttons on his shirt, he's that proud to be a Poppa."

"He is, isn't he. I've never seen a man take care of an infant before. They usually like to look but not touch, but John rocks her and talks to her, and she looks at him as if she understood every word."

The door to the store opened and then banged shut as the cold breeze caught it. Beth turned to see who had come in. She felt the blood drain from her face and her breath catch in her throat. "H-hello, James."

"Hello, Beth, I heard you were in town."

"I-I'm staying with Caroline for a few days. She just had a baby."

"It's their first, isn't it?"

“Yes, a little girl. She’s a lovely child.” Beth’s breathing came back to normal by the force of her will. “They named her Catherine after Caroline’s mother.”

James turned to the clerk. “I need a fifty pound bag of flour and ...” James reeled off five other items.

Beth regarded him out the corner of her eye. You’re better looking than you were, she thought, more mature and hardened. You’ve filled out nicely. That last thought made Beth blush and she ducked her head.

“Is there anything left on my bill?” James asked.

The clerk riffled through a pile of invoices on a spindle. “Just a piece of dress material and some candy that Amanda had charged.”

James grimaced. “What does it come to, and I’ll see if I can pay it now.” He rummaged through his pockets for his money. “I’ve been going door to door to settle Amanda’s debts. I’m just amazed at what she had bought, and I didn’t know a thing about any of it.”

“Oh, aye. My wife buys things without consulting me too, though I must say she has always kept me informed of her purchases.”

Poor James, thought Beth, it’s no wonder he looks so tired. Amanda didn’t take care of the mending either. I can see where he has tried to grop up the hole in the elbow of his coat. She sighed. If you were my man, I’d take better care of you.

James turned back to Beth. “How’re your father and brothers?”

“They’re fine. They’re probably still pretty angry with me. I expect I’ll see them before too long, they must be nearly out of baking by now.”

“Why would they be angry with you?” Concern rang in James’ voice.

Beth made a slight grimace. “Because I was disobedient and left without telling them I was going. I just left them with lots of baking and a note to say where I was.”

James frowned and shook his head. “You’re not sixteen anymore either.”

“According to them I am.”

“Your order comes to one dollar and fifty cents,” said the clerk.

James handed him the money. “Am I square with you now?”

“Exactly even.”

James turned to Beth. “It was good seeing you again, Beth. Keep well.” He turned and followed the clerk to the loading dock to get his flour.

Beth watched him go. The day seemed darker with his leaving.

Beth arrived back at Caroline's with her basket of goods. Caroline was on her last sock, her lap now empty of work. Beth hung her coat behind the stove and set the basket in the pantry. "You'll never guess who came in the store while I was there, Caroline."

"James?"

"How'd you guess that?"

"You're looking a little flushed and nervous, and that's the only person who could get that kind of reaction from you." Caroline's eyes sparkled with mischief. "Did you talk with him?"

"Briefly. He was settling Amanda's debts. It sounds as if there were a lot of them."

"Poor James. She led him a merry dance."

"By the look of his coat, she didn't take very good care of him." Beth's voice took on a disapproving tone.

"You'd take better care of him, wouldn't you?" said Caroline.

"If he was mine to take care of, I would."