Ladies of the Lake

a novel

CATHY GOHLKE

Chapter One

MAY 1935

It had been easy to set aside the engraved invitation to the July graduation for Lakeside Ladies Academy, less easy to ignore persistent letters from my beloved Bernadette with her daughterly pleas to attend the "most important event" of her life. Still, I never expected a call from the United States when Portia summoned me to the phone in the downstairs hallway.

"Mrs. Murray?"

I recognized the voice on the other end of the line immediately. My heart leapt to my throat. Seventeen years and nearly eight hundred miles were stripped away. Pulling a lace and linen handkerchief from my pocket, I wrapped it round the mouthpiece, intent on disguising my voice. Some part of my being thought how clever I was to consider that in such a moment.

"Mrs. Murray, are you there?"

"Yes."

"Good morning. This is Mrs. Meyer—Headmistress Dorothy Meyer, calling from Connecticut, from Lakeside Ladies Academy."

Mrs. Meyer. Dorothy. Dot—my Dot. I could not respond.

"I—I'm calling on behalf of your daughter, Bernadette."

And then it struck me that the headmistress wouldn't place a long-distance call across the border for anything less than life threatened. "Is Bernadette unwell?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I don't mean to alarm you. Bernadette has asked me to personally invite you to our upcoming graduation. Your daughter has worked diligently these five years and wants so much to share this momentous day with her mother."

"No, Mrs.—" I couldn't say her name.

"Meyer." She paused, as if she thought I'd forgotten. "Mrs. Murray, I realize that it's not my place to pry or push, but Bernadette has expressed that your unwillingness to come into public may be for fear—"

"No, it is not your place." I could barely control the tremor in my voice.

A moment of silence.

"Mrs. Murray, Bernadette carries her own scars, and yet she's worked so hard to override her shyness, to achieve scholastically. She's come out of her shell exponentially and formed close friendships among the girls. They no longer see her scars. They love her spirit, her vitality and caring heart. They love *her*. We all do. She's to be named valedictorian. Please know that we will embrace you as the mother of such a wonderful girl. She's a daughter to be so very proud of."

I loved hearing of Bernadette's accomplishments and friendships. It was why I'd sent her there, what I wanted—needed—for her that I could not give her. Dot's voice sounded unchanged after so many years. If she only knew . . . but she must never know.

"My love to Bernadette, Mrs.—goodbye." While Dot still spoke, I fumbled the receiver toward its cradle, missed, and finally set it into place. Pulling my handkerchief away, I twisted it into knots.

"Is Bernadette all right?" Portia, my longtime housemaid—more friend than maid—stood on the landing, waiting and listening.

I swallowed, pushing away the past, summoning the present, though it sat askew in my brain. "Yes, fine."

"That woman, she wants you to come to the graduation, doesn't she? That's why she called?"

"I'm not going."

"You owe it to Bernadette."

Portia might be my friend, my only friend, but she pushed too hard, and it was at such times I wanted to remind her of her place. Though she would scoff at the notion of "place" as much as I.

I ignored her and walked into the library.

She followed me. "You sent her to that school so she'd come out of herself, grow a life she couldn't grow inside these prison walls. Now she's done it, you should be proud."

"I've always been proud of Bernadette. And our home is not a prison."

"You can wear a veil if you're worried about—"

"Leave off, Portia. This is not your concern."

"Not my concern after looking after the both of you all these years? You've gotten to be like that Miss Haversham woman in that Dickens book you've been reading aloud. You'll keep on till you die like—"

"Portia, please. And it's Havisham."

Portia stopped. I'd insulted her and I was immediately sorry. After a long moment she walked back toward the kitchen, mumbling, "Seems to me you ought to show some of that gumption you're always preaching—and maybe a little respect." The kitchen door swung closed behind her, but I could still hear indecipherable grumbles, pots slammed onto the stove, and dishes dropped, likely chipped, into the sink.

I closed the library door, pressing my back against it, and gritted my teeth. If only I could so easily shut out the memories.

I pulled aside the draperies and threw open every window in the room, determined to usher in the sun.

Spring had finally bloomed in Halifax. The heady scent of lilacs and the tantalizing fragrance of early roses, sweet peas, lilies of the valley, and ivory peonies pierced with scarlet centers poured through open windows. Still chilly enough to warrant a fire once the sun set, but by day I filled the house with the outdoors.

Wrapping a second cardigan over my shoulders, I sat behind my desk and straightened the stack of manuscript pages to edit. I pulled my typewriter front and center. There was work to do this day, and I would not be put off by Dorothy's phone call.

My breath caught.

Dorothy. Dot. Dottie. My dearest friend. Once. Long ago. What would you say if you knew it was really me on the other end of that telephone line, that I wasn't Rosaline Murray after all? That Bernadette is actually . . . No. I wouldn't finish that thought, not even in my mind. But to remember Dot, and with her Ruth and Susannah, the Ladies of the Lake, my years at Lakeside Ladies Academy . . . and all the rest . . . I didn't want to remember, but how could I forget?

AUTUMN 1905

Never would I have gone away to school, never would I have met the girls if the storm had not come—that sudden, violent storm between the mainland and Prince Edward Island.

It was only meant to be a day's shopping trip by ferry to Halifax. My parents had intended to return home by nightfall. Wind, rain, and dark came, but they did not. Almost as one life they perished together, just as they'd lived each day.

I was eleven years old and in school the day of the storm. That's what we called it. There was life before the day of the storm, and life after. I attended a two-room school for all the grades in our small community, which meant twenty-three students. Teacher sent us home early when the sky darkened. Looking back, I believe that was irresponsible. We should have remained in the schoolhouse and

ridden out the storm together. But the teacher was young and I think not so very bright.

Drenched when I reached home, I built a fire, made myself a spare evening tea, wrote in my journal, and got myself to bed that night. The storm raged until dawn broke. In eleven years, nearly twelve, I'd lived through much foul weather that swept the island. Most times I would not have been afraid. I'd have believed that when the sky darkened, my parents and indeed the ferry would have remained docked in Halifax, determined to wait out the storm, and that ferry and parents would arrive early the next morning. But something in the dark of night told me they wouldn't, that they would never return, that by morning I would be most truly orphaned, and I wondered, *What will I do then?*

Bodies washed up onto the shore of PEI—Prince Edward Island—one at a time, and in twos and threes. I was told a local fisherman identified my parents' bodies before I reached the docks. I never knew who. I still remember finding my mother's red heeled pump washed ashore two days after the storm. She'd been so proud of those shoes. I only ever found the one.

Funerals for victims stretched throughout the week. My half brother, Lemuel, Dad's son born of a first wife who'd died with the baby in birthing their second child, came from Halifax to attend the burials, settle our parents' estate, and sell the house.

The upheaval, the packing of Mother's and Dad's books and the selling and carting away of Mother's pump organ, nearly did me in—so much so that I couldn't even pen the words in my journal, though from the time I learned to write I'd written everything there, each and every night. I remained stoic on the outside, refusing to cry in front of this half brother I little knew, who'd left home ages ago, thirteen years older than I.

Looking back, my imagining that I'd stay on PEI seems naive. I'd believed Lemuel would agree to let me live with my best friend, Eliza Billings, and her family. We'd been inseparable since we were toddlers at church, at school, through summer holidays spent on the shore. To

Eliza's and my astonishment, her parents did not offer, and Lemuel scoffed at my notion of charity.

That was when I first feared he meant for me to leave the island with its craggy hills and dales, its wild winds and rambling woods, its millions of wildflowers in summer and rocky red-sandstone shore that rushed down to the sea. I didn't know if I could live without those things, or without the morning breath of the sea. They were part of all my life, part of me.

I feared then that he meant for me to go and live with him and his wife and infant son in Halifax. I hated the city and I'd only met any of them twice in my life—but the thought had not seemed to enter his mind.

"You'll begin term next week at Lakeside Ladies Academy in Connecticut. It's a good ladies' school with a fine reputation. You should get along well enough."

"Leave Prince Edward Island?" Saying the words aloud brought a rock, more coarse than any that could be found along the shore, to my throat.

"Well, you certainly can't stay here. We've no family left on the island."

"What about the Macneills that run the post office? They're clan."

"They're old," he scoffed, "and they're not Father's MacNeills. They've no obligation."

"But—"

"One small trunk, Adelaide. Rules of dress are strict, and you won't need more. If there is a uniform, I'll arrange with the headmistress to see you're supplied. You'll leave in the morning."

"In the morning? Leave all my things?" *Leave my home—home of my body and home of my heart, my spirit?*

He glanced over the row of dolls on my shelf, the stacks of books beside my bed and baskets of rocks and pine cones in my room, then shook his head in near disgust.

"At least, I must say goodbye to—"

"No one expects that from a girl your age after such an event. I

must get back to business in Halifax, and the sooner you're enrolled, the better, the less you'll find yourself behind, though I imagine you may need to repeat a grade to catch up with the other students. PEI doesn't offer much in education." If he'd snorted, he couldn't have sounded more derisive.

Everyone will expect a goodbye and a thank-you for all they've done, all they are to me, and I need to beg them, to plead, please, oh, please write me in faraway Connecticut. A girl my age knows all of that.

But, of course, I never said those things. I walked to my room, my last night in the old house, the home where I was born, where short weeks before my parents had hugged me and kissed me and told me how dearly I was loved. I closed my bedroom door, leaned my back against it, and wept.

Little did I know at that tender age that Lakeside Ladies Academy would be the saving of me—from Lemuel and his coldness, from becoming a ward of the Crown, shunted from family to family, place to place. Little did I know that I would find a home and family there, or that I would one day so violently lose it.