

Lighting the Stars

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Chapter 1 (Excerpt)

Merilee's eyes were drawn to the abandoned Sanatorium, scanning the many windowed bays for the ghosts that still lingered. Hundreds had died there, so how could the place not be haunted? Although she had grown up in its shadow, Merilee never ventured too close on her own, for she was sure she had glimpsed spectral faces or a passing wraith.

It had been different when the tuberculosis patients had shuffled about the extensive grounds, although then she hadn't been allowed near the place for fear of contagion. Her parents, who had both been ill and met here, knew how difficult it was to fight and win the battle to breathe.

But five years ago, this private San had closed, and the Muskoka Hospital for Consumptives just north of here had expanded. So the woods and cliffs had become her domain.

Merilee scrambled over the massive rock that undulated along the lakeshore, preferring to take the scenic route to her friend Peggy's house, which lay just beyond the San. She loved the sunbaked, pink-swirled granite with its frosting of green lichen. Shrubs and grasses and a few tenacious trees flourished in the pockets of soil; pines and slender, white-stemmed birches clung to the cracks in the sides of the cliffs.

From one of the lower ledges of the bluff, about thirty feet above the lake, she and Peggy relished launching themselves into the water – unbeknownst to their parents, of course. But it was early June, the lake still cool for swimming despite the heat. Only a distant, solitary canoe silently cleaved the calm water.

Merilee tucked herself into a rocky and shady alcove that was invisible except from the lake. She'd been amused when she discovered that her parents had met here secretly when they were patients.

"Romances were discouraged," her mother, Claire, had told her. "But it was one of the incentives that kept us sane and alive during our three years here." In fact, Colin had relapsed after Claire had been discharged, so she had married him and taken him home to Hope Cottage to nurse him herself.

A canary-yellow airplane precipitated out of the thin clouds with an almighty roar and swooped low over the lake. Merilee watched it climb into a steep loop and held her breath as it plummeted back towards earth. One of the boys training at Camp Borden, no doubt. The Royal Canadian Air Force used the nearby Muskoka Airport to refuel. She breathed a sigh of relief when he leveled out just over the treetops, and stormed up the lake.

That was one of the few reminders that they were at war. She crinkled her brow with concern about her cousin Charlie Thornton, who'd been in England with the Royal Air Force since '34. And it worried her that his younger brother, Drew, was

planning to join up as soon as he was old enough. He already had his private pilot's licence, and had taken Merilee and other cousins up for thrilling flights over the lakes.

But she shouldn't dawdle, since she'd promised Peggy that she would help her study for their French exam. Merilee's grandmother was French-Canadian, so Merilee was effortlessly fluent. She had also visited France, which was just another one of the things that made her different from the other kids in town. Some hadn't even been outside of Gravenhurst.

It was partly because they both felt like outcasts that Merilee and Peggy had become such close friends.

Merilee brushed dried pine needles from her skirt and headed toward the long, curved three-storey building that showed signs of neglect in the broken windows and sagging steps. She wouldn't go any closer than the overgrown gardens before veering off to the dirt road.

But she froze as she heard the creak of an unopened door. Terrified yet mesmerized, she stared, afraid to look away from the building as if compelled to confront whatever monstrosity emerged from it. She bit her lips to stifle a scream as the front door opened.

Something growled behind her. Merilee shrieked and would have run if her legs hadn't turned to jelly.

A supportive hand took her by the elbow, and a kind voice said, "Sorry, Miss. Didn't mean to startle you."

On reflection, she realized that the "growl" had been "Pardon me".

The young officer regarded her with amused hazel eyes. Embarrassment burned her face.

"I expect there aren't many people who come here, except a few locals out to make mischief," he said astutely.

"Yes, although most are afraid of it," she stammered. "I live next door." She pointed south, toward the base of the bluff. "I rather think of this as my backyard."

"How delightful! But I'm afraid it won't be for much longer." In response to her quizzical look he added, "The military's taking it over. I'm with the Royal Engineers, and we're making preparations."

"Will it be a training camp?"

"Unfortunately not. I'm not at liberty to discuss this at the moment, but you'll find out soon enough." He looked at her sympathetically as he added, "Sorry to ruin your backyard."

An older, obviously high-ranking officer had stepped out of the building with a couple of Engineers, and stared expectantly at them.

Merilee's companion said, "Do excuse me, Miss."

"Sutcliffe," she added before realizing that he wasn't seeking her name. She flushed crimson again.

"Lieutenant Tremayne," he responded gallantly, giving her a warm smile. "A pleasure to meet you, Miss Sutcliffe. The Colonel appears anxious to hear my report about the grounds."

“Yes, of course. I expect I’m a trespasser now.”

“Not yet. Enjoy your domain while you can.”

The Colonel seemed to be glaring at her, so she moved briskly away, no longer scared, but excited to tell Peggy of her encounter with the deevie Lieutenant. She was surprised to see a convoy of military vehicles dusting along the normally deserted road and pulling up behind the old San. One of the men on the back of a truck wolf-whistled while another waved his cap gaily at her. She giggled and ran the short distance to the Wildings’.

Peggy’s great-grandfather had cleared and tried to farm the free land granted to him in the 1860s, but amidst all the rock there was little soil that could sustain agriculture. So the old farmhouse was hemmed in by a small orchard, a large market garden, a patch of meadow for the cow, and a jumble of outbuildings, including a chicken coop and a workshop for Mr. Wilding’s carpentry. The forest behind provided wood and maple syrup, which they boiled down and bottled each spring, selling most of it to tourists. The Wildings had long ago sold off the rocky waterfront acres to what had first been a hotel and during the last war had become the Sanatorium. Mr. Wilding had been employed there as the handyman, but when it closed during the Depression, he’d struggled to make ends meet with his woodworking skills. The Wildings were grateful when Merilee’s extensive network of family and friends needed his services at their cottages, and indeed, kept him and his sons busy most summers.

Chipper, the golden Labrador retriever, greeted Merilee with wagging tail and expectant affection. When she had ruffled his head and scratched behind his ears, telling him what a lovely lad he was, he bounded off happily to the workshop behind the house. He trusted people, so he wasn’t much of a watchdog, but he did keep the chickens safe from animal marauders, and enjoyed hunting with his masters.

Merilee was a welcome visitor at the Wildings’ – a second daughter, Mrs. Wilding insisted - so she merely tapped on the side door and walked into the kitchen. Lois Wilding was baking something scrumptious; tangy nutmeg and cloves and mouthwatering cinnamon scented the warm air.

“Spice cake,” Merilee ventured. “Yum!”

Lois smiled. She was a slim, energetic woman, always happiest when she was busy, especially in the kitchen. With three tall, hard-working sons, she maintained she spent most of her time keeping them fed. She had been one of the nurses at the San in its early days, which is how she’d met Mr. Wilding. “With rum-and-maple custard. Barry’s favourite. You know he’s leaving next week.”

“So soon?” Merilee was sad to think that Barry was already the second son to enlist.

“Don’t know how long I can keep Ned from joining up,” Lois admitted. “He never liked being left behind.”

Ned had just turned eighteen, and was the brother that sixteen-year-old Peggy was closest to. “How would Peggy manage without him?” Merilee asked with some alarm. Ned was like a big brother to her as well. He still took the girls fishing and boating, although Peggy could no longer go blueberry picking. She’d been crippled by polio during the epidemic in ’37.

To avoid contagion, Merilee hadn't even been allowed to see Peggy then, and had spent that entire summer at various relatives' island cottages on Lake Rosseau.

"She'll manage, like we all will, if it comes to that," Lois said firmly. She didn't pamper or indulge Peggy, because she wanted her to be strong and independent, not consider herself a helpless invalid.

Ned was the one who helped Peggy struggle up the stairs and pushed her wheelchair down to the small sandy beach at the end of the road, where he and Merilee made sure that Peggy didn't drown. The aquatic exercises did help her regain the use of her right leg, although the left defied that as well massage, electro and physiotherapy, and was still encased in a brace. But Peggy swore that she would walk properly, even run again one day.

Merilee heard the piano stop, and said with a grin, "She senses I'm here. Wait until I tell her what I just found out!"

"Anything to do with the cars I heard driving down to the Sanatorium?"

"Yes, it's the army!"

Lois Wilding obviously hadn't expected that answer. She stopped stirring and looked up at Merilee. "What in God's name do *they* want here?"

"I don't know, but an officer told me that I should enjoy the grounds as long as I can. Not a camp, he said."

"Maybe a convalescent hospital," Lois speculated with interest. She had time to do some nursing again, especially now that two of her boys would be away from home. "Might give me some useful war work, not just rolling bandages for the Red Cross."

"I can hear everything you're saying, so stop jabbering with Mum and come in here!" Peggy called from the adjoining parlour. Merilee grinned and bounced from the room.

Peggy hobbled away from the piano. She was a talented player who readily got lost in her music. Merilee played the flute, and Ned, the fiddle, so they sometimes practiced together and gave small concerts to family and friends.

"So spill!" Peggy ordered.

When Merilee had finished, Peggy said, "Hm. Merilee Tremayne has a nice ring to it."

"Do stop!" Merilee giggled. It was an old game between them, because surely your husband's name needed to sound good with yours. But she was fifteen and wasn't even supposed to be thinking about boys yet, let alone a dashing officer who must be in his early twenties. "He probably considers me a little kid."

"I bet he gave you admiring glances." Peggy wondered how any man could not be enchanted by Merilee. With her sapphire eyes and pale complexion contrasted by glossy mahogany hair, she had a delicate beauty.

"It could be fun if soldiers are stationed here," Merilee admitted. She was concerned by Peggy's pallor and the purple crescents under her usually expressive amber-green eyes. It meant that she was in a lot of pain again. Peggy often pushed herself too hard to attempt to overcome her paralysis.

"You mean we might get invited to dances in the Mess?" Peggy snorted.

“On second thought, Mum would probably make me take the long way along Louise Street to get here, so that I don’t see any soldiers,” Merilee admitted.

There was a peremptory knock on the front door, which was unusual as most people came to the side door. “Merilee, could you? I have my hands full,” Lois yelled from the kitchen.

Merilee opened the front door, which led onto a screened-in veranda where the Colonel and a couple of other officers were waiting.

“I’d like to speak with your father, young lady,” the Colonel announced.

“Do come in, gentlemen,” Merilee replied graciously, “and I will fetch Mr. Wilding. I’m just a guest here.” She hesitated for a moment, but thought it best to show them into the parlour, even though Peggy was there. She would have to leave if necessary.

But Peggy was intrigued and made no move to go anywhere. “I’ll entertain our guests until you fetch Father,” she said. “I’m afraid Mother’s tied up in the kitchen, but may I offer you some tea?”

“No thank you, Miss,” the Colonel said, looking slightly uncomfortable as he noticed Peggy’s withered, braced leg and the crutches propped beside her.

Merilee scampered out to the workshop, where Mr. Wilding, Barry, and Ned were building an oak refectory table. They followed her back to the house.

Merilee decided that she’d better wait in the kitchen, but edged her way out into the hallway so that she could eavesdrop when she heard Mr. Wilding say heatedly, “No, I will not consider renting you my home for the duration!”

She didn’t catch the muffled response. Lorne Wilding grew even more indignant as he said, “I’m as patriotic as the next fella. One son’s in the army and another’s leaving this week. I was wounded in the last war, at Ypres, Colonel. “And still limped, Merilee thought. “We make our livelihood from this land, and I have my workshop here. Nope! It’s impossible for us to move elsewhere.”

Wiping her hands on her apron, Lois tiptoed up behind Merilee, who had sidled even closer to the parlour entrance. They heard someone say, “That’s most unfortunate, Mr. Wilding, since that will put your family inside the boundaries of the camp. We have secured permission from the owner to all the property of the former Sanatorium, including the Director’s house.”

So they were evicting Matron Morrow, who had rented and turned the lavish lakeside house into a luxury tourist home when the San had closed. Even during the Depression there were people who could afford the time and money for a pampered vacation.

The Colonel stated, “You might change your mind when you find yourselves surrounded by Germans.”

Merilee was thunderstruck. After a moment of shocked silence, Barry exploded. “Hell and damnation! Whose fool idea is it to send prisoners here? How will you keep them from escaping into the woods and the lake, and threatening the townspeople? You’re putting our women at risk from those rapists! Jesus Christ!”

“The prisoners will be well guarded, Mr. Wilding. The citizens will have nothing to fear, and no contact with the POWs. Except for your family perhaps.”

There was an expectant silence, but then Lorne Wilding said, "We'll just have to take that risk. No goddamn German's going to chase me off the land that my grandfather laboured to clear! What the hell did we fight for last time, and now again? Freedom, Colonel. Democratic rights. So I'll not allow the government to force me off my land either."

"I doubt it would come to that, Mr. Wilding," one of the other officers reassured him.

"Just be aware of what you're letting yourselves in for," the Colonel cautioned. "Louise St. will be the outer perimeter on the east side. You'll be behind the main gates as well."

Zowie! Merilee thought. She could hardly believe that her treasured "backyard" would be taken over by bloodthirsty Nazis. No wonder the Lieutenant had regarded her sympathetically. And Peggy would virtually be imprisoned with them!

An officer said, "I see by the sign on your truck that you're a master carpenter, Mr. Wilding. We have troops coming to erect fences and auxiliary buildings, but we could use some local tradesmen to begin repairs on the old Sanatorium. Are you interested?"

"I will do what I can to help, other than move, Major."

"Then perhaps you could come with me, and I'll show you what is required most urgently."

Merilee was ready to scarper back into the kitchen, but Lois Wilding stood her ground and put her hands firmly on Merilee's shoulders. The soldiers gave them only a cursory glance as they left, although the Major from the Royal Engineers nodded as he said, "Good day, ladies. And good luck."

When they had gone, Ned went to the cupboard under the stairs. Among the rubber boots and warm jackets were several hunting rifles. Pulling out a .22, he said, "I'm going to teach you girls to defend yourselves."

"I couldn't shoot someone!" Merilee protested.

"Oh, I think you could if you or your family were threatened."

Lighting the Stars continues for 470 pages.