The Bay at Midnight

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CHAPTER 1

Julie

All children make mistakes. Most of those errors in judgment are easily forgotten, but some of them are too enormous, too devastating to ever fully disappear from memory. The mistake I made when I was twelve still haunted me at fifty-three. Most of the time, I didn't think about it, but there were days when something happened that brought it all back to me in a rush, that filled me with the guilt of a twelve-year-old who had known better and that made me wish I could return to the summer of 1962 and live it over again. The Monday Abby Chapman Worley showed up at my front door was one of those days.

I was having a productive day as I worked on *The Broad Street Murders,* the thirty-third novel in my Granny Fran series. If I had known how successful that series would become, I would have made Fran Gallagher younger at the start. She was already sev-

enty in the first book. Now, thirteen years later, she was eighty-three and going strong, but I wondered how long I could keep her tracking down killers.

The house was blissfully quiet. My daughter Shannon, who'd graduated from Westfield High School the Saturday before, was giving cello lessons in a music store downtown. The June air outside my sunroom window was clear and still, and because my house was set on a curve in the road, I had an expansive view of my New Jersey neighborhood with its vibrant green lawns and manicured gardens. I would type a sentence or two, then stare out the window, enjoying the scenery as I thought about what might happen next in my story.

I'd finished Chapter Three and was just beginning Chapter Four when my doorbell rang. I leaned back in my chair, trying to decide whether to answer it or not. It was probably a friend of Shannon's, but what if it was a courier, delivering a contract or something else that might require my signature?

I peered out the front window. No trucks in sight. A white Volkswagen Beetle—a convertible with its top down—was parked in front of my house, however, and since my concentration was already broken, I decided I might as well see who it was.

I walked through the living room and opened the door and my heart sank a little. The slender young woman standing on the other side of my screen door looked too old to be a friend of Shannon's, and I worried that she might be one of my fans. Although I tried to protect my identity as much as possible, some of my most determined readers had found me over the years. I adored them and was grateful for their loyalty to my books, but I also treasured my privacy, especially when I was deep into my work.

"Yes?" I smiled.

The woman's sunny-blond hair was cut short, barely brushing the tops of her ears and she was wearing very dark sunglasses that made it difficult to see her eyes. There was a pretty sophistication about her. Her shorts were clean and creased, her mauve T-shirt tucked in with a belt. A small navy-blue pocketbook was slung over one shoulder.

"Mrs. Bauer?" she asked, confirming my suspicion. Julianne Bauer, my maiden name, was also my pseudonym. Friends and neighbors knew me as Julie Sellers.

"Yes?" I said.

"I'm sorry to just show up like this." She slipped her hands into her pockets. "My name is Abby Worley. You and my father—Ethan Chapman—were friends when you were kids."

My hand flew to my mouth. I hadn't heard Ethan's name since the summer of 1962—forty-one years earlier—yet it took me less than a second to place him. In my memory, I was transported back to Bay Head Shores, where my family's bungalow stood next to the Chapmans' and where the life-altering events of that summer erased all the good summers that had preceded it.

"You remember him?" Abby Worley asked.

"Yes, of course," I said. I pictured Ethan the way he was when I last saw him—a skinny, freckled, bespectacled twelve-year-old, a fragile-looking boy with red hair and pale legs. I saw him reeling in a giant blowfish from the canal behind our houses, then rubbing the fish's white belly to make it puff up. I saw him jumping off the bulkhead, wings made from old sheets attached to his arms as he attempted to fly. We had at one time been friends, but not in 1962. The last time I saw him, I beat him up.

"I hope you'll forgive me for just showing up like this," she said. "Dad once told me you lived in Westfield, so I asked around. The bagel store. The guy at the video-rental place. Your neighbors are not very good at guarding your privacy. And this is the sort of the thing I didn't want to write in a letter or talk about on the phone."

"What sort of thing?" I asked. The serious tone of her voice told me this was more than a visit from a fan.

She glanced toward the wicker rockers on my broad front porch.

"Could we sit down?" she asked.

"Of course," I said, pushing open the screen door and walking with her toward the rockers. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"No, I'm fine," she said, as she settled into one of the chairs. "This is nice, having a front porch."

I nodded. "Once the mosquitoes are here in full force, we don't get much use out of it, but yes, it's nice right now." I studied her, looking for some trace of Ethan in her face. Her cheekbones were high and her deep tan looked stunning on her, regardless of the health implications. Maybe it was fake. She looked like the type of woman who took good care of herself. It was hard for me to picture Ethan as her father. He hadn't been homely, but nerdishness had invaded every cell of his body.

"So," I said, "what is it that you didn't want to talk about over the phone?"

Now that we were in the shade, she slipped off her sunglasses to reveal blue eyes. "Do you remember my uncle Ned?" she asked.

I remembered Ethan's brother even better than I remem-

bered Ethan. I'd had a crush on him, although he'd been six years older than me and quite out of my league. By the end of that summer, though, I'd despised him.

I nodded. "Sure," I said.

"Well, he died a couple of weeks ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," I said mechanically. "He must have been—" I did the math in my head "—around fifty-nine?"

"He died the night before his fifty-ninth birthday," Abby said.

"Had he been ill?"

"He had cirrhosis of the liver," Abby said, matter-of-factly. "He drank too much. My father said he…that he started drinking right after the summer your…you know." For the first time, she seemed a little unsure of herself. "Right after your sister died," she said. "He got really depressed. I only knew him as a sad sort of person."

"I'm sorry," I said again. I couldn't picture handsome, athletic Ned Chapman as a beaten-down, fifty-nine-year-old man, but then we'd all changed after that summer.

"Dad doesn't know I've come to see you," Abby said. "And he wouldn't be happy about it, but I just had to."

I leaned forward, wishing she would get to the point. "Why are you here, Abby?" I asked.

She nodded as if readying herself to say something she'd rehearsed. "Dad and I cleaned out Uncle Ned's town house," she said. "I was going through his kitchen and I found an envelope in one of the drawers addressed to the Point Pleasant Police Department. Dad opened it and…" She reached into her pocketbook and handed me a sheet of paper. "This is just a copy."

I looked down at the short, typed missive, dated two months earlier.

To Whom it May Concern:
I have information about a murder that occurred in your jurisdiction in 1962. The wrong person paid for that crime. I'm terminally ill and want to set the record straight. I can be contacted at the above phone number.
Sincerely, Ned Chapman

"My God." I leaned against the back of the rocker and closed my eyes. I thought my head might explode with the meaning behind the words. "He was going to confess," I said.

"We don't know that," Abby said quickly. "I mean, Dad is absolutely sure Uncle Ned didn't do it. I mean, he is *completely* sure. But he'd told me about you long ago. My mom and I have read all your books, and so of course he told me everything about you. He said how you suspected that Uncle Ned did it, even though no one else did, so I thought you had a right to know about the letter. I told Dad we should take it to the police. I mean, it sounds like the guy who was sent to prison might not have done it."

"Absolutely," I agreed, holding the letter in the air. "The police need to see this."

Abby bit her lip. "The only thing is, Dad doesn't want to take it to them. He said that the man who was convicted died in prison, so it doesn't really matter now."

I felt tears spring to my eyes. I knew that George Lewis had died of pneumonia five years into serving his life sentence for my sister's murder. I'd always believed that he'd been wrongly imprisoned. How cruel and unfair.

"At the very least, his name should be cleared," I said firmly.

"I think so, too," Abby agreed. "But Dad is afraid that the

police will jump to the conclusion that Uncle Ned did it, just like you did. My uncle was screwed up, but he could never hurt anyone."

I pulled a tissue from my shorts' pocket and removed my glasses to blot the tears from my eyes. "Maybe he *did* hurt someone," I suggested gently, slipping my glasses on again. "And maybe *that's* what screwed him up."

Abby shook her head. "I know it looks that way, but Dad said Ned had an airtight alibi. That he was home when your sis—when it happened."

"It sounds like your father wants to protect his brother no matter what," I said, trying not to sound as bitter as I felt. "If your father won't take this to the police," I said, "I will." I didn't mean it to sound like a threat, but it probably did.

"I understand," Abby said. "And I agree the police need to know. But Dad…" She shook her head. "Would you consider talking to him?" she asked.

I thought of how unwelcome that conversation would be to Ethan. "It doesn't sound like he wants to talk about it," I said. "And you said he'd be angry that you came here."

"He won't be angry," Abby said. "He never really gets angry. He'll just be…upset. I'll tell him I came. But then, if you could call him, maybe you could persuade him. You have the biggest personal stake in this."

She didn't understand how the thought of revisiting the summer of 1962 made my palms sweat and my stomach burn. I thought about George Lewis's sister, Wanda, and the personal stake *she* would have in this. I thought about his cousin Salena, the woman who'd raised him. Nothing would return my sister to her family or George Lewis to his, but at the very least, we all deserved to know the truth. "Give me his number," I said.

She took the letter from me, wrote Ethan's number on a corner of it and handed it back. Slipping her sunglasses on again, she stood up.

"Thank you," she said, returning her pen to her tiny pocketbook. She looked at me. "I hope…well, I don't know what to hope, actually. I guess I just hope the truth finally comes out."

"I hope so, too, Abby," I said.

I watched her walk down the sidewalk and get into the white Beetle convertible. She waved as she pulled away from the curb and I watched her drive up my street, then turn the corner and disappear.

I sat there a long time, perfectly still, the letter and all its horrible implications lying on my lap. Chapter Four was forgotten. My body felt leaden and my heart ached, because I knew that no matter who turned out to have murdered my sister, the responsibility for her death would always rest with me.

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