

# The Beach Quilt

Holly Chamberlin



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# Chapter 1

“Poo,” said Cordelia Anne Kane. “Poo, poo, and poo.”

The cause of her annoyance or dissatisfaction or just plain grumpiness was right outside the kitchen window. In the past twenty-four hours, inches upon inches of snow had fallen relentlessly, until now, according to the local weather station, there was close to two feet of the awful stuff on the ground. The trees—green pines and bare oaks and white birch alike—were bowed down with the weight of snow on their branches, and the yard was one big sheet of glittering silvery white.

Cordelia turned from the window. Well, what could you expect when you lived in Maine? Snow was what you could expect, and lots of it, along with freezing temperatures, followed by a frustratingly lengthy season of chill and mud. That was followed by a frustratingly short season of sun and warmth. And then, the snow came again. Blah. Cordelia didn't find it pretty or charming at all. Well, except at Christmas. Snow at Christmastime was okay, with the red, blue, and green holiday lights twinkling against it like jewels and the prospect of presents under the tree. In her sixteen years on this planet, Cordelia had found that the prospect of presents made most unpleasant things bearable.

It was a Saturday afternoon in January, around three o'clock, and already the sun, what there had been of it, was fading away and the dark was descending. Cordelia had been in the house all day, totally by choice because a lot of people considered

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this area of southern Maine to be a sportsman's paradise. You could go cross-country skiing on a golf course about two miles away, and a little bit farther than that there was a stretch of land where you could ride a snowmobile. You could hear the angry roar of the machines from the Kane family's house. It was seriously annoying, like a gigantic buzzing bee.

Anyway, there was no way Cordelia could be tempted to go outside when it was this cold and wet, not even if someone promised to take her to the mall in South Portland or down to the outlets in Kittery. Not even if someone promised her a hundred dollars to spend in one of her favorite stores! Cordelia had her priorities and physical comfort was one of them. She realized that she was very un-Maine-like in this regard. A true hearty Mainer would be outside now, going about his or her business with nary a thought about frozen fingers and a dripping nose. There was a sort of joke about the four seasons in Maine. They were: almost winter, winter, still winter, and road construction. Cordelia didn't find the joke funny at all.

Well, maybe a little bit funny. It was kind of smart and so was Cordelia. Smart, but not the most focused student, so her grades were never quite what they could be. It didn't bother her much. She passed her courses with solid Bs and a sprinkling of As. While she regularly ignored extra credit assignments (unlike her best friend Sarah, who actually liked doing extra work!), she participated in class discussions and was always on time with regular homework assignments, so she managed to be well regarded by all of her teachers.

The reality was that Cordelia really enjoyed school. She got along with pretty much everybody. The bullying types left her alone. The hipsters ignored her but not because they disliked her; they ignored everybody not wearing a wool beanie or raggedy sneakers. The shy and awkward kids appreciated the fact that she always said hello and stepped in when a bully tried to corner one of them. She was aware that she seemed to have a neutralizing effect on whatever group of people she was temporarily a part of. Goths didn't seem so intent upon nega-

tivity; jocks didn't seem determined to prove they didn't need an education; nerds seemed a bit more confident in speaking out.

The fact that Cordelia's father, Jack Kane, was principal really didn't matter to anyone at Yorktide High, probably because it really didn't matter to Cordelia. She never expected special treatment and was glad that nobody tried to foist in on her. Cordelia was perfectly content to be just one of the crowd, no better and no worse than anyone else. And her parents, too, seemed proud of their daughter for being who she was, not for who she might be.

Still, there were times when Cordelia supposed that she should start thinking about what she wanted to do with her adult life. After all, she was almost a senior in high school; it really was time to start thinking about college applications and all that went with them. (Ugh! The essays! She could get from point A to point B easily enough, but after that, she found herself jumping all the way to point M and not knowing how to get back!)

But planning of any sort wasn't so easy for Cordelia. Usually when she tried to focus on what career path she might be happy pursuing, her mind wandered to what her mother was making for dinner or what television show she wanted to watch that night. A few times the notion of doing something in the fashion world had struck her as a possibility. Maybe, she thought, she could open a boutique; she already had some notion, if vague, of how to run a retail business, just from working for her mom at her quilt shop, The Busy Bee.

Or maybe she would win a massive lottery, the biggest ever in the state of Maine, and never have to work a day in her life! She would be generous with her winnings, buy a big house on the water someplace warm, like southern California (but not too close to the edge of a cliff because you didn't want to lose your house to a mudslide), certainly not someplace like where her aunt Rita lived—right on a lake, yes, but close to the Canadian border, with no electricity and way, way too many creepy-crawly things. Her parents and friends could come and

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live with her. They would jet off to Europe a few times a year, and she and her mother would go on shopping sprees to New York and she would donate thousands upon thousands of dollars to good causes that Sarah would research and select for her. Sarah could be trusted with important things like that.

*Oh, well*, Cordelia thought now, opening the fridge and staring at the leftover slice of pizza she had sworn she would not eat. That was a fantasy. Honestly, she believed that she was too young to worry about the future. In fact, she was pretty sure that the future would take care of itself. Besides, you could make all the careful plans you wanted to and something would come along and make all those plans irrelevant. Like, there was a boy she had gone to middle school with. He had gotten sick with some sort of cancer and had died within months of his diagnosis. That was truly horrible, and Cordelia was one hundred percent sure that Sean had never for one moment planned on dying before his fourteenth birthday. In fact, Cordelia remembered him going on about becoming a famous basketball player one day. The fact that he was kind of short and not a very good athlete hadn't seemed to bother him at all. He had had a dream, if not an actual plan. Sometimes, Cordelia believed, dreams were as good as, if not downright better than, plans. Except, of course, when they didn't come true.

Cordelia shut the fridge on that tempting slice of pizza and trudged upstairs. She tiptoed past her parents' room where her mother was absorbed in the latest title of her favorite series by Alexander McCall Smith. Her father was somewhere out there in the frozen wasteland that was their yard, shoveling snow and scraping ice.

Cordelia's room overlooked the back deck. It had two beds, perfect for sleepovers. The room was decorated in shades of pink and purple. A beanbag chair slouched in one corner. In another sat an antique and rather stately rocking chair, draped in a haphazard fashion with long, silky scarves in rainbow col-

ors. A crazy quilt, one of her mother's earliest efforts, was folded at the foot of the bed Cordelia usually slept in.

Though she was long past the stuffed animal stage, Cordelia still kept a plush, and slightly dirty, unicorn named Pinky on a shelf over her bed. Occasionally, when she was feeling very sad or very stressed, she would take Pinky down from the shelf and bring him into bed. No one knew about this hold-over habit, not even Sarah. Cordelia wasn't a particularly private person, but there were a few things she liked to keep to herself.

A state-of-the-art laptop sat on the desk. Cordelia used it for schoolwork but also for browsing the Internet for videos of puppies doing silly things, celebrity gossip columns, street style blogs, and fashion Web sites. She also had the latest version of the iPhone with every app a girl could possibly want and routinely cost her parents too much money by going over the limit for texts. She was always surprised when this happened and always genuinely sorry. Okay, she was a teeny bit spoiled, but that was pretty common with only children, wasn't it?

And it wasn't as if she was a mean or nasty person. She couldn't remember the last time she had spoken back to her parents. And she had certainly never been in a feud with another girl at school! It was weird, but some girls seemed to live for the next round of rumors and hurt feelings and imagined betrayals. Not Cordelia. One of her father's favorite authors was Henry James. He had posted this quote over his desk in his home office: "Three things in human life are important: The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind, and the third is to be kind." Those words had made a really big impression on Cordelia. Besides, fighting and acting all hurtful seemed like such a huge waste of time.

There were not many books in Cordelia's room, but there was a copy of the one classic novel she could never get enough of—*Rebecca* by Daphne Du Maurier. In fact, she had read it three times already. She loved the original movie, too, the old

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black-and-white one, and every single time she watched it, she felt frightened of creepy Mrs. Danvers, even though she knew she would get her punishment in the end, and a gruesome one at that.

Cordelia opened the door to her closet and studied its contents. It might almost be time to retire the dark skinny jeans she had worn almost every day for the past nine months as they were looking a little worn out. Besides, she had her eye on a pair of mint green jeans that would be perfect for spring (whenever that came!) though she was a tiny bit worried that they might make her thighs look too big.

Cordelia had reached what seemed to be her full height, five feet eight inches, by the age of fourteen. She wasn't skinny and was always bemoaning her weight, much to her friend Sarah's amusement. Her hair was very blond; in fact, some girls at school were convinced she dyed it, but she didn't. Her skin was very white, and she kept it that way by applying super-duper-strength sunscreen year round. Her eyes were very blue and her eyesight was very poor. Cordelia hated to wear glasses, even funky frames; she was convinced they made her look dorky. So she wore contacts most of the time and only wore her glasses in the evening when she was pretty sure no one would be dropping by the house.

Cordelia closed her closet door and plopped onto her bed. She was bored. She wondered what Sarah was doing. Probably tramping through the woods behind her house, totally oblivious to the freezing temperatures and ignorant of watering eyes and chapped cheeks. Sarah was weird that way.

Or maybe she was with her boyfriend, Justin Morrow. Cordelia frowned. She would rather not think about what they might be doing together. Certainly not building a snowman or having a snowball fight! Unlike his girlfriend, Justin was not a nature lover, even though he worked for a local fisherman. In fact, he was pretty much Sarah's opposite. Sarah was smart. Justin, not so much. Sarah was quiet. Justin had a laugh like a foghorn. Sarah had hopes for an important career. Justin was

happy living paycheck to paycheck. Well, he *was* good looking, but Cordelia had never known Sarah to be impressed by something as random as a strong nose and big blue eyes.

Cordelia sighed. Maybe Sarah would dump Justin before long and things would go back to normal. It would be just the two of them again, Cordelia and Sarah, best friends since they were still in Pull-Ups.

*That, Cordelia thought, would be awesome.*

## Chapter 2

It was such a lovely day, a crystalline wonderland. Sarah Mary Bauer sighed happily as she began to remove layers of wool and fleece clothing. She loved everything about every season, but deep down, winter was her favorite.

It was the same Saturday afternoon in January, almost three o'clock, that found her best friend, Cordelia, bemoaning the frosty conditions. In spite of the bitter cold and the still-falling snow, Sarah had been out for a two-hour tramp and had come home refreshed, invigorated, and with the appetite of a lumberjack.

She went into the kitchen to make a grilled cheese sandwich. Her mother and father had gone to the home of a distant neighbor, an elderly man named Ben Downing. They made it a habit to visit Ben, a widower in his nineties, once a week, to cook a few meals, rake leaves or shovel snow or mow the lawn, and tidy up a bit.

Sarah's thirteen-year-old sister, Stevie (short for Stephanie), was probably in her room with her cat, Clarissa, sewing or reading or listening to music. Stevie was very smart and did really well in school. She was also very creative and had an intense interest in style. Sarah wasn't the least bit interested in fashion. She dressed in jeans and hoodies and T-shirts and hadn't owned a dress since first grade. She was naturally slim, like her father, with long brown hair she usually wore in a ponytail. Her eyes were brown, too. She would be the first to

admit that she wasn't beautiful or even pretty. And she didn't see the point in wearing makeup, unlike Cordelia who never left the house without mascara and lip gloss and nail polish.

Sarah took the sandwich out of the toaster oven and ate it in four bites. There was a leftover piece of her mother's award-winning apple pie, and she ate that, too. Sometimes she thought that the hardest thing about going away to college would be having to eat awful cafeteria food.

But she *would* go to college no matter the awful food, and after that, she thought that she would like to pursue a career as a nurse. All these commercials on television talked about the health field constantly growing, what with the huge ageing population. Then again, the law interested her too, especially when it involved the preservation and protection of the environment. Law school was insanely expensive, and it might take her a lifetime of hard work to pay off loans, but it might be worth it in the end, especially if she spent that lifetime fighting for a good and selfless cause. Then again, as a nurse she would also be making a positive difference in people's lives, and in a much more immediate way.

Building a career was going to be really tough. But Sarah knew that she could never be content to work at the sort of job that ended when you left the office at five o'clock in the afternoon and that started up again when you walked into the office at nine o'clock the next morning. She knew that she wanted work that would fill all twenty-four hours of her day. That sort of work had to be fought for and earned.

And her parents were totally supportive of her dreams, even though neither of them had gone to college. In fact, the only family member of her parents' generation who *had* gone to college and then graduate school was her father's brother, Jonas. Jonas and his wife lived in Chicago; he was a corporate lawyer and Marie worked for a bank, managing the portfolios of its biggest clients. Jonas and Marie had a Facebook page; Sarah had told her father about it, but he didn't have any interest in following his brother's life via the computer. From

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what Sarah could tell, there was no animosity between the two men, just a vast canyon of difference.

It was interesting, Sarah thought, as she put her dishes into the dishwasher, how two people could grow up in the same household and yet decide on two very different walks of life. She wondered if she and Stevie would become another pair like their father and uncle, amicable but also kind of indifferent to each other. That, Sarah thought, would be sad. She would try her best not to let that happen.

Sarah peered out one of the kitchen windows at the snowy scene. Nothing made Sarah happier than being outdoors. She found rain refreshing and thunderstorms exciting. Snow was beautiful. Even high humidity could be borne when the payoff was a vista filled with wild flowers and buzzing bees. Most times, her ambles were solitary because she just didn't know anyone else who shared her passion for the outdoors. Justin, her boyfriend, teased her about being "Nature Girl" (his idea of fun was a beer and a baseball game on TV) and Cordelia vastly preferred to spend her free time shopping or watching movies. Kicking through fallen leaves or climbing over the decaying remains of dead trees or tramping along a stretch of hot white sand did nothing for Cordelia. She didn't care, she said, for extremes of temperature (cold made her skin flake and heat made her hair frizzy) and she found rocks boring (they just sat there).

Sarah turned away from the window and looked around the kitchen with fondness. She loved every bit of her home, from the embroidered sampler over the sink to the old marble lamp in the living room; from the slightly slanted floors on the second level to the way the wind sang through the old, ill-fitting windows in the living room. Every inch, every possession held charm for Sarah, largely because the house was the one in which her father's paternal grandfather had been born. His father and mother had owned it after his grandfather's passing, and Joe Bauer, Sarah's dad, had bought it from his parents

when they retired to a smaller place closer to the heart of town.

Though the land on which the house sat was no longer used for commercial farming, Sarah's parents had planted a big vegetable garden, and Cindy, her mom, maintained a lovely flower garden. There had been some talk about raising chickens, too, but when the girls had admitted they would probably not be into cleaning the coop, the idea had been abandoned.

The house was a classic old farmhouse, white clapboard and two stories high with an attic that extended the length of the structure and a big porch out front. The first floor contained the kitchen and mudroom in back, and the living room in front. Stairs to the second floor were against the right wall of the front hall. The second floor contained Sarah's parents' room in front, Stevie's bedroom next, the house's one bathroom, and at the very back of the house, Sarah's bedroom.

The rooms throughout the house were small and the ceilings low by contemporary standards. It felt a bit like a warren compared to the more open plan of the Kanes' development house. There was no central air-conditioning, but there were window units in the bedrooms. As a result, the first floor of the house could feel brutally hot and close in summer. Fans did little to alleviate the oppression of the heavy, still air; most times, the Bauers didn't even bother to waste the electricity.

Sarah went up to her room now to change her socks. They had gotten slightly damp, which meant that she had to waterproof her boots again. If she were lucky, they would last for one more season. Good boots were expensive.

From her bedroom window, there was a perfect view of the extensive vegetable garden and beyond that, a heavily wooded area dense with pines and white birch and oaks. From this vantage point, you could often see deer grazing, and hedgehogs nibbling flowers, and chipmunks scurrying under rocks. On rarer occasions, you could spot a fox sneaking along the remains of an old stone wall not far into the mass of trees. Some

years there were coyotes; you heard more than saw them, and the lonely sounding howls usually meant big trouble for the neighborhood cats and small dogs.

And there were parading families of wild turkeys and all sorts of other birds on the wing, from tiny, brightly colored songbirds to impressive birds of prey, hawks, falcons, and even, on occasion, an eagle. At night, you could hear the haunting cry of owls on the hunt. And in the morning, if you looked, you could find the skeletons of the owls' prey at the base of trees. Sarah had pointed this out to Cordelia on one of the rare occasions Cordelia had, reluctantly, accompanied her friend into the woods. Cordelia had run shrieking back to the house. Sarah had not made that mistake again.

The room itself was very simply furnished. There was one bed, one dresser, and a small wooden desk with a chair. On the desk sat an old laptop, which Sarah used for school and research only. She had a very basic phone, and she was very careful about using it wisely.

The walls of the room were painted white and on her bed lay one of her mother's quilts, the one she had made for Sarah right after her birth. It was a magnificent example of something called a log cabin quilt. Every time she looked at it, Sarah was amazed at her mother's skill.

A bookshelf her father had built was crammed with volumes she had collected at yard sales and secondhand bookshops. Sarah loved to read, and it almost didn't matter what the content was—fiction, nonfiction, history, mystery. She read everything but bodice-ripping romance. Recently she had discovered the works of May Sarton. Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *Gift from the Sea* was also a favorite. There was a biography of George Washington that had taken her almost a year to get through, not because it was difficult reading but because schoolwork came first. When her history teacher had asked what famous person from the past she would most like to meet, Sarah chose Abigail Adams. She had read a biography of her, too, and a lot of the letters she and her husband had

written to each other. If she ever got married, Sarah hoped she would find a best friend in her husband, like Abigail had found in John.

For now, Sarah had Justin. She really liked him, but marriage was the last thing she could think of, not until she finished school, and that could be eight or nine years from now.

The blare of a horn alerted Sarah to the arrival of her boyfriend. She tossed the damp socks into a hamper in the bathroom, raced downstairs, grabbed her outerwear, and ran down the front steps.

Justin was driving his friend Bud's four-wheel drive truck. There was a raised plow attached to the front as Bud made extra money plowing for his neighbors. He had offered to cut Justin in on the business, but Justin had laughed off the offer. He was the first to admit that he was a pretty lazy guy.

*Gosh, he really is beautiful*, Sarah thought as she climbed up into the passenger seat. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"How about back to my place? I got a frozen pizza for us."

"That sounds great," she said.

Justin lived in a small apartment above a family-owned hardware store in downtown Yorktide. The apartment was clean enough but kind of messy. It was sparsely decorated with cast-offs from his parents' house and plastic milk crates that Justin used for storage and as surfaces for dirty plates and empty beer bottles.

Well, Justin might not be the neatest guy around, but Sarah thought he was certainly the most handsome one. He made her feel things she had never even guessed existed, a sort of excitement she had certainly never heard her mother, or Cordelia, or any of her teachers talk about. At first, it had terrified her. But over time, she had come to befriend her feelings. Eventually, she had given in to them; she had let them overwhelm all sense of caution or embarrassment. After all, sexual feelings were natural, weren't they? You weren't supposed to feel bad about having them. Her health teacher back in freshman year had stressed that.

“Here,” Justin said, holding out a little white paper bag, his eyes fixed on the road ahead. “I have something for you.”

Sarah smiled. Every time they met, Justin gave her a little gift. She wished he wouldn’t spend his money on her—she knew he didn’t earn a lot—but he seemed to get real pleasure out of giving her the tiny stuffed animals and the hair baubles. The hair baubles were more appropriate for a frillier girl, but it was the thought that counted.

Sarah took the bag and peered inside. It was one of those thingies you clipped onto your key chain. It had a green plastic disc on which was printed the image of a grinning chimpanzee.

“You like it?” Justin asked. She heard the unmistakable note of hope in his voice.

“I do,” she said. “It’s wonderful. Thank you, Justin.”

Justin smiled, and Sarah felt an intense rush of warmth. She couldn’t wait to get to his place, and the pizza had nothing to do with it.