

INN AT LAST CHANCE

CHAPTER ONE

The bitter January wind had blown in a cold front. The clouds hung heavy and somber over the swamp. There would be rain. Possibly ice.

Jenny Carpenter wrapped a hand-knit shawl around her shoulders and gazed through the kitchen window of the house she'd bought last August. The tops of the Carolina pines bent in the wind. The weatherman said it was going to be quite a storm, and Allenberg County had already had one ice storm this year—on Christmas Eve. It was now just two weeks past New Year's Day.

She turned away from the window toward the heart of her house. Her kitchen restoration was nearly finished. Yellow subway tiles marched up the backsplash behind the Vulcan stove. An antique pie safe occupied the far wall. The curtains were gingham. Everything about this room was bright and cheerful, in sharp contrast with the weather outside.

Jenny closed her eyes and imagined the smell of apple pie cooking in her professional baker's oven. This kitchen would rival the one Savannah Randall had installed at the old movie theater in town. She smiled. Savannah's strudel was good, but Jenny's apple pie had still won the blue ribbon at the Watermelon Festival last summer. She could almost hear Mother sermonizing about pride, and her smile faded. She turned back toward the window.

She couldn't remember a colder January. And Jenny hated even the mild winters that usually visited South Carolina. Today she had good reason to hate the season. Winter was getting the best of her.

She'd hired a crew to cut back the overgrowth on either side of the driveway, but they had called to say that they wouldn't be out today, and probably not tomorrow. The movers weren't going to show up today either, which meant Mother's antique furniture would spend yet another night in the commercial storage space where it had been sitting for five years. Without furniture Jenny would have to postpone her plans to move-in at the end of the week. Finally, Wilma Riley, the chair of the Methodist Women's Sewing Circle, had called five minutes ago all atwitter because there was ice in the forecast.

The sewing circle had graciously volunteered to help Jenny sew curtains for the bedrooms and sitting room. The fabric bolts—all traditional Low Country floral designs—were stacked in the room that would soon be the dining room. But as Wilma pointed out, the gals were not coming all the way out to the swamp on a stormy day in January. So today, Jenny might be the only one sitting out here sewing.

It wasn't just the weather that had her second-guessing herself. She'd taken a huge risk buying The Jonquil House. The old place wasn't anywhere near downtown. If she'd been able to buy Charlotte Wolfe's house, her bed-and-breakfast would have been located near the middle of things. And she would probably already be in business, since Charlotte's house was in perfect condition.

But Charlotte had changed her mind about selling. She'd returned from California with her son, Simon. And Simon had married Molly Canaday, and they were all living happily in Charlotte's beautiful house.

So Jenny had bought The Jonquil House, which was way out on Bluff Road, near the public boat launch on the Edisto River—a prime location for fishing and hunting. And you couldn't beat the view from the porch on a summer's day. She hoped to attract business from fishermen and hunters and eco-tourists anxious to canoe the Edisto or bird-watch in the swamp.

The Jonquil House had the additional benefit of being dirt-cheap, since it had been abandoned for years. But Jenny had to spend a lot of cash to shore up the foundation, replace the roof, and update the plumbing and electrical. Not to mention installing her state-of-the-art kitchen. Still, the purchase price had been so ridiculously low that, on balance, Jenny was financially ahead of where she would have been if she'd bought Charlotte's house.

And if all went well, The Jonquil House would be open for business by March first, just in time for the jonquils to be in full bloom. There were hundreds of them naturalized in the woods surrounding the house. No doubt they had been planted by the Raintree family, who had built the house more than a hundred years ago as a hunting camp and summer getaway.

Those jonquils were the reason she'd chosen yellow for her kitchen walls. She couldn't wait to take pictures of her beautiful white house against the backdrop of the dark Carolina woods, gray Spanish moss, and bright yellow daffodils. That photo would be posted right on the home page of the inn's website, which was still under construction, too.

She was thinking about her breakfast menu when there came a sudden pounding at her front door. Her new brass knocker had yet to be installed, but that didn't seem to bother whoever had come to call.

In fact, it sounded like someone was trying to knock the darn door down.

She hurried down the center hall, enjoying the rich patina of the restored wood floors and the simple country feeling of the white lath walls. Maybe the movers had changed their minds, and she'd be able to get Mother's furniture set up in the bedrooms after all.

She pulled open the door.

"It's about damn time; it's freezing out here." A man wearing a rain-spattered leather jacket, a soggy gray wool hat, and a steely scowl attempted to walk into her hallway. Jenny wasn't about to let this biker dude intimidate her, even if he was a head taller than she was.

His features were stern, and his nose a tad broad, as if it had been broken once. Several days' growth of slightly salt-and-pepper stubble shadowed his cheeks, and his eyebrows glowered above eyes so dark they might have been black. If he'd been handsome or heroic looking, she might have been afraid of him or lost her nerve. Handsome men always made Jenny nervous. But big guys with leather jackets and attitudes had never bothered her in the least. She always assumed that men like that were hiding a few deep insecurities.

"Can I help you?" she said in her most polite, future-innkeeper voice.

"You damn well can. I want a room."

"Um, I'm sorry but the inn isn't open."

"Of course it's open. You're here. The lights are on. There's heat."

"We're not open for business."

He leaned into the door frame. Jenny held her ground. "Do you have any idea who I am?"

She was tempted to tell him he was an ass, but she didn't use language like that. Mother had beaten that tendency out of her. It didn't stop her from thinking it, though.

When she didn't reply, he said, "I'm the man who sold you this house. I would like, very much, to come in out of the rain."

“The man who—”

“The name’s Gabriel Raintree. My family built this house. Now let me in.”

She studied his face. Gabriel Raintree was a *New York Times* bestselling author of at least twenty books, several of which had been made into blockbuster horror films. His books were not on her reading list. And she wasn’t much of a moviegoer.

She’d never met Mr. Raintree. The sale of The Jonquil House had been undertaken by his business manager and attorney. So she had no idea if this guy was the real Gabriel Raintree or some poser. Either way she wasn’t going to let him come in. Besides, the house was not ready for guests. The furniture had not even arrived.

“I’m sorry. The inn isn’t open.”

His black eyebrows lowered even farther, and his mouth kind of curled up at the corner in something like a sneer. He looked angry, and it occurred to Jenny that maybe she needed to bend a little. The minute that thought crossed her mind, she rejected it. She had inherited a steel backbone from Mother, and this was a good time to employ it. She wouldn’t get very far as an innkeeper if she allowed herself to be a doormat.

“I need a place to stay,” he said, “for at least three months. I’m behind on my deadline.”

Three months. Good Lord, she wasn’t running a boardinghouse. But then, she supposed that if anyone could afford three months’ lodging at a B and B it would be someone like Gabriel Raintree.

The income would be nice. But she wasn’t ready for any guests.

“I’m very sorry. The inn won’t be open until March. If you need to stay in Last Chance, there’s always the Peach Blossom Motor Court. Or you could see if Miriam Randall will take you in. She sometimes takes in boarders.”

“Damn it all, woman, this is my house.” He pushed against the door, and Jenny pushed back.

“Not anymore,” she said.

He stopped pushing and stepped back from the threshold. With the deep furrows on his brow, she could only surmise that he was surprised anyone would stand in his way. She slammed the door on him to punctuate her point. Then she twisted the bolt lock and took a couple of steps back from it, her heart hammering in her chest.

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Gabe stood on the porch breathing hard, trying to control his anger and a dozen other emotions he didn't want to feel, chief among them a deep, gnawing loneliness.

The hollow feeling had been with him for a long time—even before his breakup with Delilah years ago. And now, this place and the memories it raised made the loneliness feel deep and wide, like a gaping chasm. There was something dark and frightening down in the depths of that empty place. Something monstrous.

He leaned on the porch railing and looked around at the familiar scene. His younger self had been happy and carefree here. Christ, it had been a long, long time since he'd felt that way.

And The Jonquil House was perfect for what he needed right now, a quiet place almost entirely off the grid where he could wrestle with his writer's block and escape from his mistakes. Hiding out here in the middle of nowhere seemed like a good idea. He'd have solitude. He could be alone with his demons.

But a tiny little innkeeper stood between him and what he needed. It was worse than that—she hadn't even recognized him.

He let go of a short bark of laughter. He should be happy. In Charleston, he couldn't walk down a street without someone, usually dressed like a Goth, accosting him and wanting a piece of him.

He stared at the closed door. He was an idiot if he let that woman bruise his ego. Besides, he'd come here to hide out. And she'd just convinced him it was the perfect place for that singular activity.

He surveyed the overgrown drive, memories filling his head. Twenty-five years ago he would have been greeted by Zeph Gibbs, the hunting guide and caretaker. Lottie Easley would be back in the kitchen cooking up hoppin'-john and corn bread and fried okra. He could almost taste Lottie's cooking.

And he longed to see their faces. But they were ghosts now. Especially Luke, the brother he'd lost twenty-five years ago in a hunting accident.

Ten-year-old Gabe had been there the day Luke died, but Gabe had no memory of what had happened that awful day. Those memories were locked behind a barrier as high and thick as Hadrian's Wall.

His heartbeat echoed inside his empty chest. He had worshiped his older brother, and Luke's death had changed everything.

He moved down onto the porch step and let the rain fall on his head and shoulders. It was quiet here. Peaceful. Precisely the kind of place he needed to get back in touch with his muse. The kind of place he needed to write the damn book that had been eluding him for almost a year. The kind of place where a lonely man could simply be left alone.

The muscles of his neck and shoulders tensed in frustration. If the inn wasn't going to open until March, he'd have to come up with another plan.

But he didn't want a Plan B. He wanted to come back here. Something in his gut told him that this was precisely the right place to be.

The rain was picking up, and sleet was beginning to mix with it. The roads were going to get bad before too much longer.

Either way, he'd have to stay the night at the seedy motel in town. But tomorrow, when the storm had passed, he'd come back out here and negotiate. The little innkeeper had her price. Everyone did.

Tomorrow he'd buy back The Jonquil House.