

# **Return to Magnolia Harbor**

# Chapter One

Jessica Blackwood patted down her hair, hoping the humidity hadn't frizzed it too much. Granny would probably comment on it anyway, even if she'd managed to smooth it into the most perfect pageboy in the universe.

She stood on the sidewalk outside Granny's house in the historic district of Magnolia Harbor. Built in the mid-1800s in the Georgian style, the house was a study in geometry and symmetry. The plants in the garden were set out in careful rows too. Granny would have it no other way.

Jessica hurried up the brick walk, fixing a proper Southern-lady mask on her face. She rang the doorbell and waited.

It was funny, she'd once called this house home, but now it felt more like the scene of a crime, where her parents had abandoned her and disbelieved her and then sent her away.

So she didn't love the house because she'd never been loved here. And yet, like a good girl, she came back every Saturday out of obligation. Granny lived alone now that Momma and Daddy had died.

When Granny finally opened the door, Jessica drew some comfort from the fact that, like her own hair, Granny's looked like a frizzy nimbus around her thin face. But that didn't stop Granny from frowning. The fold in the middle of her forehead could intimidate anyone, and frequently did. Granny had spent a lifetime frowning and had worn that groove deep.

"Darling," Granny said in a slow drawl, "you're late." And then the old woman inspected Jess. "Why do you insist on wearing that dress? The color isn't good on you."

The dress in question had been purchased at Daffy Down Dilly, the boutique that occupied the retail space below Jessica's brand-new office. It had a border of roses along the

hemline in shades ranging from pastel to hot pink. Jessica loved the dress, but Granny had a thing about pink. Jessica should have remembered and worn something else.

Jessica said nothing because Granny didn't expect explanations or apologies. Instead the old woman turned away, and Jessica dutifully followed her into the front parlor, which was furnished with Victorian antiques that had never been comfortable.

As if to punctuate the point, Granny's sister, Donna Cuthbert, who was about a hundred pounds heavier than Granny, perched precariously on the edge of the balloon-backed sofa. Aunt Donna looked as if she might slide right off that thing at any moment, and her purple jungle-print blouse clashed horribly with the sofa's red damask upholstery.

Granny gave her older sister one of her disapproving looks, with the eyebrow lowered just so. "Donna dropped in unannounced," she said. "I had to put another cup on the tray."

As if putting on another cup on the tray was a major trial. Granny could complain about anything, even an unexpected visit from a member of her much-diminished family.

"Hey, darlin'," Donna said, hopping up from her unsteady seat and giving Jessica a big, warm hug.

"What brings you to tea?" Jessica asked, sitting down in one of the side chairs.

Granny took a seat beside Donna. There was a faint family resemblance between the two sisters, despite the fact that one was rail thin and the other quite large.

"Gossip, my dear," Aunt Donna said in a conspiratorial tone.

Jessica didn't rise to the bait because she avoided gossip at all cost. She'd been scarred by the stories people had told about her over the years.

She turned her attention to the tea tray, filled with Granny's pride and joy: her Lenox china in the Cinderella pattern. Jessica picked up the teapot and started pouring. From the time

*she was ten years old, she'd been expected to manage a teapot without spilling, as if this ability were an indication of her worth as a human being.*

“What gossip?” Granny finally asked, unable to resist the lure Donna had set.

“About Christopher Martin,” Aunt Donna said.

The teapot jumped in Jessica's hand, and she sloshed tea into Granny's saucer.

Christopher, who was widely known by the nickname Topher, had been a hometown hero ever since he'd led the Rutledge Raiders to the state football championship sixteen years ago.

“Oh, for pity's sake,” Granny said, reaching for a cloth napkin to mop up the spill.

“Sorry,” Jessica said in a tiny voice and carefully put down the pot. “What about Topher Martin?” she asked, picking up her cup and saucer, hoping that neither woman noticed the slight tremor in her hands.

“The poor man has shut himself up in Ashley's cottage,” Donna said.

“Oh, the poor dear,” Granny said.

Jessica looked up from her tea. *The poor dear? Really?* “What do you mean, he's shut himself away?” Jessica asked aloud.

“Oh, didn't you hear?” Donna asked.

“I don't gossip,” Jessica said in a tight voice, although technically she was gossiping right this minute.

“Well, it's not exactly gossip. I mean, it's practically common knowledge,” Donna countered.

“Maybe only to the members of the Piece Makers, sister,” Granny said. The Piece Makers were the local quilting club. The ladies had been meeting for decades to make charity quilts while they discussed everything and everyone in Magnolia Harbor.

She didn't ask what the heck Granny and Aunt Donna were talking about. She refused to give them any encouragement. She simply sat and sipped her tea and tried, without success, to think about something that would change the course of the conversation.

"Christopher was horribly disfigured in a car accident about nine months ago," Granny whispered in the same tone she often used when talking about someone diagnosed with cancer or having a heart attack.

"I hear it's a challenge to look him in the face now," Donna said.

"So have I. Such a pity. He's still unmarried, and a Martin. A *rich* one, evidently, since he was the CEO or something for one of those hedge funds. They say he made *billions*," Granny said.

"It's such a shame, and after the way he led the Rutledge Raiders to the championship that time." Aunt Donna let go of a long sigh.

Jessica kept her expression impassive while her emotions churned in her gut. Just yesterday, Topher Martin had called her office and asked her to design a house for him out on a remote island in the bay. She'd refused at first, but he'd been very persuasive, offering her a fee that was twice her going rate.

He hadn't really explained why he wanted to build a house so far off the grid. But now maybe she had her answer. Maybe he wanted to hide. Maybe he'd become a monster.

Although in Jessica's book he'd always been one of the villains—a member of the football team that had started the vicious rumors about her sixteen years ago. Now maybe everyone would get over their hero worship and see him for who he truly was.

If her architectural firm weren't desperate for new business, she would never have considered his commission. But she was trying to move on in her life. And a girl had to eat.

“Have you seen him since he was disfigured?” Donna asked, pulling Jessica from her thoughts.

Granny shook her head. “No. But he was such a beautiful boy once.”

“Well, it’s water over the dam now,” Donna said. Her aunt placed her empty cup down on the tray. “The juicy bit is that I understand he’s so disfigured that he wants to build some kind of hideaway on Lookout Island.” Donna paused here for impact before turning her gaze on Jessica. “And I understand from the word on the street that he’s hired you.”

Jessica’s face heated as the two old women stared at her. Granny glowered as if Jessica had been caught in a lie just because she hadn’t rushed in to tell her that she had a new client. Aunt Donna leaned in ready for the next juicy morsel.

“I’m meeting with him on Monday to discuss the house he wants to build.”

“So you’ve seen him?” Donna asked.

Jessica shook her head. “No. We had a phone conversation. And it would be an exaggeration to say that I’m his architect. I have no idea, really, what he wants to build. He hasn’t signed any paperwork, either. We’re meeting for a site visit. That’s it for now. And since he might be paying me a lot of money to design a house for him, I’m not going to gossip about him.” Although, way back in her mind, it struck her that maybe there was justice in the world. Let the old biddies of Magnolia Harbor gossip about him all day long. She hoped all that talk would make him miserable, and then he’d realize what he’d done.

Jessica leaned over and picked up the teapot. “Seconds, anyone?” she asked, hoping to change the subject.

“You know,” Donna said, holding out her cup, “I’ve heard Ashley, Sharon, and Karen talking about Topher. His cousins definitely don’t want him to build this house.”

“No?” Jessica asked.

Donna shook her head. “I gather he’s been deeply injured too. Has a problem with his leg.”

“The poor dear. He has no business moving out to that remote island,” Granny said, turning toward Jess. “You should tell him no.”

“What?”

“You shouldn’t help him, my dear,” Granny repeated.

“Why not?”

“Because it wouldn’t be right.”

Jessica bit her tongue and just barely stopped herself from asking Granny the age-old question: Who elected her to be the arbiter of right and wrong, anyway? Because she was a really bad judge.

“It might not be,” Donna said.

Jessica stared down at the stupid Cinderella teacup. Here was the exit door. She could walk through it if she wanted. She could tell everyone that she refused his commission because he had no business building a house in a remote location.

So maybe doing the wrong thing was exactly what she needed to do. She didn’t care. Let him go live a miserable life in a drafty old lighthouse. It would serve him right.

The thought warmed her in some weird and unacceptable way. She looked up from the teacup and right into her grandmother’s judgmental stare.

“I really don’t care whether it’s right or wrong, Granny,” she said. “I need a client; he has money. And that’s the end of this discussion.”