

The Cottage on Rose Lane

Excerpt

by Hope Ramsay

Chapter One

Was this her father's boat? The one he'd been sailing the day he died?

Jenna Fossey stood on the sidewalk, shading her eyes against the early-September sun, studying the boat. It was small, maybe fifteen feet from end to end. It sat on cinder blocks, hull up in the South Carolina sunshine, its paint blistered and cracked. Much of the color had faded or peeled away, leaving long gray planks of wood. Even the boat's name had bleached away, only the shadow of a capital *I* on the boat's stern remained. Some kind of vine—was that kudzu?—had twisted up the cinder blocks and crawled across the boat's hull, setting suckers into the wood and giving the impression that only the overgrown vegetation held the pieces together.

A thick, hard knot formed in Jenna's chest. She held her breath and closed her eyes, imagining the father she'd never known. In her thirty years on this planet, she'd imagined him so many times. In her fantasies, he'd been a fireman, a detective, a handsome prince, a superhero, a scoundrel, a bastard, and an asshole. That last role had stuck for most of her life because, before she died of breast cancer three years ago, Mom had refused to talk about him. In fact, by her omission, Mom had made it plain that Jenna's father had been a mistake, or a one-night stand, or someone Mom had met in college but hardly knew.

And then, one day out of the blue, Milo Stracham, the executor of her grandfather's will, arrived at her front door and told Jenna the truth. Her father had been the son of a wealthy man, a passionate sailor, and he'd died before she was born.

She took another breath, redolent with the tropical scents of the South Carolina Low Country. Musty and mossy and salty. This was an alien place to a girl who'd grown up in Boston. It was too lush here. Too hot for September.

She shifted her gaze to the house where Uncle Harry lived. It was a white clapboard building bristling with dormer windows and a square cupola on top. Its wraparound veranda, shaded by a grove of palmettos at the corner, epitomized the architecture of the South. She stood there listening to the buzz of cicadas as she studied the house, as if it would tell her something about the man who owed it.

At least Uncle Harry didn't live in a big, pretentious monstrosity like her grandfather's house on the Hudson. She would never live in her grandfather's house. She'd told Milo, who had become the sole trustee of her trust fund, to sell the place. But, of course, her grandfather's will restricted such a sale, just as it had restricted her ability to sell her grandfather's stock in iWear, Inc., the company he had founded and which now was the largest manufacturer and retailer of optics in the world, including sunglasses that regularly retailed for two hundred dollars or more a pair.

The *Wall Street Journal* may have dubbed Jenna the Sunglass Heiress once the details of Robert Bauman's will had become public, but that was so not who she was.

She'd been raised in Dorchester, a neighborhood in Boston, the daughter of a single mother who'd worked two jobs to keep her in shoes and school uniforms. She'd been a good student, but even with scholarships, Jenna had taken out huge loans for college and graduate school. But she'd earned her MBA from Harvard, and landed a job in business development with Aviation Engineering, a Fortune 500 company.

But her inheritance had cost her the job she loved, because iWear was a direct competitor in the advanced heads-up optics market that was so important to Aviation Engineering's bottom line.

The company she'd devoted eight years of her life to had made her sign a nondisclosure agreement and had booted her out within a day of learning of her good fortune. It was as if the universe were sending her a message that just ignoring the money or refusing to accept it was not sufficient.

So she did what she'd been thinking about doing for years—she took a year-long trip to the Near and Far East, intent on deepening her understanding of meditation and Buddhism. Her goal had been to learn how to handle the karmic consequence of the inheritance her stranger of a grandfather had given her.

She needed something meaningful to do. But what? She needed a cause. Or a reason. Or something.

After a year spent mostly in India, she'd come to the conclusion that she could never build a new life for herself without confronting the secrets of the old one.

Which was why she'd come to Magnolia Harbor, South Carolina, with a million questions about her father, seeking the one person who might be able to answer them—her uncle Harry, Robert Bauman's younger brother.

She crossed the street and leaned on the picket fence. It would be so easy to ascend the porch steps, knock on the door, and explain herself to the uncle she had never known. But it wasn't that simple. The rift between Robert and Harry had been decades wide and deep, and she didn't understand the pitfalls. She couldn't afford to screw this up. She'd have to gain Harry's trust before she told him who she was.

She walked away from the house and continued down Harbor Drive until she reached downtown Magnolia Harbor. The business district comprised a four-block area with upscale gift shops, restaurants, and a half-mile boardwalk lined with floating docks.

On the south side of town, an open-air fish market bustled with customers lining up to buy shrimp right off the trawlers that had gone out that morning. On the north side, a marina catering to a fleet of deep-sea fishing boats and yachts. In between stood a public fishing pier and a boat launch accessed from a dry dock filled with small boat trailers.

Presiding over this central activity stood Rafferty's Raw Bar, a building with weathered siding and a shed roof clad in galvanized metal. Jenna found a seat on the restaurant's terrace, where the scent of fried shrimp hung heavy on the air. She ordered a glass of chardonnay and some spinach dip and settled in to watch the sailboats out on the bay.

"The Buccaneers are always fun to watch," the waitress said as she placed Jenna's chardonnay in front of her.

"Buccaneers? You mean like pirates?"

"Well, they're obviously not pirates, but they do pretend sometimes. Some of them love to say *arrgh* at appropriate moments. They also regard Talk Like a Pirate Day as a holy day of obligation."

Jenna must have let her confusion show because the waitress winked and rolled her eyes. "Oh, don't mind me. I'm a sailing nerd. Those sailboats are all Buccaneer Eighteens, a kind of racing dinghy. The Bucc fleet always goes out on Tuesday afternoons for practice races."

"So, sailing is a big thing here, huh?"

"It always has been. Jonquil Island used to be a hangout for pirates back in the day. And the yacht club is, like, a hundred and fifty years old."

Had her father belonged to the yacht club? Probably. It was the sort of thing the son of a rich man would do.

“Oh, look,” the waitress said, pointing. “They’re done for the day, and *Bonney Rose* is leading them in. Her skipper is a crazy man, but so cute. He’s got a chest to die for.” She giggled. “My friends and I sometimes refer to it as ‘the Treasure Chest.’” The waitress pointed at the lead boat with a navy-blue hull and crisp white sails.

The boat was heading toward the floating dock with the others behind it. The two sailors sat with their legs extended and their bodies leaning hard over the water in an impressive display of core strength. The guy in the back of the boat was shirtless with his life vest open to expose an impressive six-pack. His skin was berry brown, and his curly dark hair rippled in the wind.

Jenna caught her breath as a deep, visceral longing clutched her core. He resembled a marauding pirate. Dark and handsome with a swath of masculine brow, high cheekbones, and a full mouth. Like someone with Spanish blood and a little Native American or Creole mixed in. Or maybe African too.

Had they met before? Perhaps in a past life?

She watched in rapt attention as the boat came toward the dock at a sharp angle. He was going to crash. But at the last moment, the boat turned away, stalling in the water, allowing the second sailor, a man with a salt-and-pepper beard, to step onto the dock in one fluid motion, carrying a mooring line. The big sail flapped noisily in the wind as the shirtless sailor began pulling it down into the boat, his biceps flexing in the late-afternoon sun.

Five more sailboats arrived in the same noisy manner, and for the next few minutes, an orderly chaos ensued as boats arrived and dropped sail and got in line for the launch. Jenna had trouble keeping her eyes off the man with the too-curly hair and the dark skin.

It was probably because she’d spent the day thinking about her father and the way he’d sailed here, and died here. Had her father been like a dashing pirate ready to buckle some swash?

She pulled her gaze away and allowed a wistful smile. She was doing it again. Inventing a father for herself instead of seeking the real one.

“Can I get you anything else?” the waitress, whose name tag said Abigail, asked.

“Yes. What’s his name? And why is the name of his boat misspelled?” She pointed to the man and the boat, where **BONNEY ROSE** was painted in gold letters along the stern.

“That’s Jude St. Pierre. And the boat’s name is a tribute to Anne Bonney, a female pirate from back in the day. It’s also a tribute to Gentleman Bill Teel’s boat, which broke up over near the inlet back in the 1700s. That boat was named the *Bonnie Rose*, after Rose Howland.”

“And who is that?”

“She’s the lady who planted jonquils all over the island in memory of Gentleman Bill, the pirate.”

“I sense a story.”

“It’s basically the town myth. Explains all the pirate stores in town. You can pick up a free Historical Society pamphlet almost anywhere. I’d give you one, but we’re out of them. It’s the end of the summer, you know. Things are starting to wind down here.”

“Do many boats go down in the inlet?” Jenna asked, a little shiver running up her spine. Is that what had happened to her father?

Abigail nodded. “The currents can be treacherous there if you don’t know what you’re doing or you get caught in a squall. Can I get you anything else?”

Jenna shook her head. “Just the check.”

As Abigail walked away, Jenna turned to study the man named Jude St. Pierre. Her skin puckered up, and her mouth went bone dry. She pushed the attraction aside. That was not what she wanted from him.

She wanted a sailboat ride to the place where her father died. But since she didn't know where that might be in the vastness of Moonlight Bay, maybe the best she could do was a sailing lesson so she could find it later herself.

"You've got an admirer," Tim Meyer said, nodding in the general direction of Rafferty's terrace. "Easy on the eyes, dirty blond, with big brown eyes."

Jude didn't follow Tim's glance. Instead, he concentrated on the job of securing the mast to its cradle with a couple of bungee cords. He didn't have time to flirt with tourists.

"She's a cutie. Aren't you even going to look?" Tim, newly divorced and constantly on the make, had spent the entire summer chasing female tourists who were too young for him, so this comment rolled right off Jude's back.

He'd learned the hard way that tourists always went home. Besides he had a rule about blondes. His mother had been a white woman with blond hair, and she'd abandoned the family when Jude was fourteen. He could do better than a blonde. He wanted a Clair Huxtable who could also speak Gullah, the Creole language of his ancestors.

"I can't believe you aren't even going to check her out," Tim said. "She's got a hungry look in her big brown eyes."

Jude raised his head without meaning to.

Big mistake. The woman's gaze wasn't hungry exactly. It was steady and direct and measuring. It knocked him back, especially when her mouth quirked up on one side to reveal a hint of a dimple, or maybe a laugh line. And she wasn't blond. Not exactly. It was more cinnamon than brown with streaks of honey that dazzled in the late-afternoon sun. Her hair

spilled over her shoulders, slightly messy and windblown, as if she'd spent the day sailing. She was cute and fresh, and he had this eerie feeling that he'd met her before.

Her stare burned a hole in his chest, and he turned away slightly breathless. Damn. He was too busy for a fling. And never with a woman like that.

“See what I mean? She’s maybe a little skinny but...kind of hot,” Tim said.

Jude ignored the sudden rushing of blood in his head and focused on snapping up the boat’s canvas cover. “Stop objectifying. Haven’t you heard? It’s no longer PC.”

Tim chuckled. “Objectifying is a scientific fact.”

“So says the science teacher. If the parents of your students could hear you now, they’d—”

“Come on. Let’s go get a drink and say hey,” Tim interrupted.

“No. I have a meeting tonight.”

Tim rolled his eyes. “With that group of history nuts again?”

“They aren’t nuts. Dr. Rushford is a history professor.” And he’d donated his time and that of his grad students to help Jude get several old homes listed on the historic register. Jude’s last chance to preserve those buildings was the petition he and several of his cousins and relatives had made to the town council, asking for a rezoning of the land north of town that white folks called “Gullah Town.” The area wasn’t really a town at all, but a collection of small farms out in the scrub pine and live oak that had been settled by his ancestors right after the Civil War. Jude’s people never used the term “Gullah Town.” To them, the land north of Magnolia Harbor was just simply home.

The council was having a hearing this week. Jude had been working on this issue for more than a year with the professor's help. He wasn't about to miss a meeting to flirt with a tourist. An almost-blond tourist at that.

"Okay. It's your loss." Tim slapped him on the back. "But thanks for leaving the field of play. You're hard to compete with, dude." Tim strode off while Jude finished securing the last bungee cord. When he glanced up again, the woman with the honey hair was still staring at him, even as Tim moved in.

Tim was going to crash and burn. Again.

Jude turned away. He wanted nothing to do with another one of Tim's failed pickup attempts. Instead, he headed down the boardwalk toward the offices of Barrier Island Charters, his father's company, where Jude had parked his truck. He needed to get on home and take a shower before the meeting.

"Can I have a minute of your time, Mr. St. Pierre?" someone asked from behind him.

Jude turned. Damn. It was the woman with the honey hair. She had a low, sexy voice that vibrated inside his core in a weird, but not unpleasant, way. "Do I know you?" he asked.

"Um, no. Abigail. The waitress? At the raw bar? She told me your name."

"Can I help you with something?" he asked.

"Well," she said, rolling her eyes in a surprisingly awkward way. Almost as if she was shy or something. Which she was not, since she'd chased him down the boardwalk. "I was wondering if you might be willing to give me sailing lessons."

"What?" That had to be the oddest request he'd gotten in a long time. He was not a sailing instructor.

"I'd like to learn how to sail a small boat."

“Did Abby put you up to this?”

She shook her head. “No. Of course not. I was watching you sail, and, well, you seem to know what you’re doing out there.” A telltale blush crawled up her cheeks as she talked a mile a minute. She was a Yankee, all right, from Boston. He didn’t need the Red Sox T-shirt to tell him that either. She had a broad Boston accent. She must be here soaking up the last of the summer sun before going back north.

She’d be gone in a week.

“I don’t give sailing lessons,” he said in a curt tone and then checked his watch. He really needed to go.

“Oh. Okay. I’m sorry I bothered you,” the woman said in an oddly wounded tone. Her shoulders slumped a little as she started to turn away.

Damn.

He’d been rude. And stupid too. If she really wanted sailing lessons, it was an opportunity to earn a few extra bucks doing the thing he loved most. Barrier Island Charters could use all the income it could get this time of year. “No, uh, wait,” he said. “How many sailing lessons do you want?”

She stopped, midturn. “I don’t know. How many would it take?”

“To do what?”

“Learn how to sail? On my own, you know.”

“No one sails by themselves. I mean, even in a small boat like *Bonney Rose* you need a crew.”

“Oh?” She frowned.

“Unless you’re learning on an Opti or a Laser. But I don’t have an Opti or a Laser.”

The frown deepened. “Oh.”

“Optis and Lasers are one-person boats. They capsize. A lot.”

“Oh.”

“If you want to learn on a bigger boat, you know, with a keel, you should check out the group courses in Georgetown.”

“What’s a keel?” she asked, cocking her head a little like an adorable brown-eyed puppy.

He fought against the urge to roll his eyes. “A keel boat has a...Never mind. It’s bigger and more comfortable. And safer.”

“Okay, then I want to learn how to sail the other kind. Does *Bonney Rose* have a keel?”

“No. She has a centerboard.”

“Perfect.” Her mouth broadened.

“I’m not a certified teacher. In Georgetown, you can—”

“So you’ve already said. But I’m not interested in group classes in Georgetown. I don’t want that kind of thing. I want to learn how to take risks. Live on the edge. Sail fast.”

“Look, sailing can be dangerous, and I don’t do thrill rides.”

She folded her arms across her chest, her eyebrows lowering a little and her hip jutting out, the picture of a ticked-off female. “I’m not looking for a thrill ride.”

“No?” He gave her his best levelheaded stare.

She blushed a little. “Okay. I know nothing about sailing. But I want to learn.”

“Go to the sailing school in Georgetown.”

“Is that where you learned?”

Damn. She had him there. He’d learned from one of the best sailors on the island. He shook his head.

“Okay. So, can you give me the name of your teacher?”

“No. My teacher is retired now.”

“Oh.” She seemed crestfallen. Damn.

He checked his watch again and huffed out a breath. He was going to be late to the meeting. “Okay, look, I don’t know if I’d be any good teaching you how to sail, but if you want to charter *Bonney Rose* for a couple of hours, the going rate is two hundred fifty an hour.” That should shut her up. Judging by her worn-out flip-flops and threadbare camp pants, she didn’t look like someone who could afford that kind of rate.

Her face brightened. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

She nodded. “Tomorrow?”

Damn. “Yeah. I guess. At the public pier. Four o’clock.” He turned away before she could argue.

“Hey. Wait,” she called as he scooted down the boardwalk.

He didn’t wait.

“Hey. Don’t you even want to know my name?” she hollered at his back.

He turned around and backpedaled. “Why? I’ll recognize you if you show up tomorrow. Oh, and bring cash.”