
The
Silver Boat

Luanne Rice

PAMELA DORMAN BOOKS

VIKING



THE SILVER BOAT

ALSO BY
LUANNE RICE

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*For Jessie Cantrell, Mike O’Gorman,
Sarah Walker, and Ted O’Gorman*

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PART I

*Three white frosts on three successive mornings
were taken by old-time Vineyarders as a sort of
scriptural ending of winter and beginning of spring.*

HENRY BEETLE HOUGH



CHAPTER ONE

Dar McCarthy sat on the granite step of her mother's rambling, gray-shingled house, listening to surf break beyond the pond. There had been a gale last night, driving in wild ocean waves, and through the salt pond's wide bight she could see gray-green seawater tower and crash, the foam bright white in the first morning light.

Last night's high wind had blown out all the clouds, and the dawn sky was turning what Delia used to call "happy blue." The sun hadn't yet melted the frost, which glimmered on the old stone walls and spiky brown grass, the lilac branches and the stone Buddha in the herb garden. Her mother's ancient cats skulked home from a night of hiding under the barn, looking tufty and tiny and old.

"What did you catch?" she asked. They ignored her as usual, rubbing at the screen door to be let in, leaving snags of gray fur in the wire mesh. Dar obliged them, reaching up to twist the brass

knob behind her head. As the five cats ran in, Scup, her mother's black Lab, ambled out. He made a quick round of the yard, padding paw prints in the frost, then came to sit beside her on the step. They leaned into each other.

Scup nosed her hand with his white muzzle. He was thin; she could feel the ridge of his spine. She petted him for a while, and then he barked. She had promised him a car ride. Standing, she patted the pockets of her down vest to make sure she had her car keys.

They never locked this house, called Daggett's Way centuries before Dar was born, and she never locked the Hideaway, her tiny yellow beach cottage at the west end of her family's fifteen-acre property on the Atlantic Ocean in Chilmark, Massachusetts.

Opening the hatchback of her teal blue Subaru, she let Scup in and smelled the fresh air. Daffodils were ready to bloom in clumps around the yard and by the corner of the weathered shingle house; tiny buds had formed on tips of the lilac bushes. After a long, cold Martha's Vineyard winter, April was here. Dar's hands felt icy, so she closed the hatch and jammed them in her pockets. She was shivering not only from the morning chill.

She knew this feeling so well, from when she was twelve; everything that mattered in life was about to give way. Back then she'd had no real preparation, but now small warnings were everywhere: bills, deadlines, contracts, constant and unwanted calls and e-mails from Island Properties.

Climbing into the car, she discovered that Scup had jumped into the passenger seat. She looked into his deep brown eyes and wondered if he sensed impending change. He had seen the boxes she had been collecting from Alley's and the Chilmark Store.

Pulling out the driveway onto South Road, she knew she was early to meet the ferry. She turned right, passing the cemetery, driving along the oak- and stone-wall-lined road, seeing the sun rise over the trees. One car came toward her, heading west—another year-rounder. They both waved. She turned into the parking lot at Alley's Store, scanned the trucks for Andy Mayhew's. There it was, dirty white with a hoist in back and his logo painted on the door.

She climbed the porch steps, looked for Andy but didn't see him, said hi to everyone standing around drinking coffee. Stopping at the bulletin board, she riffled through all the business cards and notices until she found a note written on a thick card embossed with Harrison Thaxter's family crest; this was how they communicated.

When are the girls arriving? he'd scrawled in fountain pen. Reaching for the pencil dangling from the board by a string, she wrote back, *Today!* Then, not knowing whether he'd be by any time soon, she added, *(Friday, April 9th)*.

"When's he going to get a phone?" Andy asked, handing her a large steaming black coffee.

"When's he going to get a house?" she asked.

They both chuckled. Andy, Harrison, the McCarthy sisters, and a tight group of friends had grown up here—first summering on the island, then some of them digging in and becoming year-rounders.

"You okay?" Andy asked, standing close, their arms touching.

"Yes," she said. "Going to pick up my sisters. I can't wait."

"You sure about that?" he asked. He was tall, and the top of her head just grazed his chin.

“Pretty sure,” she said, giving him a big smile, as if they hadn’t talked about this last night, as if her sheets might not still be warm from where they’d slept. “It’s going to be hard, getting ready to leave all this.”

“You don’t have to—” he began.

“Thanks, Andy,” she said, putting her finger to his lips.

“You want me to come with you?” he asked.

She shook her head. “You have a stone wall to repair.”

“I found some pretty granite, covered with lichens,” he said. “Will you come see later?”

“I’ll try,” she said. “It’s going to be sister time for the foreseeable future.”

He started to say something else but stopped himself.

“What?” she asked, but he shook his head.

“See you tonight,” he said.

They pressed each other’s hands, and she made her way back to the car. Backing out of the parking lot, she rolled down the window to wave. Sipping coffee, she let the chilly air in.

Dar arrived in Vineyard Haven just in time to see the nine o’clock boat rounding West Chop and slicing through the harbor. Gulls cried, circling the upper deck. No matter what time of year, she always felt delight and expectancy, seeing the ferry pull in. Anyone at all might be aboard, but this time she knew for sure—Rory and Delia.

She and Scup jumped out of the car, stood aside the car lane. The MV *Island Home* screeched and squeaked, thumping back and forth between the huge barnacled, creosoted pilings. Chains rattled as the ferry’s metal ramp was lowered, and Dar peered into the dark hold, her heart beating fast.

Vehicles began to off-load. She held her breath. This was the Steamship Authority's newest ferry. Dar, her sisters, and their mother had stood on this dock, listening to Carly Simon, her son Ben Taylor, Kate Taylor, and others singing to welcome the new boat. Dar had done a drawing of the scene, given it to the captain. He'd flattered her, looking for her signature.

"An original Dar McCarthy," he'd said. "My daughters won't believe it."

"Tell them I'll draw them on deck in my next installment."

"Wow," he'd said. "That better be a promise."

"It is," she'd said, and she'd kept her word, putting the ferry and the captain's children in a scene in her next graphic novel.

And now, here came Delia, driving her green Volvo wagon, waving out the open window. Dar waved back, noticing Delia's granddaughter, Vanessa, beaming from her car seat in back, as well as the fact that Rory and her kids weren't in the car.

Dar followed Delia over to an empty spot, hopped inside, and hugged her youngest sister. They rocked back and forth, not wanting to let go. Vanessa held a doll in the crook of her arm and shouted, "Hellohellohellohello!"

"Hello, Vanessa!" Dar said. "Hello, hello! Where is Rory?"

"Oh God," Delia said. "I've been up since three, and I need a whole lot of coffee before I get into that. She wanted to take her own car. Can we go home, and then I'll tell you? Have you heard from Pete? Oh, never mind that now. Let's just get home, and we can talk."

"Of course," Dar said. She held her sister's hand, not wanting to let go or get out of the car. But Scup was waiting, and they were blocking traffic, so Dar blew Vanessa a kiss and ran back to her own car.

. . .

Delia Monaghan led the way. She talked to Vanessa, pointing out landmarks.

“That’s where my best friend, Amy, lives in the summer, and that’s the old oak—see all the big, winding branches, all the way down to the ground and up again—we all used to climb, and that’s the creek where your daddy used to catch crabs and herring.”

“My daddy!” Vanessa said.

Delia met her eyes in the rearview mirror and smiled. “That’s right. Daddy.” She kept driving, was fine till they passed Chilmark Cemetery; glancing down the hill, she tried to find her mother’s grave. She could almost see herself and her sisters and half the island residents standing there in the October light. Summer people had returned to the Vineyard, and her fellow winter residents had gathered to say good-bye to Tilly McCarthy. Everyone had been there except Pete.

“Oh, Mom,” Delia said. The funeral was the last time she and her sisters had seen each other. They usually gathered on the island for Thanksgiving and Christmas, but this period without their mother, and the reality of what was to come, had been too much to bear; they’d each celebrated in their own way.

Delia had spent hers with her husband and granddaughter—Vanessa’s mother was only eighteen, pregnant again with another man’s baby, and took every possible chance for Delia to babysit.

Rory had spent the holidays with her three children, and not with her husband.

Dar had probably gotten together with Andy Mayhew; Delia could not figure out that relationship. It had lasted forever, but no one was getting married or moving in together.

Delia pulled herself together before turning in to her mother's driveway. The sight of the big old house filled her with yearning and made her think of childhood—her own and Pete's, and now Vanessa's. She could just see her mother, tall and sturdy, dressed in faded jeans and a linen shirt, white hair short and practical under a wide-brimmed sun hat.

What a great mother she'd been, basically raising the girls on her own after their father had left. The whole situation had left the family stunned and devastated, but Tilly McCarthy had always tried to keep her daughters' hopes up. Those linen shirts in beach colors—blue for sea and sky, green for marsh grass, orange for sunsets, deep pink for the beach roses that grew along the path to the beach—those colors chased the darkness in their house, let her daughters think, sometimes at least, that life was good and bright.

She'd invent special, magical occasions. The girls would come down for breakfast and find clues on the table. Cut-out stars meant that night they'd be going down to the beach, spreading blankets on the cold sand, gazing up at the sky to learn constellations and watch for shooting stars.

Three watercolor brushes tied with ribbons of marsh grass hinted that she'd planned an artists' expedition; they'd pile into the station wagon and find a cove, or salt marsh, or hilltop. Unloading easels, watercolor pads ordered from Sennelier in Paris, miniature Winsor & Newton watercolor kits for each of them, they would set up and paint *en plein air*, an all-girl version of late-twentieth-century Impressionists. Only Dar would stick with her paintings; Delia and Rory would get bored and wander off, exploring. Their mother didn't mind, as long as everyone had fun.

"Well, here we are," Delia said, unbuckling Vanessa's car seat.

Dar walked over, and they gave each other a long hug. “Hi, Vanessa!” Dar said.

“Beach!” Vanessa said.

“Yes, soon we’ll go down to the beach,” Delia said.

The kitchen was chilly, so Dar threw a few logs into the woodstove. Delia looked around. When they used to come to open the house each Memorial Day, they’d have to sweep out dead wasps and mouse droppings and broken acorns dropped down the chimneys by squirrels. Once they’d found a complete fish skeleton in the fireplace and could only imagine an osprey had lost its grip flying overhead.

“Oh my God,” Delia said, going to hug Dar as she made coffee. Her older sister felt lean, almost skinny; she’d always been that way, as if following some private, inner asceticism. Delia felt fat by comparison, folds of flesh and pudgy wrists. She pulled away and instantly felt thinner. “You have no idea how much I’ve been dying to talk to you in person. The phone just doesn’t cut it.”

“I know,” Dar said, putting two scones in a pan. The oven groaned as it heated up.

“Mom never gave in to the microwave I bought her,” Delia said.

“She liked things as old and original as she could keep them,” Dar said.

“Oh, Mom,” Delia said. “She tried to hold on to everything, balancing all the while. Imagine being stuck between Grandmother and her English ways, and Dad sounding like he’d never left county Cork.”

“Yep,” Dar said, watching Vanessa clutching her doll, playing on the floor with Scup. “We’d come here and be blue-collar girls in a silver spoon world.”

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