

A
Hatteras
Surprise

A Novella by

Hope Toler Dougherty

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For a moment, Ben Daniels was fifteen again. The tackle shop matched exactly the one in his memory. The same weathered planks. The same signs for bait and ice. A side portion had been added, but the front cast him back to ice cream cones and Popsicles with his siblings on melting afternoons.

“This is it. Nice job, man.” Talking out loud. To himself. Must be more tired than he thought.

He exited his car to stretch as scenes from that long ago summer vacation flooded his head—climbing the Hatteras Lighthouse, riding the waves, and a little girl with blond braids who tagged along or, rather, led them on other adventures.

What was her name? Would she, like the tackle shop, still be here?

He smiled and shut his door, a refreshing breeze blowing off the sound. The extended weather report promised more temperate days like this one on the Outer Banks for the remainder of October. Fantastic. He rolled his shoulders and headed inside.

A beach music favorite he recognized from college greeted him along with a woman sporting cropped gray hair. “Good

afternoon. What can we help you with today?" She turned from a rod and reel display and moved to the cash register.

"Hey." He blinked, pulling himself to the present. "I'm looking for a beach cottage."

"For rentals, Island Realty is back up the road a bit." The woman jerked her head toward the way he'd just come.

"No, ma'am, I'm staying at the Teachy Bed and Breakfast. I'm looking for the cottage my family rented years ago. I don't have the address, but it's near this store."

"When we talkin', sonny?"

"2000 or so."

"Pretty good chance the cottage is gone by now. Storms, rebuilding, and such."

"Sure. I wanted to find it for old time's sake. It was a special place, a special time for my family."

A door behind the counter opened, and a woman with sandy blond hair stepped into the shop. He sucked in a breath.

"Hazel, do you have—" she froze in the doorway, a deer caught in a flood light. She dragged her wide eyes from his, muttered, "Excuse me," and vanished into the back room.

"That's too bad. Ahm." He glanced at the office door, squinting his eyes. A crazy idea lit in his mind. "I'm also looking for someone I met back then. Someone named Ginny?" The name popped out of his mouth before he could question it. "Do you know her?"

An eyebrow arced to Hazel's gray hair, and she stiffened like a mamma bear growling in front of her den. "Maybe. Maybe not. Who wants to know?"

Ben glanced again at the door and offered his hand across the counter. "I'm Ben Daniels. I think you know her, and I think she's in that office."

She clasped his hand in a firm grip, warning of a strong will. "If that's true, why did she turn around when she laid eyes on you? Why doesn't she want to see you? Are you that fellow from

N.C. State? The one who broke her heart?” She raked her almost-black eyes over him and back again.

“No, ma’am. When we vacationed here, she showed us around the island. I’d love to say hello. That’s all.” He smiled, hoping his eyes crinkled like his sister teased him about. Would charm work on this fierce gatekeeper? “She’s in the office, right?”

“She must not recognize you since she closed the door.” Hazel slid a small pumpkin closer to the cash register and flattened her palms on the counter, leaning toward him. “Or maybe she did recognize you. Just doesn’t want to talk to you.”

Buckling under her guilt-inducing gaze, he grabbed onto the first excuse. “It’s been around twenty years. She probably forgot some tourists here for just one week.” He raised his eyebrows. “Do you mind if I knock and say hello?”

Hazel studied him and consented on her terms. “I’ll knock and see if she’s busy.”



GINNY CLICKED the door closed and leaned against it, blowing out a raggedy breath. Old humiliation blanketed her. Twenty-year-old humiliation with ample doses of worthlessness and betrayal pressed on her shoulders. Ben. After all these years.

If he isn’t Ben, he’s a dead ringer. He’s taller, more filled out. His voice is deeper, but his sea green eyes are the same.

Hey, God. That stranger dredged up a memory that makes me feel less than. I know. I know. I’m not that little girl with the hand-me-down bike, the faded shorts, the funny speech. My self-worth comes from You. I know You love me, but I just got blindsided. I need some peace.

The back window showed a tranquil scene of sea oats waving in the breeze, clouds floating over the Pamlico Sound. Three tiny boats sailed on the horizon. The normal island scenes calmed her heart and regulated her breath. Ben. After all these years. She shook her head. Her first crush. Her handsome boy

from a far away, great big city—Charlotte. Ben. One of the ones who'd laughed at her behind her back, mocked her speech.

The memory, decades old now, still stung.

Just breathe. The guy would be gone in a few minutes.

Sunlight danced on the waves outside her window, casting her mind to the week for the first time in years. She'd nursed the crush, tainted with humiliation, for years until Matt Tomes asked her to the prom. That relationship lasted until she left for East Carolina University and met a boy from New Jersey who loved her island accent and never made fun of it. To her face at least.

Other guys piqued her interest in subsequent years, but Ben's memory and green eyes hovered in the back of her mind, always a silent yardstick.

Twenty-year-old pictures flickered in her mind from that golden week. Ben, helping her into her boat even though she didn't need it. Praising her island skills. Making her feel like she was sixteen instead of ten. Stirring boyfriend-girlfriend fantasies. Oh, what silly thoughts of a ten-year-old.

Breathe, Ginny. You can show the quarterly reports to Hazel in a few minutes.

As soon as the screen door slams.



A KNOCK JERKED her heart rate into high gear again. Hazel never knocked—even when the door was closed. Not a good sign.

“Yes.”

Hazel slid in through a just-big-enough crack in the door and closed it behind her. “Why are you hiding in here?”

“I’m not—”

“You walked out front, saw that man, turned right around, and shut the door. Why? Is he the jerk who broke your heart in Raleigh?”

“No one—”

“You came back here with your tail between your legs and started keeping the office for your daddy.”

“Wrong.” Ginny fingered a fishing lure of her father’s she kept on his desk. “Daddy passed. The store needed me, and my video project was finished.”

“But you hadn’t finished your doctorate. Plus, my version’s better.” Hazel shrugged. “Anyway, he’s singing some song about vacationing here a long time ago. Wants to say hey.”

Heat climbed up her neck.

So, Ben’s back on the island. Remembered her after all these years. Asked for her.

Calm down, heart. Saying hello for a quick minute should be fine. No problem.

God, some help with a problem, please.

Filling her lungs with a good breath, she followed Hazel back into the shop. Her gaze flickered toward his face, fell to a button on his chest. She released the breath and forced her eyes up to meet his. Yep. Same green ones she remembered.

“Hello. Hazel said you wanted to see me.”

“Yeah. Ginny, it’s good to see you again. Ben Daniels. We met a long time ago when my family stayed in a cottage not too far from here.”

“Oh.” She smiled. “We get a lot of visitors on the island. I’m sure you can imagine.”

Hesitating, Ben tilted his head. “Right, but you showed my family, my two brothers and sister, to some of your haunts. Took us crabbing and ate what we caught for supper with my parents. We climbed the lighthouse together too.”

“Oh.” Her eyes widened. “Of course, I remember you. Wow. A long time ago. I hope your family’s doing well.” Did she sound kind and welcoming but non-committal at the same time?

Ginny caught Hazel watching her pleat the hem of her blouse. She smoothed down the creased fabric and stuck her hand in the pocket of her jeans.

“You helped us look for shells too. My sister dreamed of finding a conch shell, but we never did.”

“Right. Your sister.” Ginny cocked her head. “What was her name?” Josie.

Behind the counter, Hazel coughed twice, then cleared her throat for an exclamation point.

His eyes narrowed. “Josie.”

Focusing on him, she refused to look at Hazel. “Josie. Right. It’s a shame she didn’t get one. I’m usually pretty good at finding shells.”

“We heard about her disappointment for months afterward.” He grinned at her.

“Oh, no. Well, maybe you can find one for her before you go back to Charlotte.” Her stomach dropped. Big mouth. Big mouth.

His head jerked. “You—”

“It’s been nice to see you again.” Backing toward her office, she felt for the doorknob. “I’m glad you stopped by. Enjoy your stay on the island.” She slipped through the crack in the doorway and disappeared.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hope Toler Dougherty holds a Master's degree in English and taught at East Carolina University and York Technical College. Her publications include four novels, *Irish Encounter* and *Mars... With Venus Rising*, *Rescued Hearts*, and *Forever Music* as well as nonfiction articles. A member of ACFW and RWA, she lives in North Carolina. She and her husband enjoy visits with their two daughters and twin sons. Visit her at hopetolerdougherty.com.