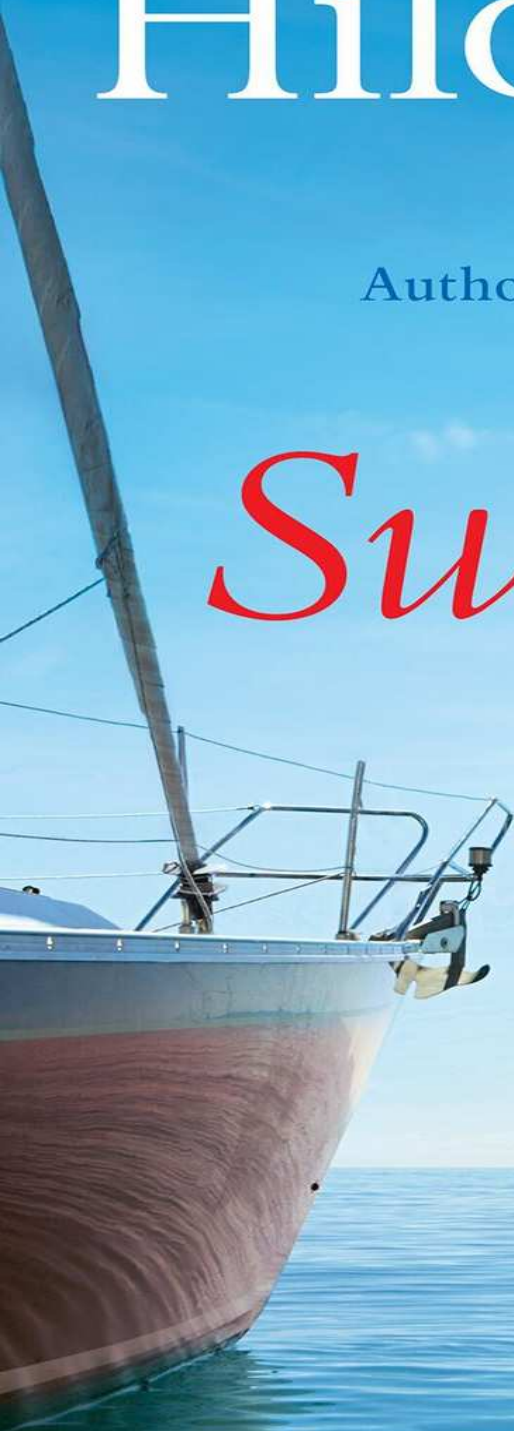


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Elin Hilderbrand

Author of *The Hotel Nantucket*

Swan Song



Swan Song



Elin
Hilderbrand



Little, Brown and Company
New York Boston London

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Copyright © 2024 by Elin Hilderbrand

Cover design by Julianna Lee

Cover photograph by Getty Images

Cover copyright © 2024 by Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Little, Brown and Company

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas,

New York, NY 10104

littlebrown.com

[X.com/littlebrown](https://x.com/littlebrown)

[Facebook.com/littlebrownandcompany](https://facebook.com/littlebrownandcompany)

First ebook edition: June 2024

Little, Brown and Company is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Little, Brown name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking events. To find out more, go to hachettespeakersbureau.com or email hachettespeakers@hbgusa.com.

Little, Brown and Company books may be purchased in bulk for business, educational, or promotional use. For information, please contact your local bookseller or the Hachette Book Group Special Markets Department at special.markets@hbgusa.com.

ISBN 9780316259705

E3-20240420-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[1. The Cobblestone Telegraph I](#)

[2. “Sherry’s Living in Paradise”](#)

[3. Level 4](#)

[4. Meet-Cute I](#)

[5. The Castaways](#)

[6. The Cobblestone Telegraph II](#)

[7. Work It, Sell It, Own It](#)

[8. Thursday, August 22, 8:45 P.M.](#)

[9. Meet-Cute II](#)

[10. Field and Oar](#)

[11. Thursday, August 22, 9:00 P.M.](#)

[12. Triple Eight](#)

[13. Special Delivery](#)

[14. Party Animal](#)

[15. Thursday, August 22, 9:15 P.M.](#)

[16. Morning Buns](#)

- [17. Amalfi Lemons](#)
- [18. Whale Island](#)
- [19. The Kitchen I](#)
- [20. Thursday, August 22, 9:30 P.M.](#)
- [21. Firecracker](#)
- [22. The Summer Day](#)
- [23. Thursday, August 22, 9:35 P.M.](#)
- [24. Big Swing](#)
- [25. Single Ladies](#)
- [26. Thursday, August 22, 9:45 P.M.](#)
- [27. Day-Drinking in Denpasar](#)
- [28. Thursday, August 22, 10:05 P.M.](#)
- [29. The Kitchen II](#)
- [30. Her](#)
- [31. The Third Eight](#)
- [32. Thursday, August 22, 11:00 P.M.](#)
- [33. Kill Your Darlings](#)
- [34. Dumped](#)
- [35. Cruel Summer](#)
- [36. Friday, August 23, 1:00 A.M.](#)
- [37. For as Long as We Both Shall Live](#)
- [38. Thursday, August 22, 8:00 P.M.](#)
- [39. There Is No Story Here](#)
- [40. Friday, August 23, 6:15 A.M.](#)
- [41. The Cobblestone Telegraph III](#)
- [42. Your One Wild and Precious Life](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Discover More](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Elin Hilderbrand](#)

*I will end where I began: This book is for Chip
Cunningham—with friendship and profound gratitude.*

Explore book giveaways, sneak peeks, deals, and more.

[Tap here to learn more.](#)



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

Prologue

Thursday, August 22, 6:00 p.m.

Rumors about Nantucket Police chief Ed Kapenash's retirement have been swirling around for the past two years, though when asked directly, the Chief said, "I'm far too busy to contemplate retirement." However, three days after the Big Scare in February, Ed told his wife, Andrea (from his hospital bed at Mass General), "That's it, I'm finished, I'll just stay on through the summer while we find someone to replace me."

"Another *summer*, Ed?" Andrea cried out. She was shaken—and for good reason.

Ed had been giving a safety talk in the gymnasium of Nantucket Elementary when his left arm started to tingle. He felt short of breath, his vision splotted—and the next thing he knew, he was being loaded onto a medevac chopper and flown to MGH for emergency bypass surgery.

"You had the kind of heart attack we call the widow-maker," Dr. Very Important said. "A full blockage of your LAD artery. You were lucky the paramedics were right there. Otherwise this could have ended differently."

Yes, the fire chief—Stu Vick—and EMTs from his department had been in the school gym as well, waiting for their turn to speak, when Ed hit the floor.

As Dr. Big Shot gave Ed a lecture about exercise, diet, and, above all, *stress*, Ed gauged Andrea's reaction to the term *widow-maker*.

Not good.

"You should retire *now*," Andrea said. "You might not survive another summer." She looked at Dr. Master of the Universe because she needed him to hear the backstory. "Ed has been admitted to the Nantucket hospital three times in the past two years for chest pain. They wanted to send him up here for testing but he *refused*."

Ed sighed. He'd married a tattletale. But also, Ed felt guilty. Had he

played fast and loose with his health? Yes. Could he just give two weeks' notice and leave the public safety of the island up for grabs? He could not.

He would retire in the fall.

Now here it is, August 22, and the Chief is celebrating: His last official day of duty is Monday, August 26. His replacement, Zara Washington, was the deputy chief in Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard, so she understands island life as well as Ed does. Zara has moved into her housing, and after two weeks of shadowing Ed, she is eager to take over. Andrea has planned a big retirement party for Ed at the Oystercatcher in a couple of weeks and there will be some official hoopla arranged by Governor Healey.

But for now, the Chief is enjoying a night out with his people: Andrea; his son, Eric, and Eric's girlfriend, Avalon; his best friends, Addison and Phoebe Wheeler and Jeffrey and Delilah Drake; and his daughter, Kacy, a NICU nurse who moved back from California this summer.

Kacy had intended to bring her friend Coco as her plus-one but... Coco works as the "personal concierge" for the Richardsons, a couple whom Ed and Andrea (and the Wheelers and the Drakes) became acquainted with this summer, and when Ed opted not to include the Richardsons in tonight's dinner, the Richardsons turned around and threw a sunset sail on their yacht, *Hedonism*—and so Coco has to work.

"I guess everyone has abandoned the Richardsons," Kacy said. "Coco didn't recognize the names on the guest list—they're mostly strangers."

Strangers who evidently hadn't been warned about the Richardsons, Ed thought. Some weird things had happened this summer.

Back in June, the Richardsons were a hot commodity; they'd nearly become part of "the Castaways," which is what the Kapenashes and the Wheelers and the Drakes call their friend group (because they all "washed ashore" on Nantucket decades earlier). Part of the appeal of the Richardsons was that they were younger, still in their forties. The Castaways, Ed in particular, had been feeling their middle age.

For tonight's dinner, Ed chose Ventuno, a restaurant housed in one of the historic residences downtown, and Andrea reserved the entire upstairs for them.

They ascend a narrow wooden staircase and find their table draped with

white linen and lit by candles near the windows that overlook the charming brick sidewalks of Federal Street. All their guests have already arrived.

Ed takes his seat at the oval table and reminds himself to appreciate the things that Andrea accuses him of missing: the crystal wineglasses, the low centerpiece of dahlias and roses, the fact that Eric has worn a tie without being asked. The air smells of garlic and herbs; Tony Bennett croons in the background. This is exactly the evening Ed wanted—and yet he can't help but feel melancholy. The summer is ending, and so is his career.

After Addison assesses the wine list—it's long been his job to serve as their sommelier—he catches Ed's eye over the top of the menu.

"There's no time to get in your feelings, Ed," he says. "A bold yet subtle Barolo awaits."

The wine, Ed has to admit, tastes divine even to his unsophisticated palate (left to his own devices, he's a beer drinker), though he holds himself to half a glass. What he's really interested in tonight is food. Andrea is seated next to him but she's whispering with Phoebe and Delilah about the Richardsons. *They couldn't leave it alone; they had to one-up us!*

The Chief is going to use his wife's obsession with the Richardsons to his advantage. He does some ordering for the table—two fritto mistos, the farfalle with crab and local corn (sourced from Jeffrey and Delilah's farm), the strozzapreti with sausage and broccoli rabe, the ricotta crostini, the stuffed clams.

"Ed," Andrea says in a warning tone. Andrea is the police chief now, at least where Ed's diet is concerned.

Ed throws in an order of the giardiniera and a Caesar salad. He waits until Andrea turns away, then says to the server, "For the main course, the Fiorentina." This is the finest steak on the island; Ed dreams about it the way some men dream about Margot Robbie. It's a thirty-three-ounce porterhouse served with roasted rosemary potatoes. Ed pushes away thoughts of the salt, the fat, his heart. At home, it's been chicken, fish, and vegetables for the past six months.

When the steak arrives sizzling on the platter—the scent is enough to bring Ed to his knees—he helps himself to two rosy-pink pieces. This might be what kills him, but what a way to go.

Andrea notices the fried shrimp and squid, the helpings of pasta, and the rare steak, but she zips her lip. She's proud of Ed—he's lost thirty-five pounds, started jogging three mornings a week, switched to decaf coffee, stopped going to the Nickel four times a week for lunch (the shrimp po'boy is his kryptonite), and he's at least pretending to meditate ten minutes each day. Andrea is also relieved that they made it to the end of the summer without any major incidents. That's not to say the summer was boring—au contraire! The moment Phoebe introduced them to Addison's new clients the Richardsons, their summer became a blur of lunches at the Field and Oar Club, pickleball, sailing excursions, and parties, parties, parties. Andrea hasn't had a summer like this since before her kids were born. For most of the summer, the Richardsons seemed like a gift sent from the heavens to remind them that they weren't too old to have fun.

But when Andrea thinks about the Richardsons now, she... no, she won't let them live rent-free in her head. She'll just feel happy that Ed is enjoying his steak.

Addison makes a toast. "To our fearless leader!" Everyone raises a glass; Ed is honored but also a little embarrassed. He drinks his red wine—he thinks Addison might have refilled his glass without his noticing—and suddenly he grows reflective.

He moved to Nantucket from Swampscott thirty-five years earlier when the chief of police position opened. People had warned him that policing on an island would be different than on the mainland. It was like a small town except that it was thirty miles out to sea, so there was no getting away. This has been tricky enough to navigate even in the off-season, and during Ed's tenure, the year-round population has doubled. But come June, the island explodes with summer residents, short-term renters, and day-trippers, some of whom feel inclined to rent mopeds despite not having a clue how to operate them. There's traffic to deal with, scores of parking tickets on the daily, kids from the cities and fancy suburbs with their designer drugs and entitled attitudes giving his officers lip.

Beyond that, there's real trouble—domestics, vandalism, drunk driving, overdoses, accidental deaths. Ed worked a case out in Monomoy half a dozen years earlier that he still believes was murder, though they never quite figured it out.

Their server shows up with a dessert sampler for the table—an apple

crostata with cinnamon gelato, baba au rhum, and cannoli.

Phoebe takes a bite of the crostata and says, “This tastes like fall.”

“Blasphemy,” Delilah says. “There’s still an entire month of summer left.”

Ed is considering a cannoli, but he’s afraid he’s pushed the limits of his diet far enough. Andrea is the one who places a cannoli on his plate, her cheeks flushed from the wine. She leans over and kisses him on the lips, a good kiss, one that promises more later. “It’s your special night.”

Ed gazes around the table, and his eyes land on Kacy. She looks wistful, maybe even lonesome; she keeps checking her phone. *It’s funny*, the Chief thinks. *No matter how old your kids get, you still worry about them.* Kacy and Coco were close all summer, a Millennial Laverne and Shirley, but things between them seem to have cooled. When the Chief asked Andrea if Kacy and Coco had a falling-out, Andrea said, “They’re grown women, Ed.” Whatever *that* meant.

After coffee is served, there’s another surprise. Their server turns up the music—Harry Connick Jr. singing “It Had to Be You”—and moves the other tables so they have room to dance. Andrea takes Ed’s hand. “Come on, Chief, let’s show them how it’s done.”

Phoebe and Addison join them on the improvised dance floor, then Jeffrey and Delilah. In that moment, the word *retirement*, a term that previously evoked only dread for the Chief, seems filled with promise. The weight of the island’s problems will be lifted from his shoulders. He and Andrea can travel; he’ll be able to go out fishing on Eric’s charter boat whenever he wants—maybe he’ll even take a job as Eric’s first mate. They’ll enjoy other nights like this when the Chief can have more than half a glass of wine.

He’ll be free.

“Are you sure you won’t get sick of me hanging around all the time?” he asks Andrea. Before she can answer, Ed’s phone buzzes in his pocket.

Andrea groans. “Please just let it go.”

He checks the screen. It’s the station, line four, which means it’s an emergency.

“I’m sorry,” Ed says. “I have to—”

He steps off the dance floor, lifts the phone to one ear, and plugs his other ear with two fingers. It’s his dispatcher, the aptly named Jennifer Speed, whom they just call Speed. The woman defines *efficiency*. “Do you want the

bad news or the bad news?” she asks.

The Chief doesn't want any news and Speed knows it. He has one hundred hours left as Nantucket's police chief. “What is it?”

“There's a fire out in Pocomo,” Speed says. “The NFD is on the scene. I talked to Stu, who says it's a total loss. Burned to the ground.”

“Pocomo?” the Chief says. “It's not...”

“The Richardsons' house, yes, it is,” Speed says. She pauses. “Was.”

The Chief closes his eyes. He feels Andrea's hand on his back.

“What else?” he says.

“Their assistant, woman by the name of Colleen Coyle?”

“Coco, yes,” the Chief says. “I know her. She's a friend of Kacy's.”

“Apparently the Richardsons were having a party on their yacht when someone called them about the smoke at their house, and they hightailed it back. The girl, Coco, was on the boat, but when they got back to the mooring, she was gone. As in, no longer on the boat.”

“No longer on the boat?” the Chief says. “Where did she go?”

“Nobody knows,” Speed says. “She's missing.”

“Is she the only one?”

“As far as I know, everyone else on the boat is accounted for, and Captain...”

“Lamont?” the Chief says.

“Yes, Lamont Oakley called the harbormaster. The harbormaster called us.”

The Chief turns back to the table. Kacy's face is bathed in blue light from her phone; she gasps and looks up at him. The *Nantucket Current* must have just broken the story.

“Thank you, Speed,” he says. The Richardsons' house burned down, and Coco is missing? The Chief wants to believe this is a prank, a gotcha for his final days. But he knows it's real. If he's honest, he would admit he feared something awful like this would happen with the Richardsons. “Tell them I'm on my way.”

1. The Cobblestone Telegraph I

Most towns have a rumor mill. We here on Nantucket have what's known as the cobblestone telegraph—and Blond Sharon has long been the switchboard operator. *Everything* goes through her.

But this summer, a twist: Blond Sharon is now the topic of gossip. Everyone on the island is talking about how Blond Sharon's husband, Walker, left her for his physical therapist, a woman who is less than half Walker's age. Walker tore his ACL skiing over the holidays, and in March, he announced that he'd fallen in love with "Bailey from PT." He was leaving Sharon; he wanted a divorce.

Ouch, we thought. It's hardly a new story, a middle-aged man leaving his wife for a younger woman, but we thought Blond Sharon's family was bulletproof. Sharon is an exemplary mother. She secured her sixteen-year-old twin girls, Sterling and Colby, coveted internships at the Nantucket Historical Association (unpaid, but so good for their college applications). Sharon's thirteen-year-old son, Robert, has type 1 diabetes, and Sharon monitors his blood sugar using an app on her phone. We feel bad that Sharon has been dropped like a hot potato at the age of fifty-four, but none of us feel guilty talking about it. When we think of how many hours Blond Sharon has spent blabbing about other people's business, we can't help but see this moment as a kind of poetic justice.

The good news, we all think, is that Sharon has her sister, Heather, to lean on. Sharon and Heather are polar opposites: Sharon is blond and Heather is brunette; Sharon is a stay-at-home mom, Heather is an attorney with the corporate finance division of the SEC in Washington. Blond Sharon is like the flight attendant who overshares about the pilot's hemorrhoids and the famous talk-show host seated in 3C; Heather is the black box. The only thing Heather has ever done with a secret is keep it.

Heather is also the voice of reason. When Sharon admits that what bothers her most about Walker leaving her is being a cliché, Heather says, "Just

promise not to wear statement necklaces and fake eyelashes and take cruises in the Mediterranean looking for a rich replacement husband.”

Sharon blinks. That had been her plan exactly.

“This is your chance to reinvent yourself,” Heather says. “Do you remember the quote you taped to your bedroom mirror when we were young?”

It wasn’t a quote, Sharon thinks. It was the last two lines of the Mary Oliver poem “The Summer Day”: *Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?* Sharon discovered the poem one summer when she worked shelving books at the New Canaan Public Library. The lines, which Sharon typed out on her father’s electric Smith Corona and taped to her bedroom mirror, had always seemed like a challenge—but when she thinks about it now, it feels like one she has failed to meet. She has spent her one wild and precious life selecting wallpaper and scheduling the pool cleaners; she has spent it reading *People* magazine in line at the market and fruitlessly trying to improve her backhand. She has spent it scrolling through her phone.

But there is something that Sharon has dreamed of doing, something we never would have guessed.

It has been Blond Sharon’s secret lifelong desire to become an author.

Well, we think, she’s certainly demonstrated her keen interest in other people’s stories, the seedier and more salacious, the better. Since beloved local novelist Vivian Howe died a few years ago, there has been no one to write about the dramas that occur every summer on Nantucket. Could Blond Sharon take her place? Does she know the first thing about writing fiction?

Summer is a prime time to embark on a self-improvement project, Sharon thinks—and she signs up for a virtual creative-writing workshop. The instructor’s name is Lucky Zambrano, which makes it sound like he’s a Mob boss, but in fact, he’s a recently retired Florida Atlantic University English professor. He tells his students that he’s teaching this online class to keep busy because his wife passed away last year.

Lucky is a widower, Sharon thinks. She sits up straighter and yanks at the bottom of her blouse to show a bit more cleavage. There are two other

students in the Zoom class, both of them women and both about Sharon's age, though neither quite as well preserved as she is. One is named Willow, the other Nancy.

"Oh," Lucky says. "Nancy was my wife's name."

Does this give Nancy an advantage with Lucky? Sharon wonders. Nancy has one of those short, no-nonsense haircuts that means she's probably already married. Willow is wearing long feather earrings and has never seen a Botox needle.

"Let's get to your first assignment," Lucky says. "Character. What I'd like you to do is venture out into the world somewhere, could be your local farmers' market, your office building—Nancy, I see you work at the RMV, that's a fertile environment—and choose two individuals to observe. Then I'd like you to dramatize a scene between the two with an eye toward developing this scene into a story. The late great novelist John Gardner famously said that there are only two plots: One, a person goes on a journey, and two, a stranger comes to town." Lucky pauses and Sharon furiously scribbles on her legal pad. Sharon is hopelessly old-school; both Nancy and Willow type on their laptops. "Go forth and observe, then, my friends. We'll meet again next week and you can share what you've written with the group."

When Sharon clicks Leave Meeting, she's energized and, dare she say, inspired. She won't be one of those orange divorcées on a cruise ship; she's going to create a dazzling second act for herself as a published author. She snatches up her legal pad, ready to venture out into the world to observe. In a way, this has always been Sharon's mission—to find out what's really going on. But now she has a more noble mission. Now she's going to write about it.

Sharon plops herself down on a bench at the Steamship Authority ferry terminal. Where better to observe a person going on a journey or a stranger coming to town? Sharon wears her enormous Céline sunglasses and a white tennis visor, though those of us who are waiting for the ferry to arrive—notably Bob from Old Salt Taxi and Romeo, who works for the Steamship Authority—notice Sharon right away.

Why, Romeo wonders, does Blond Sharon have a notebook and pen at the ready? He can't think of a single reason, but Romeo loves a mystery... especially one that involves a beautiful woman.

As soon as Sharon gets settled, the boat pulls in. She scans the people coming down the ramp. Does anyone look promising? No, no, no; it's all day-trippers, the women in roomy sundresses, the men in cargo shorts, everyone in ugly sensible shoes. Fanny packs, backpacks. Why is the casual traveler in America so decidedly unstylish?

Her eyes latch onto a young woman over by the luggage cart. She has a look not seen often on Nantucket—she's like a human piece of art. Her black hair is short and cut in angles and spikes. She's wearing a tight black tank that leaves an inch of her midriff bare. She has a tattoo of a flamingo on her left shoulder and another that looks like a gecko just above her ankle. Sharon sees a gemstone sparkling in the girl's nose as she lifts a lumpy army-green duffel off the luggage cart. This person is more than a casual tourist; this is someone arriving for the summer.

A stranger comes to town! Sharon thinks. She abandons her spot on the bench and creeps over to get a closer look. Should she offer this girl a ride to wherever she's going? Sharon is about to tap the girl on the shoulder when a second young woman appears. This young woman has honey-colored hair cut in a neat, sassy bob and she's wearing slim white jeans and a fitted navy blazer. She hoists a brightly patterned Vera Bradley bag off the cart. Sharon has the exact same bag at home.

"Here, take my number, Coco," the second woman says. "Keep in touch, okay? Let me know where you end up staying."

"I'll figure it out," Coco says. "I always do. And hey, Kacy, thanks for the chowder—it meant a lot."

The second woman, Kacy, waves a hand as if to say *It was nothing*. She walks into the snarl of traffic in the parking lot. Coco's shoulders sag as she pulls out her phone. The poor girl has come to Nantucket with a giant duffel bag and doesn't have a place to stay? Sharon is about to offer to walk her over to Visitor Services to see about available hotel rooms—but then a couple of things happen in rapid succession. One is that a black Suburban pulls up, and Romeo from the Steamship opens the tailgate door and slides Kacy's suitcases into the back. It isn't Romeo's job to help with luggage, so Kacy must be some kind of VIP. A second later, Sharon realizes the person driving the Suburban is the chief of police, Ed Kapenash. The young woman must be his daughter. Yes! Kacy Kapenash! Last Sharon heard, she was working as a nurse out in San Francisco. She must be back for a visit.