

# The Secret of the Silent Sea Gull

Dorothy Ricci



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Royal Fireworks Press  
First Avenue, PO Box 399  
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(845) 726-4444  
fax: (845) 726-3824  
email: [mail@rfwp.com](mailto:mail@rfwp.com)  
website: [rfwp.com](http://rfwp.com)

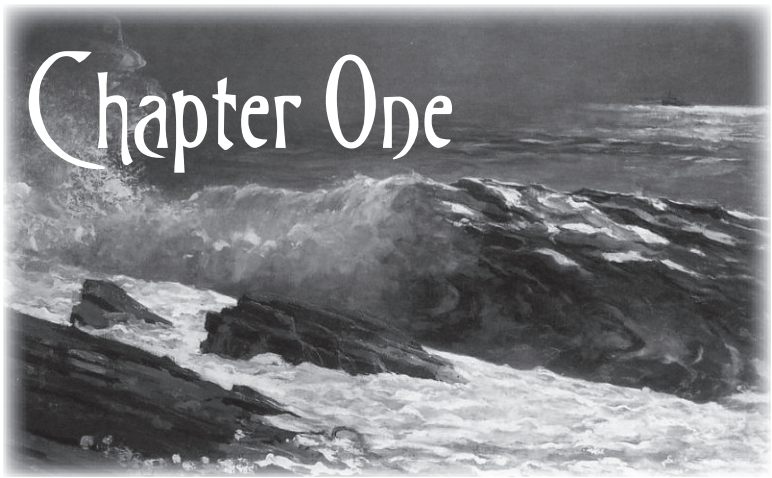
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# Table of Contents

I. The Detective.....	1
II. A Suspicious Neighbor.....	5
III. Whale Tales .....	10
IV. Barks, Brigs, and Clipper Ships.....	15
V. The Knock-out.....	21
VI. To Build a Ship.....	25
VII. Paintings and Pizza .....	29
VIII. A Stranger on the Beach .....	32
IX. The Neighbor Again .....	36
X. A Mystery Game .....	40
XI. Smugglers and Sea Gulls.....	44
XII. A Daring Plan.....	47
XIII. Hiding in the Dark.....	51
XIV. Suspicions .....	56
XV. The Grave.....	60
XVI. Chaotic Clues .....	64
XVII. The Storm .....	69
XVIII. Terror .....	75
XIX. Captured .....	79
XX. Jake Explains .....	83
XXI. The Captain .....	88
XXII. Wind and Fire.....	96
Suggestions for Sea and Art Lovers .....	100

To Matthew, Sara, Katie,  
Amanda, Alexandra, and  
Amy, with love.



## *The Detective*

A large wave slapped the small craft, as Jake Forrester reeled in his line. He looked at the Connecticut shore where his house sat high on a cliff behind a distant sandy beach, and at gray clouds gathering in the western sky. A breeze ruffled his dark hair. He was tall at sixteen and lean from running track. Stowing his fishing pole, he began to pull anchor.

“We’d better get back,” he spoke to a thin, dark-haired girl sitting quietly in the bow of the skiff.

A low rumble of thunder echoed his words. He turned to the outboard and pulled the starter cord, then tried again. The third time, the engine coughed, and quickly pulling the clutch, he exhaled slowly as it sprang to life and settled to a reassuring hum.

“Here we go. We should get home without any problem.” He spoke calmly to the girl, although he sensed she did not need consoling.



After several years apart, Jake had reunited with his cousin six weeks ago and had soon learned of her love for adventure.

*This storm is right up her alley*, he thought. *The perfect ending for her day. An adventure at sea.* He smiled grimly, as the water churned up under an increasing wind and the rumbling grew louder.

Leaving the protected cove of tree-covered Duck Island, the little craft nosed determinedly over the swells.

“Hold on, Susan,” he called to the twelve-year-old.

“Can I help you?” she called back.

“We’re okay.”

His nerves tensed, Jake kept his eyes ahead on the gray swirl of opaque water, as sea spray splashed them and their vessel struggled onward. Relieved that they wore life vests and that the skiff had oars, the words from a talk he had attended at the nearby Riverview Maritime Museum flickered through his memory: *Always be prepared. Remember the power of the sea and respect it always.*

Nearing the sandy shore, he maneuvered through the shallows past scattered rocks and nosed the skiff onto the beach.

Susan jumped out and tugging, tried to pull the craft onto shore, as Jake pulled up the outboard and leaped over the side to help.

With a flash of lightning and a huge crack of thunder, the heavens released a torrent of raindrops, drenching the sea-sprayed cousins in seconds. Pulling the skiff beyond the high water line, they gathered their fishing gear and dashed across the beach.

A flight of stone steps curved upward among beach grass, sea roses, and pine trees to an expanse of green lawn before



the veranda of their home. Speeding across the grass, they spied their aunt beckoning from the open kitchen doorway. Behind her, a large, curly fluff of Airedale barked excitedly.

“We’re soaked,” Jake protested.

“No matter, no matter, get in.” She handed towels to them.

Their aunt was tall and slender. Her dark hair was touched with gray and danced about her shoulders, as her eyes peered through tortoise-framed glasses. She had lived lost within her books and private library, with only her dog for company, until the arrival of the cousins.

An art historian and professor, Dr. Alexandra Caprio specialized in ancient history and antiquities, was an expert on maritime art, and as Jake had happily discovered, an excellent cook.

*How many sixteen-year-olds, he sometimes wondered, could enjoy homemade clam chowder while listening to every nuance of the Roman and Carthaginian sea battles of the First Punic War?*

Thunder crashed overhead, and rain splashed against the windowpanes. Noticing his cousin, Jake paused in the drawing room on his way upstairs.

In the dim room, Susan gazed through the rain-streaked glass panes of two French doors leading to the veranda. Tall for her age, she wore her dark-brown hair pulled back in two braids.

Seeing the girl’s intensely focused eyes, Jake shook his head. He followed her gaze through the doors beyond the veranda, the lawn, and the bordering bushes to a light that was barely visible in a neighboring house. The occupant lived somewhat like a hermit. Jake knew that Susan was suspicious of him, but had not a clue why. He knew only



that the man was rarely seen, spoke to no one, and that his house was usually dark.

Proceeding upstairs, he thought, *It's those books. She was all right until she found those old books on Aunt Alex's shelves.*

Jake pulled off his soggy T-shirt. He was always amazed at the way a hot, calm August day could change so suddenly. The Airedale had followed him upstairs and wagging a stubby tail, rubbed against his leg, as he changed into a fresh shirt.

"Hello, Sally," he smiled, patting her curly, brown head and scratching her ears.

The rumbles proceeded eastward as the storm moved away, until only the rat-a-tat of rain on the roof remained.

Jake stretched out on his bed, arms beneath his head, wondering if the passing storm would break the spell of hot, humid weather they had been enduring. Turning toward the window, he watched darts of rainwater prickle the gray sea surface. Sally leaped up next to him and sprawled across his feet.

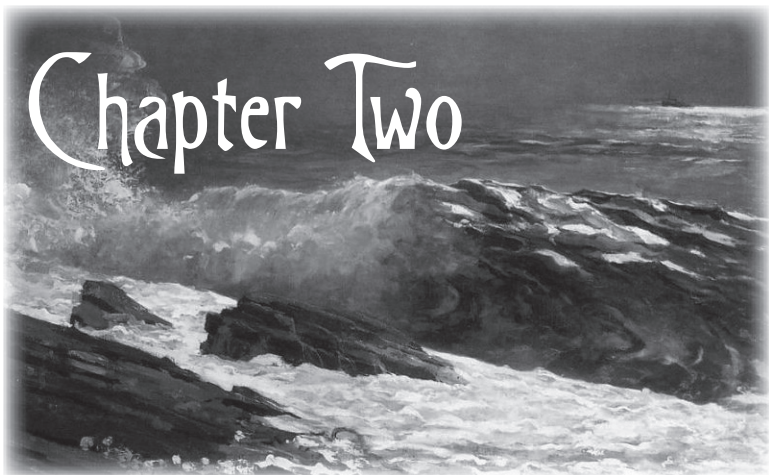
"Susan was fine until she found those books from Aunt Alex's childhood," he mused aloud to the dog. "She read them too quickly, one after another. Gobbled them up. It was too much all at once. They went to her head, like Don Quixote."

Jake had learned in his Spanish class of the old man who had read too many books on chivalry and fancied himself a knight.

*Susan is like Don Quixote, he thought, only she has read too many mystery stories too quickly and now she thinks she's a girl detective.*







## *A Suspicious Neighbor*

Alexandra Caprio reminded Jake of his mother, though his aunt was taller and her hair was darker, with fewer curls.

Something in her soft voice and in the hazel eyes and crinkly wrinkle around them when she smiled soothed his soul when he thought of his loss. His mother was gone, but something in his aunt's kindness kept her somehow near him.

Aunt Alex had learned not to overwhelm him with attention and knew when to give him space. She knew that his mother had left him suddenly, her illness spreading rapidly, and with barely time for his son to grieve and to recover from his profound sadness, his father had remarried

She had tried to explain to him, had spoken of his father's deep grief and loneliness. Nothing, however, had mattered to Jake. He had begun his freshman year at a high school in New York where, totally unsettled, he floundered badly. Unable to concentrate and drifting through his classes, he barely managed to pass his exams.



His father, distressed by his son's solitary habits and withdrawal from family life, after much discussion, had sent Jake east to live with his aunt in Clinton, a quiet Connecticut coastal town on Long Island Sound. During the following school year, Jake had seen little of his father, the two meeting only briefly at holidays.

Aunt Alex enrolled him in Aquinas Academy, a well-respected and challenging co-ed high school. Under her gentle guidance, he had adjusted, made friends, joined the track team, and returned in his sophomore year to his former level of academic excellence.

Pleased with his progress and aware of his maturity and growing love of the sea, his aunt allowed him use of her second car, as well as the skiff and a motorboat, and had purchased a jet ski for him.

Now, gazing at the scrambled eggs and slices of ham on his breakfast plate, Jake savored the aroma, while Sally sat patiently beside him, her large curly head plopped firmly on his knee. He passed a bit of ham to her, which she accepted gratefully, as his aunt placed a plate of toast near him and filled his glass with orange juice.

"Thank you," he smiled at her, a bookworm who knew how to cook. Jake looked forward to all of his meals and sensed that Aunt Alex was pleased to prepare them for him.

He also enjoyed the music, alien to him at first, that often wafted through the house, whether his aunt was busy in her library or the kitchen. Over the months, he had grown accustomed to the melodies and although not exactly an opera buff, had come to share her appreciation of certain arias.

"Where's Susan?" he asked.



“In the garden,” Aunt Alex answered, pausing to sip her tea. “She was up early this morning looking through the library, then went out to check my roses after yesterday’s deluge.”

She scooped fresh blueberries onto a bowl of oatmeal. “I’ll be leaving for the museum around ten this morning. I’d like to be there when the paintings arrive.”

Jake watched her pour milk over the oatmeal and berries. “I’m delighted that several of Winslow Homer’s watercolors are included in the show. It really will be quite a comprehensive exhibit of maritime art, the largest in Riverview’s history.”

Jake listened to his aunt between bites of ham and egg, but through the screened kitchen door his dark eyes watched Susan in the garden. Pressed against the trunk of an oak tree, she peered around it in the direction of their neighbor’s house.

Aunt Alex followed his gaze. “Susan seems quite interested in our neighbor,” she mused.

“It’s those books, Aunt Alex. She was fine when she was reading your art and poetry books, but when she found those mystery stories from your childhood days, she devoured them. Now she thinks she’s a sleuth.”

Aunt Alex smiled. “Susan loves to read and has an excellent imagination. She’s young, Jake. She wants adventure, a mystery to solve.”

“I know,” he agreed, nodding. “She went up to the attic and spent hours going through old stuff, said she was looking for clues.” He grinned. “Then she started tapping on the walls, looking for secret passages. She got really excited when she found that back door in the broom closet upstairs.” He nodded knowingly. “It’s those books.”



Aunt Alex's smile widened. "I haven't used that door in years. It accesses the beach and used to keep sand from the downstairs rooms."

Jake was using a piece of toast to wipe up the remains of his breakfast.

"Do you know our neighbor? Have you met him, Aunt Alex? I've only caught glimpses of him since I've been here. Of course, I never paid much attention to him. Not like Susan. He seems older, gray, hunched over as I remember."

Aunt Alex finished her tea and began to clear the breakfast dishes.

"I've never met him. He moved in a year or so ago, just before you came." She smiled at Jake. "I rarely see him. I'm in and out as you know. I did think, however, that he had a wife, but I can't remember when I last saw her."

Jake brought his dishes to the sink.

"Are you and Susan coming with me today?" Aunt Alex asked.

"Yes. I'll go and make sure she's ready by ten o'clock."

Jake walked onto the veranda and looked toward Duck Island. The sun rising over its treetops spread pink and lavender streaks across the sky and tinged the tranquil water, where here and there small motor craft lay tethered to floating buoys. A light breeze rippled through the roses at the edge of the veranda and fluttered the leaves of a nearby maple tree. He turned toward his cousin crouching behind the oak.

Growing up in an Air Force family, Susan had spent her elementary school years near air bases in California and Delaware. When her father, Major Philip Caprio, a pilot and Aunt Alex's younger brother, was assigned to an overseas base for four years, her parents had discussed with her the idea of staying stateside for high school.



Susan had decided that living with Aunt Alex and attending high school in Connecticut would be agreeable and planning to reunite with her parents on holidays and school breaks, had arrived at her aunt's home in early July. Now, two weeks before Labor Day and the start of classes, she looked forward not only to her freshman year at Aquinas, but, also, to celebrating her thirteenth birthday in three days.

She jumped at Jake's tap on her shoulder.

"Sorry," he said. "I just wanted to tell you we're leaving for the museum at ten."

Susan raised a finger to her lips. "Ssh!" Her eyes returned to the neighbor's house.

"What is it?" Jake asked.

"I don't know, not yet anyway, but I sense something suspicious, something isn't quite right there."

Jake shook his head. *Kids*, he thought, moving back toward the house. Sally dashed over and danced happily around him. As he stooped to pat her, the back door of the neighbor's house opened, and a gray-haired, bearded man emerged. Jake watched him place a large crate into the trunk of his car and drive away.

*So what?* he thought. *Probably going to the supermarket.*

Eyes aglitter, Susan walked past him toward the house.

"Very suspicious," she murmured.

