

THREE-TIME RITA AWARD WINNER



IRENE HANNON

Sunrise Reef



A Hope Harbor Novel

Praise for *Sandcastle Inn*

“Strong characters and positive yet realistic relationships.”

Booklist

“If you are due for a visit to Hope Harbor, *Sandcastle Inn* has an opening just for you! This is such a delightful setting, and the multidimensional characters that Irene Hannon so skillfully writes just add to the engaging dynamic.”

Reading Is My Superpower

“*Sandcastle Inn* is like hearing a testimony and coming to the belief that there is still hope, even amid uncertainties.”

Interviews & Reviews

Praise for *Windswept Way*

“Hannon’s nuanced character development and snappy pacing make this tale of second chances a pure delight. Readers will eagerly turn pages until the satisfying close.”

Publishers Weekly

“Hannon, who has long been viewed as a successful writer of Christian thrillers, proves she can excel in the contemporary romance genre as well.”

Library Journal

“Another warm, satisfying Hope Harbor novel.”

Booklist

“*Windswept Way* is a wonderfully entertaining, impressively original, wholesome romance.”

Midwest Book Reviews

Praise for *Sea Glass Cottage*

“Hannon hits the right notes of romance and comfort in this winning story.”

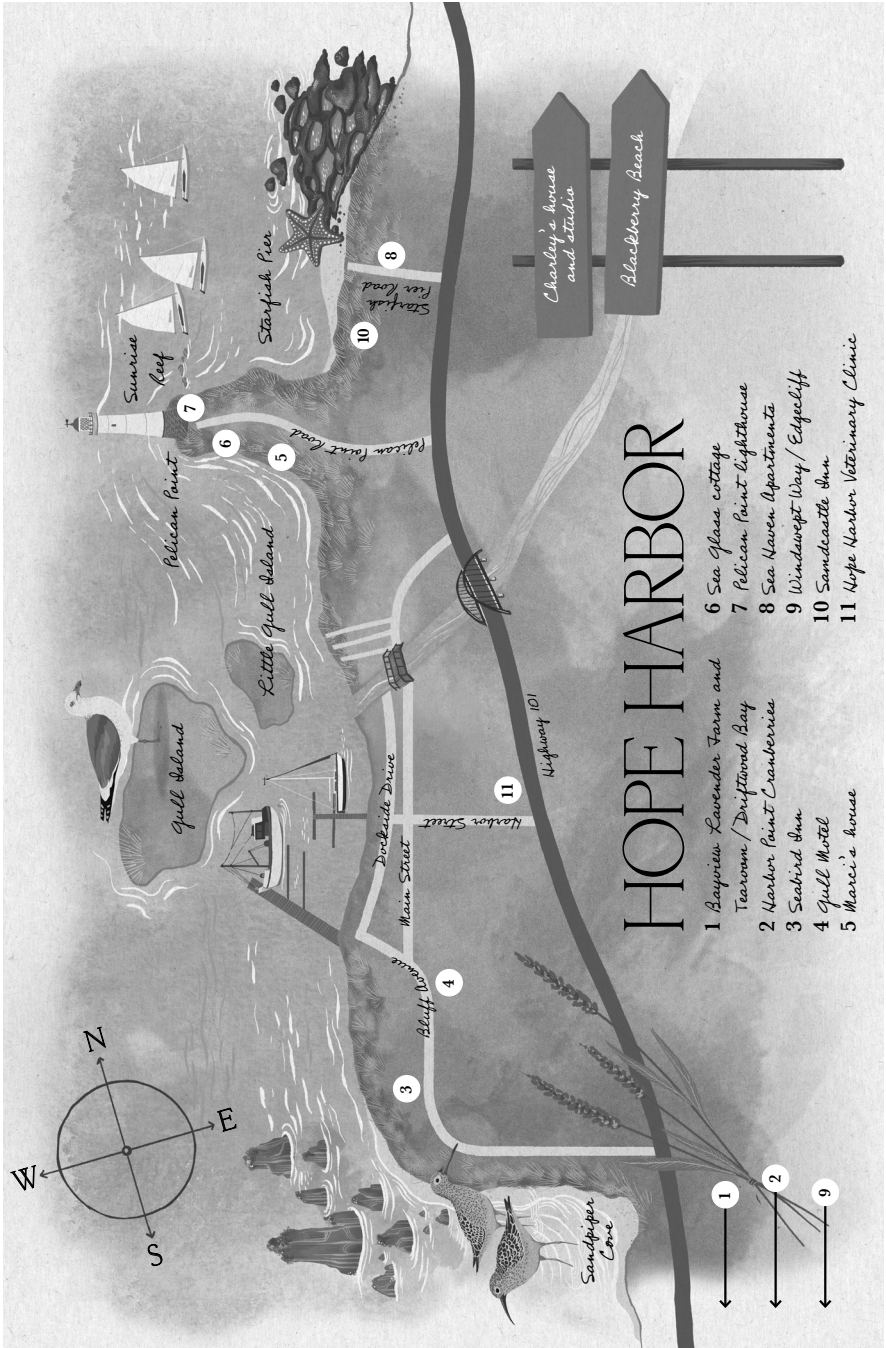
Booklist

“Set in a charming town with inhabitants who are just as charming, the Christian romance novel *Sea Glass Cottage* is a sweet story of second chances.”

Foreword Reviews

“Hannon’s characters glow with life in *Sea Glass Cottage*.”

Evangelical Church Library Association

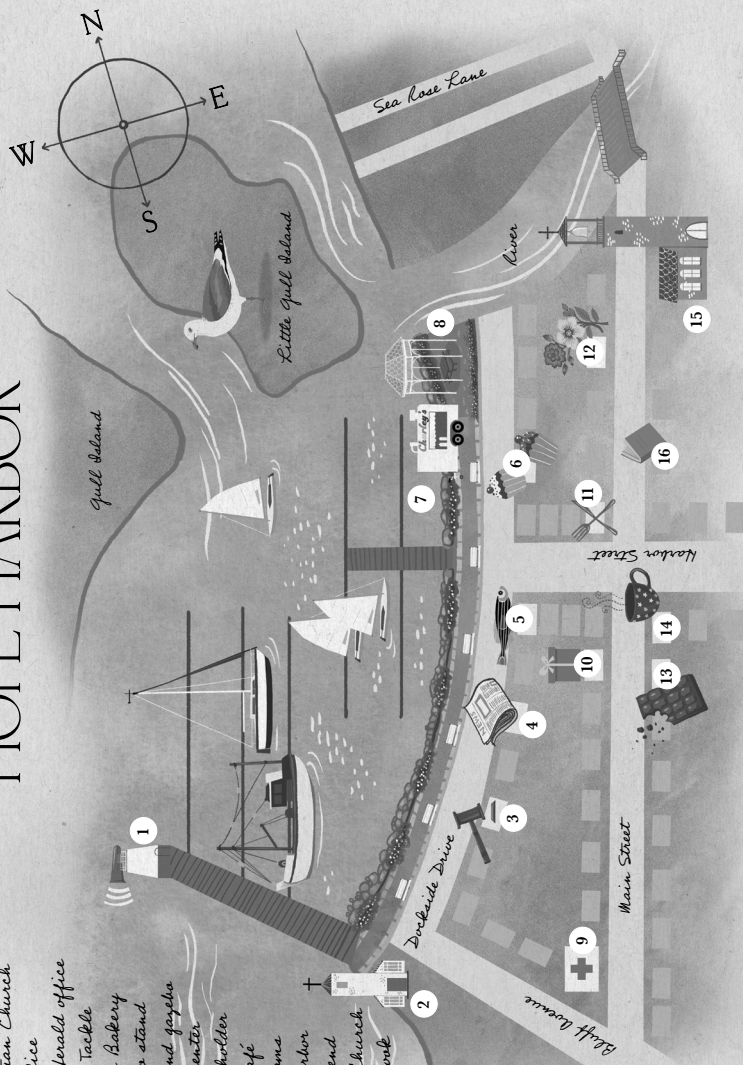


HOPE HARBOR

- 1 Bayview Lavender Farm and Tearoom / Driftwood Bay
- 2 Harbor Point Cranberries
- 3 Seahird Inn
- 4 Gull Motel
- 5 Marci's house
- 6 Sea Glass cottage
- 7 Pelican Point Lighthouse
- 8 Sea Haven Apartments
- 9 Windwept Way / Edgecliff
- 10 Sandcastle Inn
- 11 Hope Harbor Veterinary Clinic

DOWNTOWN HOPE HARBOR

- 1 Foghorn
- 2 Grace Christian Church
- 3 Eric's law office
- 4 Hope Harbor Herald office
- 5 Lori's Bait & Tackle
- 6 Sweet Dreams Bakery
- 7 Charley's Taco Stand
- 8 Pocket park and gazebo
- 9 Urgent care center
- 10 Eye of the Beholder
- 11 The Myrtle Café
- 12 Budding Blonnie
- 13 Chocolate Harbor
- 14 The Perfect Blend
- 15 St. Francis Church
- 16 Ben's Book Nook



Sunrise Reef

Books by Irene Hannon

HEROES OF QUANTICO

Against All Odds

An Eye for an Eye

In Harm's Way

TRIPLE THREAT

Point of Danger

Labyrinth of Lies

Body of Evidence

GUARDIANS OF JUSTICE

Fatal Judgment

Deadly Pursuit

Lethal Legacy

UNDAUNTED COURAGE

Into the Fire

Over the Edge

PRIVATE JUSTICE

Vanished

Trapped

Deceived

HOPE HARBOR

Hope Harbor

Sea Rose Lane

Sandpiper Cove

Pelican Point

Driftwood Bay

Starfish Pier

MEN OF VALOR

Buried Secrets

Thin Ice

Tangled Webs

Blackberry Beach

Sea Glass Cottage

Windswept Way

Sandcastle Inn

Sunrise Reef

CODE OF HONOR

Dangerous Illusions

Hidden Peril

Dark Ambitions

STANDALONE NOVELS

That Certain Summer

One Perfect Spring

Sunrise Reef

A Hope Harbor Novel

IRENE HANNON



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To Shep Hermann—

A gracious man with a heart for God,
who celebrated life . . .
and who shared his little piece of paradise with us.

We will be forever grateful
for his kindness and generosity,
and will always treasure our magical days
at his beautiful home by the sea.

Though he now dwells in his eternal home,
he continues to inspire all those
whose lives he touched—and enriched.

Rest in peace, Shep.

1

.....

Was something burning?

Bren Ryan stopped reading the instructions on the tube of hair dye in her hand, destined for use later today, and frowned at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Sniffed.

A faint acrid odor with a hint of fishiness prickled her nose.

Not quite a burn smell but close. And definitely worth investigating.

Leaving the dye on the vanity, she followed the scent, wincing as another slash of lightning strobed through the sky outside the window, followed by a boom of bone-jarring thunder.

Man, this was bizarre weather. Squalls on the Oregon coast were supposed to be confined to the winter months. They never ushered in August—especially storms that went on for hours. Besides, even in the winter, torrential rain and high winds were far more common than lightning and thunder.

Whatever the cause of this uncharacteristic outburst from Mother Nature, it was certainly a dramatic beginning to her thirtieth birthday.

And perhaps it was also an omen that her decision to create a

birthday resolution to-do list and shake things up a bit during this new decade of her life was sound.

The smell intensified as she approached the kitchen, and she paused on the threshold. Gave the room a slow scan.

Everything appeared to be normal.

Could the unpleasant odor be coming from outside?

Bren crossed to the window above the sink, pushed it higher than the scant inch she'd left it cracked, and leaned over. Inhaled.

The air outside was damp but fresh.

This was weird.

She straightened up and swiveled back toward the room.

Where could the smell be—

Wait.

Was that *smoke* coiling out of the electrical socket at the end of the counter?

Heart stuttering, she dashed across the room and got up close and personal with the plate over the outlet.

The thin, vaporous wisps sinuously twisting from the prong slots were, indeed, smoke.

Which meant there was a fire inside the wall—or at the very least, smoldering wires or insulation that could soon morph into a fire unless she acted fast.

Bren grabbed her phone off the charger on the counter and tapped in 911.

After a crisp greeting, the efficient dispatcher elicited all the pertinent details and moved on to instructions. “Your fire department has been alerted. You should vacate the house and take shelter from the storm someplace safe until the crew arrives.”

Bren glanced out the window toward the driveway, where rain continued to pummel her older-model Kia as dawn gave way to day. “I could wait in my car.”

“A structure would be preferable. Is there a neighbor who could provide shelter?”

The older couple in the next house down the road would take

her in if she showed up on their doorstep, but they never got up until after eight. Why ruin their morning too?

“No.”

“In that case, go ahead and move to your vehicle. I’ll stay on the line until you’re secure.”

“Thanks.”

Bren slid her phone into her purse, unlocked her car with the remote, pulled on the bright yellow slicker that always hung by the back door, and scurried through the rain.

Once she was behind the wheel, she put the phone back to her ear. “I’m in the car.”

“Stay there until the fire crew arrives.”

“Got it.”

As the dispatcher severed the connection, Bren checked the time. Six twelve.

No way was she going to make it to work in eighteen minutes. She’d be lucky to get to The Perfect Blend when the shop opened at seven, let alone early enough to help with prep and setup. Who knew how long it would take for Hope Harbor’s volunteer fire department to arrive?

Dang.

From the day Zach Garrett had given her one of the two barista jobs in his new coffee shop three years ago, she’d never once missed a shift or shown up late. Reliability, punctuality, and diligence had been hallmarks of her employment.

Two of those were about to take a hit.

Sighing, she put in a call to Zach and peered at her tiny rental house through the rivulets of water sluicing down her windshield.

As milestone birthdays went, this one wasn’t off to an auspicious start.

Hopefully it wasn’t a preview of the year to come.

“Morning, Bren. What’s up?”

At Zach’s chipper greeting, Bren massaged her temple and gave him the bad news. “But I’ll get there as fast as I can.”

“Hey, no worries. I’ll manage.” His tone transitioned from upbeat to concerned. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Her throat pinched.

Zach might be her boss, but he was also her friend. As were so many of the people in her adopted town, all of whom were more like family than the blood relations she’d left behind in Kentucky long ago.

“Thank you for asking, but at this point it’s all in the hands of the fire department. I’m hoping the damage is minor and a quick fix will take care of it.”

“Keep me in the loop.”

“Will do. I’ll get there as fast as I can.”

“Like I said, I’ve got it covered. Nobody will get too bent out of shape if they have to wait an extra minute or two for their drink.”

That was true—and another reason she’d fallen in love with this town.

“Thanks again, Zach.”

“No thanks necessary. I’ll see you when I see you.”

Bren ended the call, set the cell on the seat beside her, and tapped a finger on the steering wheel as she waited for help to arrive, keeping an eye on her watch.

Five minutes later, a fire engine appeared down the road, the siren increasing in volume until the truck stopped in front of the house.

Not bad for a volunteer operation.

Flipping up the hood on her slicker, she opened her door and prepared to brief whoever was in charge.

The man who approached as she alighted got straight to business. After peppering her with clipped questions, he trotted off to confer with the members of the crew, who descended on her house with various pieces of equipment.

Including an ax.

Her stomach kinked as she slid back behind the wheel.

That wasn’t promising.

Nor was the muffled pounding that seeped through the frame walls minutes later, audible from inside her car.

When the man in charge reappeared and strode toward her, the grim set of his mouth telegraphed imminent bad news.

Bracing, Bren exited the car again, sans hood. At least the driving rain had stopped and the storm seemed to be dissipating. “What’s the verdict?”

“You have an electrical fire inside the walls. Good thing you have a sensitive nose. Most people don’t detect those until there’s significant damage.”

“Are you saying the problem is minor?” *Please let that be the case!*

“There’s no visible damage, but it’s hard to say what’s on the other side of the drywall. It could take us a while to verify the fire hasn’t spread. The wiring in the house should have been replaced years ago.”

At the hint of censure in his inflection, she straightened her shoulders. “For the record, I’m a tenant, not the owner. I don’t know anything about the mechanics of the house.” Except that lights did tend to flicker randomly, and several of the outlets were finicky. But every house had its quirks, right?

“Understood.” His manner softened. “If you’ll give me the owner’s contact information, I’ll apprise them of the situation. At minimum, drywall repair and wiring updates will be needed.”

In other words, she’d be living in a construction zone for the foreseeable future.

Oh, joy.

She passed on her landlord’s phone number and surveyed the house. “Do you want me to hang around? I’m already late for work.”

“No. We could be here another hour or two.”

“Then I’ll head out. If you’d lock the door from the inside and pull it shut as you leave, I’d appreciate it.”

“No problem.”

While he got back to business, Bren started the car, pointed it toward The Perfect Blend . . . and tried to look on the bright side.

It wasn't as if the house had actually caught fire. All of her personal possessions were safe. And if she had to live with drywall dust for a while, that was manageable. The house would still be a big step up from most of the places she'd called home over the past twelve years.

Eight minutes later, she hustled through the door of The Perfect Blend to find a long line stretching from the counter.

Zach's expression shifted from surprise to relief the instant he spotted her. "I didn't expect to see you this fast."

"There was nothing for me to do at the house." She stashed her shoulder bag under the counter and put on her apron as she gave him a quick briefing.

"What a mess—and on your birthday, no less." He grimaced as he wiped the nozzle on the espresso machine.

"I've had worse birthdays."

"Yeah?" He eyed her as he plated a piece of cranberry nut cake for the espresso customer.

Whoops.

Only Bev at the bookstore knew any details about her younger years. And Charley Lopez, the town sage and taco-making artist who always had uncanny insights, had discerned a number of facts. Other than that, she'd zipped it. Why dwell on a past she'd left behind, or let it pollute the fresh start she'd made here three years ago?

Bren pushed up the corners of her mouth. "Ancient history. On the plus side, I caught the fire early." She turned toward the next customer in line, ending the exchange with her boss. "Morning, Fred. The usual?"

"Not today." A fan of lines appeared at the corners of Fred Ward's eyes as he winked at her and tucked the latest edition of the *Hope Harbor Herald* under his arm. "Charley finally convinced me to try the Mexican coffee he's always raving about.

I decided to broaden my horizons. Don't want to get stuck in a rut, you know."

"I hear you. One café de olla coming up."

The silver-haired man cocked his head. "What's this about a fire at your place? Couldn't help overhearing while I waited in line."

No point in being reticent about the incident. Few happenings of note slid under the radar in this tiny community, and a fire—or almost-fire—would be big news. Everyone would hear about it within hours.

"I'm hoping I caught it before too much damage was done." She gave him an abbreviated recap of her morning as she prepared his drink, popped in a cinnamon stick, and snapped on the lid. "Here you go. Enjoy."

"I expect I will. Charley's never steered me wrong."

He wandered over to one of the tables clustered around the freestanding fireplace in the center of the shop and settled in for his every-other-Wednesday perusal of the *Herald*—an activity he'd indulged in like clockwork since the opening week of the shop, often with his wife by his side . . . until she'd died last year.

Pressure built in Bren's throat as Fred took a tentative sip of his brew.

No surprise he'd become a regular fixture here several days a week now that Helen was gone. The Perfect Blend was a haven of warmth and welcome for all who ventured inside, staff and customers alike.

For the next hour, she was too busy filling orders to worry about what was happening at the house. But when her cell began to vibrate with a call from her landlord as the morning rush subsided, her pulse picked up.

Angling toward Zach, she lifted her phone. "I need to take this."

"Go ahead. I'll handle the counter." He shifted his attention to the customer who'd pushed through the front door.

Moving off to the side, she greeted her landlord, who gave her the bad news fast.

“I’m at the house, Bren. The fire department is finishing up. I’m sorry, but I don’t think the place will be habitable for at least the next month. I’m going to have to tear out all the wiring, so the electricity will be shut off. There are also sizable holes in the walls that will have to be repaired. There could be other damage too.”

Dang again.

It appeared this birthday was going to be a total bust.

But bemoaning her misfortune wasn’t going to solve her housing dilemma. She’d just have to book a room at the Gull Motel until she came up with a plan.

“Okay. I’ll find somewhere else to stay for the duration. Can I get inside later today to pack up my clothes and personal items?”

“Yes. I cleared that with the fire crew. I’ll keep you apprised of the progress on the repairs and get you back in as soon as it’s practical and safe.”

“Thanks. Do they have any idea how the fire started?”

“Their theory is that energy from a lightning strike nearby entered the house through wires or pipes that extend outside the structure. Or it could have come in through the meter and moved to the electrical panel. They said a whole-house surge protection device would have prevented that, but storms like the one we had today are rare. I never thought it was necessary to install one.” He expelled a breath. “This wasn’t my lucky day, I guess.”

Hers, either.

But she left that unsaid.

As they ended the call, Zach finished with his customer and joined her. “That didn’t sound reassuring.”

“It wasn’t.” She filled him in. Swiped a cloth over a coffee stain on the counter. “I never expected to end up homeless on my birthday.”

Although it wouldn’t be the first time.

Another piece of information she didn’t intend to share with anyone—her boss included.

“What a bummer. Maybe you could—”

“Excuse me. May I interrupt?”

She swiveled toward Fred, who stood on the other side of the counter, his folded newspaper under his arm.

“I wasn’t eavesdropping, but I picked up the gist of your plight. If you need a temporary place to stay, you’re welcome to use my guest cottage.”

She arched her eyebrows. “I thought you rented that out to vacationers.”

“Used to. Haven’t had much interest in doing that without Helen. She was always the more sociable half of our partnership. She could chat up guests like nobody’s business.” His smile held a hint of melancholy. “Anyway, the cottage is sitting there empty. I expect it’s dusty, but the plumbing and electricity are in tip-top shape.”

Bren wiped her palms down her apron, vision misting at the man’s kindness.

Nice as his offer was, though, she couldn’t afford the rates tourists paid for private cottages in this picturesque town during high season. The Gull Motel would have to do until she lined up a place in the same price range as her present lodging.

“I appreciate that, Fred, but my budget won’t accommodate an extended stay at the kind of prices your usual guests paid.”

“You’re not a usual guest. You’re a Hope Harbor resident. That makes you a neighbor. Since the place isn’t generating income anymore, you’re welcome to use it free of charge.”

She did a double take.

Seriously? He was willing to let her stay in his cottage gratis?

Amazing.

Yet tempted as she was to accept his generous offer, she shook her head. “I couldn’t do that. It wouldn’t be fair.”

Fred studied her. Pursed his lips. “Do you mind telling me your current rent?”

“No.” She gave him the monthly amount.

“For how many rooms?”

“Four.”

“The cottage only has two. A living room/kitchen combo and a bedroom. You can pay me half what you’re paying your current landlord. We can break it down into weekly payments to give you flexibility on the length of your stay.”

Her jaw dropped.

Was this for real?

“Take the deal, Bren.” Zach grinned and gave her a shoulder bump before he moved away to assist another customer. “Never look a gift horse in the mouth.”

Bren bit her lip.

Taking handouts didn’t sit well. And this was a handout, no question about it. When Fred rented the cottage to tourists, he no doubt charged the monthly amount he’d quoted her for a mere handful of nights.

“Don’t overthink it, my dear.” Fred’s mouth bowed. “Helen would be happy to see the cottage occupied again, and she was all about extending a helping hand to those in need. Let me do this for you in her memory.”

Smart strategy to position it as a favor to *him*.

And since he’d put it that way, maybe she should think of his out-of-the-blue offer as a birthday gift on this day that had otherwise been totally unbirthdaylike.

“If you’re certain, then I accept.”

“Wonderful. Come by whenever you like later today, and I’ll give you the key.” With a courtly dip of his head, he strolled across the shop and exited.

As the door closed behind him, Bren went back to work, heart lighter, spirits buoyed.

See? Even on an otherwise bad day, there was goodness to be found.

And there was yet more goodness after the shop closed at one o’clock and a dozen of her friends from Hope Harbor spilled out of the back room bearing brownies from Sweet Dreams Bakery

and tacos from Charley's stand to help her celebrate her milestone birthday.

Warmth bubbled up inside her as they all indulged in a hug fest.

This was why she'd settled here. Put down roots.

Maybe she didn't earn a lot of money working as a barista. Maybe she didn't live in a plush house like the one of her youth. Maybe a carefully vetted special someone to share her life with wasn't in the cards for her.

But look at her friend at Bev's Book Nook. The bookshop owner lived a simple life too—on her own terms, with no apparent regret about the lack of romance in her life. She was a role model, for sure.

And as Bren gathered up her things, thanked everyone for coming to her surprise party, and set off for her house to pack up the items she'd need for the next few weeks, she made a resolution.

In this new decade of her life, she was going to embrace her solo life and put to rest the insidious, romantic daydreams that crept up on occasion. Banish once and for all any illusions about happily ever after.

Because as she knew firsthand, illusions could lead to nightmares.

2

What a disaster this day had been.

Heaving a sigh, Noah Ward parked his rental car, cut his lights, and surveyed the dark windows of his parents' Hope Harbor retirement home.

Arriving on the cusp of midnight hadn't been in his plans. Nor had multiple flight delays or leaving the car charger for his phone back in St. Louis.

And at this hour of the night, it was too late to rouse his father with a knock on the front door.

Too bad his cell had died hours ago. Otherwise, he could have called ahead and avoided this predicament. But he could rack out in the empty cottage behind the house, get a decent night's sleep, then alert Dad to his presence in the morning. An unfamiliar car parked a house away shouldn't raise any concerns if his father rose early and glanced out the front window.

Noah slid from behind the wheel, stretched, and retrieved his overnight bag from the back seat. His larger suitcase could stay in the trunk until morning.

After locking the car, he fished around in his pocket and pulled out the keys his father had given him when he and Mom bought

this place a decade ago. It was a shame the demands of his CPA job had kept him too busy to pay more than an occasional fast visit here. The little seaside town was appealing, and it was easy to understand why his parents had been charmed by it on the vacations they'd taken here prior to making a permanent move from the Midwest.

But it was far less hassle to send them tickets to St. Louis a couple of times a year. That way, he could work during the day while they visited with longtime friends, then spend the evenings with them. It had been a fine arrangement.

Until Mom died, and Dad decided he was done traveling.

Noah maneuvered around the corner of the house in the dark, trying not to trip on the stepping stones. He didn't need a face-plant to cap off his journey, even if that would be a fitting end to this miserable day.

Nor had he needed this trip, just as the second quarter financial reporting was ramping up.

But how else was he supposed to get a read on a father who wasn't a texter, caller, or emailer, like Mom had been? Dad's heart scare a couple of months ago may not have caused any serious long-term damage, but it had been a wake-up call. What if a major health issue *did* arise? Who would Dad be able to call on for help out here?

Brow crimped, Noah pushed through the gate under the arbor that led to the backyard.

It was far more sensible for his father to move back to St. Louis, where he had friends and a son who could lend a hand if necessary.

Convincing Dad of that would be a challenge, however. One best tackled in person, without forewarning. If he'd called and been up-front about the reason for this trip, his father would have insisted that he was staying put—as he'd done whenever the subject came up—and discouraged a visit. And an out-of-pattern random trip would have made Dad suspicious.

A surprise appearance had definitely been the prudent choice.

But not a surprise appearance in the middle of the night.

Noah squinted across the backyard to the cottage tucked in the corner. It was unfortunate Dad had decided to stop renting it. Talking with guests would have kept him connected to people. Without Mom to plan their social calendar and push her more introverted husband to mix and mingle, it was very possible he'd become a hermit.

On the flip side, though, a lack of reservations for the cottage could be a plus. If the place had been booked for the whole tourist season, his father would have had an excuse to put off a discussion about moving.

At the door to the cottage, Noah bent down, felt around for the lock in the darkness, and poked the key at it. Three tries later, it slid inside.

Yawning, he fumbled for the knob and pushed the door open.

It took him a few seconds to find the light switch on the wall, but once he flipped it, soft illumination flooded the room from a lamp beside the couch.

Easy to see why the compact cottage had always been in demand. Mom had had a knack for décor, and the neutral palette enlivened by splashes of accent colors created an upscale, relaxing vibe.

But he could give the place a closer scrutiny in the morning. After his marathon, problem-plagued travel day, all he wanted to do was sleep.

Bag in hand, he strode over to the bedroom door. Twisted the knob. Pushed through.

In five minutes flat, he ought to be able to—

A beam of a bright light pierced his eyes, blinding him, and he jerked to a stop. Stumbled back.

What the . . .

Before he could finish that thought, something wet hit him in the face.

In the next instant, the fires of hell rained down on him, burning his eyes, nose, mouth, and throat.

He dropped his overnight bag as his eyes slammed shut. His seared lungs balked, and he started to hack. Hard. Snot dripped from his nose.

Chest heaving, he fell to his knees as waves of pain crashed over him.

If someone was trying to kill him, they were doing a first-rate job of it.

Splaying the fingers of one hand on the floor, he groped in his pocket for his handkerchief. He had to wipe away whatever was singeing his eyeballs. ASAP.

The instant his fumbling fingers closed over the square of cloth, he yanked it out and tried to swab off whatever toxic substance was wreaking havoc.

Didn't work.

In fact, his eyes might hurt worse—if that was even possible.

“Help . . . me.” The hoarse, croaked plea came out in a voice that didn't sound anywhere close to his usual baritone.

No response.

Whoever had done this to him must have a heart of stone.

Or else they'd hightailed it out of here after rendering him defenseless.

What kind of scumbag would attack an innocent man and—
Wait.

Was it possible Dad had started renting the cottage again and hadn't told him? Had he walked in on paying guests who'd assumed he was an intruder and doused him with pepper spray?

Oh, geez.

This day was going from bad to worse.

As the burning pain continued to scald his eyeballs . . . throat . . . tongue . . . skin . . . he dropped forward onto his hands and began crawling.

If whoever had sprayed him was gone, he was on his own to

find the bathroom and try to wash the noxious residue out of his eyes and off his face before this debilitating agony drove him stark raving mad.



Oh no!

After glancing at the man who was blindly scrabbling across the floor on all fours, Bren shifted her attention back to the luggage tag on the overnight bag he'd dropped after she'd greeted him with a faceful of pepper gel.

Noah Ward.

Fred's son.

A respectable CPA from St. Louis, not the intruder she'd assumed he was.

Her stomach twisted into a knot.

She'd attacked the offspring of the man who'd come to her rescue this morning.

Well, crud.

What a way to thank her benefactor.

But this wasn't her fault. Truly, it wasn't. Fred hadn't said a thing about his son coming when he'd handed her the key. And who else but an intruder would come creeping around in the middle of the night? Any reasonable person would have . . .

Noah ran into a wall. Moaned.

Oh, mercy.

The man was in severe distress.

Tempted as she was to slink away in abject mortification, she had to help him. No one with an ounce of empathy could desert someone who was in such pain. She'd have to deal later with the consequences of what she'd done.

"Um . . ." She crossed to him. "I'm sorry about this. I thought you were an intruder."

He groaned again, his breathing ragged.

A wave of panic washed over her.

Pepper gel wasn't supposed to be dangerous for most people, only big-time uncomfortable—unless you happened to have asthma.

Did Fred's son have that ailment?

"I'm so sorry. How can I help you?" She leaned down and touched his shoulder.

"Bathroom." The word was garbled but decipherable. "Water."

"Can you stand up?"

He shook his head.

"Okay. I'll guide you." She wrapped her fingers around the impressive bicep beneath his long-sleeved dress shirt and tugged him the right direction. At the doorway, she paused. "You're on the threshold."

Feeling his way forward, he entered and slowly pulled himself up in front of the sink, a maneuver that appeared to require almost superhuman effort.

No wonder cops used pepper spray as a last resort, if it could bring even this strapping, toned guy to his knees.

Bren reached past him and twisted on the tap.

After cupping his hands beneath the stream, he bent down and began throwing cold water at his face.

But was that the most effective way to mitigate the aftereffects of pepper gel?

Leaving him to his task, she went in search of her phone and googled the remedies. After skimming the instructions, she zipped to the kitchen, yanked a large pitcher from the cabinet, filled it with water, and returned to the bathroom.

Noah was still splashing water on his face.

"I'm back." She squeezed past him into the small space. "What you're doing isn't going to help much. We should irrigate your eyes. I have a pitcher of water. If you'll lean over and turn your head sideways over the sink, I'll pour the water into them."

Without a word, he followed her instructions.

Bren aimed the spout of the pitcher at the corner of one puckered eye and directed a gentle but steady stream there. “It would help if you’d open it as much as possible.”

In response, he lifted a hand and pulled the lower lid down.

When the pitcher was empty, she backed off. “I’m going to get a refill for the other eye.”

Without waiting for a reply, she dashed back to the kitchen and topped off the pitcher again. Followed the same procedure with his other eye.

At least he’d stopped moaning.

She repeated the drill half a dozen times in each eye until he could open them both to slits, then brought him a cup of cold water and a mug of ice chips. “If you drink the water and suck on the ice, it’s supposed to reduce any burning in your mouth.”

In silence, he moved to the toilet, sat on the lid, and gulped the water. Then he began sucking on the chips.

Bren tried not to gape—but man, he was a mess. His eyes were still half swollen shut and watering profusely, his face was splotchy red, and his nose was running like a faucet.

“Light’s too bright.” He shaded his eyes.

Right. She’d also read that pepper gel could cause light sensitivity.

After flicking off the overhead fixture, she wiped her palms down her sleep shirt. “You’re supposed to get rid of your clothes and take a shower.”

Continuing to suck on ice, he stripped off his dress shirt and wadded it into a ball.

The T-shirt underneath hugged a broad, muscular chest.

Bren cleared her throat and eased back as much as the confined space allowed. Unappealing as the guy was in his present condition, it was hard to ignore the well-developed pecs and abs outlined by the snug tee.

“Who are you?” He pulled off a length of toilet paper and tried to staunch the flow of mucus from his nose.

She forced herself to shift her attention from his chest to his face.

He still sounded gravelly, but thankfully his respiration had evened out. Beginning her birthday with a 911 call had been bad enough. Ending it with one would have been beyond surreal.

“Brenna Ryan—but I go by Bren. I live in Hope Harbor. There was a fire at my place this morning, so your dad offered to let me use his cottage until I can move back.”

All she got in reply was a grunt.

After slurping up more ice, he stood and lurched toward the door.

She backed out of the cramped space to allow him to exit. “Listen, I’m really sorry about this.”

No response as he tucked his rolled-up shirt under his arm, brushed past her, and picked up the overnight bag he’d dropped.

Halfway across the combination living, dining, and kitchen space, he hesitated. Turned. “Can I borrow your cellphone?”

“Uh . . . sure.” She detoured to the kitchen, plucked her phone off the counter, and held it out to him as she veered back in his direction.

He took it, angled sideways, and tapped in a number.

Silence.

Whoever he was calling must be in bed at this late hour. Like any normal person would be.

“Dad, it’s me . . . Yeah . . . Long story. I borrowed her phone.” Noah tipped his head and swiped the sleeve of his T-shirt across his leaking eyes. “I’ll explain later, okay? I didn’t want to come into the house without alerting you to my presence . . . Yes. I’ll see you in a couple of minutes.”

After ending the call, Noah held out the phone, his gaze flicking to the abbreviated hem of her hot-pink sleep shirt before zipping back up. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” She tugged on the bottom of the silky fabric and

waved a hand toward his face as she took the phone. “If I could undo the damage, I would.”

“I’ll survive.”

True. But based on her Google search, it would take an hour or two for the effects to wear off.

“You, uh, may want to take that shower ASAP. That’s what the internet says.”

“Top of my list. Good night.” He pivoted, strode toward the door, and pulled it shut behind him with a decisive click. As if he couldn’t get away from the scene of the crime fast enough.

Who could blame him?

As quiet once more descended on the cottage, Bren drew a long, slow breath and scanned her watch.

Eleven fifty-nine.

Her birthday was almost over—and what a birthday it had been. Good stuff in the middle, for sure, but bookended by disasters.

Shoulders slumping, she flipped off the light and trudged back toward the bedroom.

If she was lucky, Fred’s son would have a better perspective on the midnight attack by tomorrow morning and be content to stay in his father’s house during his visit.

If she wasn’t?

The younger Ward would convince Fred to let him use the cottage, and she’d be out on the street.

Wouldn’t be the first time that had happened, but she’d thought those days were over.

Just went to show how foolish it was to take the status quo for granted.

She slid back beneath the covers of the bed and pulled them up to her chin. With the busy day she had planned for tomorrow—or rather, today—she needed to get a decent night’s sleep.

But as she stared at the dark ceiling while the minutes ticked by and the night wore on, she faced the truth.

She wasn't going to wake up rested and refreshed and brimming with energy on the first full day of her thirtieth year.

In fact, if her run of bad luck continued, she'd end up spending it looking for another place to stay instead of ticking off items on her birthday resolution to-do list.