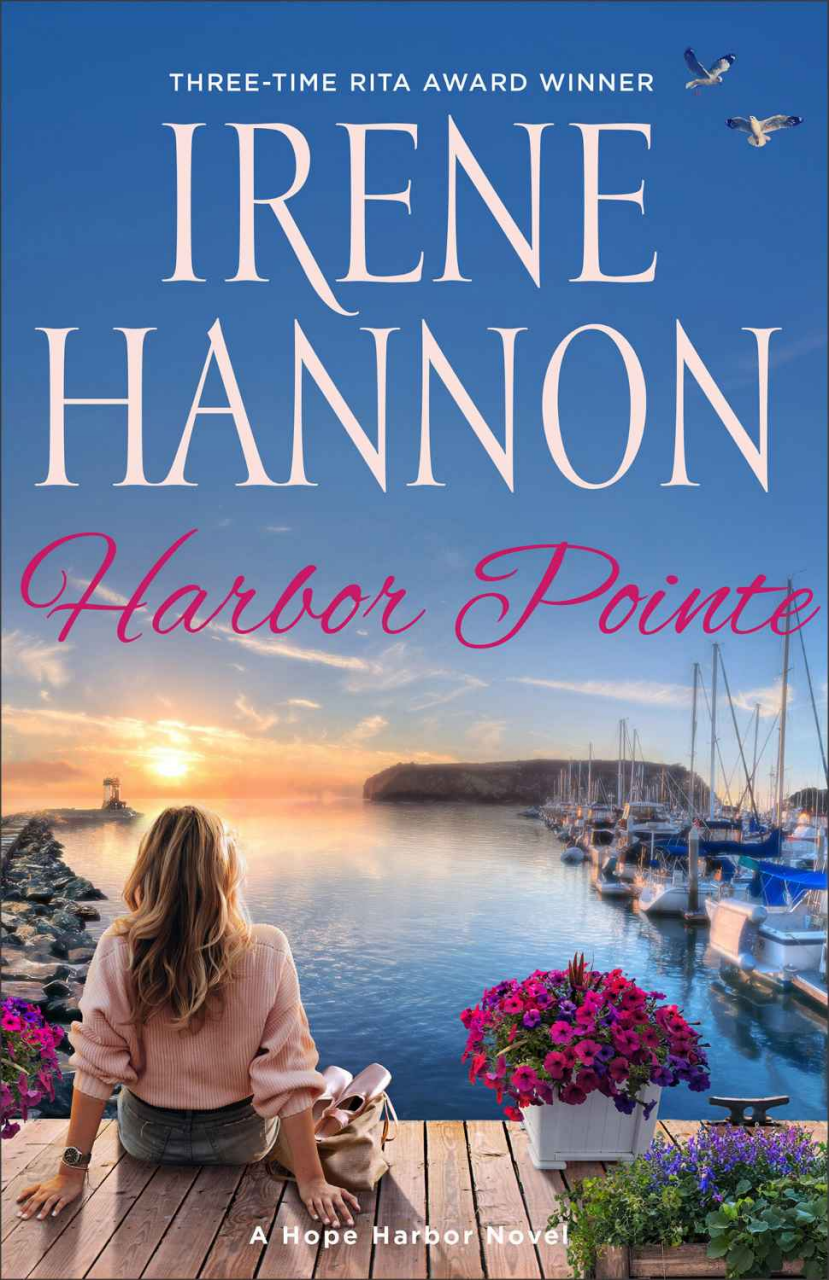
THREE-TIME RITA AWARD WINNER
IRENE HANNON
Harbor Pointe
A Hope Harbor Novel

Harbor Pointe

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Harbor Pointe

A Hope Harbor Novel

IRENE HANNON

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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To my parents,
James and Dorothy Hannon,
whose love and encouragement
was the wind beneath my wings.

As my 70th book is published,
I am filled with gratitude for all they did
to cheer me on while I pursued my dreams—
and I give thanks every day
for the gift of our magic family circle,
which graced my life in immeasurable ways.
The memories of all the years we shared
are a treasure beyond price.

Thank you, Mom and Dad—
for everything.
You are always in my heart.
Every. Single. Day.

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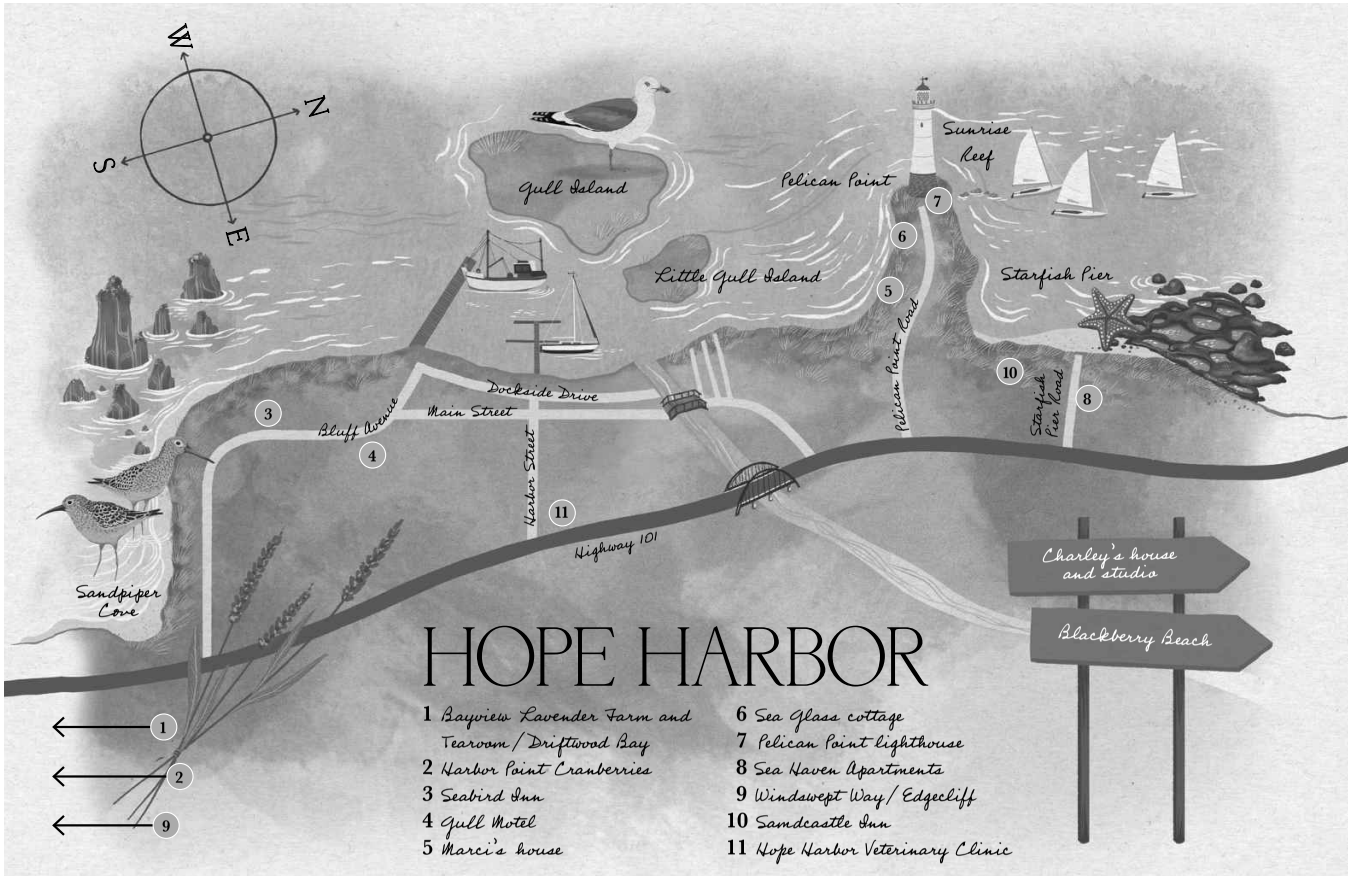

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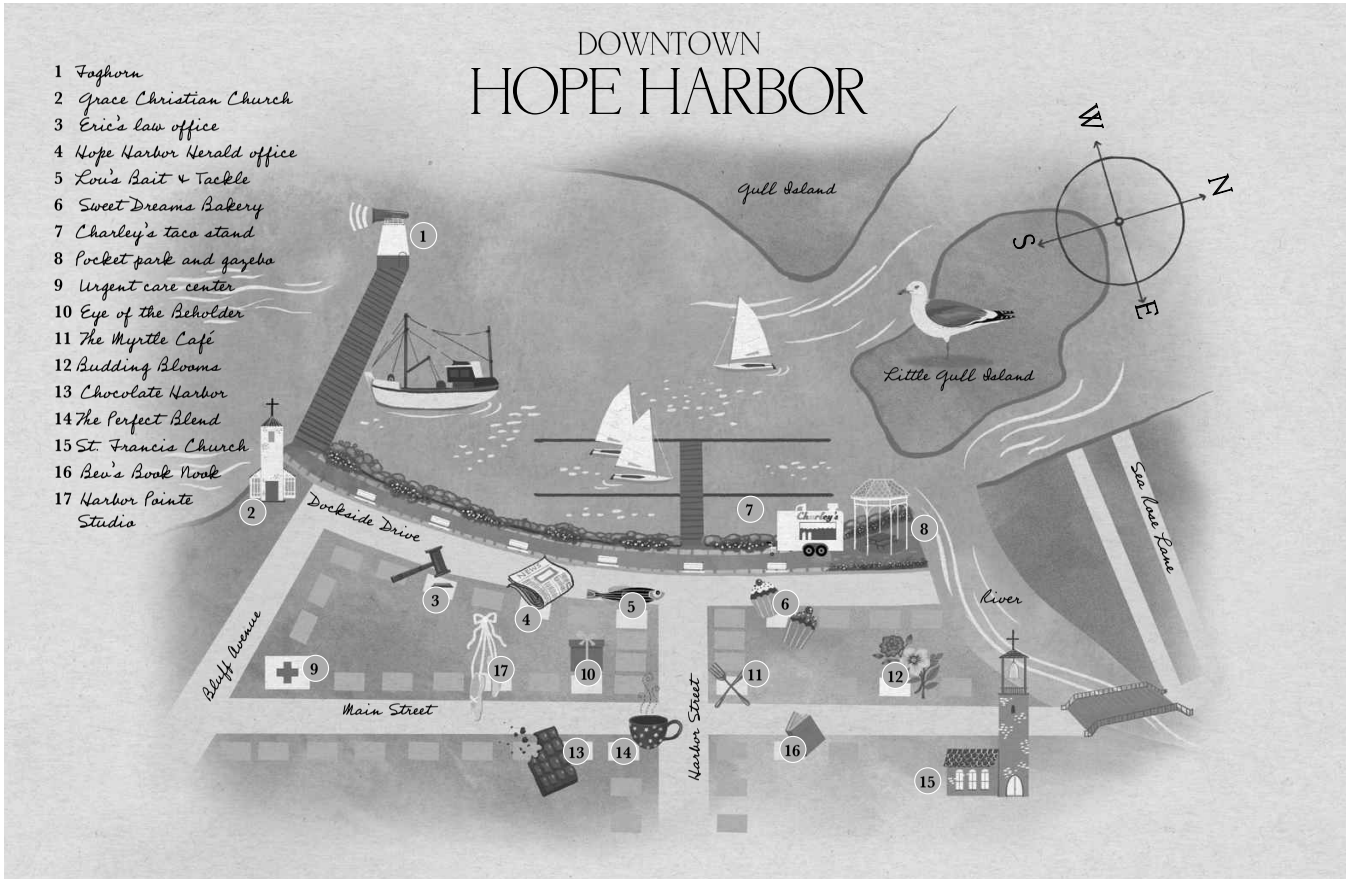

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1

Her sister was in a coma.

Sucking in a lungful of Oregon seaside air, Devyn Lee swung into a parking space, turned off the engine of her rental car, and unclamped her white-knuckled fingers from the wheel.

How could so much change so fast?

Last night, she'd been dancing the title role in *Giselle* at Lincoln Center.

Now, she was sitting outside the Coos Bay hospital where her sister lay unresponsive after tripping on broken pavement.

There was only one word to describe all that had happened in the past eighteen hours.

Surreal.

As the sequence of events scrolled through her mind, she closed her eyes and kneaded the bridge of her nose.

A late-night call from a neurologist at this hospital.

A frantic online search for the next available flight from New York City to Oregon.

A midnight phone conversation with the ballet master to alert him that an understudy would have to dance her role for today's final performance of the spring season.

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A futile attempt to catch three hours of sleep before her dawn flight on this last Sunday in May.

Nine-plus travel hours from boarding to arrival, followed by a short drive from the North Bend airport to the hospital.

Hectic as her typical days were as a principal dancer with one of the most prestigious ballet companies in the world, none of them had ever been this chaotic or frenzied.

Calling up every ounce of her waning stamina, Devyn reached for her purse. It might only be two in the afternoon in Oregon, but it was five o'clock New York time. And whatever energy boost she'd gleaned from the turkey wrap she'd gulped down in San Francisco between flights had evaporated hours ago.

Yet as she slid from behind the wheel and walked toward the hospital entrance, a tingle of anxiety-laced adrenaline vibrated through her nerve endings.

Because in mere minutes, she'd be face-to-face with the sister she hadn't seen since their father's funeral thirteen years ago.

Stomach knotting, she walked through the doors that slid open as she approached. Stopped at the reception desk to get directions. Strode toward the elevator as the questions that had plagued her since last night's summons looped through her mind yet again.

Why had she been listed as Lauren's emergency contact instead of her sister's husband?

And why had she gotten a "no longer in service" message when she'd called the number she'd long ago tucked away for Dennis?

Frowning, she pressed the up button.

What was going on with her sister's marriage?

A call to Mom at the crack of dawn Paris time to share the news about the accident hadn't provided any clues. According to her, Lauren hadn't been in touch for months and had snubbed her during their last exchange.

No surprise there. Mom and her oldest offspring had never been close.

Nor had her two daughters.

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Regrettable . . . but understandable. It was hard for sisters who not only lived on opposite sides of the country but in two different worlds to form a close bond—especially when one of them made it clear she wasn't all that interested in being chummy.

The elevator doors slid open, and Devyn stepped inside. Pushed the button for the second floor.

It wasn't as if she hadn't tried to connect with Lauren through the years. But when every attempt she made to reach out was rebuffed, it had been easier to use the hectic pace of her life as an excuse to backburner any further efforts to mend their frayed bond.

She leaned a shoulder against the wall of the elevator. Sighed.

In truth, it was hard to fault Lauren for resenting the younger sister who'd usurped their mother's attention and whose ballet aspirations had made any semblance of normal family life impossible.

But after she woke up, maybe they could initiate a few repairs in their relationship—a task that had suddenly taken on new urgency.

And her sister *would* wake up. Any other outcome was unthinkable.

The elevator doors parted, and Devyn stepped out. Clenching her fingers around the strap of her purse, she approached the ICU. Stopped beside the intercom. Took a steadying breath and depressed the button.

When the doors swooshed open, she forced herself to walk through.

A scrubs-clad woman at a central station looked over. "Can I help you?"

"Yes. I'm here to see Lauren Collier. I'm her sister."

"Oh yes. I spoke with you when you called from San Francisco." She circled around the counter. "I'll take you back."

"How is she doing?" Devyn followed the woman, lungs balking as she waited for the answer. Hopefully no complications had arisen since she'd checked in during her layover.

"No changes. All her vitals remain strong." The woman paused

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by a room with glass doors. "I'll let her neurologist know you're here. She wanted to speak with you as soon as you arrived."

A surge of unease zipped through her. "Why?"

"To discuss her treatment, I expect." The woman motioned toward the room. "Feel free to talk to your sister. Often people who are otherwise unresponsive can hear what's being said. Would you like a soft drink or water? We also have coffee and tea."

After declining that offer, Devyn took a slow breath and entered the room.

The woman in the bed was Lauren, no question about it. Same pert nose. Same naturally long, curving lashes. Same high cheekbones.

But her big sister had aged.

A lot, for someone who was only thirty-five.

Though her features were slack in repose, the embedded twin creases above her nose were new. So was the fan of fine lines at the corner of each eye. Her once-long dark hair was gone, replaced by short-cropped locks containing a few strands of silver.

The past thirteen years must have held some serious challenges for her, even if she'd never indicated there were any problems in her clipped responses to phone calls and texts.

Yet though the changes wrought by time and stress were apparent, there was little visible evidence of the injuries she'd suffered in the fall, other than an elastic bandage on her left wrist.

Except for all the medical devices she was hooked up to.

Devyn took a quick inventory.

Heart and blood pressure monitor. IV drip. Nasal cannula. Oxygen monitor on Lauren's finger.

The rest of the equipment was unfamiliar.

And what other stuff was attached to her beneath the sheet?

Devyn groped for the bottom of the bed. Held on tight.

Hard as she'd tried to prepare for this moment, seeing her sister comatose was like a punch in the gut.

Maybe she and Lauren weren't as close as they could have been

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for sisters separated in age by a mere two years, but with Dad gone, Mom remarried and living a new life in Paris, and Dennis apparently out of the picture, the only real family the two of them had was each other.

Lauren had to recover so they could make a new start.

Blinking back the sudden mist in her vision, Devyn moved beside the bed and laid her hand over Lauren's. Tried to call up a cheery tone. "Hey, sis. It's me, Devyn. I heard you were off in la-la land and decided to come out here to keep an eye on you. And I'm sticking close until you decide to rejoin the human race. We have a ton of catching up to do. I'm between seasons now, and I plan to stay awhile."

"That's good news."

The voice of the neurologist who'd called last night spoke from the doorway.

Devyn twisted sideways. "Dr. Sherman?"

"Yes." The white-coated woman, who looked to be in her fifties, remained on the threshold. "Having family on hand is always helpful during a health crisis, especially with head injuries. Why don't we talk for a few minutes? There's a small lounge near the ICU."

"Okay." Devyn leaned close to her sister and brushed a stray wisp of hair back from her face. "I'll be back in a few minutes, sis."

The doctor led the way down the hall, out of the ICU and to a small, deserted lounge. "Have a seat." She motioned to one of the chairs and took the adjacent one. "Thank you for coming so fast. I'm sure you're exhausted after our late call and your cross-country flight."

Devyn waved that aside. "This is what family does in an emergency." Not counting Mom, who'd said she'd wait for an update before embarking on the long trip from Paris—no doubt hoping Lauren would wake up, rendering such a trek unnecessary.

"Not always." The doctor's lips morphed into a rueful twist, leveling out as she continued. "I was just leaving the hospital when

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I got the call you'd arrived, and I decided to come back up to talk with you in person. I'll try to use layman's language, but don't hesitate to stop me if I start to throw in too many medical terms."

"I already did some research on comas during my flights, but the information I found online was kind of mind-boggling. And scary." To say the least.

"Brain injuries are complicated. On the plus side, your sister didn't suffer any other trauma beyond a few minor bruises and a sprained wrist. That lets us concentrate on the brain. As I told you last night, the original CT scan showed minor swelling, but there was no indication of major structural injuries or bleeding. Your sister's pupils are responsive, her reflexes are functioning, she reacts to pain, and she's breathing on her own. Those are all hopeful signs. Our goal now is to reduce the swelling to prevent any potential damage from intracranial pressure."

"Have you tried diuretics and steroids?" Based on her in-air research, those were the first line of attack for brain swelling.

"Yes. They haven't had any effect. And the newest CT scan indicates that the swelling has increased. We're concerned about a reduction in oxygen supply and blood flow to the brain, as well as brain stem issues."

Devyn fisted her hands until her nails bit into her palms. Every site she'd found said brain stem issues were a recipe for disaster. "So what do we do?"

"If necessary, a portion of her skull can be removed to give the brain more room to expand. I briefed a neurosurgeon in Eugene on the case earlier today, but I'm hoping the swelling will go down before we have to take that step. Also, while your sister is breathing on her own, there are indications her airway reflexes are diminished. So we're going to put her on a ventilator. Please don't be alarmed by that. It's often required in cases like this."

Devyn's heart stumbled.

She was supposed to remain calm while they put her sister on a ventilator?

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In what universe?

"Hey." The doctor reached over and touched the back of her cold hand. "If she responds as I hope, she'll begin to wake up soon and the ventilator won't be necessary."

"There's no way to predict what kinds of long-term effects there might be from this injury until after she's out of the coma, right?" She didn't really have to ask. Her research had already given her the answer.

"No." At least the neurologist didn't try to sugarcoat her response. "The brain can be unpredictable, and tests don't always give us clear indications about the extent of damage. But we'll begin to get answers fast when she starts to regain consciousness."

When, not if.

That was something, anyway.

"What if there *is* damage?"

"Why don't we cross that bridge if we come to it? We'll know more in the next forty-eight to seventy-two hours. And keep this in mind—many people who've been in short-term comas make excellent recoveries."

Short-term being the key.

"May I stay here with her tonight?"

The doctor hesitated. "The visiting hours end at ten, but we do bend the rules on occasion. However, I'd encourage you to get a decent night's sleep in a real bed. We can call you if there's any change. Are you staying nearby?"

"I don't know where I'm staying yet. I wanted to get an update on Lauren's condition before I made plans. My sister lives about forty-five minutes from here, in Hope Harbor, but I don't have a key to her house." Even if she'd spent the early years of her life in the family home her sister had inherited.

"There may be keys among the clothing and personal items that were brought in with her."

Devyn hesitated.

Staying in Hope Harbor would be preferable to living in a hotel

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for an extended period, but until she had a better handle on her sister's prognosis, a forty-five-minute commute was too long.

"I'll take her personal items with me, but I think I'll stay at a hotel in Coos Bay for a few days."

"No other friends or relatives in the area?"

"No. For all practical purposes, it's just me and my sister. Our mom's overseas and not very involved in our lives."

After considering her for a moment, the doctor pulled out a card and a pen and wrote a number on the back. "I don't often give my cell number to families, but if you aren't getting the answers you want fast enough, call me." She held it out.

Devyn took it, throat tightening. "Thank you."

"And remember, you have a whole team here dedicated to getting your sister back on her feet."

"I appreciate that."

"No problem." The doctor rose. "Now that we've talked, I'm going to stop in the ICU and write up orders for the plan we discussed. Why don't you spend a few minutes with your sister while I do that, then check into a hotel and have a meal? Your sister's going to need your help during her recovery, so it's important to take care of yourself."

The doctor walked back with her to the ICU, detouring to the desk as Devyn continued toward her sister's room.

Outside the glass doors, Devyn hesitated for a moment.

She owed Mom an update . . . but that could wait until she found a hotel. After all, it wasn't like she could count on their mother to be more than a long-distance cheer squad—if that. Cynthia Lee Dufour wasn't the type to drop everything and fly more than five thousand miles to pitch in during a medical emergency. As she'd often said, dealing with health issues wasn't her thing.

Devyn pushed through the door to Lauren's room, the memory of her own past injuries flashing through her mind.

Like the torn ligaments she'd suffered in her ankle after a bad landing during a rehearsal for *Sleeping Beauty*. Or the painful hip

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impingement she'd had to deal with after dancing for too many hours day after day, with insufficient rest in between. Mom had walked a wide circle around those incidents, leaving her in the hands of professionals and encouraging her to take charge of her own follow-up care.

So whatever family assistance Lauren required would have to come from her sister, not her mother.

And that was fine. She'd make this work.

Whatever it took.

After all the disruptions she'd caused in her sister's life thanks to the demands of her dancing, walking with her through this crisis was the least she could do.

Devyn stopped beside the bed and took Lauren's hand again. "I'm back, sis. I talked to the doctor. You're getting excellent care, and I'll be hovering in the wings. If you can hear me, squeeze my fingers."

No reaction—not that she'd expected one. Sudden responsiveness would have been too much to hope for.

So as the monitors beeped and the blood pressure cuff whooshed and the oxygen cannula whistled, Devyn shut out the noise, closed her eyes, and sent a silent prayer heavenward for guidance and fortitude.

Both of which she was going to need in abundance during the days—and perhaps weeks—ahead.

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2

"You get Isabel settled for the night?"

As his grandfather spoke, Aaron Steele continued across the living room and sank into a chair across from him. "Depends how you define settled. She didn't want me to leave."

"I have the same issue on nights you get tapped for the second shift at the mill." The older man closed the book he was reading. "Don't you think the clinginess should be lessening by now? Olivia's been gone almost a year."

Aaron scrubbed at his forehead, where a slight ache had begun to throb. "Grief works differently for everyone. Dad's death two years ago was hard enough on her, but losing her mom too?" He exhaled. "Back-to-back losses are tough."

"On everyone. This hasn't been an easy road for you, either."

"Or you." Gramp hadn't been all that close to Olivia, but the loss of his housemate son had hit him hard. "Isabel's only nine, though. Having two of the four most significant people in your life disappear in the space of thirteen months can put a major dent in a kid's sense of security. I didn't need the counselor I took her to a few months ago to tell me that."

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"You think it would help to schedule another session? Maybe there's more we should be doing for her."

"Like what? I'm already following all the suggested guidelines. Maintaining a predictable routine, being available, listening, drawing her out when she cracks a door, seeing that she gets regular exercise. At our last session, the counselor said the best remedy was time—unless the situation deteriorated. It hasn't. Isabel is sleeping better, and she doesn't have as many bad dreams."

"But she still seems sad and too quiet. Not to mention the clinginess."

Like he didn't know that.

He sighed. "That's why I touched base with the counselor last Friday."

Gramp's eyebrows rose. "You didn't tell me that."

"There wasn't much to tell. She ran me through a whole checklist of questions. In the end, she said to carry on, and if there's no further improvement in a month, to bring Isabel back. One thing I know. You being here helps. I'm glad you agreed to live with us after Olivia died."

"It was a win-win as far as I was concerned. Moving in with your dad after I lost your grandmother saved me. There's nothing sadder than being alone in a house that was once filled with love. Felt the same way after your dad died. Being with people you care about, helping them out, is what makes life worth living. Coming here was just what I needed."

"The arrangement has been a godsend for us too. Our diet has improved, thanks to your skills in the kitchen, and having you on hand to watch Isabel when I have to run to the mill for the occasional crisis takes a lot of stress off me."

"Glad to be of service." Gramp took off his glasses, pulled out his handkerchief, and began polishing the lenses. "Of course, you may not need me if you decide to get married again."

Aaron blinked.

Where had *that* come from?

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"Why would you bring up marriage?"

"It's been on my mind."

"Well, it's not on mine."

"Why not? You're a young man, and Isabel could use a mother."

"I don't feel all that young anymore." In truth, there were days he felt a decade or two older than his thirty-six years. "And Isabel has me and you."

"A woman adds a different touch to a home. Mind you, I'm not saying a single parent can't do an excellent job raising a child, as your dad demonstrated. You turned out fine. Better than fine. But I'd hate for you to spend the rest of your life alone, even if a new woman in your life would put me out of a job."

"No worries on that score. Your job is secure. And I'm not alone. I have you and Isabel."

"Not forever. One of these days, she'll grow up and move on. And someday I'll be joining my Elizabeth and your dad. Where will that leave you?"

"Working at the mill."

"I'm serious, Aaron."

Yeah, he was. That sober look he was wearing had always been reserved for the most solemn discussions.

And if the Steele patriarch wanted to talk, nothing was going to dissuade him.

Resigning himself to a discussion he didn't want to have, Aaron leaned forward and linked his fingers. "I really don't need anyone else in my life, Gramp. I've been married, and once was enough."

More than enough.

If he'd had any idea how fast his rose-colored dreams of happily-ever-after would fade, he would never have walked down the aisle twelve years ago.

Not that Gramp or anyone else knew about his regrets. He'd honored the vows he'd taken with Olivia. And he had *no* regrets about the wonderful daughter who'd come from their ill-advised union.

But shameful as it might be, deep inside it was a relief not to

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have to put up a front to the world or pretend everything was fine so Isabel would feel secure that their family unit was solid.

"You sound a bit like a man who's been burned."

At Gramp's astute comment, his neck warmed.

All these years, except for an occasional confidential session with Reverend Baker, he'd kept mum about the issues he and Olivia had faced. And now wasn't the time to talk about them, beyond a generic acknowledgment that their relationship hadn't always been smooth sailing.

"I expect every marriage has its ups and downs."

A few beats passed before Gramp responded. "May I say something?"

It wasn't a question. If Gramp had a comment to offer, he'd do so—with or without permission.

"I guess."

"I'm no psychologist, but I lived with a wonderful woman for more than fifty years. Sure, we had occasional spats, but we learned to work through them and restore harmony. Our home was a calm, pleasant place 99 percent of the time. Not a lick of tension in the air. Your house wasn't like that."

Aaron frowned. "What do you mean?"

"It's kind of hard to put into words. It was just a feeling I had around you and Olivia. Like you were both on edge. I can't recall you two sharing any affectionate touches or warm smiles or friendly teasing in recent years. All I picked up was strain. There was always a chill in the air."

Aaron took a long, slow breath.

So much for his efforts to keep up the pretense of a stable marriage.

And if Gramp had picked up on the strain in their home, had Isabel noticed it too?

"I'm not asking you to divulge any secrets, Aaron. I'm just trying to make the point that it can be a mistake to let one bad experience stop you from trying again. If I'd given up on singing

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after my voice started changing and the music teacher told me to mouth the words during a concert, I'd never have tried out for my high school musical four years later and gotten a lead."

"Marriage and musicals are two different things."

"Principle's the same." Gramp slid his glasses back on. "A beautiful marriage is a joy. If the right woman comes along, don't let the opportunity to find happiness pass you by. For your sake, as well as Isabel's."

"What if this woman isn't keen about a grandfather-in-law living in the house?"

"If I couldn't win her over with my charm, I'd give up my spot in a heartbeat to see you and Isabel happy." Gramp's tone was lighthearted, but his eyes were serious.

"For the record, on the remote chance that such a woman ever should come along, you'd be part of the package."

"I wouldn't want to be an obstacle to romance."

"Gramp. You and me and Isabel are a unit. It's all or nothing." After everything the man sitting across from him had done to lend a hand through the years, no way would he ever show him the door. Not for any woman.

And no woman who asked him to would be worth having.

"Well, it's immaterial at the moment. We can revisit the question if it ever becomes relevant. In the meantime, you and I should try to find a diversion for Isabel that will pep her up."

"Any suggestions?"

"No. But I intend to keep my ear to the ground. You should do the same." Gramp reopened his book. "What's on your agenda for the rest of the evening?"

"Bill paying."

Gramp shook his head. "You need to socialize more. Add some fun to your life."

"No time." He stood.

"Make time. For you *and* Isabel. This house could use more laughter."

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"I'll be in that wedding next month. That qualifies as a social event."

"Only if you go with the right attitude—and mingle."

"I'll keep that in mind." Aaron shoved his hands into his pockets and wandered toward the kitchen.

Gramp's insights were sound, as usual. There was a definite lack of fun in this household. And he wasn't doing much to change that.

But it was hard to find much joy when your days were consumed with chores and work and concern about your daughter's lackluster spirits.

And now he had another worry to fret about.

How much had Isabel discerned about the tension in her parents' less-than-ideal marriage? Had it disturbed her peace of mind and sense of security? If so, was that also holding her back from moving on? And how could he subtly find out without creating an issue where there might not be one?

He opened the drawer in the kitchen where he kept unpaid bills and booted up his laptop.

Yet as he ticked the bills off his list, his mind was only half on the task, thanks to his discussion with Gramp.

The suggestion that he find a new wife was easy to dismiss. While having someone simpatico to share his life with held a certain appeal, what if he made another bad judgment call? Got involved once again with someone who ended up being a bad match?

A shiver rippled through him.

That risk wasn't worth taking. It was far less stressful to live with loneliness than with rancor.

Gramp's proposal that they find an enjoyable diversion to add joy to Isabel's life, however, was spot-on.

It was also a challenge.

And as he toiled over the bills far later than he'd planned on this last-day-of-May evening, all he could do was pray that something would come along to brighten his daughter's outlook.

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"Ms. Lee? She's starting to wake up."

As the words penetrated Devyn's sleep-fogged brain, she forced her sluggish eyelids open. Struggled upright from the bedside chair where she'd planted herself three days ago, once the swelling in Lauren's brain had subsided.

"Her eyes opened briefly." The nurse motioned toward Lauren.

"I can't believe I missed it." Devyn pushed herself to her feet. "Or that I dozed off."

"Don't beat yourself up. Hospital stays take a huge toll on families as well as patients. Did you get any sleep at all last night in that chair?"

"Not much." Like maybe two fitful hours, if she was generous in her estimate. The remainder had been spent watching Lauren for signs of returning alertness.

"You're entitled to doze off. I'll let Dr. Sherman know about the change. I assume she spoke with you about what to expect as your sister wakes up?"

"Yes. Post-traumatic amnesia. She said Lauren could be agitated and confused and might not recognize me at first, and that she could behave out of character."

"Any or all of those may happen. Go ahead and talk to her. It's possible she's beginning to become conscious of her surroundings. I expect Dr. Sherman will stop by over lunch to do an assessment."

As the woman disappeared out the door, Devyn took Lauren's hand. "Hey, sis. I'm still here, waiting for you to wake up. And the news is all positive. The swelling in your brain went down, and everything looked normal on the last CT scan. I gave the people at your dental office an update, and they said to let you know your job will be waiting whenever you're ready to come back. So no worries on that score."

She didn't mention the other information her sister's office had

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relayed, after she'd made a comment about not being able to reach Dennis.

It seems her sister had been separated from her husband for more than a year.

Another shock in a shock-filled trip. One that raised further questions.

Until Lauren was able to communicate, however, those would remain unanswered.

Devyn leaned over and picked up the stuffed bear attached to colorful helium-filled foil balloons and set it on the bed beside Lauren.

"Wait till you see the darling little bear and balloons your office sent." She picked up her sister's hand and stroked her limp fingers over the plush fur. "Isn't that soft?"

If Lauren felt anything, she gave no indication.

"Anyway, they'll be here for you when you wake up." Devyn disengaged the weighted balloons from the bear and set them aside. Nestled the bear beside Lauren's hand. Perched on the side of the bed.

And for the next hour, while she waited for Dr. Sherman and nurses bustled in and out, she kept up a running commentary, filling her sister in on the local weather, calling up every funny story she could remember that she hadn't already shared over the past few days, and talking about her childhood memories of Hope Harbor—including the fish tacos from Charley's iconic wharf-side stand.

"I haven't gotten down there yet, but that's the first place I plan to visit." Hopefully it was still there. Trips to the taco-making artist's stand had been one of the highlights of her youth. "I've missed not only his food but his wisdom. Right now I'm staying at a hotel here in Coos Bay, but I'm planning to crash at home once you wake up. In my old bedroom, if it still has a bed. I called your minister at Grace Christian, and he's having someone get your mail until I come down. He's also got the whole congregation praying for—"

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"I hear there's good news."

As Dr. Sherman swept into the room, Devyn stood. "The nurse said she opened her eyes earlier, but I haven't seen any indications that she's coming around."

"Let's try to encourage her."

The doctor circled around to the other side of the bed and took Lauren's hand. "Lauren, if you can hear me, squeeze my fingers." After a moment, she raised her voice. "Lauren. Squeeze. My. Fingers. I know you can do it. See how I'm squeezing yours? Squeeze back." After a few seconds, Dr. Sherman's lips rose a hair. "Very good."

When the doctor glanced over and gave a thumbs-up, Devyn's throat contracted.

"Lauren, I want you to open your eyes and look at me." A few beats ticked by, and the doctor leaned closer. "Come on. Open your eyes. I'm waiting for you."

Nothing.

Devyn's spirits dipped.

If she'd opened them earlier, unprompted, why wouldn't she do it now? Did that mean—

Wait.

Lauren's lashes fluttered . . . and suddenly popped open.

Yes!

The neurologist eased closer to her. "Can you look at me? I'm on your right."

Lauren continued to stare at the ceiling . . . but her hand snaked up toward the ventilator tube.

"Excellent." Dr. Sherman straightened and spoke across the bed. "Purposeful movement toward an area of discomfort indicates a heightened level of awareness. So does her response to commands and her earlier spontaneous eye opening. She's wakeful and aware. That means consciousness is returning." She refocused on Lauren. "Lauren, look at me."

In slow motion, Lauren's gaze shifted toward the doctor.

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"Good job." The doctor smiled at her, then released her hand.

"So what happens next?" Devyn gripped the siderail of the bed, watching her sister.

"We'll change the settings on the ventilator, give her less support, and watch her closely for the next couple of hours. If everything looks good, we'll remove the breathing tube."

"She'll be able to talk to us then, right?"

The doctor's hesitation was brief but telling. "There would be no mechanical impediments to speech at that point."

Translation?

There could be neurological ones.

Stomach knotting, Devyn took Lauren's hand again as the doctor conferred with the nurse.

They'd passed one hurdle. Lauren was returning to them.

But would it be the fully functioning Lauren who'd tripped and fallen on Saturday—or someone who was going to need major assistance not only now but perhaps forever?

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