

Hope Harbor

A Novel

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Irene Hannon, *Hope Harbor*
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15 16 17 18 19 20 21 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Margaret and Tony Breslin of Ireland.

Thank you for the generosity, kindness, and hospitality
you've shown to Tom and me through the years.

Whenever we visit my dad's birthplace,
you make us feel as if we're coming home.

You are cousins extraordinaire!

May God always hold you in the palm of his hand.



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Closed until June 13

Michael Hunter stared at the hand-lettered sign on the Gull Motel office, expelled a breath, and raked his fingers through his hair.

Not the welcome he'd been expecting after a mind-numbing thirty-six-hour cross-country drive to the Oregon coast.

And where was he supposed to stay for the next three weeks, until the place opened again?

Reining in the urge to kick the door, he leaned close to the glass and peered into the dim, deserted office. Rattled the rigid knob. Scanned the small, empty parking lot.

The sign hadn't lied. This place was out of commission.

He swiveled toward the marina down the hill, where boats bobbed in the gentle swells. The motel might be a bust, but at least Hope Harbor was as picturesque as promised. Planters overflowing with colorful flowers served as a buffer between the sidewalk and the sloping pile of boulders that led to the water. Across the wide street from the marina, quaint storefronts faced the sea. A white gazebo occupied a small park where the

two-block-long, crescent-shaped frontage road dead-ended at a river. More shops lined the next street back, many adorned with bright awnings and flower boxes.

The town was exactly what he'd expected.

But with the only motel closed, it didn't appear he'd be calling it home during his stay in the area.

A prick of anger penetrated his fatigue. Why had the clerk let him book a room if the motel was going to shut down for several weeks? And why hadn't someone corrected the mistake in the thirty days since he'd put down his deposit?

If shoddy business practices like this were indicative of the much-touted laid-back Pacific Northwest lifestyle, the locals could have it—especially since such sloppiness meant he was now going to have to find another place to rest his very weary head.

He reached for the phone on his belt, frowning when his fingers met air. Oh, right. He'd taken it off as he'd rolled out of Chicago two days ago—a very deliberate strategy to make a clean break from work. Wasn't that the point of a leave of absence, after all?

But the cell was close at hand.

Back at his car, he opened the trunk, rooted around in the smaller of his two bags, and pulled it out.

Three messages popped up once he powered on, all from the Gull Motel.

He played the first one back, from a woman named Madeline who identified herself as the manager.

“Mr. Hunter, I'm afraid we've had an electrical fire and will be closing for about three weeks for repairs. Please call me at your earliest convenience so we can help you find other lodging.” She recited her number.

The second and third messages were similar.

So the shutdown had been unexpected, and someone *had* tried to call him.

Slowly he inhaled a lungful of the fresh sea air, forcing the taut muscles in his shoulders to relax. Driving for fifteen hours two days in a row and getting up at the crack of dawn this morning to finish the trip must have done a number on his tolerance. Giving people the benefit of the doubt was much more his style. Besides, he was used to operating on the fly, finding creative solutions to problems. Glitches never phased him. His ability to roll with the punches was one of the things Julie had loved about him.

Julie.

His view of the harbor blurred around the edges, and he clenched his teeth.

Let it go, Hunter. Self-pity won't change a thing. Move on. Get your life back.

It was the same advice he'd been giving himself for months—and he intended to follow it.

As soon as he figured out how.

Fighting off a wave of melancholy, he tapped in the number the woman had provided, his index finger less than steady on the keypad. For a moment he examined the tremors, then shoved his hand in his pocket. He was tired, that's all. He needed food and sleep, in that order. The sooner the better. Things would seem brighter tomorrow.

They had to.

If this trip didn't help him sort out his life, he was out of options.

While the phone rang, he looked toward the harbor again, past the long jetty on the left and the pair of rocky islands on the right that tamed the turbulent waves and protected the boats in the marina. His gaze skimmed across the placid surface of the sea, moving all the way to the horizon where cobalt water met deep blue sky. From his perch on the hill, the scene appeared to be picture perfect.

But it wasn't. Nothing was. Not up close. That was the illusion of distance. It softened edges, masked flaws, obscured messy detail.

It also changed perspective.

If he was lucky, this trip would do all those things for him—and more.

“Mr. Hunter? This is Madeline King. I've been trying to reach you.”

He shifted away from the peaceful panorama and adjusted the phone against his ear. “I've been traveling cross-country and my cell was off. I'm at the motel now. What can you suggest as an alternative?”

“Unfortunately, there aren't many options in Hope Harbor. But there are a number of very nice places in Coos Bay or Bandon.”

As she began to rattle off the names of hotels, he stifled a sigh. He hadn't driven all the way out here to stay in either of those towns. He'd come to spend time in Hope Harbor.

“Isn't there anything closer?”

At his abrupt interruption, the woman stopped speaking. “Um . . . not anything I'd recommend. I could probably find you a B&B that's closer, but those are on the pricey side. Most people book them for a night or two at most, and I believe you intended to stay for several weeks. Plus, B&Bs tend to be geared to couples.”

Good point. A cozy inn would only remind him how alone he was.

“Okay . . . why don't you line me up with someplace for a few nights while I decide what I want to do. Bandon would be my preference, since it's closer.”

“I'll get right on it.”

“Don't rush.” He inspected the two-block-long business district, such as it was. “I'm going to wander around town for a while and grab a bite to eat.”

“Sounds like a plan. And again, I’m sorry for the inconvenience.”

Once they said their good-byes, he grabbed a jacket from the backseat and locked the car. The midday sun was warm, but the breeze was cool—by his standards, anyway. Perhaps a slight nip in the air was normal for Oregon in the third week of May, though.

Stomach growling, he started down the hill. If he weren’t famished, he’d head the opposite direction and check out the big, empty beach at the base of the bluffs on the outskirts of town that he’d spotted as he drove in. A walk on the sand past the sea stacks arrayed offshore would be far more enjoyable than wandering along—he glanced at the street sign as he arrived at the bottom of the hill—Dockside Drive.

The two-block waterfront street didn’t take long to traverse, and by the time he was halfway down the second block it was clear his food options were limited to a bakery and a bait-and-tackle shop with a sign advertising takeout sandwiches for the fishing crowd.

All the real restaurants must be in the business district, one street removed from the marina.

Just as he was about to retrace his steps, a spicy, appetizing scent wafted his way. He squinted toward the end of the block, where a white truck with a serving window on one side was perched at the edge of the tiny waterside park with the gazebo. Charley’s, according to the colorful lettering above the window where a couple of people were giving orders to a guy with a weathered face and long gray hair pulled back in a ponytail.

Another whiff of an enticing aroma set off a loud clamor in his stomach.

Sold. Whatever they were cooking, he was eating.

With a quick change of direction, he stepped off the sidewalk to cross the street.

“Hey! Watch it!”

At the frantic female voice, he swung around . . . and jumped back just in time to avoid a collision with the bicycle heading directly toward him.

The cyclist, however, wasn't as fortunate.

She swerved away from him. Tottered a few more yards. Crashed to the pavement in a tangle of arms, legs, groceries, and wheel spokes.

It took him no more than a few seconds to recover enough to go to her aid, but by then she was already scrambling to her feet.

"Are you okay?"

She glared at him with vivid green eyes, rubbing her hip with one hand and shoving back the golden-brown hair that had escaped from her ponytail with the other.

"I'll live—but next time you might look before you charge into traffic."

"I'm sorry." Lame—but what else could he say? "Let me help you with your bike." He reached for it, but she beat him to it.

"I've got it." She set it on its wheels and gave it a quick once-over.

"If there's any damage, I'll be happy to pay for it."

She lowered the kickstand. "It's in better shape than my groceries." Expression peeved, she surveyed the broken eggs on the pavement, then began gathering up the canned goods that had rolled a few yards away.

While she corralled the wayward tins, he picked up a package of ground beef and a semi-mashed loaf of bread. He also retrieved a crinkled white bakery bag. Through the gap in the top he spied a crushed cinnamon roll.

An instant later the bag was snatched from his grasp. "I can take it from here." She held out her hand for the bread and meat too.

His stomach bottomed out at the blood oozing from a nasty scrape on the fleshy part of her palm, below her thumb. "You're hurt."

She gave the abrasion a quick inspection as she plucked the meat and bread from his grasp. “It’s not bad. I’ll deal with it after I get home.” She turned her back and continued to repack her plastic grocery bags.

“Look . . . let me replace the damaged food at least.”

“Don’t worry about it.” She tucked the bags into the baskets on either side of her back fender and swung one long, jeans-clad leg over the bar on the bike. “Just look before you leap next time, okay?”

With that, she pushed off, did a U-turn, and pedaled back down the street.

Michael followed her progress until she disappeared around the corner, then shoved his hands into his pockets.

What else could go wrong today?

Appetite evaporating, he detoured to one of the benches spaced along the waterfront. Nice of the town to provide a spot for residents and visitors to chill out and let their cares melt away.

Except his didn’t.

Instead, the familiar emptiness and dark despair that had been his steady companions for the past eighteen months crept over him, casting a pall nothing could overcome—not the bright sunlight, not the two thousand miles he’d put between himself and his memories, not the upbeat name of this town that had beckoned him, holding out the promise of a better tomorrow.

Hope Harbor?

He rested his elbows on his knees and dropped his head in his hands, snuffing out the idyllic view.

As far as he was concerned, whoever named this place had goofed.



Anna Williams handed her money to Charley Lopez as he passed her order through the window of the food truck, then sniffed the to-go bag. “Smells delicious. What’s the secret ingredient today?”

Charley’s smile revealed two rows of gleaming white teeth in his latte-colored face. “Nothing special. A fish taco is a fish taco.”

“Not when you make them. What kind of fish did you use?”

“You planning to give me some competition?”

She snorted. “I’m sixty-nine. My professional cooking days are over.”

He rested his elbows on the counter, looked left and right, and lowered his voice. “Halibut—with a touch of cilantro. The rest”—he winked and snapped his fingers—“is magic.” Leaning sideways, he snagged another parchment-wrapped bundle and held it out to her. “Would you mind giving this to that guy on the bench as you pass? He seems like he could use a pick-me-up.”

Anna shifted sideways. The man’s back was to her, but it didn’t take Oprah-level empathy to recognize his posture of defeat. “Any idea who he is or what’s wrong?”

“Not a clue.”

Nor would their local taco expert attempt to find out. The man didn’t miss a thing that went on in town, yet he never asked questions. Never gossiped. Never passed judgment.

Maybe that’s why they got along.

“I guess I could give it to him.” She took the extra order. “You want me to pass along a message too?”

“Yeah.” Charley grabbed a slip of paper, scribbled a few words, and folded it in half. Resting an elbow on the counter, he leaned across and tucked it in a fold of the parchment paper. “I’d take the tacos over myself, but I’ve got more customers on the way.” He gestured behind her as several guys in hard hats crossed the street, heading their way. “That repaving on

101 might be annoying for drivers, but it's been a boon for my business."

"Will you be cooking tomorrow?" Anna eased away from the window as the road crew approached.

"Depends on the weather and the catch of the day and my mood." Flashing her one more grin, he turned to greet the new arrivals.

Juggling her bag and the extra order of fish tacos, Anna started toward the man on the bench. Only Charley could have persuaded her to approach a stranger. Why, she hardly talked to people she'd known most of her life. What was the point? No one cared about you except family, and once they were gone . . . well, it was best to make your peace with being alone.

Her step faltered, and she pivoted back toward the food truck. There was a line now, and Charley was bustling around inside. If he wasn't so busy, she'd march back there and tell him to deliver his own freebie.

On the other hand, he'd never asked a favor of her before—and it was hard to fault a kind gesture.

Resigned, she continued toward the bench, giving the man a once-over. He was still sitting with his head in his hands, a few flecks of silver glinting in his dark brown hair. Not one of the vagrants who occasionally passed through town, though. His jeans might be worn enough to put him in that category, but his shoes were polished leather. She shook her head. The way people dressed these days. This guy could be a yuppie—or whatever they called those upwardly mobile younger folks who liked to defy convention and do things their way. For all she knew, he was some Silicon Valley start-up executive who'd taken a road trip up the coast to bemoan the loss of a million-dollar deal.

No reason to feel sorry for someone like that.

Straightening her shoulders, she cleared her throat to get his attention. "Excuse me."

The man didn't respond.

"Sir? Excuse me."

At her more forceful tone, he lowered his hands and twisted around to face her.

Instantly the air whooshed out of her lungs.

Was that . . . ?

She dropped the extra order of tacos on the seat of the bench and groped for the back to steady herself.

"Ma'am?" The man rose, concern creasing his brow. "Are you all right? Would you like to sit down?"

She focused on his eyes. Blue, not brown.

It wasn't John.

Of course it wasn't.

John hadn't set foot in this town for almost twenty years—nor was he likely to ever again.

But if, by chance, their paths ever did cross, she'd recognize him, thanks to today's wired world. And except for the eyes, this stranger could be his double. Same color hair, same build, same mid- to late-thirties age, same six-foot-twoish height.

What a bizarre coincidence.

"Ma'am?"

She sucked in a shaky breath. "I'm fine. You just . . . you remind me of someone I haven't seen in quite a while."

"Why don't you sit for a minute?" He picked up the order of tacos she'd dropped, making room on the bench.

Easing back, she started to shake her head. She'd be fine as soon as her heart stopped pounding. There was no reason to linger.

Yet looking at this man . . . The resemblance was uncanny. It would be easy to pretend he *was* John.

A powerful yearning crashed over her, stalling her lungs again—but she quashed it at once. Wishing wouldn't change a thing. It was too late for such nonsense. What was done was done.

Still . . . what harm could there be in indulging her little fantasy for a few minutes?

“I believe I will.” She lowered herself to the bench, perching on the edge.

The man retook his seat and held out the order of tacos.

She waved it aside. “Those are for you. Compliments of the chef.” She hooked a thumb toward the food truck.

Surprise flattened his features, and he turned toward Charley, who touched the brim of his Oregon Ducks baseball cap in salute.

“Why?” Her bench partner examined the package.

“He put a message inside . . . there.” Anna flicked the corner of the folded piece of paper.

The man removed it, read the words, and sent Charley a speculative look. Then he tucked the small slip of paper in his shirt pocket without offering to share the message.

Despite her curiosity, Anna curbed the urge to ask him about it. Sticking your nose in other people’s business only led to trouble.

When the silence lengthened, she opened her bag, pulled out her own parchment-wrapped bundle, and pointed to his. “Go ahead, dive in. Best fish tacos on the West Coast.” As long as she was sitting here, why not eat her own while they were hot and fresh instead of lugging them home, as usual?

Besides, eating would give her an excuse to extend their encounter.

Slowly the man unwrapped the paper. “They smell great.”

“Charley’s got a magic touch.”

The man bit into a taco, the tension fading from his features as he chewed. “This is amazing.” He wolfed down two while she worked on her first, slowing only as he picked up the last one.

“You must have been hungry.” She swiped up a glob of sauce

that had dropped onto the parchment in her lap. Why did good things always have to be messy?

“More than I realized. I’ve been on the road for two and a half very long days and didn’t stop too often for food.”

“Where are you from?”

“Chicago.”

“That *is* a long drive. You just passing through?”

A shadow passed over his face. “I might be now. I’d intended to stay for a few weeks, but the motel is closed. They’re trying to line up another place in Bandon or Coos Bay, but Hope Harbor was my destination. It won’t be the same if I stay somewhere else.”

I, I, I. No mention of a wife, though he wore a ring.

Interesting.

“You’ve been here before?”

His eyes shuttered and he went back to eating. “No.”

In the sudden silence, his “back off” message came through loud and clear.

Fine. People had a right to privacy, especially about painful subjects. They didn’t need to be poked and prodded and questioned by nosy strangers . . . or by well-meaning friends. And pain radiated from this man’s pores—pain that was somehow related to Hope Harbor.

He finished his last taco, wadded up the paper, and tossed it in the small trash receptacle beside the bench. “Thank you for delivering my lunch. I’ll stop by and give my compliments to the chef too. If I end up staying around, he’s got himself a new . . .” He stopped, pulled his phone off his belt, and checked the screen. “The manager from the Gull Motel. I guess they found me a place to stay. Excuse me.”

As he angled away on the seat, Anna finished her second taco and tuned in to his side of the conversation.

“Are you sure there wasn’t anything in Bandon? . . . When

does it end? . . . But that would mean packing up again Monday . . . Yeah, I suppose.” He sighed and dug through his pockets for a pen and paper. “Go ahead and give me the details.”

While he took notes, Anna rewrapped her third taco for an evening snack. Madeline must have told him about the antique car rally in Bandon this weekend. The way that annual event had grown, every hotel room was probably booked. Her bench mate was going to end up in Coos Bay—much farther away from Hope Harbor than he’d planned.

Unless . . .

The idea that popped into her mind was so startling—and out of character—she stopped breathing. Where on earth had that preposterous notion come from? Was she crazy? This man was a stranger. He might be a criminal. Or a deadbeat. Or one of those con men who cozied up to unsuspecting seniors, then took advantage of them.

No. Scratch that last item. She’d approached him, not vice versa.

Nevertheless . . . why would she even consider making such an offer?

Because he looks like John.

Her fingers crimped the edges of the package in her lap, the parchment crackling in protest. What a stupid reason to get all Good Samaritanish. Let him stay in Coos Bay and commute. The drive wasn’t that . . .

“It appears I have a room.” The man slid his phone back onto his belt and stood, his weary smile tinged with a soul-deep fatigue. “I’d better be on my way. Thank you again.” He extended his hand.

Say good-bye and good luck, Anna.

Still clutching her taco and the empty bag, she rose. “I live in town. I might be able to offer you a place to stay.” Her words came out stilted. Choppy.

His eyes widened slightly and he lowered his hand. “I beg your pardon?”

The man couldn’t be any more shocked than she was. That was *not* what she’d intended to say.

Yet for some strange reason, the offer felt right.

And in truth, what harm could there be? It wasn’t as if he’d be sharing her living space.

Letting her instincts guide her, she slid her taco into the bag and rolled down the top as she spoke. “I have a small annex on my house, with its own entrance and a kitchenette. I used to rent it to tourists, but they came and went so quickly the whole thing was more trouble than it was worth. If you’re planning to stay for an extended time, though, I’d consider letting you use it. It would be far more economical than a motel.” She quoted him her old weekly price.

He was still staring at her as if she’d invited him to join her for a rocket ride to the moon. “But . . . you don’t even know my name.”

As the idea began to take hold, her usual cut-to-the-chase manner returned. “That’s easy to fix. I’ll start. Anna Williams. I’ve lived here since I came as a bride more than forty years ago. Worked in the high school kitchen most of my life. These days I cook for Father Murphy and Reverend Baker. Feel free to talk with them if you want references. Their churches are at opposite ends of town, but I expect they’re on the golf course today if they’re following their usual Thursday afternoon routine. You can also stop in at the police department and talk to the chief. I used to babysit her. And you are?”

“Michael Hunter.”

“Are you a wanted man?”

He blinked. “No. I, uh, took a leave of absence from my job in Chicago for . . . personal reasons.”

“Nothing related to alcohol or drugs, I hope.” She gave him

the same stern look she'd used to intimidate the high school boys who tried to pilfer an extra cookie in the lunch line.

“No.” A glint of amusement sparked in his eyes, bringing them to life for a fleeting second. “You could have your sheriff check me out too, if you like.”

“I may do that.” She set her purse and taco on the seat of the bench, pulled out a notebook, and wrote down her address. “You can stop by in a couple of hours if you'd like to see the place. It'll take me that long to put things in order.” She ripped out the sheet and handed it to him. “Are you interested? I don't want to waste my afternoon cleaning if you're not.”

He studied her, slowly nodding. “Yeah. I think so.” He dug around in his pocket and pulled out a business card. “Here's a little more information about me for your sheriff to work with.”

She adjusted her glasses as he handed it over. Michael P. Hunter, chief executive officer of St. Joseph Center—“dedicated to dignity, self-sufficiency, and independence,” according to the tagline. Must be some sort of Christian-based charitable endeavor that helped get people on their feet and lead productive lives.

Impressive—assuming he was legit.

And her intuition told her he was.

She tucked the card in the pocket of her sweater and stuck out her hand. “It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Hunter.”

His grip was warm and steady. “Likewise.” After a firm squeeze, he tipped his head toward the taco stand. “I'll pay my respects to the chef. See you later this afternoon.”

With that, he strolled over to the truck and waited off to the side while Charley finished with a customer.

Anna walked the other direction, pausing at the corner. Charley was leaning on the counter, talking to Michael, and an echo of laughter drifted her way. Huh. The taco-stand owner had managed to inject some humor into her sober bench mate.

Well, good for him. The man from Chicago seemed as if he could use a laugh.

Then again, who couldn't?

The two men disappeared from view as she turned the corner . . . along with some of her confidence. For all she knew, the card Michael had given her was a fake. St. Joseph Center might not even exist—though that would be simple to verify on the net. Still—picking a man up off the street . . .

If he was having as many second thoughts as she was, however, he might not bother to show up. And that could be for the best.

But you'll be disappointed.

Snuffing out the annoying little voice that was the bane of her existence, she picked up her pace. Fine. Maybe she did hope he'd follow through—but his resemblance to John had nothing to do with how she felt. The uncanny similarity might have drawn her to him at first, but the emptiness in his eyes had sucked her in. That young man had come here seeking relief from his pain. Searching for answers, perhaps, or resolution, or solutions. Why not help him if she could?

And if fate was kind, he might succeed far better than she had.

Because Hope Harbor had offered her none of those things for twenty long years.