

Sea Rose Lane

A Hope Harbor Novel

IRENE HANNON



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Irene Hannon, *Sea Rose Lane*
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To my niece, Catherine Hannon,
as she graduates from eighth grade.

From day one, you have been a blessing in my life,
adding sweetness, joy, and sparkle.

May your high school years be filled with
fun, friendship, and infinite possibilities
as the world opens its doors to you.



1

He was going to hit that pickup truck.

As the vehicle in front of him screeched to a halt, Eric Nash flung his cell toward the passenger seat, clenched the wheel, and jammed the BMW's brake to the floor.

Too late.

A bone-jarring thud reverberated through his body, accompanied by the crunch of compressing metal and the explosive tinkle of shattering glass.

This was so not the way he'd envisioned his arrival in Hope Harbor.

Before his car even stopped shuddering, the driver-side door of the truck flew open. Shapely legs clad in snug denim swung out. In one smooth, lithe motion, a slender woman slid out of the cab, the coastal Oregon wind tossing her mane of blonde hair.

Nice . . . except for her stormy expression and taut posture. Better forget her appearance and focus on an apology.

She paused to give the back of her pickup a cursory sweep,

then marched to his door and glared at him through the window, fists jammed on her hips.

Oh, brother.

This was not going to be pretty.

Bracing himself, he pushed his door open and stood.

“Sorry about that.” He tipped his head toward her truck.

She slammed her arms across her chest, leaned sideways, and homed in on the phone resting on his front passenger seat. “In case you didn’t know, it’s illegal to use a cell while driving in Oregon.”

Of course he knew that. He’d know it even if he wasn’t an attorney. The controversial law had received a serious amount of press.

But he was almost at his destination, and Hope Harbor wasn’t exactly Portland. The only real traffic here was at lunchtime—*if* Charley’s was open and *if* there was a run on his fish tacos.

However . . . it wasn’t yet noon and he wasn’t anywhere near the wharf-side stand.

“I’m aware of the law. But making a quick call on a quiet backstreet should have been safe.”

“It wasn’t.”

“Look, I said I was sorry. My insurance will cover any damage.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Money doesn’t fix every problem.”

Sheesh. Talk about attitude with a capital A.

“It will fix your truck.” He surveyed the muddy vehicle. “Not that it will be easy to tell what damage I caused versus what might already be under the dirt.” If she could be nasty, so could he.

She bristled, and tiny pieces of . . . something . . . drifted out of her hair. Squinting, he shaded his eyes against the late-morning sun high in the sky on this early July day. Was that . . . sawdust?

“It rains a lot here, okay? I have better uses for my time than washing a vehicle that will be muddy again tomorrow. And not that it’s any of your business, but I prefer to spend my money on more important things than a hunk of metal.”

“Obviously.” He gave the truck another dubious once-over. “Hmph.”

With that pithy retort, she stalked back to the front of his car. He trailed after her. “Why did you stop so suddenly, anyway?”

“A dog ran in front of me.”

“I didn’t see a dog.”

“You didn’t see me brake, either. If you’d kept a few car lengths between us—and been paying more attention to the road—you could have stopped in time.” She bent to inspect her truck again. “Lucky for me, this baby’s sturdy. I don’t see any serious damage.” She shifted her attention to his car. “Your wheels, however, are going to need some work.”

For the first time, he gave the BMW his full attention. The left front fender was crinkled, the broken glass from the headlight glinting on the pavement.

Great.

Wasn’t it enough that his career was in shambles and his future in limbo without adding a smashed-up car to his list of woes?

He wiped a hand down his face. Some homecoming this was turning out to be.

“There’s a body shop in Bandon.”

At least the woman’s tone was a shade less hostile now.

“Yeah. I know. Marv’s.”

“So . . . you want me to call the police, file an accident report? The chief can get here fast. I passed her a few blocks back.”

And have Lexie read him the riot act, maybe even cite him for using his cell while driving?

Not a chance.

“Why don’t we just exchange contact information?”

“I don’t need yours. I won’t be calling my insurance company. But ah’ll give you mine.” She rummaged through her pockets, the faint hint of a southern accent lingering in the air. “I thought I had some business cards with me . . . but this will work.” She pulled out a dog-eared receipt and scribbled on the back with the stub of a pencil.

Eric skimmed the slip after she handed it over. No name. Just a phone number—with a local area code. “I take it you live around here?”

“Yeah.” She retreated a step and tucked her fingers in her front pockets. “You want to see if your car is drivable before I leave?”

He examined the BMW again. It wasn’t listing, and the tire was holding air. “I think the damage is mostly cosmetic. I don’t have far to go. I’ll be fine.”

“Suit yourself.” She strode back to the cab of her truck, stopping at the door to skewer him with one final scowl. “And do yourself a favor. Ditch the cell while you’re driving.”

Without waiting for a response, she swung up behind the wheel, started the engine, and drove off, spewing noxious fumes in her wake.

Eric turned away from the billow of reeking exhaust, shoved the slip of paper with her number in the pocket of his jeans, and sighed. After psyching himself up during the five-hour drive from Portland to share the bad news with his father, he’d been as ready as possible for that conversation when he drove past the Welcome to Hope Harbor sign. Had even tried to call his dad seconds before the fender bender to alert him of his approach. Softening the surprise of this unexpected visit with a few minutes’ warning had seemed like the considerate thing to do.

But since his dad hadn’t answered, and since the accident had totally *unpsyched* him, why not take a walk on the beach,

past the soaring sea stacks, before he headed home? The salt air and sea breeze had always given him a lift . . . helped clear his mind . . . calmed him . . . when he needed it most.

And he could use some calm about now.

Trudging back to the driver-side door, he tried to look on the bright side. His life might be a wreck, but the car was fixable and no one had been hurt.

There was one other plus too.

This day couldn't get any worse.



BJ Stevens flicked on her left-turn signal, swung onto Eleanor Cooper's street, and tuned out the rumble in her stomach. Fixing a stuck door hadn't been on her lunchtime agenda—but what could you do when a kindly eighty-eight-year-old woman called to say she couldn't get out of her bathroom?

As she pulled into the driveway of Eleanor's Cape Cod-style house, BJ scrutinized the modest structure. The paint was flaking on the shutters. The stepping-stones winding toward the front door were rippling. The edge of one of the wooden steps leading to the small front porch showed signs of rot.

This house needed help.

A lot of it.

But so did the houses owned by many of the older Hope Harbor residents. Upkeep had simply become too much for them. Yet none wanted to leave the place they'd called home for most of their lives.

Understandable—as she well knew.

A pang echoed in her heart . . . followed by a surge of all-too-familiar guilt.

Gripping the wheel with one hand, she jerked the gearshift into park with the other. This was not the time to dwell on the

past . . . or on regrets. She needed to rescue Eleanor from the bathroom and fix that recalcitrant door.

After grabbing her toolbox, she followed the uneven pavers to the porch and felt around under the wicker planter of geraniums until her fingers encountered the key Eleanor had promised would be there. Ten seconds later, she cracked the door and peeked in, scanning the shadows in case Methuselah was crouched on the other side, waiting for a chance to escape.

No sign of the cantankerous cat.

She slipped inside and moved toward the hall bath. “I’m here, Eleanor.” Her raised voice bounced off the walls. “I’ll have you out of there in a minute.”

“Oh, bless you, sweet child!” Relief infused the older woman’s muffled words. “I’m sorry to bother you during the workday.”

“Don’t worry about it. I was on my lunch hour.” BJ set her toolbox on the carpet beside the gold-and-black-striped feline who’d taken up sentry duty outside the bathroom door. “Hi, Methuselah.” She stroked his soft fur, earning her a mellow meow. “How long has the door been giving you trouble, Eleanor?”

“Six or eight weeks, I imagine. It’s been getting worse—but I never thought it would trap me inside. A firm tug has always done the trick if it gets stubborn.”

BJ tested the door.

Definitely stuck.

“Let me give it a push. Can you back away from the door?”

“Yes. I’m tucking myself into the corner now . . . all set.”

BJ positioned her shoulder against the wood and shoved. The door shimmied but didn’t release its hold on the frame. She tried again, putting more muscle into the effort. This time it gave way.

Instantly Methuselah wove around her legs and disappeared into the bathroom.

Once the door swung open, she turned her attention to Eleanor. The older woman's trademark neat chignon had loosened, releasing wisps of soft white hair. Her cheeks were flushed, and there was a bruise forming on the back of the hand she lifted to smooth down the wayward tendrils.

"How long were you stuck in here?" BJ edged back to let Eleanor escape the confined space, Methuselah meowing at her heels.

"About an hour. I tugged on the door, rested a bit, tugged on it some more. Thank goodness I had my phone with me. I thought about calling 911, but that seemed extreme." She paused in the hall to adjust her glasses and fuss with her hair, gripping her walker with one hand. "I imagine I look a sight."

"No, but you do have a nasty bruise on your hand." BJ gently touched the aging skin.

Eleanor flexed her fingers and studied the black-and-blue splotch. "I lost my grip on the knob during one attempt and banged my hand against the vanity. No harm done, though. This old skin bruises if you breathe on it. I'll be fine. Now what do you suppose is wrong with that door—aside from humidity?"

BJ gave the hardware on the doorframe a quick inspection. "Humidity doesn't help, but some of the screws in the hinges are also loose. That can cause a door to sag." She pulled out a screwdriver and tried tightening a couple, but they were stripped.

Of course. A simple fix would be too easy.

She rooted among her tools, found a longer screw, and replaced the one closest to the center of the jamb, tightening until it dug into fresh wood.

"Let's see if this helps." She straightened up and tried the door.

It opened . . . but under protest.

"That's a big improvement." Eleanor patted her arm encouragingly.

“Not big enough. I don’t want you getting stuck again.” Once more she dug around in her toolbox, withdrawing a few toothpicks and some wood glue.

“What are you doing now?” Eleanor leaned closer to watch while Methuselah nosed into the box.

“I’m going to coat the toothpicks with glue and shove them into the screw holes. Once they dry, it will be like new wood and I can reset the screws. That should fix the problem—but if not, I’ll try shimming one or two of the hinge mortises.”

“My. You certainly know your stuff.”

BJ grinned. “You’re easy to impress.”

“Not at all. I just recognize talent. LA’s loss was Hope Harbor’s gain when you moved here last year.”

“It was a positive change for me too.” BJ continued to work with quick efficiency as she spoke. If she finished fast, she might still be able to swing by Charley’s and grab an order of tacos on her way back to the job site.

“You know, there’s one thing I can’t understand.” Eleanor’s tone grew thoughtful.

“What’s that?” If the older woman wanted a lesson in carpentry, BJ was happy to oblige.

“With all your talent and beauty—plus your kind, caring heart—I can’t believe some smart, handsome man hasn’t wooed and won you by now.”

BJ’s fingers spasmed on the glue bottle. A spurt of white paste shot out, coating the toothpick and her fingers before dripping onto the tile floor . . . and Methuselah.

The cat yowled and sprang back.

“Oh, mercy!” Eleanor’s hand flew to her chest. “I must have distracted you. Let me grab some paper towels.”

While she trundled down the hall as fast as her arthritic knees allowed, Methuselah in her wake, BJ stared at the sticky mess on her fingers.

Sticky mess.

Yeah, that about summed up the state of her LA romance.

But she had a new life now. One that was calm, fulfilling—and blessedly romance-free. If she hadn't been on edge from the accident, she wouldn't have overreacted to Eleanor's comment.

BJ secured the cap on the wood glue with more force than necessary. She should have called the police and let them throw the book at that guy in the BMW. Maybe a ticket would have taught him not to drive with his cell pasted to his ear, paying more attention to conversation than the road.

Although—in fairness—he *had* been contrite.

Not to mention good-looking.

Oh, for pity's sake!

She grabbed a wad of toilet paper as more glue leaked through her fingers onto the floor. You'd think she'd be immune to the stereotypical charms of tall, dark, and handsome after—

No! She was not going to even *think* his name.

He wasn't worth it.

She wiped her fingers as best she could with the flimsy tissue and took a calming breath. That fender bender had really done a number on her peace of mind.

But it shouldn't have, BJ. Your truck emerged unscathed. The other guy's the one who has to deal with repair hassles. That's not why you're tense.

"Oh, shut up." She ripped off flecks of tissue that had stuck to her fingers, trying to stifle the annoying little voice in her head.

"Did you say something, dear?" Eleanor's query wafted in from the kitchen.

"Just . . . uh . . . talking to myself."

"You're too young for that. I'll be back in a jiffy. I'm trying to clean up Methuselah, who isn't inclined to cooperate."

Hooking a piece of wayward hair behind her ear, BJ slumped back against the doorframe and faced the truth. Much as she

might want to blame her agitated state on the accident, the little voice in her head was right. The BMW owner—and her visceral reaction to him—was the culprit. Like it or not, the instant her gaze had connected with those brown eyes, a bolt of electricity had sizzled through her.

The very kind of ill-advised attraction that could lead a woman astray if she followed her heart instead of prudently listening to her brain.

And she wasn't making that mistake again.

Still . . . it hadn't been fair to jump all over the guy because she was annoyed at herself. He *had* apologized. Offered to make restitution. His eyes had held sincere remorse . . . plus some other emotion, now that she thought about it. Melancholy, perhaps? Dejection? Despondency? Hard to pinpoint. But there had been a sadness in them that seemed unrelated to the accident. As if his day had gone down the tubes long before their unpleasant encounter . . . and he hadn't needed any more grief.

She blew out a breath.

Wonderful.

Now she could add a heaping serving of guilt to whatever she had time to scarf down for lunch.

“Here you go. Let me know if you need more.” Eleanor pushed the walker down the hall and thrust a handful of paper towels at her while Methuselah kept a wary distance.

“This should do it.” She used half of the towels to wipe the globs of glue off the tile, then dampened the rest and swiped up the residue.

“Do you want me to get rid of those?” Eleanor held out her hand again.

“Thanks.” She passed them over. “I'll fill the last couple of holes while you do that.”

BJ finished up as fast as she could, packed away her tools, and waited for Eleanor near the front door.

When the older woman reappeared, a foil-wrapped bundle rested on the tray of her walker. “Thank you again for coming to my rescue.”

“No problem. And I’ll be back tomorrow or the next day, after the glue is dry, to reset those screws. Could you leave the bathroom door open until I finish the job?”

“Certainly. I only close it out of habit. It isn’t as if there’s anyone here to disturb me, other than Methuselah—and at his age, he spends most of the day sleeping in the sun.” Her smile drooped for a moment, then brightened again as she picked up the plate and held it out. “A little thank-you treat.”

“That’s not necessary, Eleanor.”

“I disagree. Besides, I like to bake—and I know you’re partial to my fudge cake. Have it for dessert after lunch.”

At this point, with the clock ticking, it might *be* lunch—not that she needed to share that with Eleanor.

“I’ll do that—and enjoy every bite.” BJ took the offering. “I’ll call before I swing by to finish the job.”

“No need. I’m always here. You won’t be interrupting anything.”

The older woman’s tone was upbeat, as usual, yet a faint thread of loneliness wound through her words.

Most people would miss that subtle undercurrent.

Not BJ, though. She was tuned in to such nuances these days—which did *not* help restore her peace of mind.

“Is everything all right, dear?”

“Yes.” She switched gears and hefted the plate. “I’m looking forward to this.”

“Enjoy, sweet child. And don’t work too hard.”

She let that pass as she left the house. Working too hard was part of her DNA . . . but if she couldn’t dial back her work ethic, at least the work she did in Hope Harbor—on *and* off the clock—was worthwhile and satisfying.

And it might become even more so if the plan she was formulating came to fruition.

After carefully stowing the cake on the seat beside her, BJ glanced back toward Eleanor's planter-filled porch. With a final wave, the older woman picked up a watering can and began tending her abundant container garden.

BJ put the truck in reverse and checked the clock on the dash. No time for a swing by Charley's. But her appetite had disappeared anyway, thanks to the unsettling conversation with Eleanor about romance . . . and a disturbing encounter with a good-looking stranger.

Which was dumb.

She was *not* in the market for a relationship, especially with someone of the tall, dark, and handsome variety.

Maybe someday—some very distant day, far down the road—she'd entertain the notion of love again.

Maybe.

But for now, her quiet, simple, peaceful—uncomplicated—life suited her just fine.

And she had no intention of changing it.