

# *Sandpiper Cove*

A Hope Harbor Novel

IRENE HANNON



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To my niece, Maureen Hannon,  
as she graduates from eighth grade.

From the day I first held you in my arms,  
you captured my heart—  
and your sunny smile, warm hugs,  
and contagious joie de vivre  
have blessed my life ever since.

May your high school years be filled with  
wonderful surprises, new friends, and exciting opportunities  
as you spread your wings and soar.



# 1

.....

Not again.

Adam Stone slammed the door on his decrepit Kia, expelled a breath, and surveyed the damage.

The rustic, one-room cabin he called home appeared to be untouched this go-round. But it would take some serious sanding to get rid of the profanities spray-painted on the small outbuilding that housed his woodworking shop.

At least the vandals hadn't broken any windows this time. But where was Clyde?

Breaking into a jog on the gravel drive, he scanned the surrounding woods that offered peeks at the pristine Oregon beach and choppy April sea a hundred yards away.

"Clyde!"

No response.

"Clyde! Come on out, boy. It's safe."

Silence, save for the distinctive trill of the sandpiper that gave this secluded cove its name.

He clamped his jaw shut. Damaged property, he could deal with. But if those thugs had done anything to . . .

A soft whimper came from the direction of the workshop, and the swinging door he'd rigged up for the adopted stray gave a slight shimmy.

Adam switched direction, digging out the keys to the shed as he goosed his jog to a sprint.

"I'm here, boy. Hang on." He fumbled the key as he inserted it in the lock, tremors sabotaging his fingers.

Clenching his teeth, he tried again. It was crazy to worry about a dumb mutt who hadn't had enough sense to move out of the path of a car. Letting yourself care for anyone—or anything—was an invitation for grief.

And he didn't need any more of that.

Yet walking away from a hurt, defenseless creature hadn't been an option on that foggy day by the side of Highway 101 when he'd found the injured pooch barely clinging to life.

The lock clicked, and he pushed the door open.

From the corner of the shop where he'd wedged himself behind some scrap wood, Clyde poked out his black nose. He whimpered again, his big, soulful brown eyes filled with fear.

Adam exhaled, his tension whooshing out like CO<sub>2</sub> being released from a soft drink can.

Clyde was scared—but okay.

Hunkering down, he held out his hand and gentled his voice. "You're safe, boy. Come on out."

Clyde didn't budge.

No problem.

Adam sat cross-legged on the rough-hewn floorboards and waited. Pushing any creature to trust if they weren't yet ready to do so could backfire—no matter how well-intentioned the overture. The small white scar on his right hand from the night Clyde had mistaken a friendly reach for a threat proved that.

But these days, it didn't take long for the mangy mongrel to emerge from a hiding place.

Less than fifteen seconds later, Clyde crept out and inched toward him, limping on his bad leg.

As the dog approached, Adam fought the urge to pull the shaking mass of mottled fur into a comforting embrace.

Instead, he remained motionless until Clyde sniffed around, stuck a damp nose in his palm—and climbed into his lap.

All forty-three pounds of him.

Only then did Adam touch the dog.

“No one’s going to hurt you, fella. Everything’s fine.” The last word hitched as he stroked the mutt. “I’m here, and I won’t be leaving again until I go to work tomorrow morning. We’ll spend the rest of Sunday together. I might even grill a burger for you too instead of making you eat that dog chow the vet recommended. How does some comfort food sound?”

Of course the stupid dog had no idea what he was saying—but his soothing tone seemed to calm the canine. Clyde’s shakes subsided, and when their gazes connected, the mutt’s eyes brimmed with adoration.

A sudden rush of warmth filled Adam’s heart—but he quickly squelched it. How pathetic, to be touched by a dog’s affection.

Besides, it was all an illusion.

Dogs didn’t feel emotions.

Without breaking eye contact, Clyde gave his fingers a quick, dry lick. As if to say, *Yes, we do. And I think you’re great.*

Pressure built in Adam’s throat as he smoothed a hand over Clyde’s back, his fingertips feeling every ridge of scar tissue that had been there long before their lives had intersected sixteen months ago, when both of them had been in desperate need of a friend.

Okay. Fine.

Maybe he was reading too much into the dog’s reaction.

Maybe he was being too sentimental.

But for today, he'd let himself believe the abused pooch *did* have deeper feelings.

Because while he'd made a few friends in Hope Harbor during the year and a half he'd lived here, the only one waiting for him in Sandpiper Cove at the end of each day was Clyde.

And without the canine companion who'd claimed a wedge of his heart, his life would be even lonelier.



“Happy Monday, Lexie. How’s your week starting out?”

Hope Harbor police chief Lexie Graham leaned a shoulder against the side of Charley’s taco truck and considered the man’s question as she gave the picturesque wharf a sweep.

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 adorned with bright awnings and flower boxes faced the sea. A white gazebo occupied the small park behind Charley’s truck, where the two-block-long, crescent-shaped frontage road dead-ended at the river.

All was peaceful and predictable . . . as usual.

Just the way she liked it.

“So far, so good. Everything’s been quiet.”

“Looks can be deceiving, though. You ordering for one today?”

“Yes.” She studied the taco-making artist, who hadn’t changed one iota in all the years she’d known him. Same leathery, latte-colored skin. Same long gray hair pulled back into a ponytail. Same kindly, insightful eyes.

It was comforting to have one unchanging element in a world that liked to throw curves. The town sage and wisdom-dispenser could always be counted on to offer sound advice and brighten her day.

But his looks-can-be-deceiving comment didn't leave her feeling warm and fuzzy.

Squinting, she took another survey of Dockside Drive. Nothing amiss in town, as far as she could see. Nor did there appear to be any issues meriting attention on the water. 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 were as unchanging as the sea stacks on the beach outside of town.

Everything seemed normal.

Maybe Charley's comment had just been one of those philosophical observations he liked to throw out on occasion.

Whatever the impetus for his remark, she didn't intend to dwell on it.

"What kind of tacos are you making?"

"Cod's the star today." He pulled a handful of chopped red onions out of a cooler and tossed them on the griddle. The savory aroma set off a rumble in her stomach. "Enhanced by my grandmother's secret lime cilantro cream sauce."

"Sounds great, as always."

"We aim to please." He flipped the fish on the grill and sprinkled some kind of seasoning over the ingredients on the griddle. "So did you find any clues out at Adam's place?"

At the non sequitur, she blinked. "What are you talking about?"

"The vandalism at Adam Stone's place yesterday." He stirred the onions. "Didn't he report it?"

"Not that I'm aware of." And she would know if he had. Every crime report landed on her desk.

"That surprises me, seeing as how this was his second hit."

There'd been *two* incidents of unreported vandalism inside the town limits?

"Well, I can't solve crimes if people don't report them." A prickle of irritation sharpened her tone.



“I suppose, given his history, he might prefer to stay off law enforcement’s radar. You do know Adam, don’t you?”

She called up an image of the man she’d seen only from a distance. Six-one or two, lean, muscled, dark hair worn longish and secured with a black bandana, bad-boy stubble, usually attired in jeans and a scuffed black leather jacket. She wouldn’t be surprised if he sported a few tattoos too.

In other words, a guy who’d feel at home in a motorcycle gang—and who fit the hard-edged name everyone in town except Charley called him.

Stone.

“I know who he is.” When an ex-con came to town, the police chief did her homework. “But we’ve never spoken.”

“Is that right?” Charley set three corn tortillas on the counter beside him. “He’s a regular at Grace Christian. I assumed your paths had crossed.”

They might have if she still went to church.

Not a subject she was inclined to discuss over fish tacos on a public street.

Interesting that the guy went to services, though. She wouldn’t have pegged him as a churchgoer.

“No. I work a lot of Sunday mornings.” Like all of them. On purpose.

“Well, I hope you get a handle on this vandalism before it escalates to a lot worse than spray-painted graffiti, a few broken windows, and some uprooted flowers.” He gestured to the planters along the wharf as he began assembling the tacos. “Rose and her garden club members spent hours salvaging what they could of the flowers after the last incident. And quite a few of the planters are damaged. They’re being held together with spit and prayers.”

“We’re working the case as hard as we can, but whoever is doing this is picking times when no one is around. With our small force, we can’t be everywhere at once 24/7.”

“I hear you.” He wrapped the tacos in white paper, slid them into a brown bag, and set them on the counter in front of her. “It’s a shame about Adam’s place, though. He’s had too many tough breaks already.”

“Not much I can do if he doesn’t bother to file a report.” She dug out her money.

“But there might be a clue out there.” Charley counted out her change and passed it over.

*And maybe you should check that out.*

Charley didn’t have to say the words for her to get his message. The man never pushed, but he had a gentle way of nudging people in directions he thought they should go.

Lexie sighed and shoved the coins into her pocket. “I suppose I could swing by his place.”

“Couldn’t hurt. But he won’t be home until later.”

Right.

He and the rest of BJ’s construction crew were in the middle of building Tracy and Michael’s house out at Harbor Point Cranberries. Given the small-town grapevine, showing up at the farm out of the blue to talk to him might not be the best plan. Who knew what people would think if law enforcement tracked him down? And a man who’d paid his debt to society didn’t need any more hassles.

“I could stop by after work, on my way home.” Not that there was much chance she’d find a clue lying around a day after the fact. “How do you know what happened out there, anyway?”

“Adam came by for tacos yesterday afternoon. I think a Sunday visit to my humble truck is his weekly splurge.”

An order of tacos from Charley’s was a splurge?

The man must not be saving much of the money he earned working for BJ.

Then again, if you were starting from scratch after spending five years in prison, it could take a while to refill the well.

“Thanks for lunch.” Lexie picked up the bag, the tantalizing smell tickling her nose.

“Enjoy.” Charley grinned, gave her a thumbs-up, and greeted the next customer in line.

Bag in hand, Lexie eyed the tempting benches arrayed along the curving wharf—but there was a mound of paperwork waiting on her desk, and she’d procrastinated too much already.

She picked up her pace. Maybe after dinner tonight, she and Matt could come down and watch the boats for a while. He always enjoyed that—and it would be a pleasant end to the day.

Especially if her official visit with police-shy Adam Stone turned out to be less than cordial.



Someone was coming down the road to his cabin.

As the crunch of tires on gravel echoed in the quiet cove, Adam stopped sanding.

He never had visitors.

Ever.

None were invited; none came . . . except for the vandal—or vandals.

But since this visitor wasn’t attempting a stealth approach, it wasn’t likely another attack.

Clyde edged closer and emitted an anxious whine.

“No worries, fella.” He bent and gave the pooch a reassuring pat. “It might just be someone who took a wrong turn.”

He hoped.

An unfamiliar Civic nosed out of the woods a hundred feet from the cabin. The car didn’t set off any alarm bells—but the unfamiliar figure visible through the open driver’s-side window did.

His heart stumbled.

Why was a cop paying him a visit?

As if sensing his sudden apprehension, Clyde rubbed against the leg of his jeans and gave another small whine.

He bent down to stroke the dog again, keeping a wary eye on the woman who emerged from behind the wheel.

Though they'd never exchanged a word, he knew who Lexie Graham was. Everyone in town did. Not only was she the police chief, but her stint with the State Department in some far-off hot spot lent her an intriguing air of mystery. Plus, she was Hollywood-worthy stunning.

Until now, however, he'd only seen her from a distance.

As much distance as possible.

No reason to tangle with a woman who was daunting even from far away . . . and who held a lot of power in her hands.

Up close, however, she was *much* more intimidating—in a different way.

As she approached, he tried not to pay too much attention to the sleek, lustrous dark hair pulled back at her nape. Or the lush lips and model-like cheekbones. Or the tall, willowy frame that had curves in all the right places.

But ignoring all those assets was difficult.

He might be an ex-con with an ugly background who had no hope of ever finding a decent woman willing to share his life, but he was also a man.

And no man who was still breathing would be immune to the chief's obvious charms.

When she stopped six feet away from him and removed her shades, the air whooshed out of his lungs.

Her eyes were as blue as the cobalt sea on a sunny day in Sandpiper Cove and fringed by dark, sweeping lashes that belonged in a mascara ad.

"Mr. Stone, I'm Lexie Graham. I don't believe we've met." Her voice was businesslike but pleasant, with a faint trace of huskiness.

He stared at the slender, graceful fingers she extended until a nudge on the leg from Clyde jump-started his brain.

In silence, he transferred the sandpaper to his left hand and gave her fingers a firm squeeze.

After a few moments, she arched an eyebrow and flicked a glance at their still-clasped hands.

Whoops.

He released her fingers at once.

“Sorry to bother you at home, but I understand you had some vandalism here yesterday—for the second time.” She surveyed the side of the workshop, where remnants of the crude graffiti clung stubbornly to the wood despite his liberal application of elbow grease.

He frowned.

How in the world did she know his place had been targeted twice?

“Who told you that?”

“The source isn’t important. I’m curious why you didn’t report the damage.”

“There wasn’t much to report.”

“Breaking the law is breaking the law.”

“Look . . . I don’t want any trouble.”

“You’ve already had trouble. And whoever did this could come back again.”

“If they do, I’ll deal with it. This isn’t high-end property. They can’t break anything I can’t fix.”

She folded her arms and adopted the wide-legged stance police used to intimidate.

It did not endear her to him.

“Dealing with lawbreakers is the responsibility of law enforcement.” Her voice was harder now, and there was steel in her eyes. “And you’re not the only victim. There are quite a few others—all innocent citizens who don’t deserve this kind

of hassle. Some are older and far less capable than you of fixing the damage.”

“I’m sorry for that, but I don’t want to get involved.” His response came out stiff. Defiant, almost.

Not a smart attitude to take with a cop.

But instead of getting mean and nasty with him, the chief uncrossed her arms . . . let out a slow breath . . . and angled toward the water visible through the trees.

Several silent seconds ticked by.

When she turned back, her features—and tone—were friendlier. “I can understand why you’d prefer to keep your distance from trouble. But we’re getting nowhere solving this. I need more clues, and I hoped you might let me nose around and see if I can spot anything that could help us identify and apprehend the culprits before these minor annoyances ratchet up and someone gets hurt.”

Her request wasn’t unreasonable.

And as he’d learned in the school of hard knocks, being reasonable earned you brownie points—especially if you had nothing to hide.

“Fine.” He flexed some of the tightness out of his shoulders. “Search all you want, but I doubt you’ll find anything. I didn’t.”

“Thank you. Any other damage besides that?” She motioned toward his workshop.

“Not this visit. Three weeks ago, they broke a window in the cabin and tore out one of the steps to the porch while I was at work.”

“They must not have been worried about anyone hearing them.” She inspected the new riser, pristine and raw compared to the weathered gray wood around it.

“This is an out-of-the-way spot, and no one’s here on weekdays except my dog, Clyde.”

At the mention of his name, the canine peeked out from behind his legs.

The chief's manner warmed a few more degrees as she dropped down to one knee and held out a hand. "Hey, Clyde."

"He's skittish around . . ."

Before Adam could finish the sentence, Clyde sidled out from behind his legs, sniffed the woman's hand, and moved close enough for her to pet him.

He even gave her fingers a lick.

Adam's jaw dropped.

"You are one handsome guy, you know that?" Clyde started wagging his tail, and she chuckled—a deep, throaty sound that set off an odd flutter in Adam's stomach. "Yeah. You know it." She lifted her chin. "What breed is he?"

"Uh . . . mutt."

"Hmm." She studied him. "I see a touch of terrier . . . a dash of beagle . . . a hint of lab. Let's go with mixed breed. It sounds nicer than mutt. Don't you think so, Clyde?"

The pup gave a happy yip.

His dog had bonded with a police chief?

Go figure.

"I agree." After ruffling his fur once more, she stood. "I don't suppose the vandals left any spray cans behind."

He forced himself to shift gears. "No."

"Too bad. I'll let you get back to that while I poke around." She nodded toward the sandpaper he was holding. "You have your work cut out for you trying to get that paint off."

"Any damaged board can be smoothed out and made new with work and patience."

A flicker of surprise sparked in her blue irises. "A thought worth pondering."

With that, she began a slow circuit of the shed—Clyde trotting along at her heels.

Adam went back to sanding . . . but the mindless task left his brain free to think about the visitor roaming around his property who'd befriended his skittish dog.

If Clyde trusted her, she must be worth trusting. Animals had sound instincts about people.

Not that you needed them with the chief. She had to be trustworthy if she'd worked for the State Department. That kind of job would require all sorts of high-level security clearances and background checks.

The kind he'd never pass.

One more reminder that his past mistakes would taint him for the rest of his life and limit his opportunities to do a lot of things.

Including meet a nice woman.

What decent woman would want to associate with him?

A cloud of depression settled over him despite the shafts of spring sun filling the clearing with brightness and light.

He gritted his teeth and sanded harder.

That kind of thinking wasn't healthy. Better to take his new life one day at a time instead of worrying about—

"I don't see anything." The chief paused a few feet away from him, brushing off her hands as she inspected his work. "I'd say you're almost down to clean wood in that spot."

He surveyed the area he'd been sanding. Only faint traces of the obscenity remained.

Too bad it wasn't as easy to sand off the rough spots in a soul.

"Yeah. I'm getting there." With the shed, anyway.

"Are you certain you don't want to file an official report on the two incidents?"

"Yes. I took care of the damage, so the owner won't have to worry about an insurance claim."

"Suit yourself." She bent down and gave Clyde one last pat. "What happened to his leg?"



“I don’t know. It was twisted like that when I found him. But he’s learned to compensate.”

“Smart dog. Adapting is the key to survival.” A few beats of silence passed—and Adam had a feeling she wasn’t thinking about Clyde. Yet once she straightened up, her professional demeanor was back in place. She dug out a card and extended it. “If you change your mind, or if anything else happens, feel free to contact me. See you around, Clyde.”

With a wave, she returned to her car, Clyde following a few feet behind. After putting the Civic in gear, she turned around on the gravel pad and disappeared down the road that wove among the trees.

Not until the dust settled did Clyde return to his side, tail wagging, tongue hanging out in the goofy grin that often earned him a doggie treat.

“Since when did you decide to become an extrovert? I thought I was your best bud?”

Clyde sat on his haunches and rested one paw against Adam’s leg.

Who could resist that impish face?

“Apology accepted. Now let’s find you a treat.”

The dog followed him into the cabin, scarfed down a biscuit, and hurried back to the open door to look around.

As if he was hoping their visitor would return.

Hard to blame him.

Another visit from Lexie Graham would be welcome—even if she *was* a police chief.

But as he replaced the box of dog treats in the cabinet, fingered the woman’s card, and went back to cleaning up the shed, he recognized that thought for what it was.

A fanciful wish that had no more basis in reality than the fairy tales found in a children’s storybook.