

Pelican Point

A Hope Harbor Novel

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In loving memory of my wonderful mother,
Dorothy Hannon,
who had a deep affection for lighthouses.

Although you've been gone more than a year,
the light of your love continues
to shine in my heart,
guiding and blessing my days.

As it always will . . .
until we meet again.



1

.....

He'd inherited a *lighthouse*?

Ben Garrison stared at the dark-haired attorney, inhaled a lungful of the tangy, salt-laced air drifting in through the open window, and wiped a hand down his face.

No way.

Skip wouldn't do that to him.

It must be jet lag playing tricks on him. After all the flights he'd taken through multiple time zones to reach the Oregon coast, he was definitely in zombie land. And frequent changes in air pressure could mess with a person's ears, distort words.

At least he hoped that was the explanation.

Otherwise, this say-goodbye-and-take-a-few-weeks-to-decompress trip was going to turn into one gigantic headache.

Gripping his mug of coffee, he gave the view from the window a sweep. Usually the peaceful scene of bobbing boats in Hope Harbor's protected marina had a calming effect.

Not today.

Bracing, he refocused on the man across from him. "Tell me you didn't say lighthouse."

“Sorry.” Eric Nash folded his hands on the round conference table and gave him a commiserating grimace. “I wish I could.”

Ben closed his eyes and stifled a groan.

“I take it you weren’t aware of this . . . unique . . . asset in your grandfather’s estate.”

“No.” Ben took a long slug of his coffee, willing the caffeine to kick in.

Nada.

Too bad this brew wasn’t as potent as the stuff they chugged in the forward operating base hospitals where he’d spent his days for the past seven years. He could have used a high-octane boost about now.

“It’s the one on Pelican Point.” The man motioned toward the north. “You might remember it from your visits. Your grandfather said the two of you used to walk up there in the evening.”

An image of the fifty-foot-high weather-beaten lighthouse dating back to 1872 flashed through his mind—and despite the ache beginning to pulse in his temples, the corners of his lips rose.

Yeah, he remembered those walks. They’d been a nightly ritual during the summer visits of his youth. Fair skies or foul, they’d trekked from Skip’s small house in town up the winding, rocky path to the lighthouse after dinner. The view was amazing, and the stories Skip had told about shipwrecks and danger and the steady beacon of light that guided frightened sailors home on stormy nights had stirred his youthful imagination.

But his grandfather hadn’t owned the place.

And in the almost two decades since his last summer-break stay at age sixteen, Ben couldn’t recall Skip ever mentioning it. Nor had the subject come up during any of his whirlwind visits through the years.

So what was going on?

“I have clear memories of the lighthouse—but how did he

end up owning it?” Ben held tight to the ceramic mug, letting the warmth seep into his fingers.

“After it was deactivated and decommissioned by the Coast Guard three years ago, the government offered it to Hope Harbor. But the cost of restoring and maintaining the property was too high and the town declined. In the end, it was put up for auction.”

Ben knew where this was heading. Skip had loved that lighthouse—and all it symbolized. Light in the darkness. Guidance through turbulent waters. Salvation for the floundering. Hope for lost souls.

“I’m assuming my grandfather offered the highest bid.”

“He offered the *only* bid. It’s been his baby for the past two years. The price was reasonable—as lighthouses go—and from what I gathered, restoring it was a labor of love. However, it was also a money suck. I’m afraid there isn’t much of an estate left, other than his house and personal possessions.”

“I didn’t expect a lot, even without the lighthouse expenses.” No one who spent his life mining the sea for Dungeness crabs got rich—except the big operators. And if the cost of restoring and maintaining the structure was too high for a *town*, it was surprising Skip had anything left at all.

Other than the lighthouse.

An albatross that now belonged to him.

The throbbing in his temples intensified, giving the pounding bass beat of a rock band serious competition.

What in tarnation was he supposed to do with the thing?

“I’m afraid the lighthouse isn’t in the best shape, either—despite your grandfather’s efforts to restore it. After his knee issues began, he wasn’t able to do much physical labor, and contractors charge a lot for that kind of work. Some people in town lent a hand on occasion, but progress was slow.”

Tucking away the bad news that the lighthouse might be

crumbling, Ben homed in on the other piece of information the man had shared. “What knee issues?”

The attorney cocked his head. “You didn’t know?”

“No. In his emails, he always said everything was fine. We didn’t often talk by phone, but whenever we did, he was upbeat.”

“Maybe he didn’t want you to worry, given the demands of your job.”

Yeah. That sounded like Skip. His grandfather knew army surgeons working near the front lines had a high-stress, high-adrenaline, fast-paced lifestyle. They’d discussed it often. And Ned Garrison had never been the type to burden other people with his problems.

But Ben wasn’t other people.

He was family.

And he owed Skip. Big-time. Without those summer visits to look forward to after the acrimonious divorce that had rocked his childhood, who knew how he’d have ended up?

There was nothing he wouldn’t have done for the man who’d been his lifeline.

Ben took another sip of the cooling coffee, buying himself a few moments to rein in his wobbling emotions. “Tell me about the knee issues.”

“Your grandfather wasn’t one to dwell on unpleasant subjects, but I understand he had bad arthritis and opted for a knee replacement not long after he acquired the lighthouse. An infection set in, requiring revision surgery. When that didn’t work, a third surgery was done to insert a metal rod—which left him with a permanent limp and hampered his physical activities. He couldn’t do much on the lighthouse anymore, so four months ago he decided to sell.”

“Who was his surgeon?” Ben’s jaw tightened. If someone had botched this job, they were going to be held accountable.

And why hadn't Skip taken advantage of his expertise? No, he hadn't done many battlefield knee replacements—but he was an orthopedic surgeon, for crying out loud. He could have consulted on the case, vetted the specialist his grandfather had chosen.

Eric riffled through the papers in front of him and extracted a sheet. “Jonathan Allen in Coos Bay. I don't see a primary care doctor listed for your grandfather. He must have done what most of the locals do and simply visited the urgent care clinic in town for everyday medical needs. They may have recommended Dr. Allen.”

“Thanks.” Ben jotted down the man's name. Before he left Oregon, he intended to pay the doctor a visit and review his grandfather's medical records.

But it wasn't likely the knee procedure had anything to do with the massive heart attack that had felled him.

Swallowing past the lump in his throat, he shifted gears. “If my grandfather put the lighthouse on the open market, I'm assuming the town still doesn't want to buy it.”

“Correct. A few residents tried to stir up some interest, but the effort petered out. Even if the structure was in pristine condition, Oregon has an abundance of lighthouses already—many much more impressive than ours—so it's not as if it would draw tourists who might contribute to the local economy.”

Hard to argue with that logic—or fault the town for passing on the purchase.

“So a private buyer is the answer.”

“If you can find one.” The attorney didn't sound any more confident than Ben felt. “Your grandfather listed it with an agent, but I don't believe there have been any inquiries.”

Of course not.

That would be too easy.

“I'll go up and look it over after I arrange the memorial

service for my grandfather. Is there anyone in town who might be able to do a structural assessment?”

“My wife’s an architect and runs a local construction firm.” Eric rose, crossed to his desk, and extracted a business card from a drawer. “She went out before your grandfather bought it to give him her thoughts. She won’t mind running up there again to reevaluate it.” He returned to his seat at the table and handed over the card.

“Thanks.” Ben pocketed it. “Is there anything else we need to discuss?”

“No. Your grandfather’s estate was in order. Transitioning the assets will be simple. You have the keys to his house and car, and the paperwork’s been signed. You’re set.” Eric pushed an envelope across the table. “This is the key to the lighthouse.”

For a fraction of a second, Ben hesitated.

But there was no avoiding the truth.

He owned a lighthouse.

One that apparently no one wanted.

Including him.

Heaving a resigned sigh, he picked up the envelope and rose.

Eric stood, too, and extended his hand. “My condolences again on your loss. Your grandfather was a wonderful man—and an asset to this town.”

“Thanks.” He returned the attorney’s firm clasp.

“If I can be of any other assistance while you’re here, don’t hesitate to let me know.”

“I appreciate that. But I don’t plan to stay long.” Or he hadn’t, until he’d inherited a lighthouse. “Thank you for delaying our meeting a few hours.”

“No problem. I know how hard it can be to maintain a schedule on travel days. With all the ground you’ve covered, you must be operating on fumes.”

“I am.” Hard to believe he’d been in the Middle East thirty-six sleepless hours ago. “I’m going to crash at my grandfather’s house for a while until I feel more human.”

“Sounds like a plan. The Myrtle Café is open if you want to grab an early dinner first. Or you could swing by Charley’s on the wharf. You might have gone there with your grandfather as a kid.”

“I did. Often.” His mouth watered just thinking about the savory fish tacos the man concocted. A visit to Charley’s was on his Hope Harbor must-do list—but not until he got some z’s. He needed sleep more than food.

The attorney walked him to the door, and Ben exited into a steady drizzle typical of the Oregon coast in mid-April—or any month.

Tucking the paperwork the man had given him under his jacket, he hit the remote and jogged toward his rental car.

Fifteen seconds later, he put the key in the ignition. Tapped the wheel.

Should he drive up to Pelican Point and pay Skip’s folly a quick visit, or save that disagreeable task for later?

No contest.

Later.

He was fading fast—and the lighthouse wasn’t going anywhere.

Unfortunately.

After checking for traffic, he pulled onto Dockside Drive. Maybe, as with the prophets of old, a solution to his dilemma would come to him in a dream.

And if it didn’t?

He was going to be beating the bushes to find a buyer for his unexpected—and unwanted—legacy.



At the sudden peal of her doorbell, Marci Weber's fingers tightened on the tube of toothpaste, sending a minty-striped squirt arcing toward the mirror over her bathroom sink.

Who could be on her front porch at this hour of the night? No one in Hope Harbor came calling after eight o'clock, let alone ten-fifteen.

Pulse accelerating, she dropped the tube onto the vanity, ignoring the sinuous line of goo draped over her faucet and coiled in her sink.

Rubbing her palms down her sleep shirt, she crept into the hall, sidled up to the window in her dark bedroom, and peered down into the night.

Drat.

The tiny arched roof over her small front porch hid the caller from her sight, despite the dusk-to-dawn lights flanking the front door.

And the notion of going downstairs to get a better view from one of the front windows goosed the speed of the blender in her stomach from stir to puree.

No surprise there, given her history.

The bell pealed again, jolting her into action. She scurried over to the nightstand, snatched her pepper gel out of the drawer, and yanked her cell from the charger. Finger poised to tap in 911, she tiptoed back to the window, heart banging against her ribs.

Breathe, Marci. This is Hope Harbor. Bad stuff rarely happens here. They caught that teenage vandal who was getting his jollies destroying other people's property, and there haven't been any serious incidents since. You're overreacting.

True.

Nevertheless, she kept a tight grip on the phone while she waited for her visitor to vacate the porch and walk away.

But if he or she didn't leave . . . if her uninvited caller *did* have malice in mind . . . she had a first-rate alarm system that was

already armed for the night, the Hope Harbor police would be here in minutes, and a faceful of pepper gel would stop anyone in their tracks.

She'd be fine.

Still . . . why couldn't Great-Aunt Edith have chosen to live in the middle of town rather than on the fringes? The Pelican Point cottage might be charming, but the old saying was true.

There was safety in numbers.



If no one answered the door, what was he supposed to do about the stuck cat?

Ben planted his fists on his hips and frowned. There were lights on upstairs. Someone must be home.

On the other hand, it *was* kind of late. Not by his standards, perhaps, but Hope Harbor tended to shut down by ten o'clock on weeknights, as far as he could recall. He might have caught the owner preparing for bed.

The very thing he should be doing instead of prowling around in the dark.

Except he was too wired and wide awake for sleep, thanks to the four hours he'd spent comatose in Skip's guest room after meeting with the attorney. Much as he'd needed to rack out, he should have forced himself to wait until a normal bedtime. Now his body clock was more out of whack than ever.

The hike up the rocky path to the lighthouse, with only a peekaboo moon and flashlight to guide him, had dispelled some of his restless energy, but if he'd known a stuck cat was waiting for him on the winding Pelican Point road, he'd have returned to town on the more dangerous cliff path.

Giving up on the occupants of the Cape Cod-style cottage, Ben expelled an annoyed breath and stepped off the porch.

A plaintive meow greeted him as he circled around the house to the adjacent tree, and he aimed his flashlight at the amber-eyed feline.

If the cat didn't have a bleeding paw, he'd walk away. It might be easier for kitties to climb up trees than descend, but hunger motivated most of them to return to solid ground on their own.

Unless they were hurt or scared.

And the cowering cat above him was both.

Ben eyed the limb-free lower trunk of the hardwood tree. No way could he climb that. Besides, an encroaching human might further freak out the cat.

He could rouse the volunteer fire department—but asking them to rescue a kitty at this hour wouldn't endear him to the locals.

Stymied, Ben surveyed the yard. A weathered garden shed off to the side might hold some useful implement.

He strode over to the structure and tested the door. Open.

Aiming the flashlight inside, he poked his head in and swept the beam over the contents, taking a fast inventory. Six-foot ladder. Broom. Twine.

Those would work.

And if the occupants of the house didn't like him borrowing their stuff? Tough. They'd surely heard the cat's pitiful meows of distress. If they didn't want to deal with the little critter, they should have called someone for assistance instead of letting a helpless creature suffer.

Mouth tightening, he stripped off his knit hoodie, wrapped it around the bristles of the broom, and secured it with the twine. Ladder hooked over his shoulder, he returned to the tree.

"Hang in, kitty. We'll get you down and fix that hurt paw." He used his most soothing tone as he set the ladder against the tree. The one he reserved for the hurting, frightened civilian

children he'd treated, casualties of a vicious war that spared no one, who'd understood only his inflection, not his language.

After testing the ladder, he ascended to the second-highest rung, lifted the broom above his head, and nudged the cat with the fleece-covered bristles. The mouser wobbled, clutching the hoodie to stabilize itself.

Mirroring the rescue technique he'd seen a friend use, Ben eased the broom away from the tree. With its front claws locked into the fleece, the cat's back claws lost their grip on the tree. As the distance between tree and broom widened, it scrambled to snag the hoodie with all four claws.

The instant the writhing cat latched onto the broom, Ben slid the handle down through his fingers and gripped the kitty gently by the scruff of its neck. Dropping the broom, he supported the cat in the crook of his arm while descending the ladder one careful rung at a time.

Back on firm ground, he turned—only to be blinded by a piercing beam of light.

“What the . . .” He released the cat's scruff and lifted his hand to shade his eyes.

Apparently the cat didn't like the intense light any better than he did. With a banshee-like screech, it swiped a claw down his forearm, twisted free, leapt to the ground, and vanished into the darkness.

“Keep your hands where I can see them while we have a little talk. I'm Officer Jim Gleason with the Hope Harbor Police Department.”

The disembodied voice came from the blackness behind the light.

Squinting against the glare, Ben watched a rivulet of blood run down his arm from the claw gouge as the theme song from *The Twilight Zone* began to play in the recesses of his mind.

How could so much go so wrong so fast?

From the moment the call had come in with the bad news about Skip, he'd known this trip would be difficult—but that word didn't begin to describe his first eight hours in Hope Harbor.

And if inheriting a lighthouse and being mauled by a cat weren't bad enough, now he'd attracted the attention of the police.

This visit was beginning to border on surreal.

Even worse, it was going downhill fast.



“His story checks out, Marci. We can cite him for trespassing if you want, but . . .” Officer Gleason lifted one shoulder.

He didn't have to finish the sentence for her to know what he was thinking.

But it would be pretty low to punish a man who's come to town to bury his grandfather and who just got mauled trying to do a kind deed.

From the shadows inside the front door where she'd tucked herself, Marci peeked out at the tall, lean intruder.

He was standing ramrod straight at the edges of the light cast by the lanterns on either side of her front door, a shredded hoodie clutched in his hands. His dark hair was beginning to glisten from the heavy mist descending on Pelican Point, and while his features were dim, his pallor was impossible to miss.

The man's face was as white—and tense—as her own had been when she'd glanced in the mirror after throwing on jeans and a sweatshirt while waiting for the police to arrive.

He did *not* look like a troublemaker.

He looked like someone who'd found himself caught in a nightmare.

“So what'll it be, Marci?” The law officer flipped up the collar of his jacket as the mist intensified.

She hesitated. If the story the man had told Jim Gleason was true, he was more a cat rescuer than a cat burglar.

“You’re certain he’s legit?”

“I ran his ID, and Eric verified that the two of them met this afternoon. He also has a fresh scratch. I only caught a quick glimpse of the cat before it zipped into the darkness, but I heard it screech. The evidence supports his story.”

Yes, it did. Annabelle got stuck in the same tree every few days. She’d rescued the feline herself after several similar incidents until she’d realized Mrs. Schroeder’s pet was perfectly capable of getting down herself, despite her yowls for assistance.

But the stranger in her yard didn’t know that—and how could she punish a good Samaritan?

“Okay. Let it go. Sorry to have bothered you.”

“No bother at all. That’s what we’re here for.” He tipped his hat. “I’ll let him know he’s off the hook.”

The officer started to turn away, but Marci stopped him with a touch on his arm. “Did he say why he was up here at this hour?”

“Yep. He’s fighting a serious case of jet lag and couldn’t sleep, so he went for a walk. He flew in today from the Middle East. Can you imagine how many time zones he must have crossed?”

She did the math.

Middle East.

Grandfather’s funeral.

Compassion for an injured animal.

Gaze fixed on the man, who was keeping his distance, Marci leaned closer to Jim and lowered her voice. “Is that Ned Garrison’s grandson?”

“None other.”

Her stomach bottomed out.

She’d called the cops on the army surgeon Ned had loved to brag about. The one who’d won medals for heroism and spent

years near the front lines patching America's fighting men and women back together.

Major Ben Garrison deserved far better than the homecoming she'd given him.

"I, uh, think I owe him an apology."

Jim gave the man a dubious once-over. "You might want to wait on that. I think he's had about all he can take today—and he'll be soaked if he stands out here much longer. I'm going to run him back to Ned's house."

Marci bit her lower lip. Jim was probably right about the timing—but if she didn't try to make some initial amends she wouldn't sleep a wink tonight.

"I won't delay him long." She edged past the police officer. "Give me one minute."

The shadowy figure at the edge of the light stiffened as she approached, and her step faltered.

Just do it, Marci. Say you're sorry and get it off your conscience.

Right.

She straightened her shoulders and picked up her pace, stopping a few feet from the man. "I want to apologize for the hassle I caused you. I live alone, and I'm not used to callers at this hour. Officer Gleason explained what happened."

"You're not going to file a complaint?"

"No."

"That's one bright spot in this day, anyway."

Weariness—and a hint of sarcasm—scored his words.

Jim's assessment had been correct. The man wasn't in the mood for conversation.

Time to retreat.

"Well . . . I'll let you go before this mist becomes a full-fledged rain." She swiveled away.

"In case you're interested, the cat was hurt."

Stomach flip-flopping, Marci swung back.

Ben Garrison's arms were crossed tight against his broad chest, and though the murky light made it difficult to read his expression, disapproval oozed from his pores.

"What happened to her?"

"I have no idea. All I know is her paw was bleeding. Didn't you hear her crying?"

"I heard her *meowing*—but Annabelle gets stuck in that tree on a regular basis. She always manages to get herself down. How was I supposed to know she was injured?"

"Would it have hurt to check?"

"I don't wander around outside at night."

"Or answer the door."

"Not for strangers."

"You could have called through a window, acknowledged I was there. I would have explained what I was doing and saved us both all this aggravation."

That was true.

In hindsight, her lapse in judgment was obvious.

But why did he have to be snippy about it? She'd apologized, hadn't she? What more did he want? She couldn't go back and restage the whole scene, for pity's sake.

"Look . . . I said I was sorry. That's all I can do at this point."

"Does the cat belong to you?"

"No. My neighbor. And I expect by now she's receiving plenty of TLC for that hurt paw."

"Do you plan to verify that?"

What did he think she was, some callous animal hater?

Bristling, she glared at him. "I intend to call her as soon as you leave."

"Fine."

Sheesh.

This guy had attitude with a capital A.

Turning on her heel, she stomped back to the house, passing the police officer halfway.

He gave her an I-warned-you shrug and continued toward the cruiser parked at the end of her drive.

Fine.

Maybe it would have been wiser to hold her apology for a day or two.

But if she'd learned one thing over the past few years, it was to speak up and do what needed to be done instead of pussy-footing around until it was too late.

Putting off the hard stuff was a recipe for trouble.

However . . . not every situation required an immediate fix. Jumping into the fray too fast could cause problems too.

Tonight was proof of that.

Huffing out a breath, she climbed the two steps to her porch. Had she waited until Ned's grandson logged some sleep and recovered from jet lag, he might have been more receptive to her apology—and less judgmental.

Too late to fix that now, though.

Behind her, car doors slammed and an engine rumbled to life. By the time she let herself into the house and peeked through the window, red taillights were disappearing down the road.

Thank goodness the unpleasant episode was over—or it would be, as soon as she talked to Mrs. Schroeder and confirmed Annabelle was safe.

Marci reset the dead bolt and secured the sliding lock on the front door, armed the security system again, and retreated upstairs.

What a night.

As for that story about Ned she'd planned to write for the *Hope Harbor Herald*, filled with quotes from his beloved grandson?

She had a feeling it was toast.