

THREE-TIME RITA AWARD WINNER

# IRENE HANNON

*Blackberry Beach*



A Hope Harbor Novel

### **Praise for *Starfish Pier***

“With its nicely interwoven faith elements, Hannon’s multifaceted return to Hope Harbor focuses on how forgiving oneself is as important for healing as forgiveness from others. Series fans will be overjoyed by this complex, stirring tale.”

*Publishers Weekly*

“The restful location and quirky townfolk are sure to be soothing to those who enjoy Christian romances set in small towns.”

*Library Journal*

“A pitch-perfect contemporary romance novel by a gifted author who is a complete master of the genre.”

*Midwest Book Review*

### **Praise for *Driftwood Bay***

“Readers will delight in this pleasant romance. Hannon’s take on loss and survival is simpatico with Debbie Macomber’s Blossom Street series.”

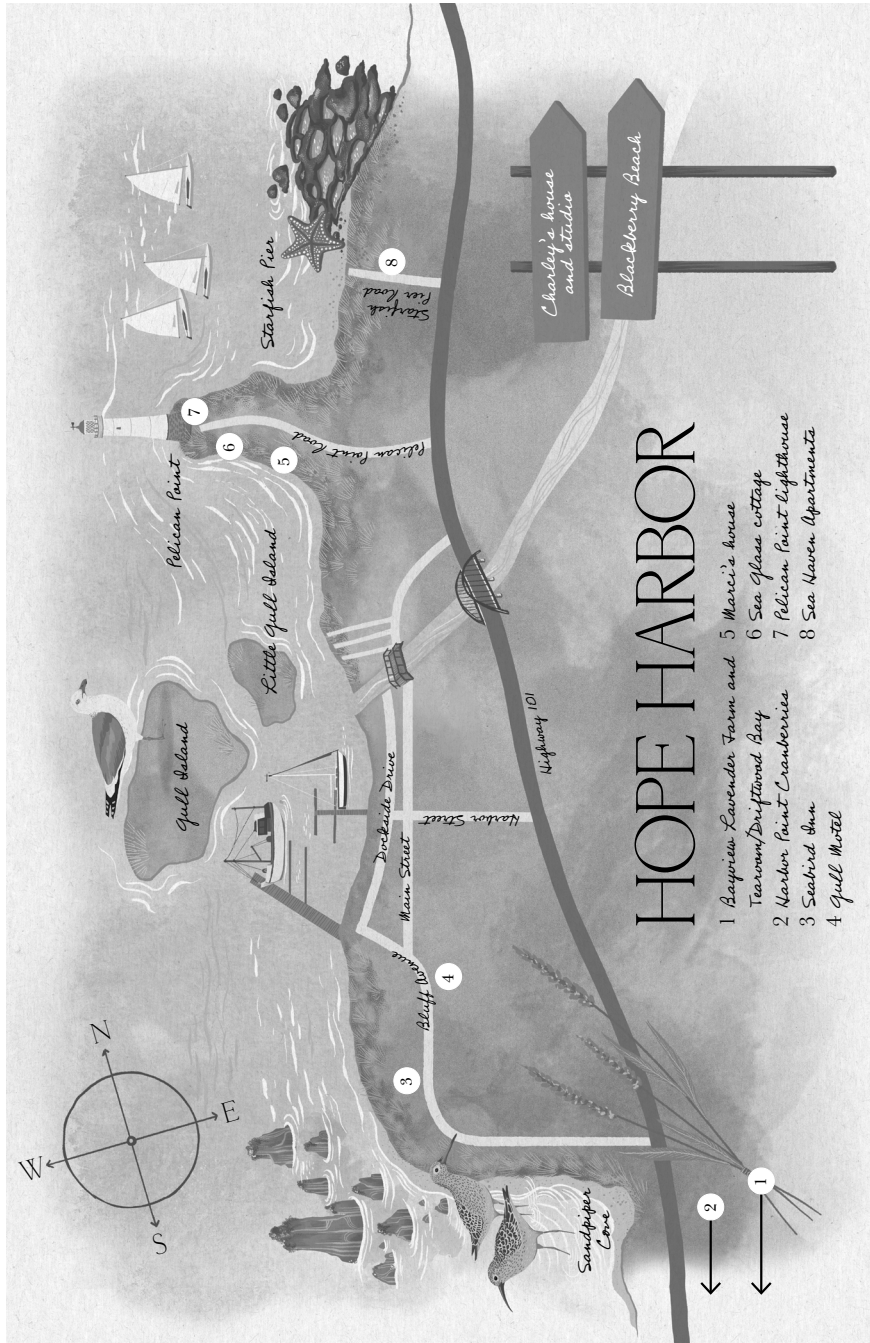
*Booklist*

“Full of faith and characters that readers will want to root for until the end.”

*Publishers Weekly*

“Character-driven, thought-provoking, and highly recommended for connoisseurs of the genre.”

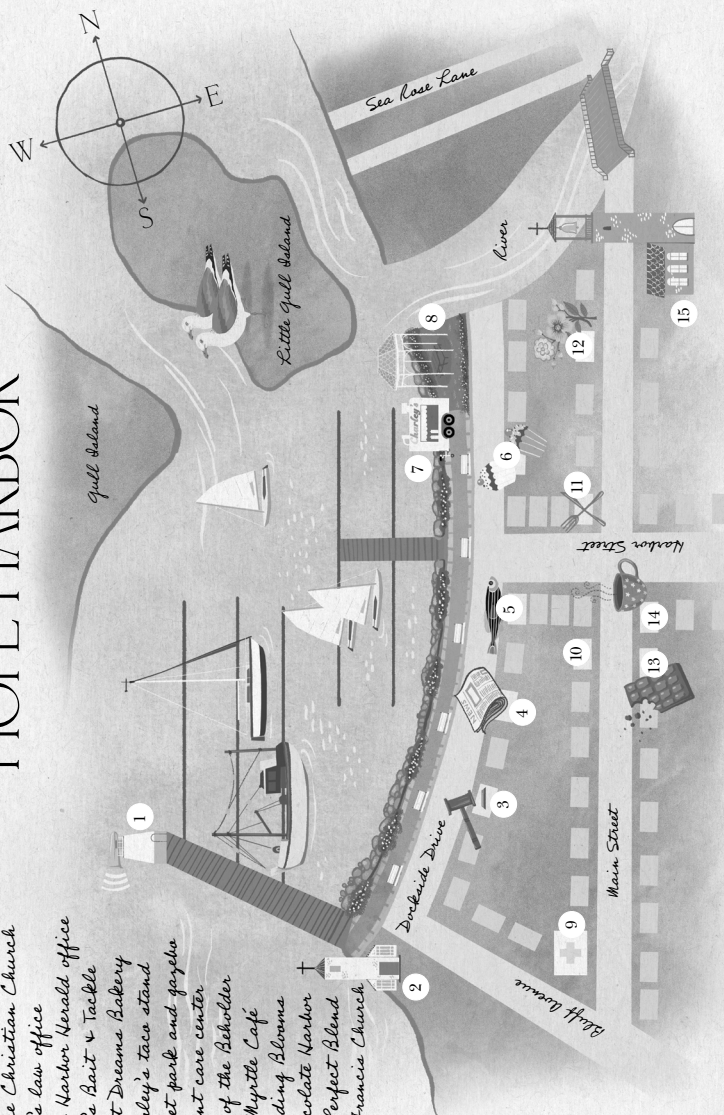
*Midwest Book Review*



Irene Hannon, Blackberry Beach  
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# DOWNTOWN HOPE HARBOR

- 1 Foghorn
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Irene Hannon, Blackberry Beach

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Books by Irene Hannon

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HEROES OF QUANTICO

*Against All Odds*  
*An Eye for an Eye*  
*In Harm's Way*

GUARDIANS OF JUSTICE

*Fatal Judgment*  
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PRIVATE JUSTICE

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STANDALONE NOVELS

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HOPE HARBOR NOVELS

*Hope Harbor*  
*Sea Rose Lane*  
*Sandpiper Cove*  
*Pelican Point*  
*Driftwood Bay*  
*Starfish Pier*  
*Blackberry Beach*

# *Blackberry Beach*

A Hope Harbor Novel

IRENE HANNON



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To my niece, Maureen Hannon,  
as you graduate from high school.

I am so proud not only of your academic achievements  
but also of your kind heart and sweet, gentle spirit.

Whatever path you follow in the years to come,  
I wish you success beyond your wildest dreams.

But most of all, I wish you a future filled with  
joy, love, and endless possibilities—  
as well as the gifts of wonder and enthusiasm  
that keep life always new.





# 1



The mystery woman was back.

Zach Garrett poured the steamed milk into the coffee mixture, creating his signature swirl pattern with the froth—all the while keeping tabs on the female customer who’d paused inside the door of The Perfect Blend, dripping umbrella in hand.

As she had on her first visit two days ago, the lady appeared to be debating whether to stay or bolt.

Wiping the nozzle on the espresso machine, he assessed her. Early to midthirties, near as he could tell—though the oversize, dark sunglasses hid most of her features. A curious wardrobe addition, given the unseasonably heavy rain that had been drenching Hope Harbor for the past seventy-two hours.

He handed the latte to the waiting customer and angled toward his Monday/Wednesday/Friday assistant barista. “Bren, you waited on her Monday, didn’t you?” He indicated the slender woman with the dark, shoulder-length blunt-cut hair who continued to hover near the threshold.

Bren spared her a quick once-over as she finished grinding another batch of the top-quality Arabica beans Zach sourced from a fair-trade roaster in Portland. “Yeah.”

“Do you remember what she ordered?”

“Small skinny vanilla latte.”

“Did you get a name?”

“Nope. I asked, but she said she’d wait for her order at the pickup counter.”

In other words, the woman wanted to remain anonymous.

Also curious.

While it was possible she was one of the many visitors who dropped in to their picturesque town for a few days during the summer months, his gut said otherwise.

And since his people instincts had served him well in his previous profession, there was no reason to discount them now.

So who was she—and what was she doing in Hope Harbor?

Only one way to find out.

“I’ll take care of her.”

“That works. I’ve already got customers.” Bren inclined her head toward the couple waiting for their pound of ground coffee.

Zach called up his friendliest smile and ambled down to the end of the serving counter. “Let me guess—a small skinny vanilla latte.”

The woman did a double take . . . took a step back . . . and gave the shop a quick, nervous scan. As if she was scoping out potential threats.

No worries on that score. There was nothing in The Perfect Blend to raise alarm bells. While several of the tables tucked against the walls and cozied up around the freestanding fireplace in the center were occupied, no one was paying any attention to the new arrival. The customers were all reading newspapers, absorbed in books, or chatting as they enjoyed their drinks and pastries in the Wi-Fi-free environment.

The door behind the woman opened again, nudging her aside.

Charley Lopez entered, his trademark Ducks cap secured beneath the hood of a dripping slicker.

“Sorry, ma’am.” He flashed her a smile as he touched the brim

of the cap, pushed the hood back to reveal his gray ponytail . . . and gave her an intent look. “I didn’t mean to bump you.”

“No problem.” She dipped her chin and moved aside, putting distance between them. As if his perusal had spiked her nerves.

“Are you coming in or going out?” Charley maintained his hold on the half-open door.

“Coming in,” Zach answered for her. “I’m betting she’s in the mood for a skinny vanilla latte.”

“Excellent choice.” Charley closed the door.

“Bren will handle your order as soon as she finishes with her customers, Charley.” Zach kept his attention on the stranger.

“No hurry.” The taco-making artist who’d called Hope Harbor home for as long as anyone could remember moseyed toward the counter. “I doubt I’ll have much business at the stand, thanks to our odd weather. August is usually one of the driest months on the Oregon coast.”

“Any day is a perfect day for a Charley’s fish taco.”

“I may steal that line. It would be a great marketing slogan.”

“As if you need one. Your long lines are proof that word of mouth generates a ton of business.”

“That it does.” He winked, then directed his next comment to the woman. “I hope you’ll pay me a visit. My truck is on the wharf. Next to the gazebo.”

“I may stop by.”

“Please do. First order for newcomers is always on the house.” He continued toward Bren.

Zach frowned after him. Everyone in town knew about Charley’s welcome gift of a free lunch for new residents . . . but this woman hadn’t moved to Hope Harbor.

Had she?

What did Charley know that he didn’t?

She edged toward the exit, and Zach shifted gears. He could pick the town sage’s brain later. In the meantime, why not try to ferret out a few facts himself?

Unless his skittish customer disappeared out the door first.

He hiked up the corners of his mouth again. “My assistant barista told me you ordered a small skinny vanilla latte on your last visit—but I’ll be happy to make a different drink for you today.”

Hesitating, she gave the room one more survey . . . then slid her umbrella into the stand by the door. “No. That’s fine.”

She was staying.

First hurdle cleared.

“Can I have a name for the order?” He picked up a cup and a pen.

Silence.

He arched his eyebrows at her.

She extracted a five-dollar bill and set it on the counter. “Keep the change. And it’s Kat. With a K.” She eased away.

Second hurdle cleared.

“Got it.” He jotted the name. “I’ll have this ready in a couple of minutes.”

She nodded and escaped toward a deserted table in the far corner—out of conversation range.

Blast.

Thwarted at the third hurdle.

He wasn’t going to find out anything else about her.

But what did it matter? Just because he was beginning to crave feminine companionship—and the pool of eligible women in town was limited—didn’t mean he should get any ideas about the first single, attractive female who walked in.

Yeah, yeah, he’d noticed the empty fourth finger on her left hand.

He mixed the espresso and vanilla syrup together, positioned the steam nozzle below the surface of the milk until the liquid bubbled, then dipped deeper to create a whirlpool motion.

Charley wandered over while Bren prepared his café de olla, watching as Zach poured the milk into the espresso mixture, holding back the foam with a spoon to create a stylized K on top of the drink. “Beautiful. You have an artistic touch.”

“Nothing like yours.” He set the empty frothing pitcher aside

and reached for a lid as he signaled to the woman in the corner. “I wish my coffee sold for a fraction of what your paintings bring in.”

“Life shouldn’t be all about making money. My stand isn’t a gold mine, but I enjoy creating tacos as much as I enjoy painting. Customers for both can feel the love I put into my work. Like they can feel the love you have for this shop. It seeps into your pores the instant you cross the threshold. A person would have to be über-stressed not to find peace and relaxation here.”

The very ambiance he’d hoped to create when he’d opened a year and a half ago.

“You just made my day.”

“That’s what it’s all about, isn’t it?” Charley motioned toward the foam art. “Why don’t you show that to your customer? Brighten *her* day.”

Not a bad idea. Perhaps it would elicit a few words from her—or initiate a conversation.

He set the cup on the counter as she approached and offered her his most engaging grin. The one that usually turned female heads. “Your personalized skinny vanilla latte.”

Lips flat, she gave his handiwork no more than a fleeting perusal. “Thanks.”

Not only was the lady immune to his charm, she had no interest in extending their conversation.

Fighting back an irrational surge of disappointment, Zach put a lid on the drink. “Enjoy.”

“Thanks.” She hurried toward the door, pulled her umbrella out of the stand, and disappeared into the gray shroud hanging over the town.

“I think my attempt to brighten her day was a bust.” He folded his arms as the rain pummeled the picture window.

“Oh, I don’t know. Sometimes the simplest gestures of kindness can touch a heart in unseen ways.”

Zach didn’t try to hide his skepticism. “Assuming the lady’s *willing* to let her heart be touched. She didn’t exude much warmth.”

“She may be hiding it behind a protective wall. Could be she’s dealing with a boatload of heavy stuff. That can dampen a person’s sociability.”

Zach’s antennas perked up. “You know anything about her?”

“Nothing much—though she seems familiar.” He squinted after her. Shook his head. “It’ll come to me. Anyway, I spotted her on the wharf Monday, sipping a brew from your fine establishment. She was sitting alone on a bench during one of the few monsoon-free interludes we’ve had this week. I got gloomy vibes. Like she was troubled—and could use a friend.”

Zach wasn’t about to question the veracity of Charley’s intuition. The man was legendary in these parts for his uncanny insights and his ability to discern more than people willingly divulged.

Present company included.

How Charley had realized there was an unresolved issue in his past was beyond him. He’d never talked about it to anyone. But the man’s astute comments, while generic, were too relevant to be random. As a result, on more than one occasion he’d been tempted to get Charley’s take on his situation.

Yet as far as he could see, there was no solution to the impasse short of returning to his former world and toeing the line—and that wasn’t happening. The new life he’d built these past two and a half years suited him, and now that he was settled in Hope Harbor, he was more convinced than ever his decision to walk away had been the right one.

“You still with me, Zach?” Charley’s lips tipped up.

“Yeah.” He refocused. “You think she’s a visitor?”

“I’d classify her more as a seeker.”

What did that mean?

Before he could ask, Bren appeared at his elbow. “Here you go, Charley.” She popped a cinnamon stick into his drink, snapped on a lid, and handed the cup over the counter.

“Thanks. It’s a treat to have authentic Mexican coffee available here in our little town.”

“We aim to please.” The door opened again to admit what appeared to be a family of tourists, and Zach lifted his hand in welcome. “Everyone must be in the mood for coffee today.”

“Count your blessings.” Charley raised his cup in salute. “I’m off to the taco stand.”

“I’ll try to send a few customers your direction.”

“Always appreciated. Maybe Kat will stop by.”

“You know her last name?” He kept an eye on the newcomers as they perused his menu board and examined the offerings in the pastry case.

“No. But I may find out if she visits my truck. Or she might come back here again and you can take another crack at breaching that wall she’s put up. See you soon.” He strolled toward the door.

The new customers began to pepper him with questions about the pastry selection, but as he answered, the image of the mystery woman sitting alone on a bench at the wharf—and Charley’s comment that she could use a friend—remained front and center in his mind.

If she *was* dealing with a bunch of garbage, he ought to cut her some slack for her lack of sociability today. Been there, done that—and it was a bad place to be.

Yet thanks to grit, determination . . . and the kind people of Hope Harbor, who’d welcomed him into the community he now called home . . . he’d survived.

Hard to say if the woman hiding behind the dark shades had similar fortitude . . . and if she was merely passing through, he’d never find out.

But if she stuck around awhile, perhaps in Hope Harbor she’d discover an answer to the worrisome situation Charley thought she might be wrestling with.



*Mistake, mistake, mistake.*

As the accusatory refrain looped through her mind, Katherine

Parker sipped her excellent latte and watched the boats in the harbor through the rain-splattered windshield of her rental car.

The drops on the glass looked like tears.

How appropriate.

Throat tightening, she set the drink in the cupholder, fisted her hands in her lap, and willed the waterworks behind her eyes to dry up.

She should have stayed holed up in her cottage above Blackberry Beach. That was the safest place for her, as today's excursion had confirmed.

Yet the cozy, comforting atmosphere in the coffee shop on Monday had been seductive. How could she not succumb to the temptation to visit again?

Especially since four days into her flight from chaos, she was as unsettled as ever. Her appetite had vanished, sleep was elusive, and her mind churned with questions . . . doubts . . . second thoughts.

But what else had she expected? Running away didn't solve anything.

Except . . . she hadn't run away. Not exactly. This trip was more about sanctuary than escape. A quiet interlude to rethink her goals in solitude, away from the raucous craziness that had become her life.

And Hope Harbor had seemed the perfect location for that.

So far, though, the peaceful ambiance she remembered hadn't managed to permeate her soul.

But it was possible she was expecting too much too soon. A few days of peace weren't going to counteract five years of constant stress and pressure. She ought to give herself a chance to acclimate to a slower pace. To let the tranquility of this place work its magic.

Fingers trembling, she picked up her latte. Took another sip as she gave the view a slow sweep.

Nothing much had changed in the past six years.

Overflowing flower boxes rimmed the sidewalk along crescent-shaped Dockside Drive, benches interspersed for the pleasure of



passersby who could spare a few minutes to sit and enjoy the view. Beyond the harbor-hugging sidewalk, a sloping pile of boulders led down to the water, where bobbing boats were protected by a long breakwater on the left and two rocky islands on the right. On the other side of the street, shops with colorful awnings and window boxes faced the distant horizon.

She shifted sideways. At the far end of the crescent, where the frontage road dead-ended at the river that emptied into the sea, a gazebo graced a tiny pocket park containing a picnic table and what appeared to be a historic cannon. The latter hadn't been there on her last visit.

And perched on the edge of that park? Charley's taco stand. The white truck with his name emblazoned in colorful letters over the serving window hadn't budged an inch—nor changed one iota.

Neither had the owner—or those perceptive eyes of his.

She set the latte down again, the quiver in her fingers more pronounced.

Despite the passage of years and a disguise that would fool most people, that tiny flare of recognition in Charley's dark cocoa irises at the coffee shop suggested he'd seen through her disguise. That he'd realized they'd met.

Whether he'd put a name to her face wasn't clear. If he had, he'd kept her secret. If he hadn't—who knew what he'd do once he did? Worst case, he'd mention it to someone . . . who'd mention it to someone else . . . and her attempt to remain under the radar would be a bust.

Sighing, she watched a boat on the horizon disappear into the mist—as she'd hoped to disappear in Hope Harbor.

Why, oh why, had she run into the one person she'd befriended during her previous stay? The one person most likely to recognize her?

Her plan to lay low and avoid his stand, despite the fabulous fish tacos he concocted, should have protected her—but how could she have known he'd frequent the new coffee shop in town she'd popped into twice for a handful of minutes?

A shop that had managed to suck her in with its low-key, welcoming atmosphere.

She picked up her latte again and took another sip of the cooling brew, spirits dipping.

Too bad the coffee shop was now off-limits. On her first visit, it had appeared to be a relatively safe haven. The customers, most of whom were no doubt transient summer tourists, had shown more interest in the twentysomething female barista with the triple-pierced ears and spiky, rainbow-hued hair than in her.

No surprise there. While the woman wouldn't have drawn a second glance in Katherine's world, she had to be a bit of a novelty here in quiet, sedate Hope Harbor.

But Charley had ruined the shop for her.

*Not fair, Katherine. Charley isn't the only reason you can't go back.*

In the distance, the light from the buoy at the end of the breakwater pierced the gloom, and the sonorous blare of a foghorn dispatched a warning across the expanse of water.

A warning she'd do well to heed.

The truth was, the tall, midthirties guy behind the counter also posed a risk—perhaps a bigger one than another unexpected meeting with Charley.

She took the lid off the remains of her latte, visualizing the fanciful K the man had created on top of her drink.

He'd been there on Monday too, but other customers had kept him occupied.

Today, however, he'd given her his full—and unwanted—attention.

Katherine's fingers tightened on the disposable cup as the rain beat a staccato rhythm on the roof of her car.

In any other circumstances, the spark of interest in his deep brown eyes would have been flattering. With his dark hair, confident air, and lean, toned physique, he had the looks to rival any Hollywood heartthrob.

But romance wasn't in her plans for this trip.

The taste of the latte grew bitter on her tongue, and she set the cup back into the holder. No more coffee shop visits for her. She couldn't risk another run-in with Charley—or another attempt by the guy behind the counter to chat her up.

And unless her instincts were failing her, that's what would happen if she showed up again at The Perfect Blend. All the signs of male attraction were there.

She twisted the key in the ignition, released the brake, and backed out of the spot she'd claimed on the south end of the wharf.

As she drove north on Docksider Drive, she surveyed Charley's truck. Despite the dismal weather, a line had formed—and the savory aroma of grilling fish infiltrated her car.

A rumble from her stomach reminded her she'd skipped breakfast.

She ignored the message—and the temptation to stop. Her kitchen was fully stocked, and preparing a meal would keep her occupied on this rainy afternoon.

Her hands, anyway.

Her mind was a different story. It would be free to wander—and that wasn't smart. Not yet. It was too soon to sort through the tangle in her brain. She needed a few days . . . or weeks . . . of long hours on a secluded beach to decompress first.

That's why she'd rented a cottage perched above an isolated stretch of sand.

Now if only the weather would cooperate.

She hung a right, toward Highway 101 and the short trip north to her secluded hideaway, giving the taco stand one last glance.

Charley's gaze connected with hers, and as he smiled, warmth radiated toward her.

Not the kind of sizzle she'd felt from the coffee shop guy. That had been more . . . adrenaline stirring.

No, this felt . . . peaceful. As if the taco maker was trying to

comfort her. Tell her everything would be okay. Encourage her not to worry.

As she rounded the corner and the stand disappeared from view, Katherine frowned.

That had been . . . weird.

How in the world could she have read so much into a connection that had lasted . . . what? Three seconds? Four?

Huffing out a breath, she tightened her grip on the wheel. She was losing it. Grasping at straws. Conjuring up far-fetched sources of the consolation and encouragement she craved.

Good grief, the man may not even have been looking at her. It was impossible to be certain from that distance.

Picking up speed, she left the town center behind.

Yet the soothing, uplifting feelings engendered by that fleeting connection with Charley—real or imagined—lingered.

So why not enjoy the brief boost to her spirits, whatever the source?

For as she'd discovered over the past few years, most moments of happiness were short-lived—and few of them offered the lasting gratification she'd assumed success would beget.