

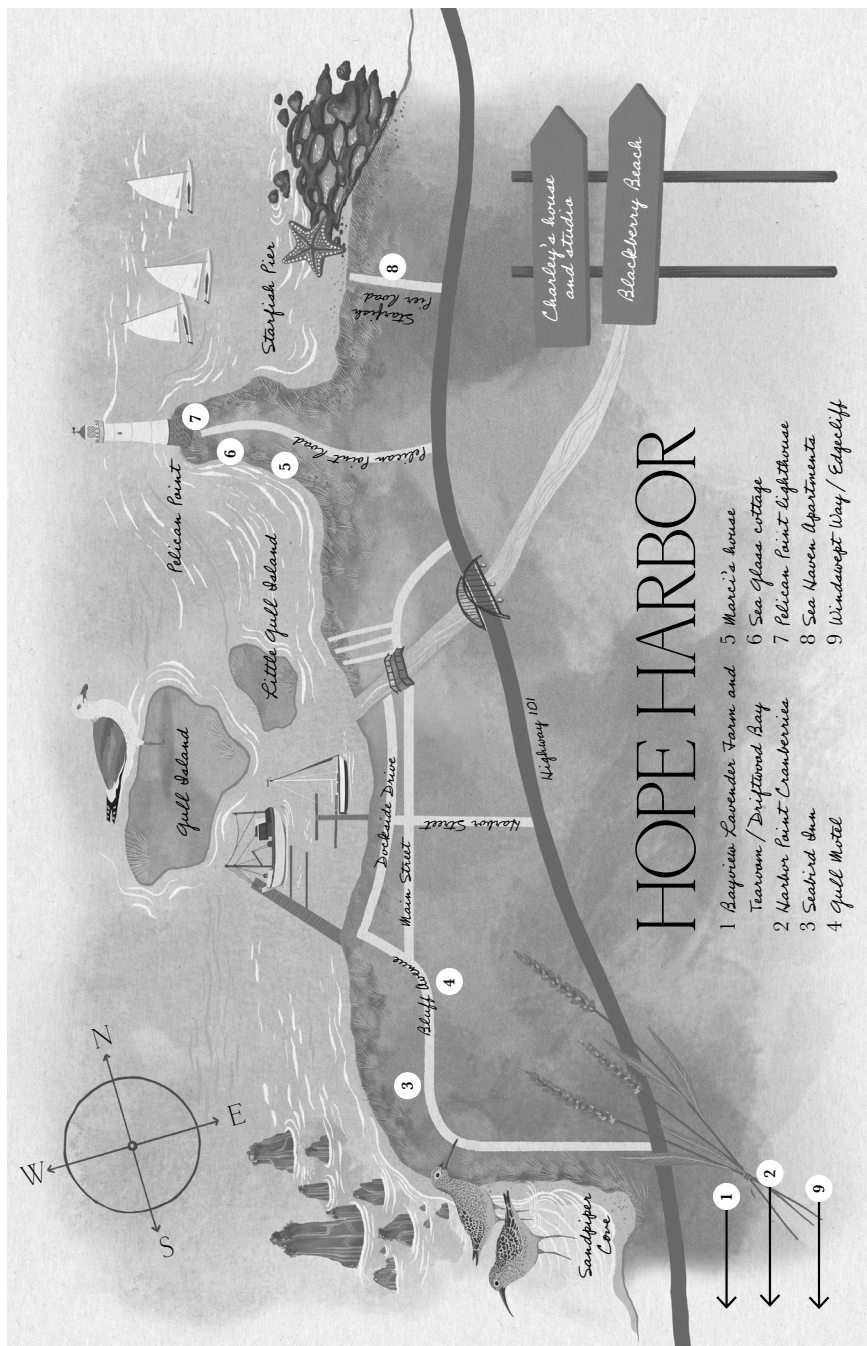
THREE-TIME RITA AWARD WINNER

IRENE HANNON

Windswept Way

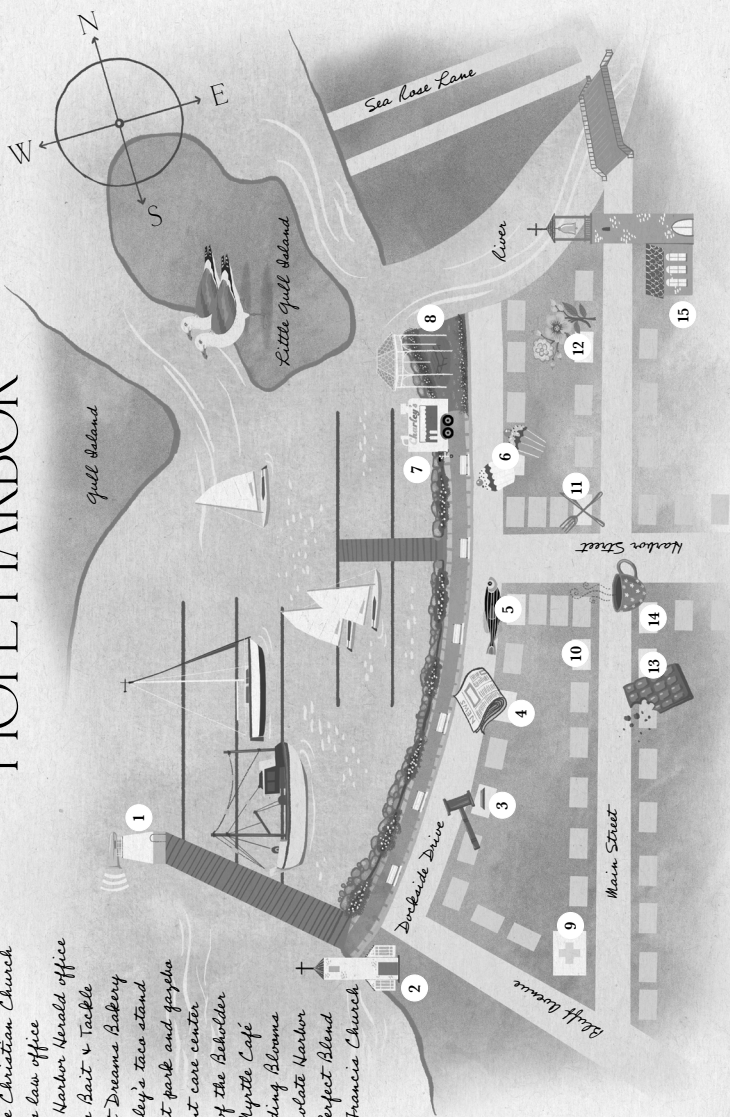


A Hope Harbor Novel



DOWNTOWN HOPE HARBOR

- 1 Fagburn
- 2 Grace Christian Church
- 3 Eric's law office
- 4 Hope Harbor Herald office
- 5 Lori's Bait & Tackle
- 6 Sweet Dreams Bakery
- 7 Charley's taco stand
- 8 Pocket park and gazebo
- 9 Urgent care center
- 10 Eye of the Beholder
- 11 The Myrtle Café
- 12 Budding Blooms
- 13 Chocolate Harbor
- 14 The Perfect Blend
- 15 St. Francis Church



Books by Irene Hannon

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

GUARDIANS OF JUSTICE

Fatal Judgment
Deadly Pursuit
Lethal Legacy

PRIVATE JUSTICE

Vanished
Trapped
Deceived

MEN OF VALOR

Buried Secrets
Thin Ice
Tangled Webs

CODE OF HONOR

Dangerous Illusions
Hidden Peril
Dark Ambitions

TRIPLE THREAT

Point of Danger
Labyrinth of Lies
Body of Evidence

HOPE HARBOR

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Sea Rose Lane
Sandpiper Cove
Pelican Point
Driftwood Bay
Starfish Pier
Blackberry Beach
Sea Glass Cottage
Windswept Way

STANDALONE NOVELS

That Certain Summer
One Perfect Spring

Windswept Way

A Hope Harbor Novel

IRENE HANNON



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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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In loving memory of my parents,
James and Dorothy Hannon.

Though you are both gone now,
your legacy of love lives on in my heart—
timeless and treasured.

Until we meet again.

1

.....

Maybe buying a haunted house wasn't her best idea.

Stomach churning, Ashley Scott braked as Windswept Way dead-ended at two open but imposing iron gates bookended by a tall, overgrown hedge. Surveyed the large, faded "Private Property—Keep Out" and "Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted" signs posted at the entrance. Read the word carved into the weathered stone block on the left.

Edgecliff.

Also known as Fitzgerald's Folly, according to local lore. A place with a storied past filled with triumph and tragedy. Where nocturnal sightings of a woman in white and ethereal music seeping from the house fed the rumors that the estate was haunted.

Ashley massaged her forehead and blew out a breath.

No wonder her mother thought she'd gone off the deep end.

But after forking out the money for a cross-country trek to Hope Harbor, Oregon, it would be even crazier to turn tail and run without keeping the appointment she'd made last week with the owner.

Besides, after all the times she and her father had driven by these then-closed gates during summer vacations and speculated

about what lay on the other side, she owed it to both of them to check the place out.

Especially since the money that might or might not be used to buy a stake in Edgecliff had come from the inheritance Dad had left her.

Tightening her grip on the wheel of the rental car, Ashley transferred her foot to the gas pedal and—

Sweet mercy!

Gasping, she mashed the brake to the floor again as a tall, muscular man emerged from behind the hedge, brandishing a chain saw and wearing a black, Covid-style mask that covered his nose and the bottom half of his face. The brim of a baseball cap pulled low over his forehead shadowed the rest of his features.

Ashley groped for the auto lock button and secured the doors as he stopped in the center of the driveway, blocking the entrance.

Now what?

Before she could decide, he began walking toward her.

Pulse skyrocketing, she raised her window. Scanned both sides of the shoulderless narrow lane.

No room for a U-turn.

All she could do was put the car in reverse and back away.

Fast.

As she fumbled with the gears, the man picked up his pace, heading straight for the hood.

Heart galloping, she tried to engage the left side of her brain.

Did she have a weapon?

No. Not unless a nail file or three-inch dress-shoe heel counted. But both were in her luggage in the trunk anyway. And her key-chain pepper gel was languishing in a bin of confiscated items at the airport back in Tennessee.

Ruing the day she'd decided to embark on this uncharacteristic adventure, she tried to coax the unfamiliar gearshift into reverse with one hand and lifted the other to the horn, prepared to press and hold on the off chance someone would—

All at once, the intimidating stranger veered toward the passenger side of the car, brushed past the door, and strode away.

What?

For a long moment . . . or two . . . or three . . . Ashley remained frozen in place.

Only after the thundering in her chest subsided did she peek in the rearview mirror.

The guy had vanished.

Meaning he hadn't had any nefarious intent after all.

Sagging in her seat, she lowered her forehead to the steering wheel and faced the truth.

She'd overreacted. Big time. Jumped to the wrong conclusion, thanks to every nerve-racking headline she'd ever read about lone women in isolated places meeting untimely and gruesome ends.

No wonder Jason had preferred someone who was more daring and exciting and bold.

Maybe she ought to eat the cost of this trip, can her half-baked idea, and slink home. Like she'd done the day their so-called relationship had crashed and burned.

As all the emotions she'd felt in those first devastating moments—hurt, resentment, anger, shock—swept over her again, Ashley clamped her lips together and straightened up.

No.

She was not going to run at the first little glitch. She would see this through, even if the trip ended up being a bust.

Easing back on the brake, she continued through the gates and into a tunnel of dense foliage that put the brambles and thorns Sleeping Beauty's prince had battled to shame.

Thank goodness a passageway had been cleared for vehicles.

But if the rest of the grounds were as overgrown as this, and if maintenance on the house had also been allowed to slide, she was out of here. She may have let herself get carried away with the fanciful notion of owning a piece of a historic property, but she wasn't about to get lured into a bank-account breaker.

Blue sky appeared around a bend at the end of the tunnel, and she pressed harder on the accelerator. The house should be—

Whoa!

Ashley jammed on her brakes yet again as she exited the warren of tangled greenery. Stared at the house, situated across a wide expanse of lawn dotted with stately evergreens and deciduous trees and backed by the deep blue June sky.

Double whoa.

The pictures supplied by the owner hadn't lied. Nor had they done this place justice.

Edgecliff wasn't crumbling. Or overgrown with vegetation. Or missing any vital parts.

It was beautiful. Stunning. Exactly what a classic 1910 Queen Anne Victorian-style house should be.

And the setting?

Breathtaking.

Surrounded on three sides by the sea, the house had a commanding view from its perch on the ten-acre promontory it had claimed as its own long ago.

Easing back in her seat, Ashley studied the details of the ornate three-story home. The wide wraparound front porch, with a rounded, domed-roof extension on the right and decorative railings, posts, and spindles. The asymmetry of the façade, with a section bumped out beside the front door. An octagonal turret on the left, its roof steeply pitched. A multitude of windows, all different shapes and sizes.

The brick exterior also gave it a sense of permanence and stability often lacking in shingled Queen Anne houses—but unusual for this part of the country, particularly in that era.

Even more unusual given that a lumber baron had built it.

But perhaps the solid construction was why it had held up despite its exposure to the Oregon coast's notorious fall and winter storms, when powerful winds and the raging waters of the Pacific put on quite a show.

Or so she'd read while researching the location.

If this trip panned out, however, she'd find out firsthand what—

Her phone began to vibrate, and she picked it up off the seat beside her. Skimmed the screen. Grimaced.

She did *not* need any more negativity undermining her confidence. Especially on the heels of her unsettling encounter at the gate.

However, if she didn't answer, her mother would keep calling until she picked up.

Bracing, she pressed talk and put the cell to her ear. "Hi, Mom."

"Have you arrived?"

"You know I did. I called you from the airport in North Bend, after I picked up my rental car." Ashley squinted into the distance as one side of the house's double front door opened partway.

"I mean are you at the house? Have you seen it yet?"

"I just pulled through the gates."

"And?"

"It's amazing. From a distance, anyway."

"Oh, Ashley. It's too soon to make that call." Dismay, along with more than a hint of exasperation, flattened her mother's inflection. "You're so like your father. You know how he got carried away whenever a new project lit a fire in him—and how he often ended up getting burned. You'll find a structural engineer to go over the place before you commit to anything, right?"

"Yes. That's the plan. But the house is brick."

"It's also more than a hundred years old."

"I know. That's part of the charm."

"Charm can be a money suck. For all you know, the foundation is crumbling and termites have turned the support beams into Swiss cheese."

Now those were cheery thoughts.

"I promise not to leap without doing my homework, Mom."

"You've already leapt. Traveling 2,500 miles tells me you're serious about this. What if it's a scam?"

“How can it be a scam? I’m the one who initiated contact, remember? And I already told you I talked to the references the owner provided. If you can’t trust a minister, a police chief, and the director of a reputable charitable organization, who can you trust?”

“Are you certain no red flags came up in those conversations?”

“Not a one.” Unless you counted the fact that while all the references had said the reclusive owner was generous and law-abiding, they’d admitted they didn’t personally know her very well.

A sigh came over the line. “The background check I ordered didn’t find anything negative either—other than a scandal in which she apparently played no role . . . and which you neglected to mention.”

Ashley blinked. “You ran a background check on her?”

“SOP in the business world. Please tell me you knew about the scandal.”

“Yes, I did. But that was eight years ago, and all my research indicated she was an innocent party.” And an injured party.

Bad as her own experience with Jason had been, having a husband indicted and sent to prison for a Madoff-like con would be far worse.

“I’m relieved you were at least aware of it. Listen, are you certain you don’t want me to fly up there? You’re only a few hundred miles north of San Francisco, and two heads are better than one if big money is at stake. I could block a day out of my schedule.”

The door of the house opened a few more inches, but whoever was behind it remained inside. “I appreciate the offer, Mom, but I’m thirty-two. I can handle this. Listen, I think the owner’s spotted me. She’s probably wondering why I stopped halfway down the drive. I should go.”

A beat ticked by.

“You think I’m meddling, don’t you?”

“I don’t know if I’d call it meddling.” But it was clear her mother wasn’t confident in her daughter’s business acumen or common sense. “And I appreciate your concern.”

“You know I want what’s best for you, don’t you?”

“Yeah. I know.”

And she did. Even if their ideas on that score seldom overlapped.

If Mom had had her druthers, her sole offspring would have followed her into a high-profile career in Silicon Valley or become an attorney or engineer or doctor.

She certainly wouldn’t have followed her heart, as her anthropology professor father had done, and picked a major as impractical as historic preservation and architectural history. Nor would she have considered a low-paying position as an assistant curator and events director at an antebellum mansion in Tennessee a dream job.

One that had, alas, gone up in smoke.

Literally.

But the experience? Priceless.

And if she had it to do all over again, she wouldn’t change a—

“... what I say, you always go your own way. Like your father did.”

Whoops. Better tune back in to the conversation.

“Dad did okay.”

“Depends how you define okay.”

That was true. And her parents’ definitions had been miles apart. No wonder they’d split when she was ten. Yet while it was true that Dad had never had a high-end condo or traveled first class to Europe or become a corporate executive like Mom had, he’d loved what he’d done. And the tidy sum she’d inherited after he’d died last year proved he’d had more money sense than Mom had ever given him credit for.

However, debating philosophy and priorities wasn’t on her agenda today.

“I agree that okay has different meanings for different people.”

The door to the house closed. “I have to go, Mom. I’ll give you a full report later.”

“I’ll be waiting to hear. Remember to be businesslike and sensible.

Put away your rose-colored glasses and don't let romantic fantasies about historic seaside estates muddle your thinking."

Ashley stifled a snort.

No problem on the romantic fantasies score. Not after Jason, thank you very much. Going forward, her head, not her heart, would prevail—with houses and with men.

"Got it. Talk to you soon."

She ended the call, set the cell on the passenger seat, and pressed on the accelerator again.

Gravel crunching beneath her tires, she traversed the extended drive that ended in a loop in front of the house. From there, a long stone walkway led to five wide brick steps that ascended to a hydrangea-rimmed porch, where a lone fern hung between the posts supporting the roof. Like the ones in the old photo she'd found. Except back then, there'd been a fern between every post. There had also been a lush garden on either side of the walkway that had long since succumbed to weeds.

Still, while the grounds displayed little of their former glory, even at this closer range the structure showed no obvious signs of decay.

Ashley set the brake, picked up her purse and the notebook containing the multitude of questions she'd jotted, and slid from behind the wheel. Time to see whether her long trek was the beginning of a new journey or an expensive, waste-of-time detour.

Purse slung over her shoulder, she walked down the path toward the steps that were flanked by empty stone flower urns. Ascended to the porch and moved toward the impressive carved double door, which featured textured, opaque glass overlaid with filigreed iron-work on the top half and was crowned by an elliptical stained-glass transom.

Man.

They didn't make entryways like this anymore.

As she leaned toward the bell, one of the doors opened a few inches. But the figure on the other side remained hidden.

Ashley's hand froze.

Not the warmest welcome—but in keeping with a woman who had no social media presence, communicated by email rather than phone, and was known as a recluse.

“I thought perhaps you’d changed your mind and were going to turn around and drive away.”

The voice that came from the shadows sounded rusty.

Also consistent with a woman who kept to herself.

“My mother called as I pulled in. She, uh, wanted to be sure I’d arrived safely.”

“I expect she also offered a few words of advice. Mothers are like that. Come in. You must be tired after your long trip.”

The door opened wider, and Ashley got her first look at the mistress of Edgecliff.

Rose Fitzgerald Warner—or Rose Fitzgerald, as she now preferred to be called—was tall and slender, her silver hair secured in a soft French twist. She wore modest makeup on a face that had remarkably few wrinkles for an eighty-year-old. Nor did her keen blue eyes hint at eight decades of living.

Her attire, however? Different story. The long black skirt, white lace blouse with high neck and leg-of-mutton sleeves, and cinched waist were turn-of-the-century.

The last century.

A red alert began to beep in Ashley’s mind.

What rational person would wear hundred-year-old clothes?

The woman’s lips quirked, as if she’d heard the unspoken question. “I thought, with your background, you’d appreciate the vintage attire.”

“Oh, I do. The outfit is, uh, lovely.”

“In case you’re concerned, I don’t dress like this every day. I exhumed this ensemble from a trunk in the attic to add ambiance to our meeting. Please come in. The drawing room is on your left.” She moved aside and motioned that direction.

After a brief hesitation, Ashley crossed the threshold. The woman might be eccentric, but she was well-spoken and seemed

lucid. Her emails had been articulate. She came with solid references.

There was no reason to be concerned.

None at all.

Reining in her overactive imagination, Ashley stopped in the middle of the foyer and gave it a slow perusal.

On one wall, a fireplace with an elaborate carved mantel dominated. A double stairway with ornate spindles hugged the walls on each side as it wound to a landing that was backed by another large stained-glass window overlooking the foyer. The light from the late-afternoon sun spilled through, creating a mosaic of colors on the parquet floor and brightening the space despite the dark wood wainscoting. All of the furnishings were period.

It was like stepping back in time.

Exactly what she'd hoped to find.

"Impressive, isn't it?"

At Rose's question, she angled sideways to find the older woman watching her.

"Very."

"As a child, I loved to sit in here in the afternoon whenever we visited. Delicious aromas would waft from the kitchen, and I'd watch the kaleidoscope of colors on the floor. It always felt safe and peaceful . . . and permanent." Her melancholy smile faded. "But of course, nothing is." She swept a hand toward the drawing room through a broad opening that could no doubt be closed off with pocket doors. "Shall we have tea and a chat? Or are you having second thoughts?"

Third thoughts would be more accurate. But admitting that could kill this deal—assuming she decided to go through with it after additional due diligence. Rose wasn't likely to sign on the dotted line with a stranger who was less than enthusiastic or committed about the plans they'd discussed.

"More like taking everything in and keeping an open mind."

"Always wise in a new situation." Rose closed the front door.

“Have a seat. I’ll retrieve the tea and join you in a minute.” With that, she disappeared through the archway between the twin staircases.

For a full thirty seconds, Ashley remained where she was, breathing in air redolent of history and opportunity.

It was possible, of course, that this trip would end up being a waste of time and money.

But maybe . . . just maybe . . . it would be a once-in-a-lifetime chance to leave her own past behind and forge a new path in a town with the promising name of Hope Harbor.