

Starfish Pier

A Hope Harbor Novel

IRENE HANNON



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

I am so proud of the young woman you've become.

Wherever the road ahead may take you,
hold fast to your dreams and values—
and may all your tomorrows
be filled with joy and love.



1

Maybe coming back to Oregon had been a mistake.

Expelling a breath, Steven Roark moved to the stern of the twenty-two-foot fishing boat where he spent his days and double-checked the cleat hitch knot on the mooring line.

Secure.

Which was more than he could say for his place in the world—or in Hope Harbor.

He ducked into the foldaway canvas enclosure that offered a modicum of protection to charter clients on blustery, cold days—like this late March Saturday—and dropped into a deck chair, massaging his forehead.

From a business standpoint, the day had been productive. For this early in the spring, steelheads had been running better than usual on the river at the north end of town, and his customers had left satisfied with their catches. One of them had even hooked a twenty-pounder.

On the personal front, however, the day was a total bust.

Steven leaned forward, flipped the latch on a storage compartment, and retrieved the envelope he'd found in his mailbox yesterday, the address penned in Cindy's fluid, curvy handwriting.

He pulled out the card, reread the printed verse, and skimmed the best wishes jotted inside by his sister-in-law under a crudely drawn smile icon that had to be his nephew's handiwork.

His brother hadn't bothered to sign his own name. Cindy had done the honors for both of them.

Stomach kinking, Steven shoved the card back in the envelope and hunched forward, elbows on knees.

Some birthday.

No one but fish, a couple of pesky seagulls, and three taciturn customers for company. No cake or festive dinner shared with friends or family. No recognition of the day by his kid brother—nor any progress in their relationship.

And if he hadn't made any inroads with Patrick after almost a year, there wasn't much chance his sibling would come around in the future unless the status quo changed.

Steven sighed.

While mustering out of the army had seemed like the right decision twelve months ago after Cindy's disturbing letter arrived in the Middle East, in hindsight—

“Hello? Is anyone on board?”

Steven jerked upright and squinted through the isinglass window.

A slender, thirtysomething woman stood on the dock beside his boat, a folder clutched against her chest. As the gusty wind whipped strands of her longish, light brown hair across her face, she brushed them aside and peered into the deck enclosure.

Given the shadowed interior on this gray day—plus the fog that had rolled in—she might not be able to make out his form.

That left him two options.

He could sink lower and ignore her . . . or give himself a birthday treat and chat with an attractive woman for a few minutes.

No contest, in light of the solitary evening that loomed ahead—providing she wasn't here on some sort of bothersome business.

He set the card down, pushed aside the canvas that covered the opening, and emerged into the stern.

The woman hugged the folder tighter and gave him a wary once-over.

Understandable, given his disheveled state after a full day on the water and the coarse stubble that would be darkening his jaw by now.

“Can I help you?” Taking into account her poised-to-flee posture, he remained where he was.

“Steven Roark?”

“Guilty.”

“My name is Holly Miller. May I speak with you for a few minutes?”

“Depends.”

Faint creases dented her brow. “On what?”

“On the reason for your visit. I’m not in the mood for a sales pitch.”

“I’m not selling anything.”

“Then we can talk.” For as long as she liked, since he had nothing more exciting to do.

How pathetic that the bright spot of his birthday was a visit from a nervous woman who looked as if she couldn’t wait to escape.

But it beat going home to an empty apartment.

“Um . . .” She surveyed the marina. “Could we sit somewhere? Like . . . back there?” She motioned toward crescent-shaped Dockside Drive, where benches and planters were placed along the sidewalk at the top of the sloping pile of boulders that led to the water.

“I have a few chores to finish here before I leave. Why don’t you come on board?”

She gave the craft a dubious sweep. “My sea legs aren’t the best.”

“There isn’t much motion in the marina.” Extending a hand, he moved toward her, toning down his usual take-charge manner. Based on her rigid stance, that sort of approach could frighten her off. “She’s easy to board, and we can sit there.” He indicated the unprotected bench seats along the edge of the stern.

It would be warmer—and far less windy—inside the portable

enclosure he'd erected for today's charter trip, but despite the windows it was safer to stay in the open. With all the misconduct allegations flying around these days, why take chances?

"Okay." She swallowed . . . grasped his hand . . . and eased one foot onto the gunwale.

The craft gave an almost imperceptible bob as she transferred her weight, and she gasped. Tightened her grip.

"You're fine. I've got you. Just step down."

She followed his instructions, but the maneuver was downright clumsy, and the instant both her feet were on the deck she groped for the seat and collapsed onto it in an awkward sprawl.

Pretty as his visitor was, she seemed to have been shortchanged in the gracefulness department.

And the pink hue that crept over her cheeks suggested she knew that.

He took a seat at the far end of the stern, leaving plenty of space between them. "You have the floor . . . or the deck." He hiked up one side of his mouth. Holly Miller appeared to be wound up tight as the ubiquitous black turban snails that clung to the rocks on Oregon beaches. Perhaps a touch of humor would help her chill.

Didn't work.

Her lips remained flat—and taut—as she set the folder in her lap, picked a speck of lint off her jeans, and zipped up her windbreaker as far as it would go. "Are you familiar with the Helping Hands volunteer organization here in town?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm on a committee that's putting together a dinner auction to raise funds for a new pro-life initiative. Everyone involved is soliciting auction items. Reverend Baker at Grace Christian mentioned you as a potential donor. That's why I'm here."

Steven stifled a groan.

This was the thanks he got for letting Cindy not only pressure him into helping with the holiday food drive at a church to which

he didn't even belong, but allowing her to drag him across the room for an introduction to the minister.

Proving the truth of the old adage that no good deed went unpunished.

Worse yet, of all the causes his visitor could be soliciting for, why did it have to be this one?

When the silence lengthened, she cleared her throat. "I was, uh, hoping you'd consider donating a charter fishing trip for two—or four, if possible. Everyone we've contacted has been very generous. I spoke this morning with the owner of the Seabird Inn B&B, and he offered a weekend romance package for one of his rooms."

If she was hoping to guilt him into donating, it wasn't going to work.

"What will the money you raise be used for?" He could guess, but the stall tactic would buy him a few seconds to figure out how to decline without coming across as a heartless jerk.

She opened the folder on her lap, withdrew a sheet of paper, and held it out to him. "This explains the effort in detail, but topline, we'll establish a fund to support efforts that protect life in all its stages. One example would be providing financial assistance to abortion alternatives, like paying expenses for women who agree to carry their babies to term and linking them with adoption agencies. We may also get involved in issues like capital punishment."

He narrowed his eyes. "What's your beef with capital punishment?"

She met his gaze square on. "Killing is killing."

"Putting a guilty person to death is called justice. And it keeps that person from taking other innocent lives."

"A lifetime prison sentence does too."

"At a huge expense to taxpayers."

"How do you put a price on a life?"

"There are practical considerations."

"Also ethical ones."

Squelching the temptation to continue the debate, he skimmed

the sheet she'd handed him. This wasn't a subject on which they were going to agree, so why argue on his birthday . . . or extend an encounter that was going south? This day had been depressing enough.

"Let me think about it." He folded the sheet into a small square, tucked it in the pocket of his jacket, and stood.

She gave a slow blink at his abrupt dismissal—but after a slight hesitation she rose too.

And almost lost her balance.

Again.

He took her arm in a firm grip. "Steady."

"Sorry. I'm a landlubber through and through." She flashed him a shaky smile.

That could be true—but it didn't explain her equilibrium issues.

The same kind Patrick had on occasion.

Yet this woman, with her clear hazel eyes, didn't strike him as the type who would struggle with his brother's problem.

Appearances could be deceiving, though. That's why you had to fact find, then make decisions using the evidence you uncovered . . . always keeping the greater good in mind.

At least that's how he'd justified some of his choices in the past.

As Holly tugged free of his hold and turned to disembark, he shifted gears. "Let me go first."

Without waiting for a reply, he hopped onto the dock and held out a hand.

After a nanosecond's hesitation, she took it and climbed up onto the seat. Swayed. Stabilized after he tightened his grip.

"One more step." Steven gave a little pull, and she heaved herself up.

He maintained a firm grip until she was on the dock beside him and wiggled her fingers free.

Although the lady still didn't appear to be all that sure-footed, he relinquished his hold—but stayed close.

She tucked the folder tight against her chest again. "I appreciate

your time today. If you decide to donate, you can contact Helping Hands at the number on the sheet I gave you.”

“Could I call you instead?”

The instant the words spilled out, he frowned. Where in blazes had *that* come from? Why would he want to have any further contact with a woman who’d run the other direction if she knew his history?

Her raised eyebrows indicated she was as surprised by the query as he was. “I, uh, suppose I could give you my phone number and email.”

No backtracking now.

He pulled out his cell. “Ready whenever you are.”

As she recited them, he tapped in the phone digits and the professional rather than personal email address. “You work for the school district?”

“Yes.”

She offered nothing more.

Fair enough. He was a stranger, and she was smart to be cautious. But he was no threat to her.

Nor was there much chance she’d ever hear from him again. Willing as he was to support charitable causes, this particular endeavor didn’t fit with his history.

He motioned toward Dockside Drive. “I’ll walk you to solid ground.”

“No.” She edged away, leaving a faint, pleasing floral scent in her wake. “I’ve delayed you from your chores too long already.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Thank you, but I can manage on my own.” Her chin rose a notch. “I may not have perfect balance, but I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I’ll let you get back to whatever you were doing on your boat.”

With that, she pivoted and wobbled down the dock toward Dockside Drive.

Steven folded his arms, reining in the urge to follow along behind

her in case she started to tumble. The lady had made it clear she didn't want an arm to hold.

All she wanted was a donation.

Too bad he couldn't accommodate her.

But after everything he'd done, God might smite him with a bolt of lightning if he tried to contribute to a pro-life cause.



Don't fall! Don't fall! Don't fall!

Holly concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other as she traversed the wooden planks.

While walking on firm surfaces posed few problems, a slightly undulating platform could be dicey.

Despite all the falls she'd taken in her life, for some reason doing a face-plant with Steven Roark watching would be the ultimate humiliation.

And the man was definitely watching her. That intent gaze of his was drilling a hole in her back.

Just a few more feet, Holly, and you'll be on terra firma. You can make it.

She focused on her destination, exhaling in relief as the soles of her shoes made contact with the concrete sidewalk.

From here, getting to her car was a stroll in the park.

She picked up her pace, furrowing her brow at a sudden urge to glance over her shoulder for one last glimpse of the charter fisherman. What was *that* all about? Why would she want to see Steven Roark again?

It wasn't as if he'd gone out of his way to be charming, after all. Yeah, he had decent manners—but he'd gotten downright argumentative during their brief exchange about capital punishment.

That was a hot-button issue for many people, though—and both sides had compelling arguments.

Given his abrupt end to their conversation, however, he wasn't

open to continuing the debate. He couldn't have hustled her off his boat any faster.

No wonder she was flustered—and unsettled.

On top of all that, Steven Roark was nothing like she'd expected. There wasn't a lick of similarity between the taciturn man and his amicable six-year-old nephew. Nor did he resemble—in appearance or manner—the boy's sandy-haired, low-key father who'd come to the recent first-grade parent-teacher conference with his wife.

Yet the temptation to look over her shoulder remained.

Holly skirted two gulls that stared at her from the middle of the sidewalk and held their ground.

There could be only one explanation for her reaction.

Brusque dismissal aside, the man exuded magnetism—and no one with his commanding presence had ever entered her orbit. Certainly none with a tall, toned physique, strong jaw, wind-mussed brown hair, and piercing chestnut-colored eyes.

He was the type who would appeal to women attracted to tall, dark, and dangerous men.

But that description didn't fit *her*. Steven Roark was one-eighty from the romantic hero of her dreams. There was nothing about him that should set off a buzz in her nerve endings.

Yet there it was.

Go figure.

As another powerful temptation to turn around swept over her, she huffed out a breath.

Enough.

She'd gone to his boat to make a pitch for a donation. Period. The next step—if there was one—was his.

Keeping her eyes aimed straight ahead, she continued toward her car—until the distracting aroma of grilling fish tickled her nostrils.

Salivary glands kicking in, she surveyed the small waterside park abutting the river at the far end of Dockside Drive. The serving window was open on the taco truck that was a permanent fixture

beside it on the wharf, and Charley Lopez was leaning on the counter, deep in conversation with a customer.

She hesitated.

It was early for dinner . . . but after that disconcerting encounter with Steven Roark, Charley's tasty tacos might help calm her.

And she wouldn't have to cook tonight either.

Sold.

She switched direction and approached the window with the owner's name emblazoned above in colorful letters against a white background.

As she drew near, the customer picked up his order, lifted a hand in farewell to Charley, and strolled away.

"Ah. If it isn't my favorite teacher." Charley's lips curved up as she approached, a fan of lines radiating from the corners of his eyes.

"I bet you say that to all the teachers." She smiled back at the man with the weathered, latte-toned skin who was wearing a Ducks cap over his long, gray ponytail.

Strange how easy it was to chat with Charley despite the childhood shyness she'd never been able to shake.

"I have many favorites—all for different reasons."

"Smooth answer."

"But sincere." He grinned at her. "Did you stop by to say hello, or are you in the mood for tacos?"

"Tacos. I caught the aroma as I was walking back from the wharf and couldn't resist."

"My best advertising. That, and word of mouth." He pulled two fillets out of a cooler and set them on the grill. "What took you to the wharf?"

She gave him a quick recap of her visit. "But I'm afraid my sales skills aren't as polished as yours. He didn't commit to a donation."

"Could be he wants to mull over how best to contribute." Charley tossed a handful of diced onions and red peppers on the griddle and began chopping a chipotle.

“I don’t think so. I got the impression he wasn’t receptive to the cause.”

“Is that right?” He finished with the chipotle. “That surprises me. He seems like a nice fellow.”

“You know him?” Holly kept her tone casual. Curious as she was about the charter fisherman, that didn’t mean she wanted anyone to *know* she was curious.

“Don’t you?”

“No. Should I?”

“Maybe not. From what I can tell, Steven keeps to himself.” Charley pulled a lime out of the cooler and began cutting it into wedges. “I don’t see you very often either.”

“It’s not a reflection of your cooking, trust me. I’ve just been busy learning the ropes on my new job and settling in. Church is about the only place I socialize.”

Sad but true.

While she’d successfully demonstrated her independence since moving from Eugene in January, so far she was batting zero on her resolution to spice up her social life.

“I expect Steven’s busy too. That may be one of the reasons he keeps a low profile. Of course, people also tend to do that if they have a lot on their mind . . . or they’re insecure.” He gave her a fast scan and went back to cooking.

She squinted at his back. Was the latter part of that comment meant for *her*?

No.

What a ridiculous notion.

She and Charley had no more than a passing acquaintance. He knew nothing of her history.

Besides, her self-confidence was growing by the day.

“Why do you think he has a lot on his mind?” Best to shine the spotlight back where it belonged.

Charley laid three corn tortillas on the grill and shook his special spice onto the fish and veggies. “Call it intuition. In any case,

I expect he could use a few friends. Don't you think so, Floyd?" He aimed the question over her shoulder.

Holly swiveled around. There was a fair amount of activity on the other side of Dockside Drive, where storefronts with colorful awnings and containers waiting to be filled with spring flowers lined the street. But no one was anywhere close to her.

Who was Charley—

A loud squawk erupted at her feet, and she jumped back.

Two gulls stood less than a yard away. One inspected her as his companion made a cackling noise that sounded like a laugh.

Charley leaned over the window. "Hey, Gladys. I didn't know you were here too."

Holly took a calming breath as amusement displaced fright. "You're acquainted with these gulls?" The town sage was living up to his reputation as an eccentric artist/taco chef.

"We're old friends. Right, you two?"

Gladys cackled again, and Charley chuckled as he straightened up and began assembling her tacos.

"You have unusual friends." Holly pulled out her wallet, keeping tabs on the twosome that was a bit too close for comfort.

Kind of like the pair on the sidewalk that had refused to budge as she walked away from the wharf.

Was it possible they'd followed her here and—

Rolling her eyes, she cut off that fanciful line of thought.

As if seagulls had agendas.

"Friends come in all shapes and sizes, and from all manner of backgrounds." Charley began wrapping the tacos in white paper. "Lots of people write off potential friends who seem too different at first glance. The trick is taking a second look—and checking out their heart as well as their face."

Holly counted out her money. "That sounds reasonable in theory."

"Works in practice too. Doesn't it, Floyd?"

In response, the gulls rose into the air with a screech and flutter of wings, then flew off in the direction of Steven's boat.

Or more likely, toward the harbor in general—the readiest source of a meal, thanks to the fishing crafts anchored in the sheltered waters between the pair of islands on the right and the breakwater on the left.

But they stopped and circled in the vicinity of his boat.
Odd.

Judging by his thoughtful expression as she turned back to pay for her order, Charley had reached the same conclusion. “Curious.” He continued to watch the feathered duo.

“How so?”

He flashed his white teeth. “Floyd and Gladys usually hang around here until I toss them a handout—unless another mission takes priority.” Without giving her a chance to question him further, he passed over her order. “Enjoy.”

“Always.” She handed him the bills.

“Let me get your change.”

She waved away the offer. “The amount’s too small to worry about. But you wouldn’t have to make change if you took credit cards.” She tapped the cash-only sign taped to the serving window.

“Why muddle up a simple transaction with computers and encryption and cloud technology? People today have a tendency to make things more complicated than they have to be. When I think of a cloud, that’s what I want to picture.” He swept a hand toward the heavens, where fluffy white billows and blue sky were appearing through the mist.

“I wouldn’t expect anything less from an artist.” Holly inhaled the savory aroma wafting up from the sack.

“Ah, but we’re all born artists. The challenge, as Picasso pointed out, is how to remain an artist once you grow up.”

“Not everyone has your talent with a brush, though.”

“Yet we can all see with the eyes of an artist if we leave preconceived notions behind, open ourselves to possibilities, listen with our heart—and take a leap of faith.” Charley grinned. “And there you have my thought for the day. Enjoy those tacos.”

Holly relinquished her place in line to a hand-holding couple

and continued toward her car, her step lighter. As usual, her short visit with Charley had lifted her spirits and provided food for both mind and stomach.

But she hadn't learned a thing about Steven Roark.

While the taco chef seemed to know an inordinate amount about Hope Harbor residents, he epitomized the word *discretion*.

Meaning if she wanted more background on the fisherman, she'd have to find another source.

First, however, she needed to determine why she was so keen to ferret out info on a man who'd been a stranger less than an hour ago.

At the door to her Civic, she angled back toward the marina. Steven's boat was too far away to distinguish—but the two gulls continued to circle in their holding pattern over a craft in the vicinity of his.

Despite Charley's assessment of the fisherman as a nice guy, if she was a betting woman she'd wager he'd already decided not to contribute to the Helping Hands event.

Too bad. A charter fishing trip could bring in a hefty sum at the auction.

Jiggling her keys, she tipped her head and watched the gulls.

If she wanted to venture outside her comfort zone again—take a leap of faith, as Charley had put it—she *could* pay Roark a second visit, make another appeal. After all, she believed in the cause heart and soul.

But that wouldn't be your only motivation for returning, Holly.

At the chiding reminder from her subconscious, she yanked open her door and slid into the car.

Fine. She could admit the truth.

Her reasons for going back—if she decided to follow through on the impulse—wouldn't be entirely altruistic.

Because despite his daunting personality . . . despite an intuitive sense that it would be safer to walk a wide circle around him . . . Steven Roark was the most intriguing man she'd ever met.

And she wanted to see him again.