
CODE OF HONOR · 1

DANGEROUS ILLUSIONS

**IRENE
HANNON**



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Irene Hannon, *Dangerous Illusions*
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To my husband Tom—
With deepest gratitude for all you take on
so I have the time and energy to write.
Three dot.
Always.

PROLOGUE

“Hello, Matt. Long time no see.”

As the words slithered through the clammy night air, a jagged shaft of lightning illuminated the speaker’s face for one brief instant.

But Matt Parker didn’t need a visual cue to identify the man on the other side of his front door.

The glib voice was all too familiar.

Fingers clutching the doorknob, he stared at the shadowy figure as shock thrummed through his nerve endings. In the background, another eruption of electricity slashed across the inky sky. A sharp crack of thunder shook the walls of the house. Rain pummeled the tulips rimming the porch, beating their heads into submission.

Hollywood couldn’t have staged a more dramatic—or ominous—reunion.

“Aren’t you going to ask me in?”

When the man he loathed flashed the same smug smile he’d worn during their last conversation five years ago, Matt attempted to slam the door.

“Not so fast.” A foot shot between the door and the jamb.
“I’ve come a long way to see you.”

“You wasted your time.” The anger he thought he’d tamed churned anew in his gut.

“I never waste my time.”

“Get your foot out of my door.” He ground out the words through clenched teeth, knuckles whitening on the doorframe.

“We need to talk.”

“I have nothing to say to you.”

“I have some things to say to you.”

“I’m not interested in hearing them. I told you five years ago—stay out of my life.”

“I intended to. But I have a problem.”

“Tough.” A pair of headlights swung onto the long driveway that led to the house he’d called home for the past three years.
“My pizza’s here. Don’t expect me to share.” He kicked the foot away from the jamb.

Before he could shove the door closed, however, the interloper shouldered through. “I didn’t come for pizza.”

“Get out of my house.” Fury nipped at every syllable as he grabbed the other man’s arm.

“I don’t plan to complicate your life for long, so back off and deal with the pizza guy.” He yanked free and strolled toward the kitchen.

As the car lights swept across the front of the house, Matt muttered an obscenity—but remained by the door. Finding a pizza place willing to deliver to his wooded property on the outskirts of St. Louis had been tough, and he wasn’t about to jeopardize their arrangement by ignoring a delivery on a night like this.

But once he took possession of the dinner he no longer wanted, the man in his kitchen was getting a swift kick out the door.

Literally, if that's what it took.

An older-model Sentra stopped in the drive, engine idling. The lanky kid who often delivered on Saturday nights bounded up the stone walkway through the driving rain and leaped onto the porch, juggling an insulated container.

"Hey, Mr. Parker." He cringed as a shaft of lightning pierced the sky, followed by another bone-jarring crack of thunder. "I thought April was supposed to bring showers, not monsoons."

Matt tried to conjure up a smile for the high schooler with the happy-go-lucky grin.

Failed.

"Thanks for coming out on a night like this." The charge for the pizza was already on his credit card, but he fished out a generous tip.

"It beats doing homework." The teen's eyes widened as he pulled the pizza out of the carrier and gaped at the bill Matt extended. "Are you sure about this? I mean . . . that's a lot of money."

"Put it toward your college fund. And be careful driving tonight."

"I will. Thanks a lot—and enjoy the pizza."

Not likely.

He waited until the kid was back behind the wheel, then closed the door and stalked to the kitchen.

His visitor had tossed his slicker over a chair and was sipping a can of pilfered soda when he entered. Water pooled on the tile below the garment, the puddle widening with every drip.

"I told you once to leave." He slammed the pizza onto the counter. "You have thirty seconds to clear out."

"And if I don't?" With infuriating nonchalance, the man settled on a stool at the island. "Is 911 in your plans?"

Matt clamped his jaw shut, silently cursing the obnoxious piece of scum across from him.

“I didn’t think so. I’ve been watching you, Matt. You lead a quiet, off-the-grid life. I doubt you’d want to call attention to yourself by filing a police report . . . or dredging up our past.”

The very thought of all that garbage seeing the light of day sent a cold shiver snaking down his spine.

But the man’s first comment scared him more.

“What do you mean, you’ve been watching me?” Although Matt tried to contain his alarm, tension nipped at his words.

“I mean exactly what I said. I’ve been watching you. Observing. Studying.” He started to lift the lid on the pizza. “Trish is pretty. I commend you on your excellent taste.”

Matt shoved the box out of his visitor’s reach, his blood chilling. “Leave Trish out of this.”

“Hey . . . can’t a man notice a pretty woman? You did. The two of you seemed very cozy at lunch last week.”

Matt’s stomach heaved. “Why have you been watching me?”

“I need your help.”

“You expect me to help you?” Matt barked out a harsh laugh. “What a joke.”

“I’m dead serious.”

“You’re also delusional. I wouldn’t lift a finger on your behalf if my life depended on it.”

A muscle twitched in the other man’s cheek. “Too bad. Refusing isn’t an option. But once you give me the help I need, you’ll never see me again. Guaranteed.”

“Forgive me if I have trust issues.” He made no attempt to hide his sarcasm. “As for that option crack—you can’t force me to help you. I want no part of your problems. If you’ve dug yourself into another hole, you can dig yourself out.”

“That’s what I’m doing. It’s why I’m here.” He finished off his soda and set the can on the counter. “To tell you the truth, I’d rather not involve you. It’s too messy. But there’s no other way.”

“You *are* delusional.” Matt planted his palms on the counter

and leaned toward the man who was fouling the air in his house.
“Read my lips. I said forget it. Now get out of here.”

As a shudder of thunder rumbled through the walls, the lights flickered. Steadied.

His visitor regarded him, an odd mixture of emotions in his eyes. At last he stood. “Sorry, Matt. You *are* going to help me. Here’s how.”

With the pizza cooling between them and the aroma of spicy tomato sauce turning his stomach, Matt’s heart stalled as the man he’d never wanted to see revealed his plan.

And as the seconds ticked by . . . as Matt stared across the counter at this specter from his past . . . as the rain pounded against the roof and the wind howled . . . one thing became terrifyingly clear.

The new life he’d created was over.

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ONE WEEK LATER

At the peal of the doorbell, Trish Bailey looked up from the lesson plan she was preparing.

“Matt’s here.” Her mother adjusted the afghan thrown over her legs.

“Punctual, as usual.”

“One of his many virtues.”

Here we go again.

Expelling a breath, Trish set her paperwork on the sofa beside her and stood. “Do you want to meet with him in the kitchen?”

“Yes. He’s handsome too.”

Best to ignore that as well.

She moved toward the door, stopping to rest a hand on her mom’s shoulder as she passed the wheelchair. “Can I get you anything while I’m up?”

“No. I’m fine.”

Hardly. But Eileen Coulter had never been a complainer—before the car accident two years ago, or since.

She gave her mother’s arm a gentle squeeze. “I’ll be right back.”

“After we finish, nap for me. Matt might stay for cake.”

Although the words were stroke-garbled, the meaning was clear. Her mom wanted her to stop mourning and start living again—a message the older woman had been communicating with increasing frequency over the past few weeks.

“We’ll see.”

“Means no.”

“It means maybe.” Without giving her mother an opportunity to press the issue, she crossed the living room to the foyer. Her parents’ accountant *was* nice . . . and she’d enjoyed the lunch he’d suggested a couple of weeks ago . . . but she was in no hurry to dip her toes back into romance.

Besides, much as she liked Matt, there was zero zing. Not like there’d been with John from the first moment they’d met.

But perhaps that kind of instant attraction, that immediate feeling of *simpatico*, only came along once in a lifetime.

The bell rang again, and she picked up her pace—and propped up her spirits. She wasn’t going to sink back into the morass of self-pity she’d languished in for the first few months after the accident. If her mother, who’d suffered far more, could carry on with a cheery spirit, she would too.

Trish straightened her shoulders, tugged the hem of her tunic down over her leggings, and summoned up a smile of welcome.

But as she pulled open the door, her mouth flattened.

Mercy!

The tall, sandy-haired man on the other side had a stitched gash on his temple, a purple-hued bruise on his forehead, and one wrist encased in a removable brace.

“Matt! What on earth happened?”

He grimaced. “Car accident. I skidded on wet pavement last Sunday going around a curve and had a close encounter with a tree. That’s why I emailed your mom and asked if we could postpone our meeting until today. Sorry to infringe on your Saturday.”

“We didn’t have anything else planned. Come in.” She ushered him into the foyer. “Are you certain you’re up to this?”

“Yes. The cut and sprained wrist are healing, and despite some memory lapses and headaches from the concussion, my ability to count beans is unaffected.” He gave her a smile that seemed strained. “To be honest, you look more tired than I do. Everything okay?”

“Fine. Busy.”

“You take on too much.”

“I have obligations.”

“More of them could be delegated. You need some downtime. You’ve been dealing with a lot of heavy stuff for two years, and long-term stress can take a toll.”

No kidding.

But her stress level was private territory, even if their lunch date had introduced a more personal element to their relationship.

“I want to be here for Mom as much as I can.” Her reply came out sharper than intended, and she moderated her tone. “Give me a sec to fill her in on your accident. Otherwise it might be too much of a shock. Why don’t you meet us in the kitchen?”

To her relief, he let the personal subject matter drop.

After rejoining her mother in the living room and sharing the news, she pushed the chair toward the back of the house.

“Matt.” Her mother held out her functional left hand as Trish wheeled her into the kitchen. “So sorry.”

He grasped her fingers. “I’ll survive. You’re looking well.”

“Doing fine.”

“Glad to hear it. Are you ready to review some numbers?”

“Yes. I read the reports you emailed.”

“Any questions?” He pulled his laptop out of the case and booted it up.

“No. Very thorough.”

“Then this shouldn’t take long. Trish . . . are you going to sit in?”

“Yes.” Her mother spoke for her. “Like always.”

“Right.” He touched his forehead gingerly. “This is causing a few memory glitches. I’ll ask your pardon in advance if I have any other lapses.”

“No worries.” Her mother patted his arm.

Resigned, Trish scooted a chair down to the end of the table so she could see the screen. Since the charitable foundation her parents had set up six years ago would be hers to oversee someday, she did need to stay up to speed on the workings.

However . . . despite her attempt to pay close attention, ten minutes in, she lost interest as Matt explained the tax implications of a donation to a charity her mother favored. Her mind drifted back to the lesson plan for Monday’s fifth-grade art class, the supplies she needed to pick up for Tuesday’s mixed media class, the field trip she wanted to arrange to the exhibit at . . .

“I think we lost Trish a while back.”

She zoned back in, her cheeks warming at Matt’s amused comment. “Sorry.”

“Numbers and Trish.” Her mother shook her head, one side of her mouth curving up indulgently. “No interest. But superb teacher—and daughter.”

“Well, you have me to deal with the numbers.” Matt winked and closed his computer.

“Providential.” Mom slid her a glance and yawned. “Nap time.”

When Trish rose, Matt did too.

“I can see myself out.” He slid the laptop into its case.

“No. Cake.” Her mother motioned toward the two-layer chocolate confection on the counter.

“Um . . . I still have to count your medicine for the week, Mom—and finish my lesson plans.”

“Cake won’t take long.”

She waited, hoping Matt would pick up on her lack of enthusiasm and decline to stay.

He didn’t.

Drat.

All she could do was wolf down her cake and hustle him out the door fast.

“If you can spare a few minutes, you’re welcome to stay and have a piece.” The invitation came out more grudging than gracious, and one of her mother’s eyebrows rose.

Matt didn’t seem to notice.

“Thank you. I’d like that.” He retook his seat.

“Coffee.” Her mother gestured toward the pot on the counter, ignoring the disgruntled look Trish shot her.

“I’ll put some on. It can brew while I take you to your room.”

She moved to the counter, paying more attention to the conversation behind her than the rote task. Only once did her mom edge into personal territory, suggesting that if Matt wasn’t up to cooking yet after his accident, he might want to join them for one of her daughter’s delicious meals some night this week.

Trish rolled her eyes and swung around. She and her mom needed to have a long talk. Soon. “We’ll have to see if we can find a night that works. I’ve got some meetings after school this week, so we’ll be having more takeout than usual. Ready, Mom?”

Without waiting for a reply, she pulled her mother’s chair back from the table and wheeled her down the hall.

Once in the bedroom, her mom waved away Trish’s attempt to introduce the subject of matchmaking, claiming she was too tired for discussion.

Trish let it ride—for now. However, the delay tactic would buy her mother no more than a brief reprieve.

When Trish returned to the kitchen, Matt stood and picked

up his laptop. “I think I’ll pass on the cake, if you don’t mind. My head’s beginning to throb.”

Yes!

Perhaps her lukewarm response to her mom’s suggestion had finally sunk in.

Whatever the reason for his quicker-than-expected departure, however, she wasn’t going to argue. “It might not be a bad idea to go home and lie down for a while.”

“I agree.”

He followed her to the foyer, said a perfunctory good-bye, and strode down the front walk without turning around.

Not his usual, personable style.

But a concussion and bad headache could ruin anyone’s disposition.

She wandered back to the kitchen to deal with the coffee they wouldn’t need . . . and found a pot of hot water instead of fresh-brewed java. The filter basket with ground coffee was still beside the coffeemaker.

Frowning, she propped a hand on her hip. Had she been so distracted by the conversation between her mother and Matt that she’d forgotten to slide it into position?

Weird—but what other explanation could there be?

She emptied the pot of water and flipped off the switch on the coffeemaker. Her lesson plans were waiting in the living room . . . but as long as she was in the kitchen, why not count her mom’s pills?

As she picked up the weekly pill organizer and box holding all the bottles of medication from their usual place at the end of the counter, Matt’s suggestion to delegate some of her obligations replayed through her mind. He did have a point. The aides who came during the week could count out pills . . . but she felt more comfortable handling the job herself until her mom regained full use of her right hand—if she ever did.

Sighing, she sat at the table and went through the routine of opening bottles, shaking out pills, splitting those that needed to be cut in half with the pill cutter, and dropping them in the correct time slots for each day of the week. Despite the diligent efforts of the physical therapist, her mother had shown little measurable progress in weeks. It was very possible Eileen Coulter would never again use her sewing machine or whip up a batch of her famous chocolate mint cakes or work in the gardens she loved.

Trish's vision misted, and she fumbled a capsule. It skidded across the glass-topped table, but she managed to snatch it before it disappeared over the edge.

Wayward pill in hand, she examined the subtle tremors running through her fingers. Sleepless nights, stress, and grief did take a toll, as Matt had noted.

Perhaps he was right about letting go of some of the more mundane tasks. After all, her mother could afford to bring in additional paid help. Had offered to on multiple occasions.

Yet being busy had its benefits. If you were occupied every minute of the day, you didn't have a chance to dwell on the past—or the future. Depressing thoughts could only worm their way in during the middle-of-the-night hours when sleep was elusive.

She deposited the pill in its slot and popped the lid of another prescription container. On the plus side, life was settling into a routine of sorts—and routine was healing. Bit by bit, day by day, the darkness was dissipating. A new normal was taking shape. Each week was better . . . easier . . . less bleak . . . than the one before.

And that trend would continue.

It had to.

Because how could things get any worse?

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

Craig Elliott took a sip of his Scotch and thumbed the remote, paying scant attention to the succession of images strobing across Matt's TV screen.

Today had been productive.

Matt had played his role well, done the necessary reconnaissance, laid the groundwork for what was to come—and neither Trish nor her mother were the wiser.

It was an ingenious plan.

He downed another gulp of liquor, wincing. The inexpensive brand wasn't as smooth as the high-end Johnnie Walker Blue Blended he preferred, but it would do until he had more funds. And if the plan he'd revised after getting the lay of the land here played out as he expected, the coffers would begin filling soon.

But timing—and patience—were everything. Rushing his scheme would raise suspicions and draw too much attention.

Not a smart move in his situation.

He opted for a show with supernatural overtones, tossed the remote onto the table beside his chair, and surveyed his surroundings. Hardly plush—but he could upgrade, once he had more cash flow. The money would come. It always did, if you knew how to work the system.

Not that his previous efforts had been flawless, of course. If they had been, he wouldn't be stuck in this Midwest town whose biggest claim to fame was a giant silver version of the McDonald's arch. He'd be living the good life in New York or LA. Maybe even Paris.

But greed and haste had brought him down.

At least he'd learned his lesson. This go-round, he was in for the long haul. That's why he'd spent weeks doing his homework. Preparing. Learning everything he could about Matt's life. It was why he'd laid low the past week, getting up to speed on intel he hadn't had access to prior to his visit with Matt.

Smirking, he downed the dregs of his drink. The man's

expression when he'd opened the door last Saturday had been priceless.

Too bad the rest of the evening hadn't been as amusing.

His lips curled in distaste. After he'd revealed his plan, the situation had become uncomfortable. Painful, even. But he'd pushed through, done what he had to do, gotten what he wanted.

And he'd continue to do what had to be done going forward. He'd charted his course, and there was no going back.

A sudden flash on the TV screen drew his attention. One of the characters had morphed from human to . . . who knew what? Someone—or something—with superhuman abilities and power.

Craig swirled the ice in his glass as the action on the screen unfolded. Entertaining, if unrealistic. Absent extraordinary powers, humans had to have a superior intellect and more ingenuity than their superhero counterparts to win in the real world.

Fortunately, he had both—as Matt had discovered last Saturday.

Craig smiled again and set the glass beside him. The audacity . . . and sheer brilliance . . . of the endeavor had stunned the other man.

But you couldn't win big if you didn't think big.

And now the stage was set. All he had to do was follow through. Trish and her mother would continue to trust Matt—and on the surface, he would continue to be their friend.

Until that illusion was no longer needed.

He tapped a finger on the arm of the chair. The timing of that depended on Trish, and she'd turned out to be a bit of a wild card. Apparently she wasn't as interested in Matt as he'd surmised. That might change with more aggressive wooing . . . but if it didn't, his contingency plan was solid.

Whichever direction he took, the end result would be the same: one day soon, all his troubles would be history.

Along with anyone who got in his way.