

THREE-TIME RITA AWARD WINNER

IRENE  
HANNON

HEROES OF QUANTICO

IN  
HARM'S  
WAY

## **Praise for *Against All Odds***

“Brava! Award-winner Hannon debuts the Heroes of Quantico series with a wonderful array of believable characters, action, and suspense that will keep readers glued to each page. Hannon’s extraordinary writing, vivid scenes, and surprise ending come together for a not-to-be-missed reading experience.”

***RT Book Reviews*, 4½ stars, Top Pick**

“I found someone who writes romantic suspense better than I do. I highly recommend *Against All Odds* as one of the best books I’ve had the privilege of reading this year. This is a captivating, fast-paced, well-written romantic suspense destined for my keeper shelf. I loved this book, and highly recommend this author.”

**Dee Henderson, author, the O’Malley Family series**

“Nothing like a great romantic suspense novel to engage and delight, and Irene Hannon does it with ease! Coop is the quintessential emotionally reserved hero who finds his heart breached by the woman he is charged with protecting. Irene has perfected the dialogue between Coop and Monica as the sparks fly. Well-drawn bad guys, a dysfunctional relationship between Monica and her diplomat father, and witty male banter between Coop and his partner Mark add intensity and levity in equal measure in this rapid-paced, well-written romance. Irene has garnered herself another faithful reader with *Against All Odds*.”

***Relz Reviewz***

“Hannon delivers big-time in this novel. The intercontinental suspense plot combines flawlessly with a fantastic romance that sizzles. The realism in her FBI details adds authenticity to the novel and allows the book to branch out to a male audience and women who would not pick up a romantic suspense title. The characters are all well developed and the interplay between

partners is wonderful. So if you're looking for a great suspense read, pick up *Against All Odds*. I promise you will be delighted that you did."

***The Suspense Zone Book of the Month***

**Praise for *An Eye for an Eye***

"RITA-award-winner Hannon's latest superbly written addition to her Heroes of Quantico series neatly delivers all the thrills and chills of Suzanne Brockmann's Team Sixteen series with the subtly incorporated faith elements found in Dee Henderson's books."

***Booklist***

"The long-anticipated sequel in the Heroes of Quantico series does not disappoint. Hannon continues to bring her own special brand of suspense and romance to this genre. This winning recipe provides readers with characters that are engrossing, a plot filled with unexpected twists, and a love story that will melt your heart. The only downside to this terrific novel is that you won't want to put it down."

***RT Book Reviews, 4½ stars, Top Pick***

"You will be hooked from the first chapter with an explosive start, followed by brilliant pacing through the rest of the story and the perfect balance of suspense, action, and romance."

***Relz Reviewz***

"A new queen of suspense joins the ranks of Brandilyn Collins, Terri Blackstock, and Dee Henderson . . . her name is Irene Hannon. This is masterful storytelling."

***Deenasbooks Blogspot***

**Books by Irene Hannon**

HEROES OF QUANTICO

*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*

HOPE HARBOR

*Hope Harbor*

*Sea Rose Lane*

*Sandpiper Cove*

*Pelican Point*

*Driftwood Bay*

*Starfish Pier*

*Blackberry Beach*

*Sea Glass Cottage*

STANDALONE NOVELS

*That Certain Summer*

*One Perfect Spring*



HEROES OF QUANTICO

# IN HARM'S WAY

IRENE HANNON

  
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## PROLOGUE

In a matter of minutes, the baby would be hers.

Forever.

Debra flexed her fingers inside the snug latex gloves, tightened her grip on the loop of wire in her hand, and melted deeper into the shadows at the back of the dim, gothic-style church. As the final organ notes reverberated through the deserted sanctuary, their hollow echo fading into the murky alcoves along the perimeter, the woman behind the keyboard tilted a bottle of water against her lips, emptying it in two long swallows.

The hint of a smile touched the corners of Debra's lips. Rebecca O'Neil was nothing if not predictable.

Standing, Rebecca leaned over the pew behind her and rearranged the blanket on the infant in a pumpkin seat. She cooed a few words Debra couldn't distinguish, smiling as the child gurgled gibberish in response.

The mother bent close to press a gentle kiss to the tiny forehead, and Debra's fingers twitched on the wire, itching to pick up the baby, to cuddle her close, to breathe her fresh scent. To experience all the sweet joys of motherhood that had been denied her.

But they would be denied her no more.

Today she would rectify that wrong.

Drawing a deep breath, Debra tried to slow her accelerating pulse. She was close, so close to realizing her dream. If all went according to plan, in less than five minutes she would hold her baby in her arms.

And she never intended to let go.

The organist moved toward the back of the church, and Debra's fingers clenched . . . unclenched . . . clenched in a spasmodic rhythm on the wire. Her eyes narrowed as she watched Rebecca approach, and for one fleeting instant, doubt assailed her. The woman seemed like a caring person, a good mother. One who would miss her baby. But three months ago, back in October, Debra had overheard her admit to a friend at the gym that she was overwhelmed. The words had replayed over and over in Debra's mind.

"It's a handful," Rebecca had said. "The kids are a lot more closely spaced than we planned. I never expected to have two in diapers at once. But Megan is such a good baby. It's only been seven weeks, and already she's starting to sleep through the night. Would you like to see her latest picture?"

While Rebecca pulled a photo from her purse, Debra had strolled past and glanced over the woman's shoulder. It had been no more than idle curiosity . . . until she'd seen the baby's copper-hued curls—the same shade as hers—and the blue eyes that matched her own.

The child looked like the baby she might have given birth to, Debra had realized with a jolt. *Should* have given birth to. She deserved a baby. Far more than did Rebecca, who already had one child.

The sudden flash of insight that followed had stunned her.

*That baby should be mine.*

She'd known that as surely as she'd known that the pleasant fall breezes would soon give way to the icy winds of winter.

That's why she was sequestered in a house of God on this cold January day, her visit the culmination of weeks of careful planning. Nothing less monumental than today's task could have compelled her to set foot in a church. She and God had parted company long ago.

A familiar ache in the empty place that had held her womb radiated upward, tightening her throat. Natural birth might no longer be an option. Nor adoption. They didn't give healthy Caucasian infants to single parents. Or women with her history. But there were other ways to get babies.

And it wasn't as if she would leave Rebecca childless. She would never do that to anyone. She knew what it felt like to lose a child. But Rebecca already had one daughter.

Besides, Debra's plan would benefit everyone. Rebecca would be less stressed. Both children would receive undivided attention. And she would have the baby that fate, or nature, or God—or the conspiracy of her doctors and her husband—had deprived her of.

Rebecca passed her, mere inches away, and Debra shrank further into the shadows, readying the sturdy loop of wire in her hands. Except for the day she'd seen the baby's picture, this was the closest she'd ever been to the mother. Yet she knew a lot about her from eavesdropping at the gym. Rebecca worked as an organist. She practiced every Saturday morning in the empty church. Brought her new baby with her while her husband watched their two-year-old. Finding her address had been a simple matter of following her to her car one day and copying down her license number. Debra's work provided easy access to research resources.

The location of the church had also been easy to track down. All Debra had to do was wait at the end of Rebecca's street and follow her one Saturday. The next day, she'd attended services to scope the place out. It had been a little trickier to slip into the

practice sessions unobserved, but she'd pulled it off. Rebecca always unlocked the church door and propped it open before retrieving the baby from the car, exposing the infant as briefly as possible to Chicago's frigid January weather. That gave Debra the perfect opportunity to slip in.

It had taken just two trips to find the window of opportunity she needed and to formulate a plan. The young mother always brought an oversize bottle of water with her, and about halfway through her practice session she visited the ladies room.

As she was doing now.

Heart pounding, Debra waited while the woman stepped into the restroom and pulled the door shut behind her. As the click echoed in the empty sanctuary, Debra moved to the door and slipped the small wire loop over the knob, her rubber-soled shoes noiseless on the terrazzo floor. Stretching the remaining length of wire taut, she wrapped it around the adjacent knob to a storage closet, securing it with half a dozen tight twists.

The whole maneuver took less than fifteen seconds.

She was halfway to the baby when the knob on the door to the restroom rattled. Rattled again. And again, with more force.

"Hey! Is anyone out there?"

Rebecca's voice sounded faint through the heavy oak door.

More rattling followed.

Debra rounded the pew and smiled down at the tiny baby. Her blue eyes were wide, her coppery curls bouncing as she kicked her tiny legs. She was clutching a Raggedy Ann doll that lived up to its name, its face patched, the hair sparse and limp. Debra gave the worn doll a gentle tug, but the baby tightened her grip and screwed up her face, signaling her intent to register a loud protest. Debra hesitated. A crying baby would attract attention. Not a good thing. She could dispose of the doll later.

Retrieving a stretchy wool hat from the pocket of her coat, Debra pulled it low over her forehead and lifted the infant from

the pumpkin seat, relishing the sense of completeness that washed over her as she held the small bundle against her shoulder. The baby felt good in her arms. Like it belonged there.

“Is anyone there? Please . . . let me out!”

Tuning out Rebecca’s desperate plea, Debra strode toward the side door near the sanctuary. As far as she’d been able to determine, the small church in the quiet suburb had no security cameras. And the back parking lot was hidden from the street. Getting away unseen should be a piece of cake.

She cracked the door and surveyed the lot. Empty. Slipping out, she shut the heavy door behind her, the stone walls muffling the faint, panicked cries from within.

As if sensing distress, the baby began to whimper.

“Hush, little one.” Debra stroked a soothing finger down the child’s satiny cheek as she settled her into the brand new safety seat in the rental car. “Mommy will take good care of you. In a little while we’ll stop and have lunch, okay?”

Once more, she tugged on the doll. When the baby let out a howl of protest and clutched it against her chest with both hands, Debra wavered. If the doll kept her baby happy—and quiet—during the drive, why not let her keep it for a few hours? She could dispose of it later.

Snow began to fall as she slid behind the wheel. Soft, downy flakes that kissed her windshield. Perfect, each one. And unique. But so short-lived. God had made a mistake with snowflakes, Debra decided as she watched them melt against the glass. They deserved much more than a brief moment of glory.

In truth, God made a lot of mistakes. Like with her, for example. She’d wanted to be a mother for as long as she could remember. *Deserved* to be a mother. Why else would she have married? Put herself through all those treatments? Kept trying after three miscarriages? She’d still be trying, if she could.

But she'd fooled them all. All the people who'd said she'd never have a baby. Her doctor. Her husband. God.

She had her baby now. The child of her heart. The one person in her life who would love her for always. Unconditionally.

Today, at long last, she'd become a real mother.

Smiling, she put the car into gear and began the long drive home.

# 1

## One Month Later

Fast food.

What a joke.

Rachel Sutton tapped her foot on the tile floor by the pickup counter, sighed, and checked her watch. Again. A ten-minute wait did not qualify as fast. At this rate, she'd have to push the speed limit and inhale her lunch or risk being tardy for her first class of the afternoon.

"Rachel!" A harried clerk plopped her order on the counter as he called her name.

Finally.

Elbowing her way through the crowd, Rachel snagged the large bag of sandwiches and chips and settled it into the cardboard tray between two soft drinks. Juggling her purchases, she plowed through the sea of customers and pushed the glass door open with her shoulder.

Unseasonable spring-like temperatures greeted her, an early February reprieve from the past month's harsh weather. If the throng around her was any indication, the nice weather had brought everyone in St. Louis out of hibernation. And no one appeared to be in a hurry. Didn't any of these people have jobs? Commitments? Schedules to keep?

Dodging a stubborn patch of ice, she trudged toward the last spot in the parking lot, where her older-model Camry was squeezed in next to the mountain of plowed snow piled beside the dumpster. *Chill out, Rachel*, she counseled herself. *The world won't end if you're five minutes late for class.*

But the pep talk didn't do much to calm her tense nerves. And for the dozenth time in the past few weeks, she tried to figure out why she felt so stressed and on edge. It didn't make sense. Her life was good, her career fulfilling. She loved teaching music to grade schoolers. Playing piano during high tea on Sundays at one of St. Louis's most elegant hotels was a highlight of her week. Her young piano students were a joy. And she'd found a way to indulge her artistic leanings by starting a very successful mural-painting business on the side. There was no reason for her recent unease.

Yet she couldn't shake it. She hadn't had a good night's sleep in more than a month, and her patience was at an all-time low. Ten days ago, she'd nitpicked one of her piano student's technique until the poor child was almost in tears. Last week, she'd refused to kitsch up a mural with Victorian curlicues, much to the annoyance of a well-paying client. Yesterday she'd snapped at Marta when her co-worker tried to tease a smile out of her.

That display of bad temper was the very reason she was battling the noontime crowd at this popular outlet. Today's lunch was a peace offering—even if she'd never felt less peaceful in her life.

Sidestepping a puddle, Rachel shifted the tray, balancing it in one hand while she dug in her shoulder purse for her keys. Marta had meant well yesterday, she conceded as she edged between her car and the mound of melting snow on the passenger side. She did need to lighten up. The frown imbedded in her forehead was fast becoming a permanent

addition. And it was out of character. In general, Rachel was upbeat, patient, and calm. She had no idea why her usual tranquility had evaporated, leaving an unnerving jumpiness in its place.

As if to underscore that point, the horn in the car next to her blared as the owner unlocked it with the remote from across the parking lot. Rachel's hand jerked, and she watched in dismay as the drinks tottered. Somehow she managed to juggle them back to stability, but her luck ran out with the bag of sandwiches. It took a nosedive into the melting pile of snow.

Disgusted, she set the tray on her trunk and bent to retrieve the bag. This whole lunch thing was turning out to be a disaster.

As she snagged the top of the white sack and rescued it from the pile of dirty, melting snow, a tuft of bright orange yarn peeked out at her from beneath the mound. A knit cap perhaps. Or the end of a scarf. No doubt lost in the parking lot on a snowy, windy night and later swept aside as the plows barreled through.

After depositing the food on the front passenger seat, she poked at the orange clump with the toe of her boot. If she wanted to be a good Samaritan, she could dig it out and add it to the shop's lost and found collection. But it didn't seem worth the effort. It may have been buried for a month. The person who'd lost it would have given up all hope of finding it by now.

Suddenly her toe dislodged a large chunk of ice, and a button eye blinked back at her.

So much for her cap and scarf theory. Judging by the patched face that was emerging as she nicked away the ice and snow, the object buried under the pile of frozen slush was a well-loved Raggedy Ann doll. One that would be missed.

That put a whole different light on the situation.

She knew it was foolish, but for some reason Rachel couldn't bring herself to abandon the doll in the parking lot. On the off chance a mother was desperately searching for her daughter's beloved doll, Rachel decided to dig it out and deposit it in the restaurant's lost and found.

Retrieving the ice scraper from the floor of her front seat, she went to work on the frozen snow caked around the doll. The warm sun had softened the surface, but the deeper she dug, the more ice-like the snow became.

"Excuse me, ma'am . . . is there a problem? Can I help you with something?"

Rachel shifted around. An older man, white sandwich bag in hand, was regarding her from under arched, shaggy gray brows. "No. I'm . . . uh . . . just trying to rescue this doll."

"Is it yours?"

"No." Warmth flooded her cheeks. "But I imagine the little girl who lost it would like to get it back."

The man moved closer and bent down to give the jointed cloth leg an experimental tug. It didn't budge. "I don't know. It's stuck pretty good." He backed up and regarded the filthy, sodden doll. "Besides, I'm not sure the little girl's mother would want it back. It has to be full of germs." He regarded his damp fingers with an expression of distaste.

Rachel surveyed the doll, exposed now except for one black-mitted hand. He had a point. The frayed gingham dress was stained, the threadbare white apron gray with dirt. "You're probably right."

"It was a nice thought, though," the man offered.

"Thanks." Rachel shot him a half smile and rose, tossing the ice scraper into the backseat.

"Well . . . enjoy your lunch." He hefted his bag in salute and continued toward his car.

Rachel started to close the door. Hesitated. Gave the Raggedy Ann one more look. It seemed so forlorn, lying there abandoned in a puddle of muddy water. Yet she doubted the restaurant would appreciate her hauling a dirty, dripping doll across the tile floor to the lost and found.

But she could display it in some prominent place in the parking lot. That way, if the mother frequented this restaurant, she might see it—and could reclaim it if she chose. Scanning the property, she spotted an air-conditioning unit. Perfect.

Armed with a plan, Rachel chipped the remaining snow away from the doll's hand with her boot and bent to pick it up. As her fingers closed around the arm, she was already swiveling toward the air conditioner. If she hurried, she might be able to sit for five minutes with Marta and eat part of her—

Two steps toward her destination, Rachel was blindsided by a sudden rush of adrenaline. Her pulse rocketed, and she leaned against the car, sucking in a sharp breath as the world tilted. Her whole body began to tremble, and the doll slipped from her grasp, falling to the ground.

As quickly as the violent reaction had gripped her, it disappeared. Her pulse slowed, her lungs kicked in again, the world righted itself.

What on earth had just happened?

Aftershocks rippled through her, robbing her legs of strength. She clung to the back of her car, scanning the parking lot for an explanation. Searching for anything out of the ordinary that could have triggered such an intense reaction.

But the scene appeared normal. People were walking in and out of the restaurant, talking on cell phones, laughing together, juggling bags of sandwiches. The sky was blue, the sun was shining. A convertible drove past, top down in honor of the unseasonable warmth, the middle-aged driver in sunglasses and shorts, the radio tuned to an old Beach Boys song.

There was nothing around her to account for what had happened moments ago.

Yet her reaction had been real. And there was only one word to describe the emotion that had rocked her.

Terror.

But what had brought it on?

And why had it gone away with such dizzying speed after she dropped the doll?

Her breath hitched in her throat, and she slowly lowered her gaze to the doll. The innocuous, patched face smiled back up at her, as innocent as childhood. Was it possible that . . . ?

Irritated, she cut off that train of thought. She didn't believe in that kind of creepy stuff. No sane, logical person did. Whatever had prompted her reaction had nothing to do with the doll at her feet.

No way.

And she could prove it. All she had to do was pick up the doll again.

Except she didn't want to.

Annoyed, she wiped her palms on her black slacks. Now how ridiculous was that?

Clamping her lips together, she flexed her fingers and snatched up the doll.

Instantly the terror slammed into her again, gripping her lungs in a vise.

Fighting for air, Rachel held the doll at arm's length and stared at it. Sweat broke out on her brow and she began to tremble. Jarring, disjointed images and sounds crashed over her. She heard the distant cry of a baby. Sensed danger. Pain. Anguish.

This couldn't be happening.

She groped for the latch on her back door, fingers fumbling. Yanked it open. Flung the doll inside.

The panicked sensations abated at once, leaving a residue of anxiety—and urgency—in their wake.

It was almost like a message.

A call to action.

But what kind of action?

Stumped, Rachel regarded the doll beaming back at her from the seat. Odd. From a distance, she sensed no danger. Just the opposite. The doll gave her a warm, happy feeling. Only by touch did it convey a more ominous aura.

Aura.

She cringed. Now she was even beginning to *think* in psychic terms.

Torn, Rachel scrutinized the doll. That man who'd stopped a few minutes ago had touched the doll and hadn't had any adverse reaction. Only she seemed to pick up bad vibes.

*Why me?* she wanted to ask the smiling face. *Why pick me to dump on?*

She'd have spoken the question aloud, except people would think she'd gone off the deep end. Herself included.

Besides, the real question was what to do with the doll.

Leaving it in the parking lot was no longer an option. She might not understand why it affected her the way it did, but the feelings of danger it evoked were too real—and too strong—to ignore.

She supposed she could offer it to the police. They were the danger experts, weren't they? But she could imagine the reaction she'd get if she showed up at a precinct station and told them her story.

They'd think she was nuts.

And considering how odd she'd been feeling lately, maybe she was.

Unsure how to proceed, she slammed the door, circled the trunk, and slid behind the wheel. As she put the car in gear,

she glanced at the forgotten lunch on the seat beside her—and inspiration struck. Marta’s husband was a police officer. She could run the whole incident by her friend and see what she recommended. Marta knew she was a serious, stable, intelligent person who wasn’t given to flights of fancy. They’d shared lots of lunches and laughs over the past two years as they chatted about the antics of their students.

Marta wouldn’t think she was crazy.

At least Rachel hoped not.



Marta stopped eating mid-chew and gaped at her co-worker. “That’s crazy.”

The bite she’d taken from the sandwich she no longer wanted stuck in Rachel’s throat. “Look, I know it sounds weird. But it’s true. I feel danger whenever I touch that doll.”

Several beats of silence passed while Marta resumed chewing, her attention riveted on her friend. “You’re serious about this, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Let me get this straight. You found a doll, and when you picked it up it freaked you out.”

“Twice.”

“And where is this doll now?”

“In the backseat of my car.”

“Get rid of it.”

Rising, Rachel began to pace in the cluttered lounge, grateful now that she’d been running late. All the other teachers had returned to their classrooms, and she and Marta had the place to themselves. “I considered that. But I can’t. I feel this sense of urgency to get it to the right person.”

“And who would that be?”

“I don’t know.”

“You know, this is creeping me out.” Marta took a long swallow of soda and drummed her fingers on the table. “It’s like one of those late-night sci-fi movies you watched as a kid that gave you nightmares for weeks. I think I’ll be sleeping with the light on tonight.”

Folding her arms across her chest, Rachel shook her head. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to freak you out too. To be honest, I hoped you might ask Joe’s opinion. I thought the police might be interested.”

Marta grimaced. “I’ll ask if you want me to. But I’ve heard a few stories from him through the years about people who show up at the station claiming to be psychics and offering to help the police solve a crime.”

“I’m not claiming to be a psychic. I don’t even *believe* in psychics. In fact, I can’t believe we’re having this conversation.” Rachel shoved her shoulder-length hair behind her ear and re-settled her glasses on her nose.

Marta tipped her head. “This really got to you, didn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Rachel massaged her forehead and returned to the table. As she rewrapped her almost untouched sandwich, she realized her fingers were trembling. Marta, she noted with a quick shift in focus, was watching them too. She stopped fiddling with her sandwich and shoved her hands in the pockets of her slacks.

“Okay, Rachel.” Marta wadded her sandwich wrapper into a tight ball. “Let me run it by Joe. I can vouch for your sanity—or I could until the past few weeks. I’ve never seen you this stressed. Are you sure everything’s okay?”

“Yes. Everything’s fine. I have no idea why I’ve been on edge.” Rachel heard the irritation nipping at her voice and softened her tone. “But I appreciate your concern.”

“Hey.” Marta laid a hand on her arm. “We’ll get this sorted out, okay?”

Rachel felt the pressure of tears behind her eyes. That, too, was a new—and too frequent—phenomenon in recent weeks. “Yeah.”

“Maybe it’s some kind of hormone thing.”

“I almost wish there was a medical explanation for it.”

“There might be. Set up an appointment with your doctor. In the meantime, I’ll get Joe’s take. Tonight’s our once-a-month dinner date without the kids, meaning I’ll have his undivided attention. I’ll let you know what he says tomorrow, okay?”

“Yeah. Thanks. And listen . . . you guys won’t tell anyone about this, will you?”

“Of course not. I know how to keep my mouth shut when I have to. And Joe’s the soul of discretion. Just one thing . . . until I get back to you with Joe’s input, stay away from that doll, okay?”



Claudia Barnes liked the soup at Le Bistro. The chef had a way with mushrooms, no question about it. And the desserts were to die for, despite the dent they put in her reporter’s salary. But tonight, the conversation between the couple in the booth behind her was even better than the food.

Pulling out her notebook, Claudia opened it to a blank page and tuned in, her pen poised.

“Tell her to forget it.” A man’s voice.

“But Joe, she’s really spooked by this.” A woman speaking now. “And Rachel isn’t the type to go for any of that supernatural stuff. We’ve worked together for two years, and she’s very levelheaded. She thinks it’s weird too.”

“That’s understandable. I mean, come on, Marta. She finds a Raggedy Ann doll buried under a pile of snow in a Bread Company parking lot and says it’s sending her a message?”

"I know. If it wasn't Rachel telling me this, I'd dismiss it. But I told her I'd check with you and see if the police would be interested."

"Nope." The sound of ice tinkling in a glass.

"You're sure?"

"Honey, if she shows up at the station, no one will take her seriously. They'll listen to her story with a straight face, but once she's gone, everyone will have a good laugh. Trust me on this. Save your friend the embarrassment."

A heavy sigh. "That's what I thought." The sound of cutlery against china. "What do you think she should do with the doll?"

"Pitch it."

"That's what I told her. But I might have to do it for her. I don't think she wants to touch it again."

More ice clinking. "Listen, don't get involved, okay? Stay away from the doll."

"I thought you said her story was a bunch of nonsense?"

"It is. But weird things happen sometimes."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know. Nothing."

"Hey, I'm not letting you off the hook that easily." The woman's tone was half teasing, half serious. "'Fess up. I sense a story here."

"Not much of one."

"Come on, Joe. Out with it. We always said there'd be no secrets in our marriage, remember?"

"This isn't a secret."

"Then tell me."

"Okay. Fine. I had this friend in high school. Nice guy, on the quiet side, very straight-laced. Anyway, a couple of days after I got my first used car, I tossed him the keys and asked if he wanted to drive it. He stood there, jingling the keys, and

out of the blue he said, 'I'd lay off the booze and smoking if I were you. It could cause you a lot of trouble.' That blew my mind."

"Why?"

"Because the night before, I'd met up with some friends who were a little more on the wild side, and we shared a twelve-pack and some cigarettes at a picnic table in one guy's backyard. No one was around—but I was scared to death we'd be caught. That was the first time I'd ever done anything like that. The thing is, my keys were on the table the entire evening."

"Are you saying the keys . . . transmitted . . . your secret to him?"

"I have no idea. I never asked. I wasn't about to admit my guilt, so I passed it off as a joke. But I knew he knew. I told myself he must have seen us, but I never did quite buy that. He lived on the other side of town. And he didn't socialize with the fast crowd."

A few seconds of silence followed. The woman sounded more serious when she responded. "Maybe the police *should* check into Rachel's story."

"It's not going to happen, Marta. Trust me."

"Can you offer her some other options?"

"Pitch the doll."

"Besides that one."

"She could always try the FBI."

"Would they be more receptive?"

"Probably not. But it's the only alternative I can think of. Hey, do you want to split this chocolate decadence thing for dessert? I won't feel as guilty if we share it."

As the conversation shifted to mundane matters, Claudia set her pen down and dipped her spoon into the cooling soup, considering her own options. The features editor at the St. Louis tabloid where she worked was always on the hunt for unusual

stories. A local woman with some sort of telepathic power ought to qualify. Her tale would be a great lead for a story on ESP or clairvoyance. If she dug around, Claudia was pretty certain she could find some interesting material connecting ESP and crime-fighting. Better yet, if she dug deep enough she might be able to put a local slant on the piece.

If nothing else, a story like that should help circulation. Readers might claim they didn't like sensational stuff, but it sold papers. Look at the *National Enquirer*. And anything that boosted circulation boosted advertising revenue. Her editor would love that.

Too bad she hadn't tuned into the conversation earlier. Claudia propped her chin in her hand and toyed with her spoon. All she had was the ESP woman's first name. Rachel.

There was a way to fix that, though. The woman in the next booth was the psychic's friend. Claudia figured she could trace Rachel through the cop's wife. All she had to do was check the last name on their credit card.

Unless they paid in cash.

Nursing her soup, Claudia listened to the exchange as the waiter presented the couple's bill. Smiled when it was clear the twosome was paying by credit card. Followed the waiter and positioned herself behind a pillar. Ran into him as he passed on his way back to the table from running the card. Beat him to the ground picking it up as he apologized. Scanned the information she needed.

You didn't get to be an ace reporter by being meek, she congratulated herself with a smirk as she slid back into her booth. And that was her goal. Working at the tabloid didn't thrill her, but she was only twenty-four and two years out of J-school. Everyone had to start somewhere. If she could write some unique stuff that got noticed, she could move on to bigger things sooner rather than later.

Claudia jotted down the cop's name in her notebook and smiled. Not bad for a night's work.

Signaling for the waiter, she ordered dessert. And considered charging her meal to the paper.

She figured it qualified as research.