

MEN OF VALOR · 2

THIN ICE

A NOVEL

IRENE HANNON



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Irene Hannon, *Thin Ice*
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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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To Dr. Avis Meyer,
with fond memories of my days at the U News.

Thank you for pointing me toward journalism.
It led me to a road less traveled . . .
And that has made all the difference.

PROLOGUE

What was that odd shimmer in the night sky?
Christy Reed crested the hill on the undulating rural road and peered at the eerie dome of light above the trees in the distance. On a chilly, clear November evening, the heavens should be pitch black save for the stars strewn across the inky firmament, not tainted by unnatural illumination.

The road dived again, the woods snuffing out her view of the mysterious glow. But the twinge of unease that had compelled her to head to her sister's tonight instead of waiting until tomorrow intensified.

Pressing on the accelerator, she swooped through the dip in the road and shot up again.

At the peak of the next hill, her twinge of apprehension morphed to panic.

Flames were strafing the night sky—in the vicinity of her sister's house.

Please, God, no! Not again! We can't take any more trauma!

Smashing the gas pedal to the floor, she plunged down the hill.

Only then did she notice the police cruiser at the bottom, angled sideways, blocking access to the narrow road that led to the Missouri farmhouse her sister called home.

She flinched as the harsh, flashing lights strobed across her retinas. They screamed emergency. Disaster. Tragedy.

All the things that had changed her world forever six months ago.

Fingers clenched around the wheel, she sped toward the vehicle, screeching to a stop beside it.

As a uniformed officer emerged from the shadows and circled around to her side of the car, she fumbled for the auto window opener. Lowered the insulating sheet of glass. Inhaled the smoke-fouled air that leached into the car.

The coil of fear in the pit of her stomach tightened.

“Can I help you, ma’am?”

“I need to get down that road.” Her last word hitched.

“Do you live that way?”

“No. My s-sister does.”

Twin furrows dented the man’s brow. “What’s her name?”

“Ginny R-Reed.”

“Hold on a minute.” He pulled his radio off his belt and melted back into the shadows.

Christy closed her eyes and clung to the wheel, shudders coursing through her.

Please, Lord, let there be some simple reason Ginny wasn’t answering her phones or returning calls all evening! A dead cell. An emergency at work. Anything that’s not connected to this fire.

“Ma’am?”

She jerked her eyelids open.

“There’s a fire at your sister’s house. I’ll move my vehicle so you can get through. One of the officers at the scene will meet you.”

Her knuckles whitened as she struggled to suck in air. “Is she okay?”

He shifted from one foot to the other, the leather of his belt squeaking as he rested one hand on his gun. “I don’t know. But they’re doing everything they can to contain the fire so they can get inside.”

“You mean she’s still in the house!” Hysteria goosed the pitch of her voice.

“They aren’t certain of that. Give me a minute.”

Before she could respond, he jogged toward his car—putting as much distance between him and her questions as possible.

Because he didn’t have the answers . . . or because he didn’t want to deliver more bad news?

Please, God, let it be the former!

The instant the cruiser moved aside, she yanked her wheel to the right and accelerated down the woods-rimmed road.

The glow grew brighter as she approached, and fingers of fire stabbed the night sky above parched leaves not yet willing to relinquish their tenuous hold on life.

Her lungs locked.

This was bad.

Really bad.

Though she tried to prepare for the worst, her first full look at Ginny’s small, two-story clapboard farmhouse across a field of shriveled cornstalks destroyed the fragile hold she had on her composure.

The whole structure was engulfed in flames.

No, no, no, no, no!

Another uniformed officer appeared in her headlights, waving her to the shoulder before she could turn in to her sister’s driveway.

Swerving to the right, she bumped onto the uneven ground,

flung open her door, and scrambled from the car. Despite the crisp chill of the late fall evening, the air was hot.

Too hot.

“Ma’am?”

She tore her gaze away from the fire to focus on the officer. Flashes of light darted across the woman’s face, giving her a macabre appearance.

“Why don’t you wait over there?” She inclined her head toward an ambulance parked halfway up Ginny’s driveway, off to the side. The paramedics were standing idle and silent at the rear door, watching the blaze.

Waiting for a victim to treat.

Meaning no one had yet rescued Ginny.

Unless . . .

Was it possible she wasn’t here? Maybe she *had* been called in to work for an emergency.

Please!

Christy squinted toward the garage at the rear of the house . . . and her stomach bottomed out.

The door was open—and Ginny’s car was inside.

Her sister was here.

But where?

Lifting her head, she scrutinized Ginny’s second-floor bedroom. The window was cracked open, as usual. Even on the coldest nights, her sister liked fresh air. There was no movement from inside, but maybe . . .

She grabbed the woman’s arm and pointed. “That’s my sister’s bedroom! She might be in bed. Can’t you get a ladder up there and . . .”

“Clear the collapse zone. Now!”

At the sudden barked order, the firefighters who’d been struggling to quench the hungry flames dropped their hoses and scattered.

Seconds later, a shudder rippled through the house. The siding buckled. Then, spewing sparks high into the black sky, the second floor collapsed into the raging inferno below like an ancient Viking funeral pyre.

Christy stared in horror at the consuming flames, the world around her receding.

No!

This wasn't happening.

It couldn't be.

But the roar of the voracious blaze and the surge of scorching heat against her face mocked her denial, searing the ghastly truth across her mind.

No one could survive a fire like this.

Ginny was dead.

Despite the waves of heat rolling off the collapsed house, a numbing cold gripped her. Tremors convulsed her body. Blackness nipped at the edges of her consciousness.

And somewhere in the distance, screams ripped through the air.

Again.

And again.

And again.

Christy squeezed her eyes shut and pushed her hands against her ears, trying to block them out.

But she couldn't.

Because they were her own.

Two Months Later

“You settling in okay?”

At the question, Lance McGregor swiveled in his desk chair. Mark Sanders stood on the threshold of the cubicle, holding two disposable cups of coffee. His new FBI colleague held one out.

“Thanks.” Lance leaned forward and took it. “Still adjusting to St. Louis in the winter. When does the January thaw hit?”

“Don’t hold your breath. I was referring to the job.”

Lance took a sip of his brew and gestured to the warren of cubicles in the center of the St. Louis FBI office. “This bullpen arrangement will take some getting used to. Ditto for the suit and tie.”

“You’ll get there.”

“I appreciate the encouragement—especially in light of the source.” When Mark responded only with a raised eyebrow, Lance tipped his chair back and grinned. “Since you’re a former member of the Bureau’s Hostage Rescue Team and the current leader of this office’s SWAT team, I suspect you’d prefer to be in field dress chasing bad guys too.”

“You’ve done some homework.”

“I like to know the players.”

“A skill that would have served you well as a Delta Force operator.”

Touché.

“I see you’ve been checking me out too.”

“SOP for new agents—especially ones fresh out of the academy. For the record, you came out rosy instead of green.”

“Nice to know.”

Mark took a sip of his own java. “If you’re interested in the SWAT team, let me know. It’s an ancillary duty, so don’t expect any perks for volunteering, but we can always use members with your background. The Delta Force operators I’ve met were the kind of guys I’d want watching backs when lives are on the line.”

Despite Lance’s valiant attempt to hold on to his grin, it slipped a hair. “Thanks. But my first priority is to get the lay of the land.”

“Makes sense.” Though Mark’s words were agreeable, the slight thinning of his eyes told Lance the man had picked up on his sudden discomfort. “If you want to consider it down the road, the door’s open.” Raising his cup in salute, he strolled off.

Lance waited until he disappeared, then pivoted back to his desk, mouth flattening. His new colleague’s offer was flattering, but the SWAT team wasn’t in his future. Sure, he’d handle trouble if any came his way as a special agent. But he was done seeking it out. Done having to watch people’s backs 24/7. Done trying to be Superman.

Because even Superman had his Achilles heel—and if you played the odds long enough, you were bound to lose. Mistakes happened.

And sometimes they were deadly.

A bead of sweat popped out on his forehead, and he scrubbed it away. Enough. He was past this. History couldn’t be rewrit-

ten. It was over. Finished. He'd made his peace with that and moved on.

But if that was true, why had a simple invitation to join the SWAT team twisted his gut and short-circuited his lungs?

Blowing out a breath, he raked his fingers through his hair. This was *not* a complication he needed three days into his new career as a special agent.

The phone on his desk rang, and he grabbed for it, checking the digital display. A call from the receptionist might not provide much of a distraction, but it would do a better job redirecting his thoughts than reviewing eye-glazing case files—his lot since reporting for duty.

“Hi, Sharon. What’s up?”

“Do you have anything urgent on your desk?”

“Not unless sifting through old 302s qualifies.”

A chuckle came over the line. “I figured Steve would give you a pile of evidentiary interviews to read. I think it’s his version of hazing for the new agents in the reactive squad. Kind of an endurance contest.”

“If it is, I’m failing.”

“Maybe I can rescue you. You ready for a real case?”

“More than.”

“Don’t be too anxious. I might be handing you a fruitcake.”

“Better a fruitcake than files. What have you got?”

“I have no idea. She won’t tell me. Won’t give me her name, either. Just said she needs to talk to an agent.”

“Okay. Go ahead and transfer her.”

“I jotted down her number from caller ID in case you need it. The fourth digit is a nine.”

Meaning there was a strong chance she was calling from a pay phone.

“Thanks.”

“Good luck.” The line clicked. “Ma’am, I’m putting you

through to Agent McGregor.” Another click as Sharon exited the call.

Lance leaned back in his chair. “This is Agent McGregor. Who am I speaking with?”

Silence.

“Ma’am?”

A beat of silence passed. Two. Three. He heard an indrawn breath. “A situation has come up that merits FBI involvement—but I can’t discuss it by phone.”

Still no name.

“Would you like to come to our office?”

“No! That would be too dangerous.” She sounded agitated. Scared, even. But she was lucid. That was a plus. “I’d like to set up a meeting on neutral territory. I want it to look like friends getting together, in case anyone’s watching.”

He tapped the tip of his pen against the tablet in front of him. Paranoia—or valid caution? Too soon to tell. “Can you give me a clue what this is about?”

More silence.

He waited her out.

“I think it . . . it could be kidnapping.”

He sat up straighter. “Have you called the police?”

“I can’t do that. Please . . . I’ll explain when I see you. Besides, this would fall under FBI jurisdiction.”

“Is a child involved?”

“No.”

He doodled a series of concentric circles on the blank sheet of paper in front of him. The woman was articulate, and she sounded intelligent. Yes, she could be a nut—but the mere mention of kidnapping warranted further investigation.

“All right. Where would you like us to meet you?”

“Us?” He could hear the frown in her voice.

“I’d like to bring another agent along.” That was the usual protocol in a situation this filled with unknowns.

“No. Just you.”

The tension in her words told him she was getting ready to hang up. Better to agree to her terms than lose her. He could always call for support if he needed it.

“Okay. Where?”

“I was thinking a Panera. They’re busy, and the noise level should give us some privacy. But please wear casual clothes. A suit would draw too much attention.”

The lady had thought this through.

He put a dot in the middle of his circles to complete the bull’s-eye. “Which one?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Brentwood.” The central corridor was a reasonable choice. Besides, it was the only Panera he’d visited to date. Why not make this easy on himself?

“Fine. I get off work at five. I’m available after that.”

He’d have to bail on dinner with Mac, but his older sibling would understand. Police detectives didn’t keep regular hours, either.

“Let’s make it seven. I need to go home and change first. How will I recognize you?”

“I’ll be wearing jeans and a dark green sweater. I have long-ish auburn hair.”

“Got it.”

“I’ll see you at seven.”

The instant the line went dead, he punched in Sharon’s extension and got the source number. A quick check of the crisscross directory confirmed what he’d suspected—the call had come from a pay phone.

The woman wasn’t taking any chances.

A ping of adrenaline prickled his nerve endings. At least his first case was intriguing.

And even if the meeting led nowhere, a clandestine rendezvous was a whole lot more exciting than reading old case files.



Pummeled by a gust of icy wind, Christy whooshed into the crowded Panera, muttering an apology as she jostled the elderly gent who'd stopped to remove his gloves.

He steadied himself on a trash bin topped with a stack of empty trays. "No problem, young lady. Mother Nature is pitching a fit tonight, isn't she?"

"Yes." His amiable comment deserved a reply, but she wasn't in the mood for smiles—or chitchat. Not when she was getting ready to meet an FBI agent . . . and tell him a story he would undoubtedly find farfetched.

But the letter in her pocket was very real.

And very, very scary.

The door opened again, giving her an excuse to move away. She took it.

From the edge of the dining area, she surveyed the room. There were only a few empty tables, and she claimed one in the center, beside the fireplace. An older couple, two teens doing homework, and a woman engrossed in a bestselling thriller occupied the adjacent tables. None of them seemed suspicious. Besides, no one other than the FBI agent knew about this meeting. And as far as she could tell, no one had followed her here.

She shrugged out of her jacket, draped it over the back of her chair, and perched on the edge of the seat. Wrapping her fingers around the computer case in her lap, she held on tight.

What if she'd made a mistake by going to the authorities?

The knot that had been lodged in the pit of her stomach since she'd made the call tightened. If this decision turned out

to be wrong, the consequences would be dire. That much had been clear.

Yet she wasn't equipped to deal with a kidnapper. She needed the kind of resources law enforcement could provide.

Talk about being caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place.

She pried one hand off the case and tucked her hair behind her ear. She could have hung up while the operator transferred her to McGregor. In fact, she almost had. She could also have severed the connection at any point during her conversation with the agent. He didn't know her name, and using a pay phone had allowed her to keep her options open.

But the man had sounded confident and professional, with a subtle take-charge, I'm-in-control manner that reeked of competence.

All of which had convinced her to take the leap.

Now it was too late for second thoughts. He'd be here any minute. All she could do was hope she hadn't misjudged him.

And pray she wasn't making a fatal mistake.



So that was his auburn-haired mystery caller.

From his seat at a corner table that offered a panoramic view of the eatery, Lance did a quick assessment as the woman claimed a table. Early thirties. Slender. Five-five, five-six. Model-like cheekbones. Flawless complexion. Full lips. Classic profile.

In other words, the lady was gorgeous.

And very nervous.

It didn't take an FBI agent—or former Delta Force operator—to recognize that the taut line of her shoulders, the clenched fingers, and the lower lip caught between her teeth spelled *tension* in capital letters.

He took another sip of his coffee and scanned the crowded

restaurant. Thanks to that striking hair, he'd spotted her the minute she stepped inside the door—and no one had followed her in. Nor was anyone watching her . . . except him. Whatever worries she'd had about someone seeing them meet appeared to be groundless.

But he'd give it ten or fifteen minutes to be on the safe side.

By 7:05, the woman was jiggling her foot and checking her watch every thirty seconds. She had to be wondering if she'd been stood up . . . and he was tempted to put her mind at ease. But he'd learned long ago not to let pretty women influence his judgment on the job.

Off the job . . .

His lips twitched. As his older and younger brothers would be the first to remind him, he wasn't immune to the charms of an attractive female in his personal life.

Then again, neither were Mac and Finn.

Must be in the McGregor genes—though Mac's newly engaged status meant the St. Louis dating field was his until Finn showed up on his next leave.

At 7:12, the woman rose and reached for her coat.

His cue.

After one more sweep of the café, he slid from behind the table, left his jacket draped over the chair, and wove among the seated diners.

“Don't leave yet.”

She gasped and spun toward him, her face a shade paler than when she'd entered.

“Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you.” He leaned closer and dropped his voice. “I'd show you my creds, but I know you want to keep this discreet. I'll do that once we're seated.”

She gave a stiff nod and rested one hand on the table she'd been in the process of vacating. “Is this all right?”

“I claimed a more out-of-the-way spot.” He indicated the corner table he’d just left.

She frowned at it. “How long have you been here?”

“Long enough to scope out the place.”

After a moment, she pasted on a smile, slipped her arm through his, and raised her volume. “It’s good to see you again.”

He could tell her she didn’t need to follow through with the friends-getting-together act for the benefit of anyone who might be watching, since no one was. And he’d get around to that in a minute.

But why not enjoy the sweet scent tickling his nose and the pressure of her graceful fingers on his arm until they got back to his table?

Too bad the trip was so short.

Once they arrived, he indicated a chair at a right angle to his and held it as she sat. After retaking his seat against the wall, he again scanned the interior.

Still clear.

No one appeared to be the least interested in their meeting.

Redirecting his attention to her, he pulled out his creds and laid them on the table. “You weren’t followed here. Or if you were, no one followed you in.”

Her artificial smile faded as she cast a nervous glance around the room, then skimmed his ID. “Are you certain?”

“Yes.”

She exhaled, and some of the stiffening in her shoulders dissolved. “I didn’t think so, but I’m glad to have that confirmed by an expert.”

“Did you want to get anything to eat or drink while we talk?”

“As long as we don’t need to keep up a social pretense, I’ll just grab a cup of water.”

Before he could offer to get it for her, she slipped out of her seat and headed toward the drink dispenser.

He watched as she wove through the crowd with a lithe, natural grace. Like that ballet dancer he'd dated in Washington, DC. The one with the legs that went on forever.

His gaze dipped. Hard to tell for sure, with those jeans—but he had a feeling this woman might give the ballet dancer some serious competition in the legs department.

Which was not the most professional train of thought under the circumstances.

Get your act together, McGregor. You're here to talk about a possible kidnapping, not troll for a date.

Check.

By the time she retook her seat, he'd reined in his wayward musings and was ready to concentrate on business.

"Now that you know my name, would you like to share yours?"

Instead of responding, she lifted the cup to take a sip. When the water sloshed dangerously close to the rim, she flicked him a glance, wrapped both hands around the clear plastic, and tried again.

The woman was seriously spooked.

She leaned close enough for him to catch another whiff of that pleasing, fresh fragrance. "My name is Christy Reed. I'm the director of youth programs for a municipal recreation center in St. Louis County." She named the city.

Based on what he could remember from his review of local maps, that was one of the closer-in suburbs. Not far from the location of the public phone she'd used to call him earlier.

"You mentioned kidnapping during our phone conversation."

"Yes." She swallowed. Crumpled a paper napkin. "Look, I'm taking a huge risk by trusting you. But I need experts on this. I can't lose my sister twice." Her voice rasped on the last word and she averted her head, bending to pull her laptop out of the carrying case.

Lose her sister twice?

What was that supposed to mean?

She angled the laptop his direction, a shimmer of tears in her eyes. “This is just a cover while we talk.” She lifted the lid. “That’s why I called you.”

He glanced down. An envelope was lying on the keyboard, addressed by hand to the woman beside him. Next to it was a blank sheet of paper. Both had been placed in plastic bags.

Like she was preserving evidence.

He sent her a quizzical look.

She scooted her chair closer and locked gazes with him. “Two months ago, my sister, Ginny, was killed in a house fire. She was my only sibling, and we were very close. More than ever after we lost our parents eight months ago in a car accident.”

Whoa.

Christy Reed had lost her whole family in the space of six months?

That was serious trauma. Enough to account for the smoky whisper of shadows under her eyes. Enough to etch those faint lines of strain at the corners of her mouth.

Enough to push some people over the edge.

Was she one of them?

He studied her. “That’s a lot to deal with in a very short time.”

“Tell me about it.” She rested her left hand on the table beside the computer and clenched her fist. “I try to take it day by day, and I pray a lot. Some days are easier than others. Yesterday wasn’t one of them. Not after this arrived in the mail.” She touched the corner of the plastic-encased envelope.

“Why was that a problem?”

Her throat worked again, and she moistened her lips. “Because that’s Ginny’s handwriting.”

The letter was from the sister who’d died two months ago?

He checked the postmark. The note had been mailed January 5 from Terre Haute, Indiana. Four days ago.

But dead people didn't write letters.

"I had the same reaction." At her quiet comment, he turned his head. Intelligent eyes the color of burnished jade met his, steady but anxious. "This is what was inside." She flipped over the sheet of paper.

He read the short, typewritten message.

I took your sister. If you want her back, do not tell anyone about this or call the police. Just wait for further orders.

A typical kidnapping note.

Except this wasn't a typical kidnapping scenario. Not by a long shot. For one thing, kidnappers didn't wait two months to initiate contact. For another, this victim was supposed to be already dead.

"I know this doesn't seem to make sense." Christy drew a shaky breath. "But it could if my sister didn't die in the fire."

He frowned. "Are you telling me they didn't find her body?"

"They found *a* body. It was burned beyond recognition." Her voice choked, and she swallowed. "Everyone assumed it was her."

"Wasn't there an autopsy?"

"No. Ginny was a wildlife biologist in the Mark Twain National Forest. She lived on the outskirts of Chandler, a small town just south of Potosi, and the local police didn't see any need for an autopsy after an investigator from the state fire marshal's office ruled the fire accidental."

"What was the basis for that opinion?"

"My sister's house was old and drafty, and she supplemented her furnace with electric heaters downstairs and in her bedroom. According to the investigator, it appeared the one in the

bedroom had been too close to the curtains. The window was open, and he reasoned that the wind blew the fabric against the heater, which started the fire. The frame house was old, the wood dry . . .” She lifted one shoulder.

No matter the apparent cause, an autopsy should have been done. *Would* have been done by a larger police department.

And it could still be done—if necessary.

Lance folded his hands on the table. “Other than this note, do you have any reason to think the body found in your sister’s house belonged to someone else?”

“No. That’s why the whole thing is so confusing. But this is Ginny’s handwriting. The backward slant, the curlicue at the end of the s, the tail she always added to her capital R’s . . . her penmanship is distinctive.”

“An expert forger could replicate it.”

She sucked in a breath. “You think this is some sort of hoax?”

“It’s possible.”

“But . . . why would someone do that?”

“Good question—except look at the flip side. If this isn’t a hoax, someone went to a lot of effort to make it appear your sister died in a fire, including providing a body. Why would someone do *that*?”

She shook her head, her distress almost palpable. “I have no idea.”

“Did your sister have any enemies?”

“No. Ginny was the sweetest, gentlest . . .” She groped for her water, lifting it with both hands again to take a sip. “Sorry.” She set the cup back down. “Everyone loved Ginny.”

“Was she married?”

“No.”

“Was there an ex-husband or boyfriend or ex-boyfriend in the picture?”

“No. She didn’t date much, and she lived alone.”

“How old was she?”

“Thirty.”

He shot her a skeptical look. “Thirty years old and no significant ex-love interests?”

“She worked long hours, often in the woods communing with nonhuman species, and lived in the middle of nowhere. There weren’t many opportunities to meet eligible men.”

“Even so, most people don’t make it to thirty without logging a few failed relationships—and those often leave bad feelings in their wake on one or both sides.”

“Ginny never dated anyone long enough to generate hurt feelings when she stopped seeing them.”

“As far as you know.”

Her chin lifted a notch. “We were close. If there was a man in her life, she’d have told me. Not everyone is interested in putting notches on their belt, Agent McGregor. And not everyone ends relationships with bad feelings. It’s dangerous to jump to conclusions about others based on personal experience.”

Ouch.

Still, whether or not he liked her inference, it did tell him two things.

There was nothing wrong with her mind. The FBI might get its share of fruitcake calls, but this woman was a clear, analytical thinker not inclined to flights of fancy—or over-reaction.

She was also becoming defensive, which would get them nowhere.

Better to ease off and circle back to this topic later or she might shut down.

He took a sip of coffee and set his cup off to the side. “Why don’t you tell me about the fire?”

Her posture drooped, and she dropped her chin to stare at the melting ice in her cup. “It happened on a Friday night. I’d

been planning to drive out on Saturday to spend the weekend with Ginny. But when she didn't answer her phone or return my calls, I got worried and went out after work. The whole house was in flames when I arrived about nine forty-five. I got there right before it . . . collapsed."

Christy Reed had watched the tragedy unfold.

The lady beside him had had some very tough breaks.

Out of nowhere, an urge to weave his fingers through hers swept over him, the impulse so powerful his hand was already halfway to its destination when he caught himself, forcibly shifting direction to grab his coffee cup instead.

Keep your mind on the case, McGregor, not the woman. You're here to investigate, not console.

He took a sip of his coffee and set the cup down. "Any particular reason you'd worry because your sister wasn't responding to your calls?"

"Yes. Ginny was having a hard time dealing with our parents' deaths. She wasn't eating or sleeping enough, and it was beginning to impact her ability to function at work. She finally resorted to taking over-the-counter sleeping aids. That worried me, even though she was responsible about it."

"Did you tell this to the police?"

"Yes. Since she was found in bed, they concluded she must have taken some pills and slept through the fire. Otherwise, she should have smelled the smoke and called for help. As it was, a passing motorist sounded the alarm after he spotted flames on the roof. But it was too late. Ginny never made it out. At least I didn't think so, until that came." She touched the edge of one of the plastic-encased documents.

He pulled a notebook out of his pocket. "I'll get copies of the police and fire investigator's reports tomorrow morning."

She leaned down, removed a manila file folder from her laptop case, and handed it to him. "Done. I asked for copies of

everything . . . never knowing I'd need them for such a bizarre reason. I assumed you'd want them."

Nope. No problem with this lady's brain.

He opened the file and gave the brief, straightforward reports a quick read. It was hard to fault their logic or the conclusions. The pieces all added up to a typical tragic house fire.

Or they had, until now.

Unless the note was, indeed, a hoax.

He was back to the line of questioning Christy hadn't liked.

"I asked before if your sister had any enemies." He approached the topic with more caution this go-round, choosing his words with care. "If the note turns out to be some sort of sick joke, it would suggest this is more about you than her. Do *you* have any enemies?"

"No." Her answer was immediate—and firm. "And I'll save you from asking the next question. I've had one serious relationship in my life. It ended four years ago, but we parted on friendly terms. It's hard to fault a man for choosing the divine over the human."

He squinted at her. "What does that mean?"

She gave him a wry look. "He was Catholic, and after a lot of soul searching, he decided he had a calling to the priesthood."

A former boyfriend who was a priest.

Not a likely suspect.

He closed the file. "I'm sorry if I offended you with my earlier questions on this subject—but romantic relationships gone south are often the impetus for crime."

"I can understand that." She fiddled with the edge of her napkin and exhaled. "I owe you an apology too. My personal remark was uncalled for—and unkind. I'm not usually snippy."

"Apology accepted." No need to admit she'd come close to pegging him. "Considering the stress you're under, I think you're remarkably composed."

“Not on the inside.” She touched the back of his hand, her fingers cold and not quite steady. “So can you help me with this? Since Ginny was a federal employee and that note crossed state lines, I assumed it fell under FBI jurisdiction.”

He tried to focus on her question rather than her touch. “Yes, it does. And yes, I can help. My first priority is to have our handwriting experts in Quantico compare this envelope to a verified sample from your sister.”

Once again she reached into the computer case. “I assumed that would be a first step, so I pulled notes and cards she sent me over the past few years. I also included a poem she handwrote for my thirtieth birthday. I don’t have much else. She was more into email and texting.”

He gave the documents a fast perusal. He was no expert, but he agreed with Christy. The handwriting appeared to match.

“May I?” He lifted the plastic-bagged documents.

“Yes.” She watched him slide them into the file. “The instant I realized what they were, I put them in the bags. On my end, no one but me has touched them.”

“We should be able to pull some prints from your sister’s cards too. All federal employees are in the automated fingerprint database. Any others we find can be run to see if they belong to someone with a criminal record.”

“How long will that take?”

“I’ll courier the material to Quantico tomorrow and ask for priority analysis. We should have a response by Friday if I press.”

“What if I hear back in the meantime from the person who wrote the note?”

“Call me.” He extracted a business card and set it on the table. “However, I’m not expecting that to happen. The fire was two months ago. Unlike most kidnapers, this person doesn’t appear to be on a fast track.”

“What’s next if your experts decide that’s Ginny’s handwriting?”

“We’ll need to exhume the body buried in her grave and do an autopsy—including a DNA analysis—to verify it’s not your sister.”

“This whole thing is surreal.” She massaged the bridge of her nose. “Have you ever run across a case like this before?”

“No—but every situation is unique.” No need to tell her he was so new to the FBI that he had no personal basis for comparison. “We’ll figure this out. And you made the right choice in coming to us.”

“I hope so.” She didn’t sound convinced.

“Ms. Reed, the FBI is committed to confidentiality. You don’t need to worry about leaks on our end.”

“But if you start investigating and asking questions, word could spread to the wrong people—especially if you get too close.”

He couldn’t dispute that.

“We’ll do everything we can to keep that from happening.”

Based on the apprehension in her eyes, his less-than-absolute reassurance wasn’t what she’d hoped to hear. But it was the best he could offer.

Because sometimes, no matter how hard you tried, things went south.

Swallowing past the sudden constriction in his windpipe, he opened his notebook. “Why don’t you give me your contact information, including address and cell phone?” After she complied, he pushed the card on the table toward her. “If you need to talk to me—day or night—use the cell number. Don’t hesitate. That will always be the fastest way to reach me. Now let me walk you to your car.”

He held her coat, then followed her out to a dark blue Mazda, scrutinizing the parking lot as they walked. Nothing seemed amiss.

At the car, she turned to him. “Just in case anyone is watching, can I give you a hug? So this looks like a social meeting?”

“No problem.” At all.

She stepped toward him, and he pulled her close.

Nice—but over too fast.

“Thanks again for meeting me tonight.” Without waiting for a response, she slid behind the wheel.

He moved aside while she backed out, shoving his hands in the pockets of his jacket as her taillights receded into the night.

Only after they disappeared did he return to his own car, a thrum of excitement pulsing in his veins.

His days of reading boring 302s were over. He had his own case now.

And it was a hot one—in more ways than one.