

PRIVATE JUSTICE #2

TRAPPED

A N O V E L

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Irene Hannon, *Trapped*
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To Tom—
my real-life hero.

I give thanks every day
for the gift of your love.

Prologue

The house was quiet.
Too quiet.

Laura Griffith paused inside the back door and frowned.

Where was the thudding bass that usually shook the walls as it reverberated from behind Darcy's closed bedroom door?

Where was the soda can her half sister always left on the counter, despite repeated requests to rinse empties and put them in the recycle bin?

Where was the faint odor of burned bagel that had greeted her at the end of every workday since the teen's arrival in St. Louis four months ago?

She crossed the room and dropped her purse and tote bag on the kitchen table, the thump of the heavy satchel echoing in the uncharacteristic stillness. "Darcy?"

No response.

As a tingle of unease slithered along her nerve endings, Laura forced herself to take a deep breath.

Chill, okay? This could just be a new strategy. She hasn't tried the silent treatment yet. Stay calm.

As if.

Chagrin twisted her lips as she walked toward the living room. Her placid existence had evaporated the day Darcy stepped inside the house, a hundred and two pounds of brashness, bravado, and attitude. It had taken mere hours for the girl to figure out her thirty-three-year-old half sibling had zero experience dealing with a sixteen-year-old—and Darcy had done her best to exploit that liability ever since.

Was it any wonder they clashed constantly?

Laura passed through the living room, giving it a quick scan. No gloves or hat thrown on the couch. No muffler trailing across the floor. No parka dumped in the wing chair.

Since it was doubtful Darcy had altered her typical behavior pattern and put her winter gear in the coat closet, the conclusion was obvious.

She'd broken the rule about coming straight home after school. Again.

With a sigh, Laura walked down the hall toward Darcy's room. Not much chance she'd find the teen poring over her homework on a Friday afternoon, but it couldn't hurt to check. Hope sprang eternal and all that—even if she was already psyching herself up for the battle of wills sure to come later in the evening.

As usual, Darcy's door was closed. Laura knocked and called her name. After waiting a few beats, she turned the knob.

Once again, apprehension skittered through her, along with a sudden chill that had nothing to do with the frigid early February weather outside or the icy wind whistling around the corner of the house. Darcy's bed was made, the desktop swept clean of clutter, the carpet pristine rather than littered with discarded pieces of clothing from the teen's ritual morning search for the perfect outfit.

But it was the folded sheet of paper on the pillow that caused her heart to stutter.

Rubbing her damp palms on her slacks, she forced herself to move toward the bed. Hesitated. Then, pulse pounding, she picked up the note and flipped it open.

It took her only a few seconds to read the brief message.

A few more to quiet her chaotic thoughts.

A full half minute to formulate a plan of action.

Then she strode back to the kitchen, reached for her phone . . .
and started to pray.

THREE DAYS LATER

Stifling a yawn, James “Dev” Devlin pushed through the back door of Phoenix Inc., buffeted by a blast of Arctic-like air. Man, was he beat. His late date Saturday night had taken a toll, as had the Sunday double-shift surveillance gig for the insurance fraud case. At least those long hours of boredom in the cold van had paid off. He’d nailed the perp with that final batch of photos.

Dev detoured into the small kitchen, rubbing his hands together to restore circulation as he made a beeline for the coffeepot. Too bad he wouldn’t be there to see the look on the claimant’s face when he got a load of the incriminating shots. If you were alleging debilitating back damage from a slip on a wet floor at work, it wasn’t too smart to play a lively game of Twister in front of a picture window where there was no reasonable expectation of privacy . . . and where any PI worth his salt could snap away in full compliance with the law.

The guy was not only a cheat, he was an idiot.

“About time you got here.”

At the reproving comment behind him, Dev stifled a groan. So much for sneaking in an hour late.

He poured his coffee, took a long swallow, and braced himself as he turned.

With a pointed glance at her watch, Nikki folded her arms across her chest, raised an eyebrow, and waited.

“The streets are a sheet of ice.” Why he felt the need to justify his behavior to the Phoenix receptionist/office manager escaped—and annoyed—him.

“I got here on time.”

Touché.

He took another fortifying sip of java. “I had a busy weekend.”

“I’ll bet. Who was it this Saturday, the blonde rocket scientist you brought to the company picnic who forgot to refrigerate the potato salad she contributed and made us all sick, or the nuclear physicist from last year’s Christmas party who thought computer forensics was a new video game?”

He did *not* need a razzing first thing on a Monday morning.

“For the record, I worked all day yesterday. And I mean all day. I put in a freezing double shift on the workman’s comp case while you lazed around in your warm house and changed the color of the stripe in your hair.” He squinted at the hot pink streak in her short platinum blonde spikes. “What happened to the purple?”

“I was in a pink mood. And don’t try that best-defense-is-a-good-offense baloney on me. We have a new client in the waiting room, who fought her way here through the ice storm. She’s been twiddling her thumbs for half an hour, which has not helped calm her down. Why haven’t you been answering your phone?”

“It didn’t ring.”

“Is the battery dead?”

“No.” He pulled it off his belt.

The battery was dead.

“I guess it needs to be charged.”

“I guess it does. You want me to show her back?”

“In a minute.” If this potential client was anything like the hysterical woman he’d dealt with last week, who suspected her husband was cheating on her and wanted Phoenix to gather incriminating evidence so she could sock him with a huge settlement, he needed

a few slugs of caffeine before he explained that wasn't their kind of case and sent her on her way.

"It's not a marriage-on-the-rocks issue."

He narrowed his eyes at Nikki. What was she, psychic? Or was he that transparent? Had to be the latter—but how had he survived as an undercover ATF agent if he was that easy to read?

Then again, he almost hadn't.

Pushing that thought aside, he snagged a packet of sugar to cut the bitterness of the coffee.

If only he could cut the bitterness of his memories as easily.

Nikki gave him another disapproving look. "I bet you ate a bowl of sugarcoated cereal this morning too."

Without responding, he ripped the top off the packet and dumped the whole thing in—an act of defiance more than prudence.

"That's what I figured." She leaned a shoulder against the door frame, expression smug.

He grabbed a plastic stir stick, fighting down another surge of irritation. "Just because your new husband caved under your health-food crusade doesn't mean we all have to sign on to the cause."

"Hey." She lifted her hands, palms toward him, and shrugged. "It's your body—but I don't want to hear any complaints when it starts to fall apart. So can I show this woman to your office? With Cal on his honeymoon and Connor tied up with that protection gig, you're it."

Lucky him.

"How come Connor gets all the glamorous assignments? I wouldn't mind protecting a Hollywood star for a week while she films a movie in town."

"If you were a former Secret Service agent, you might get a few of those plum jobs too. As it is, you get a distraught woman by the name of Laura Griffith. It's a runaway case, by the way. I'll stall her for three more minutes. Drink up."

She swiveled in her high-heeled leather boots and exited into the hall with a swish of her short skirt.

Dev took a sip of his coffee as he watched her disappear. Grimacing, he dumped the rest down the drain. It was far too sweet—unlike their saucy office manager. But she knew her stuff. They'd be hard-pressed to find someone else who was not only a skilled administrator but also happened to have a gift for bookkeeping and computer forensics . . . not to mention a heart of gold—though he'd never admit that to anyone.

Especially her.

After refilling his cup and leaving it black, he followed in her wake. When she said three minutes, she meant it—ready or not . . . unless she took pity on him and decided to give him more breathing space to get his act together.

But he wasn't going to count on her generosity.

“He'll be with you in a couple of minutes.”

Laura turned as the receptionist reentered the waiting area through the door behind her desk. “Thanks.”

Clasping her hands in her lap, she switched her focus to one of the larger-than-life nature-themed photos that decorated the walls. The office was nicer than she'd expected. Based on what she'd read about real-life private investigators, most PIs bore little resemblance to the glorified Hollywood version of the profession. A lot of them sounded like sleazy, work-out-of-the-car-and-at-the-fringes-of-the-law types.

This setting, however, didn't fit that image. The nubby Berber carpet, the neutral, patterned fabric of the three chairs, the glass-topped coffee table—classy. And the prominent rectangular wooden plaque with the Justice First brass lettering was comforting.

The receptionist, on the other hand, was more than a bit off-putting.

Laura stole a look at the woman. Her streak of hot-pink hair, miniskirt, boots, clunky metal jewelry, and heavy-handed makeup

were a disconnect with the low-key, discreet setting. But Darcy would no doubt approve of her splashy look.

Just one more example of the 180-degree difference in their viewpoints.

On the other hand, if she hadn't called the receptionist's teen-aged brother last night after stumbling across his name and number scribbled on a slip of paper in Darcy's room, she'd have been on her own with the daunting task of finding a reputable PI firm. Instead, the boy had passed the phone to this woman, who'd sounded businesslike and capable. The Phoenix website had also been impressive, as had the law-enforcement backgrounds of the three PIs. So here she was.

For better or worse.

She hoped it was the former. Because so far, she hadn't been impressed by official law-enforcement reaction to her sister's disappearance. She needed expert help—and she needed it fast.

“I can show you back now.”

As the receptionist spoke again, she rose and joined her at the door behind the desk. The woman pushed through, then led the way down a carpeted hall to the first office on the right, where she paused and gave a discreet knock on the half-closed door.

“Your client is here.” She stepped aside and gestured for Laura to enter.

“Thanks.” As Laura murmured the word, she slipped past the receptionist, crossed the threshold . . . and did a double take.

While glitzy Hollywood-type PIs might be more fabrication than reality, the athletic-looking man who rose to greet her did fit the stereotype. As he circled the desk to shake her hand, she did a quick assessment. He was tall, topping her five-and-a-half-foot frame by a good six inches, and definitely handsome, his herring-bone jacket emphasizing his broad shoulders. But he missed the mark on the dark attribute. Instead, he had striking, deep auburn hair and eyes the color of polished jade.

“Ms. Griffith, I'm James Devlin.” He took her hand, his firm grip warm and somehow reassuring.

As their gazes locked, Laura's throat tightened. All weekend, she'd borne her worry and stress alone. Yet as his fingers squeezed hers, some of that burden lifted. The PI seemed strong, confident, and capable—the kind of man who could take on any challenge and succeed.

Her relief was palpable . . . and she hoped not premature.

“Thanks for seeing me on short notice.” If he noticed the slight quiver beneath her words, he didn't let on.

A dimple dented one cheek as he smiled and released her hand. “Short notice is par for the course in the PI world. Please, have a seat.” He indicated a small round table off to one side of his office.

As she walked over and slid onto a chair, he picked up a pad of lined paper and a pen from his desk. “Did Nikki offer you a beverage?”

“Yes. I turned her down, but I'm rethinking coffee. It's been a long, sleepless weekend.”

“Not a problem. Cream or sugar?”

“Just cream, please.”

“I'll be back in a minute. Make yourself comfortable.”

Once he disappeared out the door, Laura tried to follow his advice. She took a deep breath. Let it out slowly. Repeated the process as she scanned his office. Better. The vibrating hum in her nerves quieted, and the knot in her stomach loosened—thanks perhaps in part to the impressive ATF-related awards and honors on the walls that confirmed her favorable impression of James Devlin. Distinguished Service medal. Medal of Valor. Framed letters of commendation, including one to her left that included the words *tenacious*, *professional*, *diligent*, and *courageous*.

That was just the kind of person it would take to track down Darcy, who'd left few clues.

And her half sister needed tracking down.

Because no matter how mature she thought she was, Darcy wasn't anywhere close to being old enough to survive on her own. And Laura was counting on James Devlin and his Phoenix col-

leagues to help her find the runaway teen before she wound up in far deeper trouble than she'd ever encountered during her past forays into independence.

Maybe he hadn't drawn the short straw after all.

As Dev poured a cup of coffee for Phoenix's newest client, he grinned. While he hadn't been psyched up to launch his week with a demanding case, when the client was as pretty as Laura Griffith . . . not so bad.

He dumped a container of cream into the steaming brew and stirred, watching the dark color lighten to mocha. Interesting that he would find their new client appealing. Brunettes didn't usually attract him. Not that her hair was a plain mousy brown or anything. Not with those gold highlights that glinted every time she moved. Too bad she wore it in that single French braid, becoming as the style was. He'd much prefer to see it loose and full. Still, the more severe style did draw attention to her long-lashed blue eyes, soft lips, and model-like high cheekbones.

Still grinning, he straightened his tie, tossed the stir stick in the trash, and started toward the door. Even though Phoenix had an unwritten hands-off rule for active clients, there was no law against looking . . . and enjoying. Discreetly, of course.

Discretion top of mind, he used the short return trip to his office to shift back into professional mode.

After setting the coffee in front of Laura, he took his own seat. "So how can I help you, Ms. Griffith? Our office manager mentioned a runaway situation?"

She knitted her fingers into a tight knot on top of the table. "Yes. My sixteen-year-old half sister, Darcy Weber. She left Friday. I verified she was in class all day, so it was sometime after three. I'm assuming she came home first, because she was only carrying her usual stuff when she caught the bus in the morning. I've called everyone I can think of, but I haven't been able to find a trace of her."

“Did you notify the police?”

“Yes, not that they appeared to be overly concerned. An officer came by, read the note she left, and took some basic information. He said all the precinct officers would be made aware of the situation and they’d put her in the National Crime Information Center database. They did follow up yesterday to see if I’d learned anything else or heard from her, but that’s about it.” She leaned forward, her knuckles whitening. “Shouldn’t they be doing more?”

He hesitated, tempted to sugarcoat the truth and ease her anxiety with some vague reassurances.

But he never lied to clients.

“Police resources are always stretched thin, Ms. Griffith. A runaway won’t be their highest priority unless there’s a suspicion of foul play. However, since running away is a juvenile offense in Missouri if you’re under seventeen, they’ll do what they can. But their efforts will be constrained by staffing levels and more urgent cases. That’s why private investigation is a reasonable option in a situation like this. You mentioned a note?”

“Yes.” Laura shifted sideways in her chair and dug through the purse she’d slung over the back. She withdrew a single sheet of paper and held it out, the vibration in the paper betraying the tremor in her fingers.

He took it, flipped open the folded sheet, and read the brief note.

Laura: This isn't working out for either of us. I'll be seventeen in four months, old enough to be on my own. So I'm heading out to meet up with a friend. Once I get settled and find a job, I'll repay the money I took from the stash you keep in the shoe in your closet. Please keep my stuff and I'll send for it down the road. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. This is better for both of us. No more rules for me, no more trouble for you. Thanks for trying.

It was signed “Darcy” in a scrawling hand.

Dev set the sheet of paper on the table and picked up his pen. “Based on that note, I’m assuming there were some problems on the home front.”

“Yes.” Laura rubbed at the twin vertical lines etched above her nose. “Darcy and I had the same mother, who died three years ago. They lived in New York. Mom and I rarely visited in person because of distance and my limited vacation time, so Darcy and I were practically strangers. But when her father died four months ago, there was no one else to take her in. If I hadn’t offered, she’d have ended up in foster care.”

“Admirable.”

She dismissed his praise with a rueful shake of her head. “My intentions were good, but I had no idea what I was getting into. Darcy’s had a few minor problems since Mom died—truancy, a possible pot-smoking incident, a couple of drinking parties that got busted, another runaway attempt last summer that lasted all of twelve hours—but I thought I could handle her, maybe help her get her act together.” She sighed and stared into the dark depths of her coffee. “Talk about wishful thinking. We clashed from day one. Her dad was a lot older than our mom and not in the best of health his last year, and I’ve gathered she got away with a lot. I assume she expected to do the same here.”

“And you didn’t let her.”

“I *tried* not to let her, but she’s smart, and she’d already become adept at evasion tactics. If I told her to tone down her makeup for school, she stashed it in her locker and put it on there. I found that out one day when she forgot to take it off before she came home. If I told her to be back at seven, she’d push it to eight. That kind of thing.”

“Was there a precipitating incident for this?” Dev gestured toward the note.

“No. Nothing out of the ordinary happened. We argue almost every day about something. Thursday night we got into it about

the length of her skirt and a paper she needed to finish that was due Friday.”

Laura took a sip of coffee, wrapping her fingers around the mug as if trying to warm them. “Part of the problem is the New York City to St. Louis transition. That’s been tough for her. As far as I can tell, she hasn’t made any real friends here—nor tried very hard to connect. She thinks this is a cow town and everyone is 404.” Laura sighed. “I had to look that term up in the urban teen slang dictionary, by the way. It means a worthless person, place, or thing and comes from the web code for ‘web page not found.’ I’ve been spending a lot of time with that dictionary in the past four months.”

Taking a sip of his own brew, Dev considered the information Laura had offered about her half sister. Fights with her guardian. Adjustment problems. The typical I’m-grown-up-and-can-take-care-of-myself attitude of many teenagers.

It was the recipe for a runaway.

“So this probably wasn’t a spur-of-the-moment decision.” Dev set his mug down. It was always more difficult when teens planned their exits versus leaving in a huff, as most did. “What did she take, other than the money she mentioned?”

“Not much. Some clothing, her laptop, and a couple of photos from her dresser. Based on a quick kitchen inventory, I think she also made some sandwiches and took some granola bars. She left her cell phone, but she removed the SIM card.”

Smart kid. She’d eliminated the possibility of GPS tracking and left them with very little retrievable electronic data.

“Okay. Tell me what you’ve already done to try and track her down.”

Once more, Laura reached into her purse, removed a sheet of paper, and laid it on the table. “I went online and pulled up the log for her cell, which is billed to me. I’ve called all the numbers that appeared more than once in the past two months.”

He gave the printout a quick skim. Most of the area codes were from New York—and one number dominated.

“Who’s this?” He indicated the recurring number.

“Darcy’s best friend, Brianna. She was the first one I called. If anyone would know Darcy’s plans, it would be her, but if she’s in on this, she’s not talking and I haven’t a clue how to reach her parents. I don’t even know her last name. Everyone at the other numbers I called seemed clueless.”

“We can get the billing name for Brianna’s cell. I assume it’s her parents. I’ll call them, but they may want you to verify it’s okay to talk with me. Any problem if I give them your number?”

“No.”

“What about any contacts Darcy might have had here?”

“The only name I found in her room was your office manager’s brother, which is why I’m here. When I called him last night, he passed the phone to her and she suggested I come by this morning if Darcy still hadn’t turned up.”

Nikki had recommended Phoenix to Laura?

Nice of her to tell him.

Positioning the tablet in front of him, he picked up his pen. “Why don’t I get some basic information from you about Darcy and then we’ll talk next steps.”

He ran through the usual checklist of questions—date of birth, social security number, height, weight, hair color and style, eye color, scars/tattoos, identifying mannerisms, glasses/contacts, preferred type of dress, past boyfriends, what she might have been wearing when she left. The butterfly tattoo on her left wrist was helpful. He put an asterisk beside that.

“Did she have an ATM or credit card?”

“No.”

“Do you have a recent photo?”

Once more, Laura dug into her purse. She pulled out two snapshots and handed them over.

“I took that one at Christmas.” Laura leaned closer to view the first photo too, bringing with her a subtle sweet scent. “She was in an upbeat mood that day. I hoped it would last, that we’d

mend our fences and start the new year on better terms. It would be nice to have some family ties again. I didn't have any brothers or sisters, and my only relations are distant cousins I never see. Same with Darcy."

"No dice?" Dev studied the image. The blonde, blue-eyed teen, attired in jeans and a sweatshirt, was sitting on the floor with a Christmas tree behind her and smiling for the camera.

"No. That happy little interlude lasted all of one day. The other photo is one I found in her dresser, taken in New York, I assume."

He shuffled the other photo to the top. It was a professional image, the sophistication of Darcy's upswept hair, glitzy makeup, and somewhat suggestive attire more appropriate for a woman-of-the-world twenty-six than sweet sixteen.

"Quite a transformation."

"I know. In that getup, she'd have no problem passing for mid-twenties. And that could get her into a lot of trouble on the street."

So could looking sixteen. Maybe more so. But Dev let that pass. The woman beside him was already worried enough.

"How would you describe her mental state?"

Laura tipped her head, her expression pensive as another whiff of that faint, appealing scent wafted his way. He tried to ignore it. "Deep down, I think she's still angry about Mom dying—and still grieving, even after three years. They had similar go-with-the-flow personalities and were very close. I also sense some guilt over her father's death."

That piqued his interest. "Why would she feel guilty about that?"

"He died of a heart attack a month after she ran away. He had heart issues anyway, but I have a feeling she suspects her escapades might have contributed to his demise."

So the situation was more complex than a simple defiance of house rules or an inappropriate show of independence. And anger, grief, and guilt could lead to compromised judgment and vulnerability.

Bad combination.

“Could she have been depressed too?”

“It’s possible, though she hid it under a veneer of bravado if she was. I did try to get her to talk to a counselor at school when she first came, but she refused so I didn’t push. It wasn’t as if there were any serious problems here. No more truancy or pot smoking or alcohol-related incidents, just clashes on normal, everyday-life kinds of issues.”

He caught a subtle glimmer in her eyes as she dipped her chin to pull a nonexistent piece of fuzz from the sleeve of her sweater. “Maybe I was too hard on her. Maybe my rules *were* old-fashioned, as she claimed. I can hardly remember being sixteen. Besides, it’s a different world now.”

The whisper of tears in her voice tugged at his heart, and he blinked in surprise. That was weird. His standard procedure was to offer clients a sympathetic ear but limit personal involvement. For whatever reason, that tactic wasn’t working today. “I wouldn’t be too hard on myself if I were you. Kids like to push the limits. Sometimes parents—or guardians—have to be the bad guys. That whole tough love thing.”

She flicked a glance at his left hand. “Do you have children?”

“No. I’m not married, and *I’m* old-fashioned about that. No wife equals no kids.” He paused, frowning. Now where had *that* come from? Sharing personal information wasn’t part of his usual client spiel, either.

Time to lighten the serious tone with a little humor.

Leaning back in his chair, he adopted a more casual pose. “But I do remember being sixteen, and with this hair, trust me—I got into my share of scrapes. Kids like me need a firm hand, and I’m forever grateful to my mother for reining me in.”

More personal revelations. His lips flattened. Okay, this had to stop. But at least some of the tension and uncertainty in Laura’s features had eased.

“Thanks for saying that. Is there any other information I can give you that might help?”

“How much money did Darcy take?”

“Whatever small amount of cash she might have had on hand, plus my three hundred dollars.”

“Your shoe money?”

Pink spots appeared on her cheeks. “It’s a strange place to keep extra cash, isn’t it?”

“I’ve heard stranger. A litter box, for one.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Seriously?”

“Yep. One of our clients told me he liked to put fifty-dollar bills there. He claimed he wrapped them in plastic, but I always washed my hands after any exchange of cash with him.”

Her sudden smile blindsided him. The twinkle in her eyes lit up her face, chasing away the worry. Her lips softened and parted, revealing rows of even white teeth. Her features relaxed, giving him a glimpse of a different, carefree version of this woman.

A woman who, under other circumstances, he might be interested in getting to know better.

Not going to happen, buddy. She’s a client.

Right.

He forced himself to look back down at his notes. “With three hundred dollars and change, she won’t get far. Flying would eat up too much of her money, and she’d run into issues trying to buy a ticket at her age—unless she used a credit card and did it online?”

Laura shook her head. “No charges have shown up on my card for any sort of transportation.”

“Could someone have sent her a ticket or money?”

“Maybe. But I don’t think she’s close enough to anyone here, and Brianna’s younger than Darcy. I don’t know how she’d manage to pull that off without alerting her parents. I do think New York is where Darcy is headed, though. She loves it there, and she knows the city well. I called Greyhound, but I didn’t get anywhere.”

“We can probably do better. And a bus would be my guess too. She could pay cash for a ticket with no questions asked. The only other possibility would be hitchhiking.” Laura’s complexion went a

few shades paler, and Dev tacked on a caveat. “But in this weather, I’d say that’s unlikely. Not much is moving on the roads.”

“I hope that’s true.” She tapped a finger against the handle of her mug, her expression thoughtful. “Besides, I can’t imagine Darcy hitching rides. She’s savvy about some of the seedier sides of life, as most New Yorkers are.” The words seemed meant to reassure her as much as him—but her next comment told him a lot of doubts remained. “I’ve been trying to think positive, to believe she’ll be okay even if it takes me awhile to find her. But tell me the truth—am I kidding myself?”

Dev played with his pen. The simple answer was yes. Runaways faced threats on numerous fronts—drugs, gangs, alcohol, assault, to name a few. And the danger intensified the longer they stayed away, especially if they were wandering the streets. Theft—and worse crimes—could fast become a way of life as money ran low and desperation set in. Seventy-five percent of runaways who remained on the street for more than two weeks found themselves in big trouble.

But as he looked into Laura’s anxious face, he couldn’t bring himself to share that disheartening statistic. There would be plenty of time to bring it up later, if his initial steps to find Darcy proved fruitless.

“Not necessarily. Given the weather, she may have holed up somewhere with a friend you don’t know about, waiting for a break in the storm.”

“I hope that’s true.”

He did too—but he wouldn’t lay odds on it after all the stuff he’d seen.

Before she could press him for further reassurance, he stood and moved to his desk. After retrieving a client contact form from a drawer, he passed it to her. “I’d appreciate it if you’d fill this out for our records. We always do a brief background check on new clients to help ensure our services aren’t being used for some illegal end.”

She skimmed the form, sufficiently distracted by his request to

drop her previous line of questioning. “I guess that makes sense. We haven’t talked about fees yet, either.”

“We work on an hourly basis for most cases.” He quoted her the hefty amount; she didn’t blink.

“Whatever it takes.” She reached for the pen he’d left on the table. “When Darcy’s dad died, he left us equal shares in his and Mom’s estate. I can’t think of a better use for some of that money than finding Darcy.”

She bent to her task, and Dev returned to his desk. The window rattled as a gust of wind shook the glass, and he looked out. The winter storm the weather gurus had said would bypass St. Louis had instead launched a frontal attack, beginning Friday night with sleet. Steady freezing rain the past two days had coated the streets and the tree branches, weighing down the limbs of the pine outside his office window. The needled boughs were bending, trying to hold up under the strain, but if the assault continued, they’d eventually reach a breaking point—as most things did under pressure.

For the second time in an hour, the bad memories edged into his consciousness, trying to scale the wall he’d erected. Shoving them back, he focused on the slim woman at his office table instead. She’d slipped on a pair of glasses and was bent over the form, faint furrows of concentration marring her brow. Her studious air, simple makeup, and understated attire were in marked contrast to the double-pierced ears and world-here-I-come attitude that had come through loud and clear in the second photo of Darcy.

No wonder they’d clashed.

But despite their differences, it was obvious Laura cared deeply about the younger girl’s welfare. The faint smudges below her lashes, the creases at the corners of her eyes, and her taut posture spelled worry in capital letters.

And it wasn’t misplaced.

Girls like Darcy were easy prey for the wrong kind of people, New York street savvy notwithstanding.

A flicker of movement at the door caught his attention, and he

looked over as Nikki gestured to him. Leaving Laura to her task, he slipped into the hall and closed the door behind him.

“You could have told me she came here at your recommendation.”

“You’re complaining because I brought in business?” Nikki arched an eyebrow, then shrugged. “I didn’t know if she’d follow through—and what difference does it make, anyway?”

“I might need to talk to Danny, since he obviously knows the missing girl.”

“Not well. He’s smitten, but near as I can tell, your client’s sister has been ignoring him. It was all one way.”

“Still, he could have some piece of information that might be helpful.”

“Fine. I’ll tell him you might be in touch—which will make his day. He’s had a strong case of hero worship since he stayed with you while Steve and I were on our honeymoon. Go figure.” She rolled her eyes, then gestured to the window behind him. “It’s starting to snow, and the weatherpeople are predicting ten inches by tonight. Despite their bad call on the ice, I’m apt to believe them on this, given the accumulating evidence. If you don’t need me, I’d like to head home. I can do the monthly billing from there.”

“What about the files in the corner of my office? I thought you were going to get to those today. The pile’s about to topple.”

She gave him a disgruntled look. “The pile’s always about to topple. The faster I file them, the faster the stack grows. The world won’t end if they have to wait a day or two.”

“Fine. I’ll hold down the fort alone today.”

“Not quite.” She nodded toward the closed door.

“My client will be leaving shortly.”

“Maybe you can stall her.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

Nikki grinned but remained silent.

He blew out an exasperated breath. “She’s my client, Nikki.”

“So? Moira was Cal’s client, and they ended up getting married.”

“That’s different.”

“Yeah? How?”

“Look, just because you walked down the aisle a few months ago and are still the glowing bride doesn’t mean everyone has the same goal.” He shot her his most intimidating ATF-agent glare.

It didn’t work.

So what else was new?

“Suit yourself. However, your eyes did light up when she walked through the door.” Nikki sashayed back down the hall, throwing one final comment over her shoulder. “But she may not be the one. I can’t imagine you getting with a librarian.”

Librarian?

He gaped at Nikki’s retreating back. Based on his usual choice of dates, she was right. That would be a stretch.

Still processing that latest bit of news, he pushed back through the door.

Laura stood as he reentered, handing him the form as he joined her. A quick glance at the place-of-employment question confirmed her profession. She worked at one of the St. Louis County Library branches.

“So what are the next steps?”

He looked at her. She removed her reading glasses, and those big blue eyes fixed on him. The faint sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of her nose was cute too. Not that he’d darkened the door of many libraries, but she didn’t fit his stereotype of a . . .

“Mr. Devlin?”

Her uncertain tone registered, and he shifted gears. Next steps. Right.

He cleared his throat. “Just make it Dev, okay? We’re not into formalities around here. My next step is to get the contact information for Brianna’s parents and give them a call, see if they can exert a little pressure on their daughter for information. I’ll also look into the Greyhound bus possibility. Any idea how she might have gotten downtown to the station?”

“No, but being a New Yorker, she’s adept at public transportation.”

“Then we’ll assume she took a bus or cab or found her way to a Metrolink station. With the city shut down since late Friday, she might not have made it out of town yet. That works to our advantage.”

“Is there anything more I can do to help?”

“Let me do some preliminary digging and I’ll get back to you on that. But please call if you come across anything that might offer us some other clues.” He plucked a card out of the holder on his desk and handed it over. “Use my cell number. I always have my BlackBerry with me.”

She took the card, and as her cold fingers brushed his, he had to fight a sudden urge to warm her hands in his.

Get a grip, Devlin. She’s a client—and not your type, anyway.

“Thanks.” She slipped the card in the pocket of her black slacks.

“I’ll show you out.” He followed down the hall to the reception area, retrieved her calf-length wool coat from the rack, and held it as she slipped her arms inside. “Let me walk you to your car.”

She eyed his dress shoes as she tugged a knit hat over her hair and wrapped a muffler around her neck. “Thanks, but I’m right in front . . . and better dressed for the weather.”

No argument there. Her footwear was designed for practicality, as were the insulated gloves she pulled out of a pocket. Both would serve her well in the swirling snow that was already obliterating the landscape. As it was, he’d be lucky to make it to his own car without slipping on the ice and breaking an arm.

Today’s attire wasn’t the finest example of his planning skills.

“Good point. I’ll walk you to the door instead.”

She accepted that offer with a nod. Circling behind Nikki’s desk, he pressed the release button on the floor with his foot before joining her at the entrance.

“You have quite a security setup here.”

“It pays to be cautious. The bad guys aren’t always happy with

the results of our work.” He grasped the handle on the door. “Be careful driving home.”

“I will.” She tucked her muffler closer as she prepared to plunge into the swirling snow. “Wherever Darcy is, I hope she’s warm and safe.”

“Hold that thought.”

She sent him a quick smile in response.

But as he watched her carefully navigate the icy sidewalk, clinging to her late-model red Civic for support as she rounded the hood, his own lips flattened. More often than not, teen runaways got into trouble—especially ones who thought they had street smarts. Minor delinquency and a brush with pot and alcohol wouldn’t prepare a girl like Darcy for the gritty rawness of the life she’d escaped to, where one out of three runaways were lured into prostitution within forty-eight hours.

And while the blizzard might delay her departure and keep her close to home for a couple of extra days, that scenario had a downside he hadn’t shared with his client. Darcy had limited funds and few friends in St. Louis. With her plans thwarted by the crippling storm, she’d need to seek temporary shelter somewhere until traffic started flowing again.

He just hoped she didn’t take refuge in the wrong place.