

PRIVATE JUSTICE #3

DECEIVED

A N O V E L

IRENE HANNON



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To Tom,
as we celebrate twenty-five years of marriage.
The anniversary may be silver,
but the memories are golden.

Thank you for the gift of your love . . .
and for being my hero.

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Prologue

A stranger was coming up her driveway. Decorative tube of icing poised over the cake, Kate Marshall froze as the crunch of gravel outside the open windows at the front of the house stopped by the porch.

Definitely not John. He would have headed straight to the detached garage in back, as usual. Besides, he and Kevin never cut their Wednesday fishing outings short. And none of their friends would make a social call at this hour of the morning.

A car door slammed, and she finished the last swirl of red icing on the *y* in *birthday*, frowning as a tingle of apprehension skittered through her. How silly was that? This was Hilton, New York, not New York City. A peaceful village of six thousand people. Just because she was a big-city girl who'd never quite acclimated to the solitude of their five-acre spread on the outskirts of town didn't mean it was unsafe.

Still, as the doorbell rang, she grabbed her cell out of her purse and slipped it in the pocket of her jeans—just in case.

But as she entered the living room and caught a glimpse of the dark-colored cruiser through the front window, her step faltered.

There would be no need for a 911 call.

The police were already here.

A sudden swirl of memories kaleidoscoped through her mind, catapulting her back sixteen years, to her eighteenth summer. A porch swing . . . a tall glass of tangy lemonade . . . a heart-melting romance novel. All the makings of a perfect June day.

Until a police car pulled up and a grim-faced officer emerged.

Two minutes later, as the man informed her and her mother that a faulty construction elevator at a job site had plunged her architect father three stories to his death, the perfect day had ended.

But history didn't repeat itself.

God wouldn't do that to her.

Would he?

Reining in her burgeoning panic, she breathed in, then out, and forced her feet to carry her across the living room.

Through the art-glass sidelight next to the front door, she had a distorted view of the uniformed man on the other side. He appeared to be young . . . and his expression was serious.

Her heart lurched.

Fingers fumbling the lock, she opened the door. "May I help you?" Her rote words seemed to come from a distance, leaving a hollow echo in her ears.

"Mrs. Marshall?"

"Yes."

The man clasped his hands behind his back and planted his feet shoulder-width apart, in military at-ease position.

But he didn't look at ease.

His posture was rigid, his features taut.

"I'm Trooper Peyton, New York State Police. Did your husband go fishing in Braddock Bay this morning?"

"Yes."

His Adam's apple bobbed. "I'm afraid there's been an accident."

No!

The denial screamed through her mind as she clutched the edge of the door, her slippery fingers leaving a smear of icing on the shiny white woodwork.

It looked like blood.

She tore her gaze away from the crimson smudge, forced her brain to process the man's statement . . . and came to the only possible conclusion.

John was hurt.

Badly.

Otherwise, he would have called her himself.

Cold fingers squeezed her heart as she choked out the question she didn't want to ask. "My son . . . is he . . . is Kevin hurt too?"

The uniformed man frowned. "Your son?"

She furrowed her own brow. "Yes. My husband and son were together. Kevin's f-four." Her voice hitched on the last word.

The officer reached for his radio. "Let me call that in. The last I heard, they were only looking for a man."

Looking for?

The room began to spin, and she grabbed the door frame with her free hand. Darkness licked at her soul, snuffing out the light like storm clouds advancing on the sun. "What do you mean, looking for?"

His features softened as his radio crackled to life. "I'm sorry, ma'am. All we have so far is an overturned boat and an adult life jacket."

Adult life jacket.

As the words reverberated in her mind, she shook her head, trying to clear the muddle from her brain.

No.

That couldn't be right.

“Wait.” She plucked at the man’s sleeve. “You shouldn’t have found a loose life jacket. My husband and son always wore their vests.”

He held up a finger and angled away to speak into the radio, conveying the news about Kevin in a crisp, official tone before he turned back to her.

“If you could give me a description of what your husband and son were wearing, ma’am, it would be very helpful to the search and rescue team.”

He wasn’t listening to her.

She stepped closer. In-your-face close. “Did you hear what I said? They always wore their life jackets. Always! John promised me they would, and he never broke his promises. There shouldn’t be a loose life jacket. And where are they?” Her pitch rose as hysteria nipped at the edges of her voice.

“I don’t know, ma’am, but we’re doing everything we can to find them.” The officer’s reassuring tone did nothing to soothe her. “May I come in while I ask you a few more questions?”

She stared at him as an insulating numbness began to shroud her, weighing down her arms and legs, dulling her senses. “You expect me to just sit here while my husband and son are missing?”

“Professionals are handling the search, Mrs. Marshall. The most useful thing you can do is give us a description and answer some questions.”

It wasn’t enough.

But how else could she contribute? With her fear of the water, she’d hinder more than help if she showed up at the bay.

Closing her eyes, she sucked in a breath—and sent a silent, desperate plea to the Almighty.

The officer took her arm. Wondering, perhaps, if she was going to cave?

Not yet.

But soon.

Because even as he guided her toward the couch, even as she prepared to answer his questions, she knew with soul-searing certainty that nothing she told him was going to change the outcome on this day intended to celebrate the beginning of her husband's thirty-sixth year.

And she also knew there would be no more happy birthdays in this house.

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THREE YEARS LATER

Kate sniffed the enticing aromas wafting her way from the food court, transferred her shopping bag from one hand to the other, and checked her watch. Nope. She was already behind schedule, and being late for her one-thirty client wasn't an option. No lunch today.

So what else was new?

On the plus side, maybe she could swing by Starbucks after dinner and apply those saved calories to the ultimate summer indulgence—a double chocolatey chip frappuccino . . . heavy on the whip.

A wry grin tugged at her lips as she lengthened her stride. Like that was going to happen. If this day followed her typical pattern, she'd be so exhausted by the time she got home she'd opt for a quick omelet or nuke a frozen dinner, then fall into bed—and the oblivion of sleep. But better catatonic slumber than nights spent watching the LED display on her bedside clock mark the slow-motion passing of middle-of-the-night minutes.

Cutting a path straight toward the escalator that led down to the first level of the mall, she averted her head as she passed the Mrs. Fields shop. Tempting, but not healthy.

When her stomach rumbled, however, her course somehow drifted to the right.

Maybe one cookie.

Two minutes later, cookie in hand, she took a large bite and closed her eyes as the warm chocolate chips melted on her tongue.

Nirvana.

And far tastier than the turkey sandwich in the fridge at work—the lunch she would have been eating if she hadn't volunteered last night to exchange her neighbor's defective heating pad during her lunch hour. But with the older woman's arthritis acting up . . . with the sweltering heat of a St. Louis July taking a toll on seniors who ventured out . . . with West County Center just ten minutes away from her office . . . how could she ignore the prodding of her conscience to do a good deed?

Besides, she might not be as old as her neighbor, but she knew what it was like to be hurting . . . and alone . . . and in desperate need of a respite from pain.

The chocolate lost some of its sweetness, but she finished the last bite of cookie anyway and picked up her pace toward the escalator. She was *not* going to let melancholy thoughts ruin this moment of pleasure. She'd done that far too often over the past few years—as her mother never hesitated to remind her during her occasional calls from the West Coast. Take what life hands you and get on with it, that was Angela Stewart's motto. And that philosophy had served her well as she'd forged her executive career. Unlike her daughter, she hadn't needed pills to get through her first year of widowhood.

Then again, she hadn't lost a child too.

Kate shoved the chocolate-smearred paper napkin in a trash can and straightened her shoulders. So she wasn't made of the same tough cloth as her mother. So she had a softer heart. But

she'd survived the hard times and gotten her act together eventually, hadn't she? And that soft heart had turned out to be an asset in her counseling work.

A horde of Friday lunchtime shoppers jostled her as she approached the escalator, and she tightened her grip on the shopping bag. Good heavens, you'd think it was the day-after-Christmas sale.

Leading with her shoulder, she inserted herself in the middle of the surging throng, then maneuvered through the clusters of chattering women to claim a riser and begin her descent.

To think some people found shopping fun.

Her errand had gone smoothly, though. Assuming she got out of the parking garage without delay, she should be back at the office in time to grab a bottle of water, touch up her lipstick, and run a comb through her hair before—

“. . . a poppysicle?”

As the eager, childish voice carried over the background hum of mall noise, the air whooshed out of her lungs, and she grabbed the railing.

Poppysicle?!

The only child she'd ever heard use that term was Kevin.

And that voice . . . it sounded like his.

How could that be?

Whipping toward the adjacent ascending escalator, she scanned the crowd. Several risers above her, moving farther away by the second, was a youngster about six or seven with hair the hue of ripening wheat.

The same color as hers.

The same color as her son's.

“Kevin?” Her incredulous whisper was lost in the cavernous echo of the mall.

She tried again, raising her voice. “Kevin!”

The boy angled her way. She caught a profile. Then a full

face. As they made eye contact, as he frowned and cocked his head, her heart stalled.

He looked just how she would have expected Kevin to look when he was seven.

As they stared at each other, the noise in the mall receded. Movement slowed. Everything faded from her peripheral vision. Only the little boy's face registered.

Dear God, is that . . . ?

No. Impossible.

Wasn't it?

All at once, a protective arm pulled the boy close, and the child turned away.

Kate jerked her gaze up. The T-shirted man attached to the arm averted his face, tugged the brim of his baseball cap down, and dipped his head as he spoke to the child.

Three seconds later, they stepped off the escalator and melted into the crowd.

No!

Heart pounding, Kate spun around and started to push back up the escalator, through the crowd stacked behind her, trying to keep the baseball cap in sight.

"Hey, what's going on?" The twentysomething behind her tucked her purse closer to her body.

"I need to get back to the top. Please. I have to . . . to catch someone." She craned her neck, but the duo had vanished.

"Just take the escalator back up." The woman motioned toward the first level below. "You're almost at the bottom."

Kate looked over her shoulder. Yes. That would be faster.

She swung around, more or less shoved the two middle-aged women in front of her off once they reached the bottom, and tuned out their muttered complaints as she bolted for the up escalator.

Once on board, she wove her way up, squeezing between

mall patrons, ignoring their dirty looks as she scrutinized the crowd milling about on the second floor, her gaze darting left, right, then back again.

Nothing.

At the top, she did a rapid 360 sweep.

Still nothing.

But that little boy was here somewhere. He and his companion couldn't have wandered far in the short time it had taken her to return to the second level.

Yet her frantic search of likely nearby places—food court, game store, kids clothing shop—yielded nothing. She sent the two-level JCPenney anchor store a dismayed glance. If they'd gone in there, it was a lost cause. The place was too large and spread out.

Besides . . . what was the point?

Legs suddenly unsteady, Kate stepped out of the flow of traffic and leaned a shoulder against the wall, forcing herself to take several slow, deep breaths. To think with her mind instead of her heart.

The little boy on the escalator couldn't have been her son. Just because the authorities had never located his body didn't mean he'd survived the accident. If he had, someone would have found him three years ago and called the police. Today was simply a regression. She was doing what she'd done in the early days after the tragedy, seeing Kevin in every blond little boy who bore the slightest resemblance to him. Letting herself fall back into the role of a wife and mother unwilling to accept the harsh reality of loss, whose inconsolable grief had led her to a desperate coping strategy that had taken months to shake.

No way was she going down that road again.

Ignoring the tremble in her fingers, Kate wiped her damp palms down her slacks. If she left this minute, she could still make it back to the office in time for her one-thirty appointment.

Never once, in her two years at the center, had she been late for a client meeting. Why break that record?

She started toward the escalator, deliberately placing one foot in front of the other, trying to ignore the picture of the little boy strobing across her mind.

Halfway there, her steps slowed.

Stopped.

No matter how hard she tried to wipe it from her brain, the image wouldn't go away. Nor could she tune out the echo of that poppsicle reference. And what about the momentary glint of what might have been recognition in his eyes when he'd spotted her?

Was it all just coincidence?

Squeezing her eyelids shut, she tightened her grip on the handle of the shopping bag.

Dear God, am I crazy? Is this just a manifestation of grief and loneliness and desperate hope? Please . . . tell me what to do. Should I walk away and forget this ever happened, or should I—

“Excuse me, ma'am . . . are you all right?”

She opened her eyes to find an older man with a concerned expression appraising her.

Somehow she managed a stiff smile. “I'm fine. Thank you.”

“You sure? I'd be happy to get you a glass of water or help you over to a chair in the food court. You're kind of white—almost like you've seen a ghost.”

Ghost.

Her heart skipped a beat, and she swallowed. “I-I don't believe in ghosts.”

“Neither do I.” He shoved his hands in the pockets of his baggy slacks and rocked forward on his toes. “Bunch of nonsense, if you ask me.” A rumble of thunder shook the building, and he glanced up at the skylights. “Sounds like we might be in for some rain.”

She tipped her head back. Dark clouds were scuttling across what had been a solid expanse of blue fifteen minutes ago. How could the weather change so quickly? “It was supposed to be sunny and dry today.”

“That’s God for you. He likes to throw us a few curves now and then, turn things upside down. At least he’s giving us a sign of what’s coming today, and I, for one, intend to heed it.” He dug out his keys and jingled them. “You take care, now. Don’t get caught in this storm those Doppler folks failed to predict.” With a lift of his hand, he headed for the exit.

Kate watched him until he disappeared in the crowd, his warning echoing in her ears. Unfortunately, it had come too late. She was already caught in a storm, one far more unsettled than the St. Louis weather. But their brief conversation had served a purpose. All that talk about ghosts and signs and God turning things upside down had given her the guidance she’d sought.

She wasn’t leaving without trying to locate that man and child.

Even if people thought she was nuts.

Taking a deep breath, she set her shopping bag on the floor, rummaged through her shoulder purse, and extracted her cell. Someone else would have to cover her one-thirty meeting. Because unless she saw that boy up close, talked to him, confirmed he wasn’t Kevin, she’d be spending a lot of sleepless nights wondering if maybe, just maybe, this was one of those times God had thrown her a curve that could have changed her life.

“How can it be eighty-two degrees at eight o’clock in the morning?” James Devlin pushed through the back door of Phoenix Inc., then made a sharp left from the hall into the small kitchenette at the rear of the office suite. After dumping his jacket on the dinette table against the wall, he grabbed a paper

towel from the dispenser and swiped at the beads of sweat on his forehead. “And how can you drink hot coffee in this weather?”

Connor Sullivan topped off his U2 mug and lifted it in salute. “Good morning to you too. And it’s never too hot for coffee—unless you grew up in Minnesota and never learned to take the heat.”

“There’s heat, and then there’s heat.” Dev headed for the refrigerator. “You’d think after five and a half years here I’d be used to dealing with the atmospheric kind.” He extracted a Coke and released the tab.

“Atmospheric. That’s a big word for you on a Monday morning.”

As a female voice joined the conversation, Connor turned toward the hall door and leaned back against the counter. A verbal sparring match between his partner and their office manager/receptionist would be an entertaining way to kick off the week.

“Don’t start, Nikki.” Dev took a swig of soda and strafed her a warning look.

“My, my. Did we get up on the wrong side of the bed this morning? Or maybe Laura came to her senses and gave back that ring you persuaded her to take on the Fourth of July.”

“As a matter of fact, we spent yesterday planning our wedding.”

“Yeah?” Nikki propped a shoulder against the door and crossed her arms. “So what were you complaining about, then?”

“The heat.”

She tipped her head. “It’s July in St. Louis. Get over it.”

Dev flexed his soda can while he gave her a slow once-over, the aluminum pinging like the bell for round two. “I see you dressed for the weather. New color in the hair too.”

Hiding the quirk of his lips behind the rim of his mug, Connor gave Nikki a more discreet perusal. Dangling gold ice cream cones were a nice seasonal touch in her triple-pierced

ears, and her Caribbean-turquoise tank top matched the swath of neon color in her spiky platinum-blond hair. The shimmering mother-of-pearl belt buckle on her tropical-print miniskirt was a little over the top—but it went with the shell necklace she'd brought back from her Hawaiian honeymoon a year or so ago. At least she'd worn heeled hemp sandals instead of flip-flops.

Still, Dev would have a field day with this outfit . . . and Nikki would match him barb for barb.

Connor settled in for the show and sipped his coffee.

"The color is called St. Bart's Blue. And if you think cool and act cool, you'll be cool." Nikki smoothed a hand down her abbreviated skirt.

"Thinking cool doesn't change the outside temperature. Neither does wearing beach attire to the office."

Nikki raised an eyebrow. "You have a problem with my clothes?"

"Problem?" Dev took another swig of soda. "Nah. They're very . . . colorful. And tropical. But you forgot the hat with fruit on top."

Connor covered his snicker with a cough.

Ignoring him, Nikki patted her hair. "You know, that's a thought. After all, Carmen Miranda was once the highest-paid female entertainer in Hollywood. Not a bad role model." She let a beat of dramatic silence pass, then delivered her zinger. "And I know just where to get the lemon for the hat."

Connor almost choked on his coffee.

A faint flush that had nothing to do with the outside temperature suffused Dev's face as he conceded the bout. "How come you never pick on Connor or Cal?"

"It's more fun to make your face match your hair." Nikki folded her arms and smirked at him.

"Ha-ha." Dev drained his soda and tossed the can in the

recycle bin. “Well, some of us may have time to stand around all day and gab, but I have work to do.”

As he disappeared through the door, Connor refilled his mug. “It sure would be boring around here without you two.”

“Hardly, considering some of the dicey cases you guys handle. But I’m happy to do my part to liven things up on the duller days—and Dev’s easy to rile.”

Only by her—and that was all show. If Dev didn’t like their sassy receptionist, he wouldn’t have offered to take in her teenage brother while she went off on a two-week honeymoon.

But Connor kept those thoughts to himself as he pushed off from the counter. “You know, if you’re not careful, he might stop bringing you those lattes you like.”

“Not if he wants me to tackle those mountains of files in his office, he won’t.”

“Good point. Did you want some coffee?” Connor inclined his head toward the pot.

As he expected, she wrinkled her nose. “I’m not as desperate for caffeine as you guys always are. I’ve got some herbal tea at my desk—and a new client waiting. Yours, by the way.”

“Why don’t you give this one to Dev or Cal? I’m beat after that weekend executive security gig.”

“Sorry. No can do. Cal’s meeting off-site with our favorite defense attorney to talk about some witnesses he wants tracked down, and Dev’s going to be starting surveillance for a workman’s comp case this morning—as soon as he finishes the two employee background checks buried somewhere in that mess on his desk.”

So much for his hope of a quiet Monday morning. “Fine. What’s the deal?”

“I don’t know. She’s not talking—to me. But she seems nervous.” Nikki shook out Dev’s jacket, picked off a piece of lint, and hung it on a hook by the door.

“How long has she been here?”

“She was waiting at the door when I went out front five minutes ago.”

“Anxious.”

“That would be a safe conclusion.”

“Tell her I’ll be out in a couple of minutes. I want to straighten up my desk first.”

“It won’t take you that long. There’s not much to clean in your office . . . unlike our red-haired friend’s work space.”

“Maybe Laura will whip him into shape now that they’re engaged.”

Nikki snorted. “Fat chance. He’s a lost cause, if you ask me. That pile of files in the corner of his office is higher than ever.”

“More lattes for you.”

With a nod, she started for the door. “I like the way you think.”

Mug in hand, Connor followed her out of the kitchenette and crossed the hall to his office. A quick survey confirmed Nikki’s assessment; there wasn’t much to clean up. Pitch last Friday’s *Wall Street Journal* and the empty bag of pistachios from that child custody case stakeout last week, put away the files on the skip trace and corporate fraud cases he’d planned to review this morning, slip on the jacket he kept handy for new-client meetings—he’d be set. Sixty seconds, tops.

And if fate was kind, perhaps this case would be straightforward, simple, and easy to solve so he could go home early and catch up on the shut-eye his two partners never thought he needed—no matter how many consecutive hours he worked.