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TRIPLE THREAT 1

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POINT  
OF  
DANGER

IRENE  
HANNON



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Irene Hannon, Point of danger  
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To JoAnn Case—  
My one-hundred-year-young friend.

Thank you for enriching my life beyond measure.

We may not be bound by blood . . .  
but you will always be family in my heart.

**T**HE PACKAGE WAS TICKING.

Eve Reilly froze . . . sucked in a breath . . . and gaped at the FedEx box propped beside her front door.

*Tick.*

*Tick.*

*Tick.*

*Tick.*

The sound was faint—but distinctive.

And was that . . . was that a *wire* sticking out through the tape?

She squinted.

Yeah.

It was.

Heart stuttering, she eased the door closed, snatched up the cell she'd dropped on the hall table, and jabbed in 911 as she bolted toward the back of the house.

The box definitely didn't contain anything as prosaic as the new water filters she'd ordered for her fridge.

"911. What is the nature of your emergency?"

"There's a package on my front porch that's t-ticking—and a wire is hanging out of it." Eve dug through the drawer next

to the kitchen sink until her shaky fingers closed over the back-door key for her neighbor's house.

"I'm dispatching as we speak." The woman's voice was calm. Like she dealt with bombs every day. "I want you to vacate the premises and find cover a safe distance away until officers arrive."

"Got it." She pulled open the back door and clattered down the deck steps while she answered the woman's questions, trying to wrap her mind around this surreal turn of events.

Hate mail was one thing. An occupational hazard you learned to live with in her type of job.

But a bomb?

Way out of bounds.

She skipped the last step and leapt to the ground.

Maybe her sisters were right.

Maybe hosting a controversial talk radio show *was* a dangerous job.

And maybe, in the future, she wouldn't cavalierly dismiss the venom that was sometimes spewed at her by listeners who didn't agree with her opinions.

For now, though, she had to focus on keeping her neighbors safe. Willing as she was to put *herself* in the line of fire as part of her job, it wasn't fair to endanger the innocent residents of this bucolic St. Louis suburb she called home.

The 911 operator finished her questions as Eve sprinted next door.

"I'll stay on the line until officers arrive. Are you moving to a safe location?"

"Uh-huh." Or she would be soon. After detouring to Olivia Macie's. The eighty-one-year-old widow would either be watching TV with the volume sky-high or napping without her hearing aid. She wouldn't hear her phone—and she might not even notice the noise from the emergency vehicles that would soon descend on the quiet cul-de-sac.

After bounding up the steps to the woman's back porch, she skidded to a stop, set the phone beside the pot of geraniums on the patio table, and pounded on the door.

"Come on, Olivia. Open up. Please!" As she squeezed her other neighbor's key, the first faint wail of a siren keened through the muggy August air.

She continued to pummel the door until the spry, white-haired woman at last pulled it open.

"Gracious, Eve." Olivia adjusted her glasses and blinked. "I thought I was being raided."

"Sorry. You need to go down into the basement ASAP." She gave the woman a choppy three-sentence explanation. "Until the police get here and tell us what to do, that's the most secure place."

She hoped.

After all, if subterranean walls of concrete offered protection from tornados, they ought to shield a person from a bomb that was a hundred feet away . . . right?

And it had to be safer than fleeing in the open air. What if the package exploded while Olivia was outside?

Her skin grew clammy as a stream of stomach-turning images strobed through her mind.

"There's a bomb on your front porch?" Her neighbor stared at her as if she'd just said aliens had landed in the yard.

"I don't know for sure—but it's ticking, and I'm not taking any chances. Can you get downstairs by yourself while I stash Ernie in the basement?" Her neighbors to the north would be devastated if anything happened to the coddled bichon frise they'd left in her charge while they attended a wedding in Chicago.

"Of course—but you should take cover too."

"I will." She tossed the promise over her shoulder as she hurtled down the steps and dashed across her backyard to her other neighbor's house, the wail of the sirens louder now.

*Please don't let that package blow up while I'm out here, Lord!*

With that desperate plea looping through her mind, she zoomed to her neighbor's back porch, breaking every personal speed record.

Once she slipped through the door, Ernie pranced around her feet with a happy yip, then charged toward his food dish and gave her a hopeful tail wag.

"Sorry, buddy." She snagged his leash off a hook and swept him up. "You can chow down later. In the meantime, you and I are going to the basement."

The white fluff ball began to squirm as if he'd been attacked by a band of marauding fleas.

Clearly the word *basement* did not conjure up positive vibes.

She set her cell on the counter and tightened her grip. "Sorry again, but that's the best place for us until this is over."

Negotiating the stairs with a wriggling fur ball in her arms was a challenge—but self-preservation was a powerful stabilizer.

At the bottom of the steps, she snapped on his leash, secured it to the rail, and set him on the floor.

"Chill, Ernie. We won't be down here for—"

*Bam! Bam! Bam!*

She jerked, hand flying to her chest as the pounding on the back door reverberated through the quiet house.

Ernie whined, and she gave him a quick pat before starting back up to the main level. "Stay."

Instead of following her order, the pup clambered up on her heels as far as the leash allowed, almost knocking her off balance in his frenzy to avoid banishment.

Tuning out his plaintive howls, she hightailed it to the back door. A police officer in tactical vest and helmet with the visor down was visible through the window, fist raised as if he was preparing to bang again.

He spoke the instant she pulled the door open. “Ma’am, you need to leave the house. We have a possible bomb next door, and we’re evacuating the adjacent homes.”

“I know about the bomb. I called it in. I live there.” As she flapped a hand toward her modest Cape Cod house, his eyebrows rose. “I came over to take care of my neighbor’s dog, okay? They’re gone for the weekend. I have their key.” She held it up. “The basement’s safe, isn’t it? Because that’s where I told my neighbor on the other side to go too.”

The man pulled his radio off his belt. “I’ll give the officer who’s working those houses her location.” He took her arm and urged her out the door. “We’ll get a statement once we’re out of range.”

“Should I bring Ernie?”

He frowned. “Who?”

“My neighbor’s dog.” She motioned toward the basement door. “I wouldn’t want—”

“He’ll be fine. Let’s go.”

Without giving her a chance to respond, he hustled her across the yard, keeping the houses lining the street between them and the package on her porch.

While the 911 dispatcher had treated her call as routine, the officer from this quiet, local suburb seemed a bit rattled.

At the end of the cul-de-sac, he handed her off to a County officer inside the yellow police tape that cordoned off the neighborhood.

The uniformed woman introduced herself, but the name didn’t penetrate the fog that had begun to swirl through Eve’s brain.

“Ma’am?” The officer peered at her. “Are you all right?”

The question registered at a peripheral level, and she forced herself to concentrate. “Um . . . sure. I think so.” She tightened her grasp on the key in her hand as police officers swarmed the area, sweat glistening on their brows.



But the hot sun couldn't dispel the cold chill that rippled through her.

"Let me get you a bottle of water." The officer kept tabs on her as she strode toward the emergency vehicles that were multiplying like mosquitoes in a stagnant pond.

Eve suppressed another shiver and tried to tune out the controlled frenzy around her.

Weird how she could pontificate for six hours a week to a quarter of a million listeners around the country about the violence, vulgarity, and vice besetting society, yet when serious nastiness hit close to home, her stomach morphed into a blender.

It wasn't a good feeling.

But she was *not* going to succumb to pressure. Or threats. Or intimidation.

No way.

She'd honor the promise she'd made to herself the day she'd launched this venture—to seek and stand up for the truth, whatever the cost.

Still . . . a bomb?

Seriously?

Yet if someone was determined to undermine her resolve, an explosive device did have more punch than a nasty letter.

Except the scare tactic wasn't going to work.

She mashed her lips together and lifted her chin.

Whatever the motivation for today's incident, she was sticking with her principles. She would *not* back down from her point of view, no matter the danger. Tomorrow would be business as usual.

In the meantime, though, she needed to rein in her galloping pulse, get her shakes under control—and try not to lose her lunch.

So much for any hopes of a quiet end to his first week in the Crimes Against Persons Bureau.

Expelling a breath, St. Louis County detective Brent Lange shoved his cell back into its holster, executed a U-turn, and pointed his Taurus east.

A possible bomb hadn't been in his Friday afternoon plans, but if you were the detective closest to the action, you got the call.

And even if it ended up being a false alarm—as most such calls were—he'd be on the job long after the bomb and arson crew called it quits. Someone had to dig in and get all the details, make certain there wasn't more to the story than a silly prank or a simple mistake.

Despite his rookie detective status, after ten years as a street cop he knew how the system worked.

Flipping on his lights and siren, he pressed harder on the unmarked vehicle's gas pedal. It would be much easier to get questions answered before the news crews descended and added to the chaos.

Ten minutes later, as he approached his destination in a neighborhood of older but well-kept middle-class homes, he gave the area a sweep.

In the distance, yellow tape blocked the entrance to the cul-de-sac where the possible bomb was located. A second perimeter had been staked out beyond that to create a working zone for law enforcement and emergency crews.

Standard protocol for a situation like this.

He flashed his creds at the local officer who was monitoring the flow of traffic into the restricted area, and the man waved him past.

Brent wedged his vehicle behind a County patrol car, slid out of the driver's seat, and surveyed the scene in the outer perimeter.

It took mere moments to locate the 911 caller. Eve Reilly,

according to Sarge. As the only civilian inside the yellow tape, she wasn't difficult to spot.

Pausing near the front of his vehicle, he studied her. The slender thirtysomething woman was clutching a water bottle, every toned muscle of her five-foot-sixish frame taut, her free hand clenched. Gray leggings extended a few inches below her knees, delineating a pair of notable legs, and a moss-green tank top outlined generous curves. Her copper-colored hair was pulled back into a stretchy band, but the elastic loop was losing its grip, leaving her short ponytail askew. While the strong tilt of her chin hinted at fortitude, her pallor suggested her stamina had taken a major hit.

As if sensing his scrutiny, she angled toward him.

His cue to approach.

Resuming his trek, he took in a few more details as he drew close.

Gold-flecked irises the same hue as her tank top were fringed by lush lashes. A faint sprinkling of freckles arched over her nose. Her full lips bore no trace of artificial color.

Even makeup free, Eve Reilly was a beauty. The typical girl next door, with a hint of exotic glamour.

An intriguing combination.

But nothing in her appearance offered a clue about why she would be the victim of a bomb scare.

Determining that was his next order of business.

He nodded to the female officer who was sticking close. "I've got this, D'Amico. Thanks."

"No problem." She moved off.

"Detective Brent Lange." He turned his attention to the redhead and extended his hand. "Eve Reilly?"

"Yes." She attempted to transfer the bottle of water to her left hand but appeared stymied by the key she held—as if she couldn't recall why it was there or what it was for.

"Your house key?"

She inspected the ridges in her fingers. Shook her head. “No. Uh . . . my neighbors’. I grabbed it as I left. I wanted to put their dog in a safe place.” She set the water bottle on the ground and held out her right hand.

Her grip was firm—but her hand was cold despite the late-afternoon heat, and subtle tremors vibrated through it.

“Let’s move over to the side.” He indicated a bench near a mailbox that was out of the line of traffic, bending to retrieve her water.

He let her lead as they wound through the crush of emergency personnel and vehicles, then took a seat beside her and handed over the bottle.

“Thanks.” She tipped her head back and took a long swallow, the plastic crinkling beneath her fingers.

Brent pulled his gaze away from her long, graceful neck and retrieved a notebook from his pocket. “Why don’t you walk me through what happened with the package?”

She recapped the bottle and gripped it with both hands. “It was there when I got home from spinning class. About three-thirty. I saw it as I pulled into the driveway, so after I parked in the garage and dropped my gear in the kitchen, I went to retrieve it. I opened the door, started to bend down—and heard ticking. After I spotted a wire sticking out, I called 911.”

“Keep going.”

“I left the house and went next door to warn my elderly neighbor. Then I ran over to my other neighbors’ house to stow their dog in the basement and take cover. One of the local officers met up with me there and brought me here.”

He frowned. “Didn’t the 911 operator instruct you to vacate the area?”

“Yes—but I didn’t want Olivia or Ernie to get hurt.”

“You were taking a chance.” True as that was, it was hard to fault a woman who put the safety of others above her own.

“I couldn’t live with myself if anyone was injured because of me. This mess isn’t their fault.”

“You think it’s yours?”

“The suspicious package was left on my doorstep.”

“Any theories about who did it, or why?”

“Nothing specific—but I’m on quite a few people’s black-list.”

Not what he’d expected to hear.

“Explain that.”

A wry smile touched the corners of her mouth. “I take it you don’t keep up with local talk radio.”

“No.”

“I host a syndicated current-events show three mornings a week. While I try to present all sides, I make no secret about my personal conservative leanings. That doesn’t sit well with everyone.”

“Does that mean you’ve been targeted before?”

“Never like this—and never at home.” She watched the bomb crew in the distance prepare the robot for deployment, faint creases marring her forehead. “Until today, the attacks have been confined to words and an occasional harmless package.”

“Define harmless.”

“A box of manure was delivered to the studio once. Also the back end of a two-person donkey costume. And a few months ago someone sent a voodoo doll that resembled me, with pins stuck in it.”

Powerful statements—but not dangerous.

“Any serious threats?”

“None that keep me awake at night.”

That didn’t answer his question.

“How about any that would keep the average person awake at night?”

“Maybe.” She shrugged and took another swig of water.

“After a while in this business, you develop a thick skin. But that”—she pointed her bottle toward the cul-de-sac—“is disturbing.”

At the very least.

“Did you see anyone unfamiliar in the area as you drove in?”

“I didn’t see anyone, period. Most of the residents are young couples. The neighborhood’s deserted during working hours.”

Great.

That diminished the odds of finding someone who could have witnessed the drop-off.

And except in high-end neighborhoods, most residents didn’t have a video component in their home security systems.

But they’d canvass the area anyway. Just in case.

“What are the odds the package is a real bomb?”

At Eve’s question, he shifted his attention back to her.

“Low. A homemade bomb *could* be triggered by an alarm clock, but digital timers are more common these days.”

“What happens if it’s a fake? A prank?”

“We investigate. Planting a hoax bomb isn’t a prank. It’s a felony. Let’s talk about any recent troubling communication you’ve received.”

“It’s all been the usual kind of garbage. None of the comments raised serious red flags.”

“Have you ever contacted law enforcement about any of these hostile messages?”

She rolled her eyes. “If I reported all the nasty notes I got, I’d be on the phone with the police every day. The left preaches tolerance—but only as long as you agree with them. If you don’t, they consider you unenlightened and fair game for their wrath. Sorry to offend if you happen to be of a liberal bent, but that’s how I see it.”

The lady wasn’t shy about speaking her mind.

No wonder she ticked off some of her listeners.

“I’m not offended. Depending on how this plays out, we may want to see any recent malicious communication you’ve received.”

“I’ll give you the contact information for the program director at the station. He and one of the admin people monitor my snail mail and social media accounts. The volume got away from me months ago. Now they just send me any notes they think merit a direct response. They’ll be happy to provide anything you need.”

“Are there any disgruntled listeners you hear from on a regular basis?”

“Some.” She rubbed her thumb over the almost-empty bottle. “Near as I can tell, though, they prefer verbal sparring to bombs.”

“One of them could have decided actions would speak louder than words.”

She flicked a glance at the first responders in the restricted area, faint furrows denting her brow. “I suppose that’s possible.”

“Any particularly controversial programs in the past couple of weeks?”

She huffed out a small snort. “Every program is controversial to some people.”

His phone began to vibrate, and he pulled it off his belt. Sarge—wanting an update, no doubt.

“I have to take this.”

“No worries. I’m not going anywhere. But if I could borrow your cell after you finish your call, I’d appreciate it. I want to tell the station what’s going on, and I left my phone at my neighbor’s house.”

“Give me two minutes.”

He scanned the crowd for a small pocket of quiet. Spotted one behind an ambulance that was pulled up to the curb.

As he walked toward it, he gave Eve Reilly another once-over.

She was watching the activity inside the inner perimeter, clasping the empty water bottle in one hand, her neighbor's key in the other. Given her calm demeanor, no one would suspect she'd found a possible bomb on her doorstep less than an hour ago.

But he'd felt the tremors in her fingers. Seen the taut cords in her neck when she swigged her water. Heard the slight breathlessness in her voice. Felt the waves of tension rolling off her.

She was putting up a brave front, but she was spooked.

Big time.

As she should be.

Maybe she was used to negative feedback, given the rancor she roused on her show.

But someone had risked a felony charge by putting that package on her porch.

And anyone who was willing to take that kind of chance wanted to do far more damage to Eve Reilly than best her in a verbal sparring match.