

PRIVATE JUSTICE #1

# VANISHED

A N O V E L

IRENE HANNON



*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Irene Hannon, *Vanished*  
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Published by Revell  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hannon, Irene.

Vanished : a novel / Irene Hannon.

p. cm. — (Private justice ; #1)

ISBN 978-0-8007-2123-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Women journalists—Fiction. 2. Private investigators—Fiction. 3. Missing persons—Investigation—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3558.A4793V36 2013

813'.54—dc23

2012026723

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13 14 15 16 17 18 19      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my nieces,  
Catherine and Maureen Hannon,  
who listened to this tale in its very early stages  
as we sat in front of a crackling fire on Thanksgiving.

Thank you for loving my stories—  
and for all your ideas.

What a lousy night to get lost.

Moira Harrison peered through the April rain slashing across her windshield. Even at full speed, the wipers were no match for the torrential onslaught. The faint line bisecting the narrow strip of pavement—the only thing keeping her on the road and out of the ditch filled with churning runoff immediately to her right—faded in and out with alarming frequency.

Tightening her grip on the wheel with one hand, she cranked up the defroster with the other. Fogged-up windows were the last thing she needed. As it was, the high-intensity xenon headlights of her trusty Camry were barely denting the dense darkness of the woods-rimmed rural Missouri road. Nor were they penetrating the shrouding downpour.

So much for the premium she'd paid to upgrade from standard halogen.

She spared a quick look left and right. No light from house or farm broke the desolate blackness. Nor were there any road signs to indicate her location. Maybe a St. Louis-area native would be better able to wend his or her way back to civilization than a newcomer like her, but she doubted it. Dark, winding rural routes were confusing. Period. Especially in the rain.

With a sigh, Moira refocused on the road. If she'd known Highway 94 was prone to flooding and subject to sudden closure, she'd never have risked subjecting herself to this poorly marked detour by lingering for dinner in Augusta after she finished her interview.

Instead, she'd have headed straight back to the rented condo she now called home and spent her Friday evening safe and warm, cuddled up with a mug of soothing peppermint tea, organizing her notes. She might even have started on a first draft of the feature article. It wouldn't hurt to impress her new boss with an early turn-in.

A bolt of lightning sliced through the sky, and she cringed as a bone-jarring boom of thunder rolled through the car.

That had been close.

Too close.

She had to get away from all these trees.

Increasing her pressure on the gas pedal, she kept her attention fixed on the road as she groped on the passenger seat for her purse. Maybe her distance glasses were crammed into a corner and she'd missed them the first time she'd checked.

Five seconds later, hopes dashed, she gave up the search. The glasses must still be in the purse she'd taken to the movie theater last weekend. That was about the only time she ever used them—except behind the wheel on rainy nights.

It figured.

The zipper on her purse snagged as she tried to close it, and Moira snuck a quick glance at the passenger seat. Too dark to see. She'd have to deal with it later.

Releasing the purse, she lifted her gaze—and sucked in a sharp breath.

Front and center, caught in the beam of her headlights, was a frantically waving person.

Directly in the path of the car.

Less than fifty feet away.

Lungs locking, Moira squeezed the wheel and jammed the brake to the floor.

Screeching in protest, the car fishtailed as it slid toward the figure with no noticeable reduction in speed.

*Stop! Please stop!*

Moira screamed the silent plea in her head as she yanked the wheel hard to the left.

Instead of changing direction, however, the car began to skid sideways on the slick pavement.

But in the instant before the beams of the headlights swung away from the road—and away from the figure standing in her path—one image seared itself across her brain.

Glazed, terror-filled eyes.

Then the person was gone, vanished in the darkness, as the vehicle spun out of control.

Moira braced herself.

And prayed.

But when she felt a solid thump against the side of the car, she knew her prayers hadn't been answered.

She'd hit the terrified person who'd been trying to flag her down.

The bottom fell out of her stomach as the car continued to careen across the road. Onto the shoulder. Into the woods. One bone-jarring bounce after another.

It didn't stop until the side smashed into a tree, slamming her temple against the window of the door to the accompaniment of crumpling metal.

Then everything went silent.

For a full thirty seconds, Moira remained motionless, hands locked on the wheel, every muscle taut, heart hammering. Her head pounded in rhythm to the beat of rain against the metal roof, and she drew a shuddering breath. Blinked. The car had stopped spinning, but the world around her hadn't.

She closed her eyes. Continued to breathe. In. Out. In. Out.

When she at last risked another peek, the scene had steadied. Better.

Peeling her fingers off the wheel, she took a quick inventory. Her arms and legs moved, and nothing except her head

hurt. As far as she could tell, she hadn't sustained any serious injuries.

But she knew the person she'd hit hadn't been as lucky—a person who might very well be lying in the middle of the road right now.

In the path of an oncoming car.

Her pulse stuttered, and she fought against a crescendo of panic as she tried to kick-start her brain. To think through the fuzziness.

Okay. First priority—call 911. After that, she'd see what she could do to help the person she'd hit while she waited for the pros to arrive.

Plan in place, she groped for her purse. But the seat beside her was empty. Hadn't her purse been there moments before?

With a herculean effort, she coerced the left side of her brain to engage.

The floor.

Her purse must have fallen to the floor while the car was spinning.

Hands shaking, she fumbled with the clasp on her seat belt. It took three jabs at the button before it released. Once free of the constraint, she leaned sideways and reached toward the floor—just as the driver-side door creaked open.

With a gasp, she jerked upright. A black-shrouded figure stood in the shadows, out of range of her dome light.

Her heart began to bang against her rib cage again as a cold mist seeped into the car.

“I saw the accident. Are you all right, miss?”

The voice was deep. Male. And the only clue to his gender. The monk-like hood of his slicker kept most of his features in shadows.

But she didn't care who he was. Help had arrived.

*Thank you, God!*

“Yes. I . . . I think so. I banged my head against the window, and I'm a little dizzy. But . . . I hit someone on the road. I need to call 911. And I need to help the other person.”

The man leaned a bit closer, and she glimpsed the outline of a square jaw. “You’ve got a nasty bump on your temple. Moving around isn’t a good idea until the paramedics check you out. I’ll help the person you hit.” He tipped his head and looked across her. “Is that blood on the passenger seat?”

As Moira shifted sideways to look, she felt a jab in her thigh. “Ow!”

“Watch the broken glass. Lean a little to the right.” The man restrained her with one hand on her upper arm as she complied. “Hold on a second while I brush off the seat.”

He was silent for a moment, and she shivered as the wind shifted and the rain began to pummel her through the open door, soaking through her sweater.

“Okay. I think I got most of it.”

He released her, and she collapsed back against the seat. As he retracted his hand, she caught a quick glimpse of his gold Claddagh wedding ring. The same kind her dad wore.

Somehow that comforted her.

“Stay put.” He melted back into the shadows, beyond the range of the dome light. “I’ll call 911 and check on the other person. Give me a few minutes.”

With that, he closed the door.

Alone again in the dark car, Moira tried to keep him in sight. But within seconds he disappeared into the rain.

As the minutes ticked by and the full impact of what had happened began to register, her shivering intensified and her stomach churned.

She could have been killed.

And she might have killed or seriously injured someone else.

Wrapping her arms around herself, Moira closed her eyes as a wave of dizziness swept over her.

At least help had arrived.

With that thought to sustain her, she let the darkness close in.

Why was she so cold?  
Why did her head hurt?  
Where was she?

Moira struggled to lift her eyelids, then blinked into the darkness.

What was she doing in her car?

Clenching her fingers around the wheel in front of her, she nudged her brain into action until, bit by bit, the mind-numbing grogginess dissipated. She'd hit someone on the rain-slicked pavement. Her car had spun out of control. She'd slammed into a tree—and banged her head against the window.

But someone had stopped. A man. He'd said he would check on the victim and call 911.

Moira frowned and looked around.

There was no sign of any emergency equipment. Nor of her Good Samaritan.

Lifting her arm, she tried to read the time on her watch. Too dark. She fumbled for the dome light. Flipped it on. Squinted. The hands were fuzzy, but it looked like . . . 9:30?

She'd been out cold for more than an hour?

No way.

She checked her watch again, angling it a different direction.

9:30.

How could that be? Unless her eyes were lying to her, the police should be here by now. An hour was plenty of time for help to arrive. Even in the rain. Even on a deserted road in no-man's-land.

Despite the lingering sluggishness in her brain, she came to the only possible conclusion—and the jolting truth shut down her lungs.

The man had never called 911.

He'd simply left.

But . . . why stop at an accident scene if you didn't intend to help?

And what about the person she'd hit? Was he or she still lying in the road? Or in a ditch on the side? Perhaps gravely injured?

A surge of adrenaline shot through her, tripping her pulse into double time.

*Breathe, Moira! Stay calm.*

Forcing herself to keep inhaling and exhaling, she snagged her purse from the passenger side floor and dug for her phone. Once she had it in hand, she opened the glove compartment, silently thanking her father for drilling into her the importance of keeping a working flashlight in the car for emergencies.

Tonight certainly qualified.

As she shoved her door open with her shoulder, she punched in 911. At least the rain had slowed to a steady drizzle.

She lurched to her feet while the phone rang, clinging to the door when the ground tilted beneath her feet.

"911. What is your emergency?"

The question registered, but she was too busy trying to stay upright to answer.

"911. Please state the nature of your emergency."

She tightened her grip on the door and focused on forming the words. "Car accident."

"Are there injuries?"

"Yes." Moira leaned against the door, trying to orient herself.

"I'm dispatching an ambulance and the police as we speak."

"I-I don't know where I am."

"We have your location from the GPS in your phone, ma'am."

"Oh. Right." She knew that.

"How many vehicles are involved?"

"One." And it was on the wrong side of the road, she realized. Facing the direction from which she'd come.

"Can you describe the nature of—"

She didn't wait for the rest. Now that she'd placed the emergency call, she needed to find the person she'd hit.

Pushing off from the car, she scrambled up the small embankment toward the road. Her flashlight picked up the skid marks at once, and she worked her way back to the spot where she'd begun to slide, all the while looking for signs of the victim.

But no one was lying in the road.

No one was lying in the ditch.

No one responded when she called out.

She stopped in the middle of the road, flummoxed. This didn't make sense. The person had to be here somewhere.

Retracing her steps, she continued to search until she heard the distant, welcome wail of a siren. Finally. Help was on the way.

She staggered to the side of the road, above her car. Maybe a police officer whose head wasn't pounding and whose vision wasn't going in and out of focus would have more success locating the person she'd hit.

The patrol car slowed as it approached and pulled onto the shoulder. Leaving on the headlights and the flashing light bars in the front and rear windows, a youngish cop slid out. With a glance at the bashed-in back fender of her car, he crossed to her.

"I'm Deputy Davis, ma'am." After giving her a quick sweep that lingered on her temple, he took her arm and started to guide her toward his vehicle. "Why don't you sit down? An ambulance is on the way."

She held back. "No. We need to keep looking."

"Ma'am?" He paused, clearly puzzled.

She moistened her lips, trying to think coherently despite the throbbing in her head. "I hit someone."

Twin furrows appeared on his brow as he scanned the wooded area. "We don't get too many pedestrians around here, ma'am. This road isn't even used a whole lot by *drivers*. Are you sure it wasn't an animal? A deer, maybe? We have a lot of those."

"I know what a deer looks like, Deputy." She jerked her

arm free of his and took a step back. If he wasn't going to help her search, she'd continue alone. "It was a person."

"Okay." He held up his hands, palms toward her, in a placating gesture. "Man or woman?"

"Woman. I think."

He tilted his head. "You think?"

Moira caught her lower lip between her teeth. "It was dark. I only got a glimpse of her in my headlights, and she was wet. But from the build, and her eyes . . . yes, I'd say it was a woman."

"All right." He gestured toward his car again. "Why don't you sit and I'll take a look?"

From his tone, she could tell he was humoring her.

And she didn't like it.

But as long as he was willing to continue the search, she'd go along with him. Because she needed to sit. Fast.

Fortunately, she reached the patrol car at the same moment her legs buckled.

He made a grab for her and eased her down on the passenger side. "The ambulance will be here any minute. In the meantime, stay put. I'll be right back."

"That's what the other guy said too."

He cocked his head. "What guy?"

Oh yeah. She'd forgotten to mention that.

"A man stopped after the accident. He said he'd check on the woman I hit and call 911. I must have blacked out after that. When I came to, he was gone."

"Was it another motorist?"

"I don't know. He just appeared out of nowhere."

Deputy Davis's headlights were behind him, leaving his features shadowed, but Moira had no trouble reading the skepticism on his face.

"Look, I'm not making this up." She glared at him. "There was a man here."

"Okay. We'll talk more in a minute."

He closed her door, and she watched through the rain-

spattered window as he examined the skid marks with his flashlight. Checked the embankment on her side of the narrow road and the ditch on the other. Planted his free hand on his hip and stared into the empty darkness.

The throbbing in her head intensified.

He'd come up as empty as she had.

But how could that be? She hadn't imagined the woman on the road. Her unsuccessful evasive maneuver was what had sent her skidding into a tree.

Based on the deputy's expression when he rejoined her, however, he wasn't buying her story.

Pulling open her door, he shrugged. "I don't see anything, ma'am." As another distant siren floated through the air, he gestured to her temple. "Head injuries can do strange things to the memory. And visibility was poor. Was this . . . person . . . running across the road?"

"No. I glanced away for a second to zip my purse after I felt around for my glasses, and when I looked up again, she was standing in the middle of the road, waving her arms."

His eyebrows rose a notch. "You have glasses you weren't wearing?"

Uh-oh. Big mistake. That admission would make her story even less credible.

She shifted in the seat. Time for damage control. "I have a pair for distance that I wear on occasion. As it turns out, I left them at home. But I can see well without them. They just enhance my night vision a little."

Though he didn't comment, his silence communicated a lot.

A gust of wind blew a spray of chilly drizzle through the door, adding another layer of cold dampness to her already-wet clothes. Moira shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. A real hug would be better, but this would have to do. Hugs had vanished from her life as surely as the figure in her headlights. The romantic kind, anyway.

"Where is home?" The officer shifted sideways to block some of the rain.

“St. Louis. Brentwood.” Her teeth started to chatter. “It’s a s-suburb.”

“I’m familiar with it.” The siren was close now, and he angled toward the approaching vehicle. “We’ll have some help for you in a minute. What brought you out here tonight?”

“I was in Augusta.”

“Pretty spot. Visiting the wineries?”

She heard the inference under the casual question. And resented it.

“I wasn’t drinking, Officer. I was w-working. The road was closed when I tried to leave, and I got turned around on the detour.”

“I’ll say. You weren’t even close.” He watched the ambulance pull into view and slow to a stop behind his car. “Let’s have the paramedics check you out. Then we’ll talk some more.”

He joined the technicians, who were climbing out of the vehicle. After exchanging a few words she couldn’t hear, all three walked her direction.

The technicians circled around toward her. The deputy slid into his own seat and began to fiddle with the computer. Running a license check, no doubt. Trying to determine if she was some nutcase.

But as she answered the paramedic’s questions and looked straight ahead while he flashed a light in each pupil, she knew Deputy Davis would find no explanation in her DMV file for her behavior tonight—nor anywhere else. She’d never gotten so much as a parking ticket. As he would discover, she was a normal, law-abiding citizen.

Unfortunately, in the absence of any supporting evidence, she doubted her clean record was going to convince him her story was true. He’d file a report citing her head injury and the lack of evidence to substantiate her claim, move on to the next call, and forget about tonight’s incident.

Truth be told, she couldn’t blame him. The whole scenario was bizarre. In his shoes, she might do the same.

In her shoes, however, the perspective was different.  
She knew she'd hit someone with her car. A desperate  
woman who'd been seeking help.  
And she knew something else too.  
She wasn't going to be able to file away this night and forget  
about it as easily as the responding cop would.  
Because that woman's terrified eyes weren't going to let her.

Moirira parallel parked with two quick twists of her wrist, set the brake on her rental car, and eyed the discreet sign beside the storefront office on the Kirkwood side street.

Phoenix Inc.

This was the place.

And she must be nuts.

What sane person would set herself up for more humiliation?

Tapping a finger against the steering wheel, she frowned. So far, everyone had dismissed her tale about Friday night. That cop, the paramedics, the hospital personnel. On the plus side, no one had checked her for drugs. Or asked her to submit to a Breathalyzer test. They'd all agreed a deer was the likely cause of her wild spin across the road and had attributed her confusion to the mild concussion she'd sustained—no matter how vehemently she'd stuck to her story about the two people who had vanished.

And in her muddled state, she'd almost let them convince her.

But she wasn't muddled anymore. After four days, the pounding in her head had subsided to a dull ache. And she was more certain than ever no deer had caused her accident.

Still . . . why waste her lunch hour on a beautiful day like

this to hole up with some private investigator who in all likelihood would come to the same conclusion as everyone else?

Yet as she watched a young mother, toddler in hand, window-shop on the quaint street, she knew the answer.

That woman's eyes were haunting her. Day and night.

Despite the warmth of the sun coming through the windshield, a shiver swept through her. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't banish the chill from her heart or eradicate the lingering feeling of terror that woman had transmitted in a few fleeting seconds.

She had to do something. And with the police out of the picture, a PI was her only option. Otherwise, she'd never have mentioned the distressing incident to a co-worker—even if said co-worker happened to be one of her best friends from their college roommate days. But Linda's crime beat gave her access to cops, and Moira wasn't going to settle for anything less than a cop-recommended PI.

Ex-detective Cal Burke at Phoenix Inc. was the name that had come back.

And she had an appointment with him in—she checked her watch—five minutes.

Okay. Decision time.

Flee or forge ahead?

Capitulating with a sigh, she grabbed her purse and slid out of the car. As long as she was here, she might as well go in. If nothing else, this free consultation might provide some fodder for small talk at social events.

Like there were so many of those.

But that was a dilemma for another day.

As she crossed the street, she checked out the picture window to the right of Phoenix's front door, hoping for a glimpse of the interior. No luck. The glass was tinted. And the door itself was a sturdy number. Solid wood—and locked. Only after she tried the knob did she notice the intercom and a small sign to the side, instructing visitors to press the button for entry.

It all seemed a bit cloak-and-daggerish, but what did she know? Most PIs handled a lot of messy divorce cases; maybe the Phoenix crew had had a few nasty encounters with irate spouses who didn't appreciate being put under surveillance by their better—or worse—half.

She depressed the button, and a moment later a woman's voice greeted her.

"How may I help you?"

"Moira Harrison. I have an appointment with Mr. Burke."

"Yes. He's expecting you. Please come in."

A click sounded near the door, and Moira braced herself as she pushed through. From everything she'd heard, most private investigators operated on the cheap and at the fringes of the law. They might have glitzy websites, but a lot of them worked out of their cars.

Based on the reception area, however, Phoenix Inc. was several steps above that stereotype. A spotless, nubby Berber carpet covered the floor. Three chairs upholstered in a neutral, patterned fabric were clustered around a glass-topped coffee table off to one side. Colorful, artsy photos of landscapes and close-up still-life scenes covered the walls.

Classy.

Most of all, she liked the prominent rectangular wooden plaque with the brass lettering, which mirrored the wording on the Phoenix website: Justice First.

But there was one jarring element.

Moira tried not to stare at the twentysomething receptionist seated behind a cherry desk, but it was difficult not to with her triple-pierced ears, unicorn-tattooed forearm, and spiky platinum-blond hair sporting a long swath of bright purple in the front. A necklace of shells lay against the modest neckline of her purple knit tunic—the hue an exact match for that swath of hair. When she stood to circle the desk, her wide, studded belt came into view. As did black leggings and silver platform sandals. Iridescent plum toenail polish was the final touch.

Oh, brother.

Despite the impressive law-enforcement credentials listed for the three PIs on the Phoenix website, Moira was not getting positive vibes.

Tightening her grip on the strap of her shoulder purse, she took the hand the woman extended.

“Nikki Waters.” As the receptionist gave her a firm shake, some subtle change in her features told Moira that Nikki knew she’d been assessed and had come up lacking. Maybe it was the slight tapering of her eyes. Or the speculation in their depths.

But what did that slight twitch of amusement at her lips mean?

“Please have a seat.” Nikki gestured to the upholstered chairs. “I’ll let Cal know you’re here. Would you like some coffee or a soft drink?”

“No, thank you.”

The woman turned to go back to her desk.

Moira hesitated.

Stay or leave?

She cast another glance at the receptionist, who’d retaken her seat and picked up her phone. All the while watching her as if expecting she might bolt like a frightened rabbit.

Moira straightened her shoulders. Not happening. As long as she was here, she’d see this meeting through.

Calling the woman’s bluff, she chose a chair and planted herself.

But if Cal Burke came out with a mohawk or a shaved head or sporting an oversized medallion on a heavy gold chain, she was out of here.

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Grin tugging at his lips, Cal dropped the receiver back into the cradle and stood. Once again, Nikki’s creative cue system had come in handy. Moira Harrison wasn’t just here. She was “waiting” to see him.

Translation: she was guarded and nervous and might not wait a whole lot longer.

He slipped his arms into the sport jacket he kept handy for initial meetings with wary clients. Time to pull out the stops to make a good first impression.

Settling the jacket with a flex of his shoulders, he exited his office and started down the short hall toward the reception area.

“Hey! You going to lunch?”

At Jim Devlin’s query, he paused in the doorway of his colleague’s office and surveyed the piles of paper on the desk and the mound of manila folders beside the filing cabinet.

“A little behind in our filing, are we?”

Dev narrowed his eyes. “I’ve been working round the clock on that workers’ comp case—as you well know. And since someone gave Nikki three weeks off for her honeymoon”—he arched an eyebrow at Cal—“who was I supposed to get to help me organize this stuff? The file fairy?”

“Now that’s an interesting picture.” Cal propped a shoulder against the door frame and slid his hands in the pockets of his slacks. “But look on the bright side. Maybe you’ll appreciate Nikki more now.”

“I appreciated her before.”

“Tell her that once in a while.”

“I watched her kid brother while she was in Hawaii on her honeymoon, didn’t I?”

Okay. He got points for that.

“So what about lunch?” Dev added another file to the towering stack on his desk. “I’m starving.”

“Can’t. I’ve got a consult with a new client. Bring me back a burger, okay? And fries.”

“I’ll consider it.” He leaned back in his chair and swiveled toward the window to survey the blue sky, fingers linked behind his head. “Nice day. I think I’ll try out that new sidewalk café down the street. Soak up some sun. Why let Connor get all the rays?” He swung back toward Cal. “Tell me again why

he got the executive security gig in Bermuda and I got the workers' comp case?"

"Sorry, buddy. When the client saw Connor's Secret Service background, it was a done deal."

"So an ex-undercover ATF agent is chopped liver?"

"He didn't want an ex-homicide detective, either. At least *you* have time to stop for lunch." Cal pushed off from the door frame and started toward the reception area.

A chuckle followed him down the hall. "I'll think of you while I laze around in the sun. Have fun!"

Fat chance. Wary clients had to be handled with kid gloves. And they weren't usually a load of laughs.

On the plus side, though, Phoenix was in the enviable position of being able to be selective. If he didn't get positive vibes, this meeting would be over fast. In which case he might be able to join Dev for lunch after all.

He smiled. A nice, juicy burger at a sidewalk café on a fine spring day. It didn't get much better than that.

But when he opened the door to the reception area and Moira Harrison rose from her perch on the edge of her chair, all thoughts of the burger and the weather and the sidewalk café fled.

His potential client was a knockout.

Maintaining a neutral but pleasant expression, Cal took a quick inventory as he approached her. Early thirties. Slightly frizzy strawberry blonde hair that skimmed her shoulders. Green eyes. Height five-six, five-seven, using his own six-foot-two frame as a gauge. Her black slacks and subtly patterned black and gray jacket showed off her trim figure, and she was clenching the strap of her shoulder purse in a tight fist. Her posture was stiff. Her ring finger was bare.

She also sported a sizeable bruise on her temple that her soft, wispy bangs and a heavy application of makeup hadn't quite been able to conceal.

While Cal did his rapid appraisal, she reciprocated. After

eight years as a cop and four years in this business, he was used to being sized up. It went with the territory.

When her grip on the purse strap loosened and the taut line of her shoulders relaxed a fraction, he knew he'd passed.

And for some weird reason, her tacit approval pleased him.

"Cal Burke." He smiled and extended his hand. She took it, her slender fingers firm in his. "I hope you didn't have any trouble finding us." He released his grip and gestured toward the door that led to the hall, falling in behind her as she walked toward it.

"No. I used MapQuest. There weren't any directions on your website."

"On the left." He pulled the door open, then motioned down the hall, ignoring Dev's stretched neck and thumbs-up as he passed the other man's door. "Most of our clients are referrals, and Nikki is always glad to provide directions. Please . . . make yourself comfortable." He indicated a chair at the small round conference table in one corner as they entered his office.

While she settled in, he took his time retrieving a pen and a tablet of yellow lined paper from his desk. Cautious, uncertain clients needed a few moments to get comfortable. To build their confidence level. The law enforcement citations and commendations and diplomas on his wall did the trick in most cases—the very reason they were there.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched her give his office a discreet perusal. If she was like many of his clients, she thought PIs belonged to one of two extremes: glitzy, Ferrari-driving investigators like Magnum PI, or sleazeballs on the shady side of the law who dug up dirt in messy divorce cases.

Truth be told, Magnum was off the scale completely. Nobody could do a tail in a red sports car and not get made.

On the other hand, there were a lot of sleazeballs out there.

As she'd soon discover, however, Phoenix took the higher road. The sign in the lobby said it all.

He joined her at the table, checking out her clasped hands. Good. Her fingers had relaxed.

“I understand from your initial conversation with Nikki that one of my former detective colleagues at St. Louis County recommended us.”

“Yes. Cole Taylor, I believe. I asked a friend at the *Post-Dispatch* who covers the crime beat to check with her contacts. I didn’t want to take a chance by picking a firm at random.”

“And end up with a seedy investigator who works out of some dingy office, operates on the edge of the law, and spends his time digging up dirt on unfaithful spouses.”

A pink stain crept over her cheeks. To her credit, though, she didn’t try to deny he’d nailed her concerns.

“Something like that. I assumed the police wouldn’t recommend a firm they didn’t respect, and the ex-law enforcement credentials for the PIs on your website are impressive. So was the tagline about justice.”

“It’s more than a tagline. We live that motto.” Cal leaned back, keeping his posture open. Candid. “A lot of PIs will work for anyone who’s willing to pay the bill. We don’t. Because of the credentials you mentioned, we have more business than we can handle. Also, since the firm was established four years ago, we’ve solved a couple of police cold cases at the request of the families involved. That’s put us in the enviable position of attracting other interesting cases in addition to a lot of corporate, insurance, and protection work. Thanks to the demand for our services, we have the luxury of taking on only cases we think have merit.”

She exhaled. “I hope you’ll think mine falls into that category.”

“A great segue.” He smiled and uncapped his pen. “Why don’t you tell me what brought you here?”

A flicker of distress darted through her eyes, and she tightened her linked fingers. “I have to warn you, the whole thing is kind of weird. And I also have to be honest about my

financial resources. I may not be able to afford you. I didn't budget for this."

"We can get to the fee schedule later. Why don't you tell me your story, and we'll go from there?"

"Okay." She swallowed and moistened her lips. "It all started Friday night when I went to Augusta to do an interview for a feature story. I work for the *Post* too."

Cal listened as she recounted the details of the night, jotting some notes on the tablet, asking a few questions, tuning in to visual cues, assessing the veracity of her tale, weighing probabilities. By the time she finished, he was intrigued—but cautious. And not overly optimistic Phoenix could turn up any more than the sheriff's department had.

"I tried to get a copy of the police report yesterday, but they told me it hadn't been filed yet. Otherwise, I would have brought it with me." She finished her account and took a deep breath.

"We can get it. Probably faster than you can. Let me ask you a few other questions. Augusta is in the heart of the Missouri wine country. Did you have anything to drink with your dinner?"

The firm line of her mouth told him she didn't like that question. Or perhaps it had been asked once too often already. "No. I don't drink. I showed the deputy my dinner tab to prove that, and gave him the name of my waitress if he wanted to verify my claim."

"How fast were you driving?"

"I'm not sure. Not that fast. The rain was bad. But I did speed up a little right before the accident. I was in a wooded area, and I wanted to get away from the trees because of the lightning."

He checked his notes. "You said you were dazed but conscious when the so-called Good Samaritan appeared. Yet you lost consciousness after that. For an hour. That's a long time to be unconscious from a slight concussion. What did the ER staff say about that?"

She wrinkled her brow. “I don’t know that we discussed it very much. At that point, my head was pounding, and my memory starts to get blurry.”

“All right. Let’s back up. You said you think the person you hit was a woman. Can you describe her?”

Regret pooled in her eyes. “I wish I could. It all happened so fast, and I only got a quick glimpse. Plus, she was wet. I do know she had short dark hair, and she was wearing a tan raincoat. I had the impression she was thin.” Moira closed her eyes, as if trying to extract more specifics from the image in her mind. “I think she was on the short side. And young. Under thirty.”

“Okay. What about the man?”

“His face was hidden by the hood. I couldn’t make out any distinguishing features. But he wore a Claddagh wedding ring.”

He tapped his pen on the table and studied her. His instincts told him she wasn’t a woman given to fancies—or to seeing things that weren’t there. She was a reporter, trained to be observant, to notice details. She had clear memories of the events of the evening before and after the accident, up until her arrival in the ER. If she said she’d seen a woman in her headlights, he was inclined to believe her.

Proving that, however, could be extremely difficult.

Besides, what was the point?

“Ms. Harrison, I’m confused about one thing.”

“Just one?”

At her wry inflection, his lips quirked up. The lady had a sense of humor. Nice.

“Why are you bothering to investigate this? Assuming there was a woman there, she’s (a) a stranger, and (b) long gone.”

She leaned forward, posture intent, no hesitation in her response. “Because it’s the right thing to do. I saw that woman’s eyes. She needed help. Maybe she still does. I can’t walk away from that. If I don’t try to get to the bottom of this, who will?”

A woman who believed in doing the right thing—despite the inconvenience to herself and unfavorable odds. Impressive.

And her ethics meshed with the principles on which Phoenix had been founded.

He tipped his head toward the simple gold cross that hung on a slender chain around her neck. “I take it that’s more than a piece of jewelry.”

“Yes.”

At the quiet conviction in her voice, Cal’s heart skipped a beat. Lindsey would have said the same thing—and in the exact same tone. The strength of his wife’s moral compass and her certitude and passion about the causes she believed in and supported had always blown him away.

Even after five years, the reality of his loss was like a punch in the gut.

Clearing his throat, he stood and crossed to his desk. “I’ll tell you what. Why don’t I take a look at the police report and have a chat with the responding deputy? Then we can talk again.” He opened a drawer, pulled out a client contact form. “In the meantime, it would be helpful if you filled this out for our file.” He returned to the table and set it in front of her, along with a pen. “We always do a topline background check on new clients to ensure our services aren’t being used for some illegal end.”

She examined the sheet. “I suppose that makes sense.” She flipped it over to the blank side, as if searching for something more. “What about the fee schedule? And don’t you want a retainer?”

“Usually. But we waive it in some cases. And it’s a bit premature to discuss fees. Talking to the deputy and reviewing the police report won’t take long, and that may be as far as we get.”

The corners of her eyes crinkled in distress. “I hope not. I can’t stop thinking about that woman. There have to be answers somewhere.”

“We’ll dig for them if we find even the slightest lead to investigate.”

“Do you charge by the hour?”

She was back to the money. Obviously, it was an issue.

“Yes.” He hesitated, then quoted her their standard rate.

Her eyes widened. “Wow.” She breathed, rather than spoke, the word. “I think I’m in the wrong business. My budget isn’t going to buy more than a few hours of your time.”

He retook his seat at the table. “Let’s not worry about that yet. You know those cold cases I mentioned earlier? We did those pro bono because we didn’t think justice had been served and we believed they deserved a second look. The side benefit was that they ended up bolstering our credibility and bringing in a lot of new business that more than made up for the fees we didn’t receive. This case could do the same.”

Her chin rose a fraction. “I’m not looking for charity. You deserve to be paid for your work.”

“And if the woman you saw was truly in trouble, she deserves justice. For now, let’s just say we’re both doing a good deed.”

She hesitated. Her gaze flicked down to the gold band on the third finger of his left hand, with its pattern of etched crosses. “I’m impressed.”

“Why don’t you reserve that comment until we see what I can find?”

“The fact that you’re willing to try despite the apparent lack of evidence says a lot.”

She picked up the pen and tackled the form, saving him from having to formulate a reply.

Just as well. Compliments—even implied ones—always made him uncomfortable.

After collecting his notebook and pen, he returned to his desk. He had plenty to do while she worked on the form. A report to complete for the child custody case he’d finished yesterday. Some addresses to track down for a defense attorney whose “justice first” philosophy meshed with Phoenix’s. A skip trace to run on a deadbeat dad.

But he couldn’t concentrate on any of them—thanks to the potential client sitting a few feet away.

He stole a glance at her. She was bent over the form, faint creases on her brow, lower lip caught between her teeth. An intriguing woman with an intriguing story—who also happened to be very appealing. He liked her principles. Her sincerity. Her subtle sense of humor.

And he liked how she looked.

A lot.

His pulse kicked up a notch, and he frowned. Not appropriate. Moira Harrison had come here to seek his professional services—and he didn't mix business and pleasure. Ever. None of the Phoenix PIs did. It was a bad practice that could compromise objectivity.

So why did he have a feeling he might have difficulty maintaining a professional distance with this client?

And why did that make him feel guilty?

But he knew the answer to the second question.

Cal swiveled away from Moira, toward the framed photograph of a tropical seascape that had once graced the pages of a national travel magazine. Lindsey had had the ability to take ordinary scenes and imbue them with depth and magic and possibilities, her touch transforming them into more than they'd been before.

Just as she'd transformed him.

And in the five years she'd been gone, his love for her hadn't diminished one iota. He doubted it ever would. She'd captured his heart with her vivacious smile that long-ago day he'd pulled her over for a traffic stop and she'd charmed him out of writing a ticket. It had been hers ever since.

End of story.

Compressing his lips into a firm line, Cal turned back to his computer and began typing his report. And he didn't look up—didn't let himself look up—until Moira spoke ten minutes later.

"I'm finished." She rose, crossed to his desk, and handed him the form.

A quick scan told him she'd left some lines blank. Social

Security number. Date of birth. License number. Didn't she realize he could get all that information in minutes?

As if reading his mind, she spoke. "I don't like to give out a lot of personal data. But I suppose it won't be hard for you to track it down."

"No." Why lie?

Despite his candor, she didn't offer to provide the missing information. Maybe she hoped he wouldn't bother checking it out.

Not a chance. The gaps on the sheet left him more intrigued than ever.

"Why don't I contact the deputy, get the report, and give you a call in a day or two?" He double-checked the form to verify she'd included her address and cell phone number.

"That works." She retrieved her purse, settled it on her shoulder, and held out her hand. "Thank you for your time today—and for treating my story more seriously than anyone did on Friday night. I'm not crazy, Mr. Burke. I know what I saw."

He returned her steady clasp, fighting a disquieting urge to hold on longer than necessary. "I have no reason to doubt you, especially with your journalism background. What kind of writing do you do?"

"For now, I'm filling in wherever they need help until an investigative slot opens. That was my specialty in Springfield, before I moved here a few weeks ago."

"Promotion?"

She flashed him a quick smile. "Yes."

"Congratulations. From what I hear, journalism's a tough business these days. You must be good." She didn't respond as he fished a card out of his pocket and handed it to her. "My cell number is on there too. Feel free to call at any time if you think of additional information that might be helpful."

"I doubt I will. I've been over the events in my mind dozens of times already." Nevertheless, she tucked the card into a pocket in her purse.

“Let me show you out.” He indicated the door.

She exited, and he followed her down the hall.

The reception area was deserted when they passed through and said their good-byes. No surprise there. Nikki hadn't wasted any time getting back to her Pilates regime after she returned to work from her honeymoon yesterday. Fitness was high on her lunch-hour priority list. Far higher than the mess in Dev's office.

But his partner's pile of files would have to wait another day, anyway.

Because he had a research assignment for Nikki this afternoon that he hoped might help clear up a mess far greater than Dev's.