

DEFENDERS OF JUSTICE | 02

# ***DARK DECEPTION***

**NANCY  
MEHL**



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Nancy Mehl, *Dark Deception*  
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This novel is dedicated to Peter Marsh.

If I could talk to you one more time, I'd tell you how smart, funny, and special you were.

If I could talk to you one more time, I'd tell you that I still remember your great smile.

If I could talk to you one more time, I'd tell you how much it meant to me when you'd leave the other boys playing outside so you could come in just to visit with your friend's mom.

If I could talk to you one more time, I'd tell you how much you were loved.

If I could talk to you one more time, I'd wrap my arms around you and never let go.

If I could talk to you one more time, I'd tell you that one of the worst moments in my life was telling my son that you were gone. I'd tell you that we both cried. That we still cry.

If I could talk to you one more time, I'd tell you that God can turn any situation around. That life is never, ever hopeless. If only you'd talked to us one more time.

But now there's an empty spot in the world where you should be. No one will ever fill it. No one else can. It will always belong to you.

We can't talk to you one more time in this world, but we're praying that someday we'll get to talk to you one more time . . . forever.

We love you, Peter.

## PROLOGUE

Playing dead was harder than she ever could have imagined. Despite the pain and the warm blood that surrounded her, she fought to lie perfectly still. It was quiet. Too quiet. There was no doubt in her mind that if he thought she was still alive, he would come back and finish the job.

How could this be happening? Only two hours ago she and Kelly were at a party, celebrating. Then they'd come home to find a man hiding in the bathroom. Kate hadn't known anything was wrong until she'd found him with one arm around Kelly's neck, his other hand holding a knife to her throat. He'd looked shocked to see her. As if he hadn't known Kelly had a sister.

"Back up," he'd ordered. "Or I'll slit her throat."

Kate wanted to stop him. Wanted to free her sister, but she couldn't find a way to do it. If she angered him, she was certain Kelly would die. So she stayed where she was, praying he would leave.

But he didn't. Not until Kelly was dead, and Kate wished she could join her. She lay on the floor until she was absolutely sure he was gone. Then she crawled over to the phone and dialed 911.

When the dispatcher answered, all she could do was cry.

# CHAPTER ONE

Icy rain pelted the windows of the St. Louis courtroom, given strength by a stiff wind that shrieked and moaned, eerily echoing the sounds of the serial killer's victims. The city was under a tornado watch, and if the watch became a warning, the courtroom would be emptied and everyone would be directed to the building's basement. Seated a couple of rows behind the defense table, Deputy U.S. Marshal Tony DeLuca shivered, even though the room was abnormally warm. The old courthouse smelled of sweat and despair. Its polished floors had been trod upon by thousands of feet. Its marble pillars had seen many criminals pass through the doors while their victims waited inside its walls, praying for justice.

There was complete silence as twenty-year-old Kate O'Brien walked slowly up to the front of the room and took the stand. She held up her hand as she was sworn in. Tony could see her body tremble, and he wished he could stand by her side and comfort her as she faced the man who'd

tried to take her life. Deep down inside, Tony believed she'd be okay. Kate's fragile beauty belied her inner strength. She was determined to conquer the monster who had brought so much destruction into her life.

She took her seat, purposely looking away from Alan Gerard, who stared at her brazenly, as if trying to destroy her confidence. Kate had vowed to ignore Gerard until the moment she was forced to identify him. After that, she'd made it clear he would never take up space in her head again. Tony admired her bravery, but he doubted if anyone could so easily banish the demons that lurked in the dark.

He looked carefully around the packed courtroom. There had been several threats made against Kate from delusional people who considered themselves fans of the demented serial killer. Although some in law enforcement had chalked up most of them to individuals who would never carry out their warnings, Tony took each one seriously. Several of the letter-writers had been tracked down and found to be harmless, but there were a dozen or so who couldn't be traced. One in particular bothered him. The verbiage used was educated and succinct. Although the writer was obviously delusional, he had reasoned out his insanity in a way that kept Tony awake at night.

*Everyone has a destiny. Every step we take only brings us closer to the inevitable. There is no way to change what must happen. Kate O'Brien's course is ordained, and there is nothing anyone can do about it. Accepting this truth is the only thing that can free our souls.*

Although Tony believed in destiny too, he refused to accept that there was no deliverance from evil. He was determined

that Kate would find happiness in a world that had been so unkind to her.

Tony had talked to her about witness protection, but she didn't want anything to do with it. She was ready to leave her aunt's house and start a new life—on her own terms. Even though Tony had assured her they would work to provide her with the kind of lifestyle she wanted, Kate's mind was made up. Tony could only hope that after Gerard was sentenced, the crazies would find some other vicious killer to worship. Still, he felt unsettled. On guard. As if his gut was trying to tell him that Kate was in danger.

As District Attorney Matthew Gibbons stood up and headed her way, Kate searched the gallery until she spotted Tony. She'd asked him to stay where she could see him. She'd told him she felt more secure knowing he was there. Tony hoped she'd be able to keep herself together as she faced Gerard in court. The pressure of living through that awful night again—of coming face-to-face with the monster . . . Well, talking about it and actually going through with it could prove to be two very different things.

Tony kept his gaze steady as Kate stared back at him. If he could send her additional courage through sheer will, she would have all she needed.

After Kate was sworn in, Gibbons asked her to recount the events of April twenty-third of last year. She began with the birthday party. She and Kelly were turning nineteen—getting ready for college, moving into their own apartment. They should have started a year earlier, but Kelly had been injured in a car accident with her boyfriend. Scott had walked away with a mild concussion, but Kelly had broken both legs and



shattered her right arm. Recovery and rehabilitation had taken so long, starting school was impossible. Kate had decided to wait for her sister rather than begin without her. Sharing an apartment and going to college together was something they'd looked forward to since they were children.

"Where was this party held?" Gibbons asked.

"At McGoogles. Near the campus."

"So this was a happy occasion?"

"Yes, very. Kelly was doing well after her accident, and we were both looking forward to our first year in college."

"How late did the party last?"

"We shut it down around midnight. Even though Kelly was much stronger, she still tired easily. I wanted to get her home so she could get some rest."

"And where was home?"

"We'd just found an apartment near the college. We'd moved in two weeks earlier. That's where we went."

"You're talking about the apartment on Delmar?"

"Yes."

The assistant D.A. cleared his throat. Tony knew the testimony that would follow was important. Even though there was DNA at the crime scene that linked Gerard to the attacks, it was only a small amount of evidence—a spot of blood in one location, found after the scene was initially processed. The defense claimed the DNA had been planted. That no one who had committed such a brutal murder could have left such a small amount of blood behind. They also contended there were no marks on Gerard's body—no cuts that could have produced blood. There was nothing under the girls' nails, no fingerprints that matched Gerard's, and nothing

else to link him to the murders—except for Kate’s eyewitness testimony. She’d recognized him as a maintenance worker at the college. Her identification had led to his arrest.

The lack of physical evidence was highly unusual, but not for Alan Gerard. He was suspected in a long string of other murders. In almost every case, just like this one, there was nothing left behind linking him to the killings. In addition to that, only one body had ever been recovered. Tony couldn’t quite understand why he’d left Kelly and Kate behind. Maybe he’d been thrown off from his usually well-timed, thoroughly planned procedure because he hadn’t realized Kelly was a twin. He’d thought his victim would be alone. Thank God Kate had survived and could describe her attacker.

Even though the prosecution believed the DNA was enough to get a conviction, Kate’s testimony would make the case a slam dunk for the state.

“Tell me what happened when you got home,” Gibbons said gently.

Kate took a deep breath and once again looked at Tony. He nodded slightly and smiled. She shifted in her chair as if trying to find a more comfortable position, but there was no way to make this any easier. The words she must say were horrific. Impossible. Tony realized he was holding his breath and forced himself to slowly breathe out. The entire courtroom was as silent as a tomb except for a large clock on the wall *tick-tick-ticking* away the seconds. Now it was here. The moment Kate had prepared herself for. Tony fought an urge to take out his gun and shoot the clock. The sound was driving him crazy.

“We . . . uh . . .” She locked eyes with Tony, her face pale

but her expression determined. “We got home around twelve-fifteen. Everything seemed fine. We entered the apartment, and Kelly went into the bathroom. I had some leftovers from the party and put them in the fridge.”

Gibbons nodded. “And then you heard a noise?”

“Objection,” the defense attorney said loudly. “Leading the witness.”

Gerard’s lawyer had a reputation for getting guilty people off. He was sleazy with a capital *sleaze*. Tony had no respect for the man. Darwin Branford was a third-generation lawyer who had followed in his father’s and grandfather’s footsteps. His grandfather had dropped dead two years ago under suspicious circumstances, and his father was serving five years in prison for attempting to bribe a judge.

“Sustained,” the judge said. “You know better, Mr. Gibbons.”

“Sorry, your honor,” Gibbons said. “What happened after you put your food in the refrigerator, Miss O’Brien?”

“I heard a noise. I wasn’t sure what it was, but it concerned me. I went over and knocked on the bathroom door to see if Kelly was all right.”

“And then what?”

“I . . . I heard her scream. I tried to open the door, but it was locked.” Kate reached up and brushed away a lock of crimson hair that had fallen across her forehead.

Her bright red hair and startling blue eyes were disquieting. Unfortunately, it was her eyes that had drawn the Blue-Eyed Killer to her and Kelly. Truthfully, Tony hated the inane names the press loved to tack onto low-life murderers. Especially this one. The title didn’t even make sense. Correctly used, it

would mean that the killer had blue eyes—and Gerard’s eyes were brown. But it had stuck and it wasn’t going away. In this case, however, at least it had alerted potential victims that the killer was looking for women who had blue eyes. There were other similarities among the victims, though. His first known victim, Tammy Rice, had been in her thirties and was the oldest. Most of them were younger. In their twenties.

At first, authorities hadn’t recognized that they were looking for a serial killer. Tammy had a son who was briefly suspected of killing his mother, but a solid alibi had cleared him. When Ann Barton, the second victim, disappeared and the same song sheet that was left with Tammy’s body showed up at Ann’s house, officials began to look in another direction.

Besides having blue eyes, all of his victims also had long hair. Hair color changed from victim to victim, but the killer never deviated from eye color and long hair. So far, profilers hadn’t figured out who he was actually trying to kill. Gerard’s mother was a lovely lady who couldn’t believe her son had committed such heinous crimes. She had short brown hair and hazel eyes. And there didn’t seem to be any past girlfriends who fit the description. Gerard wasn’t talking, so it was possible they might never understand his predilections. Tony didn’t care. He just wanted Gerard locked away forever.

Gibbons nodded at Kate again. She clasped her hands together for a moment and looked away. Gibbons moved closer to her and effectively blocked Tony from her line of sight. The silence from the stand told Tony Kate had noticed. Would she let Gibbons know he needed to move? Or was the prosecutor so focused on her answers he’d forgotten her request to keep Tony in her field of vision?

He was just about to get up and move to another location when suddenly Gibbons stepped back a few feet and glanced back at Tony. Obviously he'd realized his faux pas. Tony frowned at him.

"Could you tell us what happened next?" Gibbons said quickly, trying to reestablish Kate's concentration.

Kate met Tony's gaze once again. The relief on her face was evident. "Yes. Suddenly the door burst open. There was a man with my sister. He had one arm around her neck and he held a knife up to her throat with his other hand."

"Did this man say anything to you?"

She nodded and then realized her mistake. "Yes. He told me to back up or he'd kill Kelly."

"And what did you do?"

"I moved away, into the living room." She blinked several times. "I . . . I wanted to run out the front door and get help, but I was afraid. Afraid he'd hurt Kelly. Maybe if I had . . ."

"That's okay, Miss O'Brien. Let's stay focused on the facts, okay?"

Tony tensed a bit. Gibbons's response seemed harsh. As soon as the thought came, he dismissed it. Gibbons's job was to keep Kate's testimony centered around the facts that would send Gerard to his justified reward. He couldn't take a chance on coddling Kate right now. If he did, she might fall apart—and his case with her.

"I . . . I'm sorry." She clasped her hands together again and clearly fought to gain control of her emotions while Gibbons waited for her. "He told us to sit down on the couch," she said finally. "I sat down first, and then he pushed Kelly next to me."

“Did you say anything to him?”

“Yes. I told him he could take anything he wanted. Our computers, our TV, jewelry . . . I even told him about the extra cash we had hidden in the bedroom.”

“You thought he was there to rob you?”

Again she started to nod before she caught herself. “Yes. There had been quite a few robberies in the neighborhood. I just assumed that’s what he wanted.”

“And when did you realize he was there for . . . something much different?”

Kate’s eyes widened and she gulped. When she opened her mouth, nothing came out. Tony smiled at her and nodded again. He felt so helpless. He wanted to get out of his chair and wring Gerard’s neck. Put an end to this. After a few seconds, he noticed a slight dip of her chin.

“He . . . he started singing. Softly.”

“And what did he sing?”

“I didn’t know what it was then. I found out later it was a song from the eighties. ‘Blue-Eyed Angel.’”

Even though he’d tried to force that stupid song out of his mind, the words ran through his thoughts as if they had a life of their own. *She has a heart as cold as ice. Frozen kisses that take my breath away. Blue-Eyed Angel who sees into my soul and somehow makes me whole.* It hadn’t been popular when it was released, but now that the song had become part of the Blue-Eyed Killer’s repertoire, the stupid thing was played nonstop on television and radio. The group that had released it, Brain Dead Zombies, had soared to fame. Their notoriety wasn’t based on their talent—just on a bloodthirsty murderer’s bad taste in music.

“Then what did he do?”

Tony brought his attention back to Kate, aware that his mind had wandered for a moment. Hopefully, she hadn't noticed. She didn't seem to. Her large blue eyes still sought his. Although he kept his gaze steady, the account of the terrible acts that had left Kelly dead and Kate barely clinging to life were too awful even for him. Even though he was only twenty-seven, his stint in law enforcement had already forced him to see things no human being should ever see.

Kate took a deep, shuddering breath and bravely repeated the words she'd rehearsed so many times. Her tone was almost robot-like, but Tony knew it was the only way she could get through it.

The entire courtroom was silent as the words dropped like toxic bombs, fouling the air and the atmosphere around them. Several people in the gallery got up and left. Quiet sobbing came from different parts of the room. Tony glanced over at Kate's aunt, but Miriam had her usual stoic expression firmly in place. Kelly and Kate were only six years old when their parents died in a motorcycle accident. Miriam was the kind of person who took her responsibilities seriously, and she'd taken in the twins. Unfortunately, she wasn't really the motherly type. She'd done an admirable job of raising her nieces, and she had great affection for them, but there was no deep love between her and Kate. Kate was pretty much on her own without Kelly.

Finally, Kate stopped talking. Even the defense attorney looked stunned. After a few seconds, Gibbons walked over to the side of the courtroom, next to a sour-faced guard who glared at him.

“Miss O’Brien,” he said, his voice smooth and controlled, “is the man who attacked you . . . who killed your sister . . . in this courtroom?”

“Yes. Yes, he is,” Kate said.

“Will you please point him out?”

This was it. The moment of truth. Tony nodded at Kate as her eyes bored into his. Then she turned her head to focus on the sorry excuse for a human being who had torn her life to shreds. Tony waited for the words he knew were coming. But instead of Kate pointing at Gerard to seal his fate, something happened that momentarily froze Tony to his seat.

Without warning, the prison guard, who day in and day out had escorted Gerard to the courtroom, pulled out his gun and shot Gibbons. Then he approached Kate with a crazed look on his face. Kate leapt up and put her hands out in front of her, as if somehow she had the ability to stop bullets.

Tony’s momentary shock disappeared as his training kicked in. He pulled his weapon and ran toward the front of the courtroom. The guard was yelling something about retribution, but Tony didn’t pay any attention to his words. His eyes were glued to the man’s trigger finger. There was one slight movement, but it was the last voluntary action the guard’s body ever made. Tony’s bullet struck the guard’s temple, killing him instantly. As a horror-struck courtroom began to come back to life, people pulled themselves up off the floor, many of them running for the doors. Tony hurried over to Kate. She stepped out of the witness box and threw her arms around him, her body shaking and her voice a whisper.

“I don’t understand,” she said. “I don’t understand.”

But when Tony turned around and looked at Alan Gerard,



he understood. He understood perfectly. Gerard stared back at him, his eyes narrowed and his mouth twisted into a half smile. Even though he was under arrest, kept in a cage, Gerard had just taken two more lives—and tried to complete his deadly plans for Kate.