

MEN OF VALOR · 3

# TANGLED WEBS

A NOVEL

# IRENE HANNON



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Irene Hannon, *Tangled Webs*  
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To my father, James Hannon—  
the most unselfish man I've ever met.

As I conclude my Men of Valor series,  
thank you for reminding me by example  
that valor isn't found only in grand, sweeping gestures,  
but in quietly doing—day after day, with  
kindness, grace, humility, and love—  
what needs to be done.

You will always be my hero.



# Prologue

It was a terrible night to die.

Father Daniel Pruitt cringed as another boom of thunder shook the ground beneath his older-model Taurus. This weather wasn't fit for man nor beast.

Priests, however—different story. Being available 24/7, no matter the whims of Mother Nature, was part of the job description. That's why the archdiocese paid him the big bucks. Right.

Setting his brake, he peered through the pelting rain toward the hospital. In better days, Joe Larson would have offered one of his quiet smiles at that wry joke. He knew, as did all the parishioners at St. Michael's, that priesthood was a vocation, not a job, for their pastor. That Father Pruitt considered it a sacred privilege to be there for his flock during life's biggest transitions.

And death was a huge transition.

Especially when the person dying was alone—except for God.

Father Pruitt gauged the distance from the car to the front door of Faith Regional and sized up the black umbrella on the

seat beside him. The folding model was better suited to fending off April showers than April monsoons.

No way around it—he was going to be uncomfortably damp for hours.

With a resigned sigh, he tucked his book of prayers inside the inner pocket of his raincoat. Positioned the umbrella. Opened the door.

His pants legs were soaked before his feet hit the ground.

Ducking his head—and keeping a firm grip on the umbrella as the blustery wind tried to wrench it from his grasp—he jogged toward the entrance as fast as his sixty-five-year-old arthritic knees allowed.

The door whooshed open as he approached, and he scurried inside, moving from darkness to the perennial day of the rarefied hospital world.

At this late hour, the reception desk was deserted, all the volunteers long gone and in bed—the very place he’d been until the urgent call came in sixty minutes ago.

And based on what the nurse had said, there would be no more sleep for him this night.

He continued to the bank of elevators. One opened the instant he pressed the up button, and ten seconds later the doors parted on Joe’s floor.

A woman at the nurses’ station looked up as he approached. Holly, according to the ID pinned to her scrub top. The nurse who’d summoned him.

“Father Pruitt?”

“Yes.” He halted across the counter from her, his sodden umbrella shedding drops of water on the floor.

“Sorry to make you come out on such an awful night, but after Mr. Larson took a sudden turn for the worse, he insisted. In fact, he became quite agitated about it. Since he’s left directions for no mechanical ventilation and it’s hard to predict timing

with end-stage COPD, I thought it best to call you. I hope you didn't have a long drive."

"Twenty-five miles."

She winced. "Too long on a night like this."

True. Motoring through the Nebraska cornfields from Linden to Norfolk was pleasant enough on a sunny day, but the trek across dark countryside while battling wind and rain had seemed endless.

The nurse pulled out her cell, checked the window, and exhaled. "It's going to be one of those nights. Thunder has a way of unsettling patients." Finger hovering over the talk button, she nodded down the hall. "Last door on the right. Mr. Larson asked us to hold off on morphine until after he spoke with you, so just press the call button once you're finished."

"Thanks. I will."

She was already talking on her cell, heading the opposite direction from Joe's room.

Trying to ignore the wet fabric clinging to his legs, Father Pruitt made his way down the corridor. Most of the rooms he passed were dark; Joe's was dimly lit. Hand on the knob, he paused for a moment of prayer, then entered and closed the door behind him.

As he approached the bed, his rubber-soled shoes silent on the floor, Joe didn't stir. Hard to believe this gaunt figure was the same man he'd visited here three days ago, when they'd both assumed his lung infection would follow previous patterns and clear up.

But it didn't take a medical professional to know there would be no reprieve this time. Above the nasal cannula delivering oxygen to lungs that had finally succumbed to the man's sole vice—chain-smoking—Joe's cheeks were sunken and shriveled. His disease had followed the classic pattern: shortness of breath, fatigue, weight loss, infections, heart failure . . . and now his

uneven respiration completed the pattern, affirming the truth of the nurse's comment.

The end was, indeed, near.

Father Pruitt hung his coat over a chair and moved beside the bed.

"Joe."

No response.

Perhaps his faithful parishioner hadn't been able to hang on to consciousness after all.

Vision misting, he touched the dying man's hand. During the dozen years he'd tended parishes in three small towns that dotted the cornfield-quilted land, he'd never met a kinder, more humble person. Joe might not have much in a material sense to show for a lifetime of labor in the corn processing facility, but he'd always given generously to his church and to those in need. And along the way, he'd also become a trusted friend.

Saying good-bye wouldn't be easy.

All of a sudden, Joe's eyelids flickered open. "Father." The greeting was no more than a wisp of air.

Father Pruitt grasped the gnarled fingers that had seen more than their share of hard work over the past seventy-two years. "I'm here, Joe."

"I . . . need you . . . to do . . . a favor . . . for me." Each gasping word was a struggle, pain contorting the man's features.

"Anything."

"After I'm . . . gone . . . letter in my . . . nightstand . . . at home . . . will you . . . mail it?" He tightened his grip, his gaze intent.

"Of course."

An odd request, though. Joe had lived alone in his tiny, two-bedroom bungalow for decades—and despite their friendship, he'd never mentioned relatives or talked about anyone with whom he might have corresponded.

"Need to . . . confess something."

“You did that on my last visit, Joe. Three days ago.”

“There’s . . . more.”

More?

What possible transgression could he have committed while flat on his back in a hospital bed?

“I’m sure you and God are on solid ground, my friend.”

“No.” He clenched his fingers. “Need . . . to confess.”

“All right.” If talking about some minor sin eased his mind, there was no harm in repeating the ritual. Gently Father Pruitt retracted his hand, lowered himself into a bedside chair. “Whenever you’re ready.”

The room fell silent save for the other man’s labored breathing, and at last he lifted his chin. Joe was watching him, eyes filmed with moisture.

“This is . . . bad . . . Father.” Anguish darkened his blue irises.

Father Pruitt touched the fingers Joe had clamped around the edge of the sheet. “When we approach God with a contrite and sincere heart, no sin is too great to be forgiven. And both I and God have heard it all. Nothing you can say will shock either of us.”

But as it turned out, that was a lie.

Because as Joe recited his confession in a halting, thready voice . . . as the meaning of the letter the dying man had asked him to mail became clear . . . Father Pruitt wasn’t just shocked.

He was stunned.

Somehow he managed to complete the rite. But as he spoke the final prayer, as Joe drifted out of consciousness for the last time, his mind was spinning.

How could you know a man for years and never suspect he carried such a devastating secret?

He pondered that through the long hours of darkness as he kept vigil beside the bed—and was still pondering it as faint



lines of pink streaked the horizon and Joe's breathing slowed. Stopped.

For several minutes, he remained seated . . . in case Joe's spirit hadn't yet departed the earthly realm.

But at last, filling his own lungs with air, Father Pruitt pulled himself to his feet and rested his hand once more on Joe's motionless fingers. Studied the kindly face, now at rest, all lines of pain erased. Bowed his head and uttered one final prayer.

“May God have mercy on your soul.”

**M**aybe his brothers were right.

Maybe this was a mistake.

Gripping his mug of coffee, Finn McGregor pushed through the door of the cabin, into middle-of-the-night darkness. The April air was chilly, but the brush of coolness against his clammy skin eased his jitters a tad.

Funny how the notion of spending four quiet weeks in a secluded cabin had seemed inspired ten days ago but now felt so wrong.

Just as Mac and Lance had predicted.

He huffed out a breath. Okay . . . staying in St. Louis until he'd fully wrestled his demons into submission might have been smarter—except he had a decision to make, and trying to do that with his two overprotective big brothers in hover mode had been impossible.

Melting into the shadows of the rustic porch, he took a sip of the strong brew and did a sweep of woods unbrightened by even a sliver of moon. The blackness was absolute . . . yet it didn't raise his anxiety level one iota. Darkness had often been

his friend. A significant tactical advantage in certain circumstances, in fact. Like the night his unit . . .

*Hoo. Hoo.*

His hand jerked, and hot coffee sloshed over the rim of the mug, burning his fingers.

Shaking off the liquid, he gritted his teeth.

Spooked by an owl.

How dumb was that?

Good thing Mac and Lance weren't here. He could picture them, arms folded in that intimidating pose all the McGregor men had mastered, reminding him that hanging out alone in the middle of nowhere might not be the best game plan at this stage of his recovery.

Too bad.

He was here now, and he wasn't going back—not yet, anyway. Not after two nights. His McGregor ego would never let him admit defeat this fast.

However . . . if the quiet and solitude were still too oppressive in a few days, he might make the hour-and-a-half drive back to St. Louis. Despite its remote feel, this part of the Mark Twain National Forest wasn't all that far from the bright lights of the big city he'd called home for the past nine months.

More than likely, though, he just needed a few days to acclimate. The stack of books he'd brought with him should keep him occupied. And he might chop some wood with that ax he'd found in the shed. Nothing beat manual labor for exorcising restless energy.

He lifted the mug and took a swig. Once he settled in, adjusted to the slower pace, and—

“AAAAHHHHH!”

Finn choked on the coffee as a woman's distant scream ripped through the night.

What the . . . ?!

Still sputtering, he pushed off from the wall, adrenaline surging, every muscle taut.

Five seconds passed.

Ten.

Fifteen.

The owl hooted again.

Twenty.

Yards from where he stood, the underbrush rustled—a foraging rodent or raccoon, no doubt. Nothing sinister.

Thirty seconds.

The forest remained quiet.

Throttling his paranoia, he exhaled and forced his brain to shift into analytical mode.

Fact one: The sound had been distant, and somewhat indistinct.

Fact two: His cabin was surrounded by a national forest more populated by deer than people. As far as he could tell—based on the single narrow gravel lane off the main drag he’d passed before turning onto his own access road—he had only one relatively close human neighbor.

Fact three: This was rural Missouri, not downtown St. Louis or some crime-ridden—

“AAAAHHHH!”

His hand jerked again, sloshing more coffee.

It *was* a woman’s scream. He was *not* being paranoid. This was *not* a tray dropping in the base cafeteria that just *sounded* like an explosion.

This was the real deal.

Another scream propelled him into action. Moving on autopilot, he grabbed his compact Beretta, Ka-Bar knife, and a flashlight from the cabin, left behind the cell phone that didn’t work around here anyway, and raced through the woods, every ounce of his dormant training kicking back in.

Several more terrified screams kept his direction true as he zig-zagged through trees in early leaf-out stage, the winter-scoured forest floor hosting little undergrowth that would impede his progress.

When he at last emerged into a clearing, breathing harder than he should be after a quarter-mile run, a large, meandering lake stretched before him.

A scream to his right directed his attention to a small cabin perched on a slight rise above the water, a hundred yards away.

Ignoring the protests of his left leg, he sprinted toward the log structure, where light shone from behind curtains in several windows. Not helpful. The element of surprise worked best if you entered in an optimal spot. If he could determine the woman's location . . .

As if on cue, another scream pierced the air.

She was in the back of the cabin, left side.

Beretta in hand, he raced toward the log structure, staying in the shadows at the edge of the woods. Too bad he didn't have his trusty M4—but that kind of equipment wasn't part of his standard issue anymore. Nor would it be again. He might be unclear about a lot of stuff, but that much he knew.

Still, a Beretta could be as deadly as an assault rifle in a shootout, if it came to that.

He hoped it didn't. He wasn't up for a life-and-death battle . . . physically or emotionally.

But that was a moot point.

Something bad was going down in this cabin, and ducking out when things got dicey wasn't part of the McGregor DNA.

Bending low, he dashed from the cover of the woods to the structure. Flattening his back against the rough-hewn logs, he eased around the corner, to the rear wall.

All clear.

He crouched lower and edged close to the dim light shining

from the window of the room he'd pinpointed. It was open halfway—no wonder the scream had carried in the quiet country air. But the shade was pulled all the way down, and a screen stood between it and him.

Might there be a window open somewhere else that would allow less obvious access?

Circling back to the front of the cabin, he checked every window.

Bingo.

One was cracked.

He pulled his knife out of its sheath, dispensed with the screen, and worked the sash up. A slight tip of the shade revealed that the space on the other side was clear, and he slipped inside—just as another high-pitched scream ricocheted through the house.

Sheathing the blade, he flexed his fingers on the Beretta and slipped noiselessly through the cabin, ticking through the factors in his favor as he psyched himself up for a confrontation that was liable to become violent.

The element of surprise was on his side.

He was armed.

He'd led dozens of successful assault and rescue missions.

No matter what he found on the other side of the door where the woman was being held, he could handle the situation. *Would* handle it.

Whatever it took.

Finn stopped outside the door. Angled sideways. Smashed his heel below the lock.

The door flew back.

Another scream sliced through the air as he tucked himself beside the frame, pistol in the ready position. He ducked down, muscles coiled as he prepared to spring into action, and looked around the edge.

Froze.

A thirtyish woman with tousled light brown hair was sitting bolt upright in bed, clutching a blanket against her, blinking as if she'd been abruptly awakened from a peaceful slumber and was trying to figure out what was going on.

There was no one else in the room.

She squinted at him, and despite the dim light he knew the instant full consciousness returned. Stark terror widened her eyes, and she shot to her feet, grabbed a cell phone off her nightstand, and dashed for the door in the corner. It banged behind her. A moment later, the lock slammed into place.

*Regroup, McGregor.*

Sucking in a lungful of air, Finn gave the room a fast sweep. The covers were jumbled. The pillow was scrunched up. A glass of water and a bottle of aspirin rested on the nightstand.

Conclusion?

There was no emergency here. This woman had simply been having a nightmare.

To make matters worse, he'd broken into her house wielding a gun, exacerbating whatever trauma she was already dealing with.

Stomach clenching, he closed his eyes.

What a colossal mess-up.

And now she was barricaded in the bathroom, calling the cops. Or trying to.

If he was lucky, her cell would be as useless as his was out here.

But whether she got through or not, he had some serious explaining to do.

He holstered his pistol and crossed to the bolted door. "Ma'am?"

No response.

Of course not. She thought he was some thug, up to no good.

Would telling her the simple, honest truth convince her otherwise?

Unlikely—but that was the only strategy that came to mind.

“Ma’am? I’m sorry about frightening you. I’m actually your neighbor, Finn McGregor. I heard screams coming from your cabin and thought you might need help, but it appears you were just having a bad dream. Mark Busch, who owns the adjacent property, can confirm my identity if you want to contact him. In the meantime, I’ll take the screen I destroyed getting in, have it fixed in town, and return it tomorrow. I’ll also repair your bedroom door. I’m leaving now—but I’ll come around back first to let you verify I’ve left the house. Again . . . I apologize.”

Beating a hasty retreat, he escaped through the window, unclipping the slashed screen first. Man, he’d done a number on it. If there wasn’t a hardware store in Beaumont, he’d have to drive into Potosi to get it fixed.

At least tomorrow was Monday, and the local businesses should be open bright and early.

He circled the cabin, screen in hand, and stopped a few feet away from the bathroom window in the back. She hadn’t flipped on the light. Smart. Staying in the dark would allow her to crack the shade and see the exterior without being seen.

“Ma’am? I’m outside now.” He set the screen on the ground, pulled the flashlight out of his back pocket, and shined the light on his face, making it easy for her to identify him. That should help calm her.

Or would it?

He hadn’t shaved in two days, and while the stubbled bad-boy look might be popular in Hollywood, it could have a negative connotation in this situation. In real life, true bad boys often sported this look too.

He flicked off the light.



“Again, it’s Finn McGregor. I’ll return your repaired screen tomorrow.”

With that, he turned away from the window and trudged back toward his cabin—berating himself every step of the way.

*Way to go, buddy. Freak out a woman who’s already on edge—and who isn’t going to sleep another wink tonight, thanks to you.*

But what else could he have done? She *had* been screaming. And if she *had* been in trouble, politely knocking on the door and alerting the perpetrator to his presence would have been stupid.

He’d explain that to her tomorrow when he returned her screen—unless she’d locked herself in the house . . . or summoned reinforcements . . . or hightailed it out of here.

He pushed past a cedar tree, the distinctive scent reminding him of the old chest his mom had inherited from her grandmother. She’d always said the treasured heirloom was a reminder of the importance of family—a value she’d passed on to her three sons. The McGregors always stood shoulder to shoulder in times of trauma or trouble.

The woman in that cabin was obviously in the midst of some kind of trauma too—yet she appeared to be alone.

Had she left a caring family behind, as he had—or did she lack a support system?

And what sort of demons would produce such anguished screams?

He increased his pace as the wind picked up, the chilled air sending a shiver rippling through him.

Neither of those questions would be answered tonight.

But perhaps on his return visit tomorrow, in the safety of daylight and after another sincere apology, he might get a few clues about the background of his young, attractive—and traumatized—neighbor.

Assuming she was still around.

Dana Lewis lifted her shaking hand and checked her cell again.

No signal.

Raking her fingers through her tangled hair, she huddled on the toilet seat lid. What did she expect? In the four weeks she'd been here, how often had she managed to get a signal in the cabin? Never. Just on the dock down by the lake.

No way was she venturing out there tonight, though. The guy who'd burst into the cabin could be lurking in the shadows, waiting to pounce.

*Not likely, Dana. He was in your bedroom. If he'd wanted to get to you, he could have.*

Yes . . . that was true. Plus, he'd made a point of letting her see his face. The light he'd flashed on hadn't illuminated it long, and the shadows had distorted his features, but there'd been no missing the dark auburn hair and wide, muscular shoulders.

Her pulse slowed as the left side of her brain continued to process the situation. He'd told her his name too. And Mark Busch did own the adjacent property. First senior, now junior. A quick call to him would confirm the man's identity.

As for the excuse the intruder had offered for breaking in—it was credible. The nightmares plagued her less often now, but they cropped up on occasion . . . and the one tonight had been bad. It was very possible she'd screamed. Hadn't her big-city neighbors told her they'd heard her cry out on several occasions, despite the soundproofing in the high-rise walls?

But given her remote location, who'd have guessed someone out here would not only hear her but respond?

Clutching her dead phone, she stood and sidled up to the window. A quick crack of the shade confirmed the man was gone.

And unless she wanted to cower in the bathroom all night, she needed to open the door and do a walk-through of the house.

Gathering her courage, she slid the bolt back and pushed the door open.

The room was just as she'd left it—bedclothes disheveled, dim light burning, purse untouched on the chair beside the door. She moved to the window and shut it, flipping the lock.

Then she crossed to the hall door that was hanging on one hinge. Peeked out.

The corridor was deserted.

There was no one in the rest of the house, either. When she came to the screenless window in the living room, she closed and locked it too.

She was as safe as she could be for the rest of the night.

Rotating her stiff shoulders, she returned to the kitchen and peered at the tacky fish-shaped clock that had hung on the wall for as long as she could remember. Two-forty-nine.

Daylight was more than three sleepless hours away.

But between the nightmare and her unexpected visitor, there would be no more slumber for her this night.

Stifling a yawn, she filled a mug with water, added a bag of English breakfast tea, and slid it into the microwave. Might as well get some work done if she was going to be up anyway. She could always take a nap tomorrow if her short night caught up with her.

While she waited for the water to heat, she booted up her laptop, flipped on the adjacent monitor, and padded back down the hall in search of her slippers and the oversized cardigan sweater Pops had always worn.

She found both at the foot of her bed. After shoving her feet into the slippers, she pushed her arms through the rolled-up sleeves of the sweater, fingering a spot that was beginning to unravel.

Kind of like her life of late.

Wrapping her arms around herself, she did a slow pivot in the room, with its knotty pine paneling, handmade log bed crafted from trees grown on this property, and framed serenity prayer attributed to Francis of Assisi that sat on the doily-bedecked pine dresser. At least here, in her refuge, life felt more stable.

Or it had until tonight.

Spirits drooping, she returned to the kitchen as the microwave emitted a high-pitched summons. A soothing cup of hot tea was the perfect antidote to whatever ailed you. That and a warm hug. Or so Mags and Pops used to tell her.

She retrieved the mug from the turntable, dunking the tea bag as she wandered toward her computer. The tea, she had. Warm hugs? In short supply.

Instead of the discouragement that usually accompanied such melancholy thoughts, however, an image of auburn hair and broad shoulders zipped across her mind.

Dana stopped in front of the laptop, frowning. How bizarre was that? She'd seen the man for less than ten seconds and could call up nothing more than a vague impression of him. Plus, he'd broken into her house. With a gun.

Taking a sip of tea, she lowered herself into the chair, for once barely noticing the baby giraffe in her screensaver, neck straining to reach a leafy branch just out of grasp.

The man hadn't seemed to be a criminal, however. He'd had a logical explanation for his appearance, offered a heartfelt apology, and left fast once he realized his mistake. Plus, he had a nice voice. Deep and resonant and . . . caring. It was the voice of someone who'd come to help, not hurt.

In fact, if everything the man told her was true, his behavior tonight was downright heroic. He'd been willing to put himself in danger to rescue her.

Dana opened the document she'd been working on earlier and scrolled through to where she'd left off. This author was talented—but her work needed a lot of polishing. The perfect project to occupy her mind until dawn chased away the darkness.

Yet as she dived into the task, she found herself thinking ahead to tomorrow—and looking forward to Finn McGregor's return visit.

Which was silly.

The man was a stranger to her. He might be her temporary neighbor, living within shouting—or screaming—distance, but once he returned her repaired window screen, there would be no reason for their paths to intersect.

Besides, for all she knew, he had a wife and children staying with him at Mark's place. That would put the kibosh on any dreamy-eyed fantasies.

Rolling her eyes, she picked up her glasses, slid them on, and leaned toward the screen. She'd been editing too many romances recently—like this one. Maybe she should take on a literary novel next. No need to worry about optimistic, happy endings with those.

Yet the whole notion of heroes and heroines overcoming great odds to find a future together was a lot more uplifting.

Even if it didn't often happen in real life.