



# IRENE HANNON

THREE-TIME RITA AWARD WINNER

## INTO THE FIRE

UNDAUNTED COURAGE

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IRENE  
HANNON



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*To Tom Becker,  
FBI veteran and retired police chief,  
who has been my premier law enforcement source  
since my first suspense novel was published in 2009.*

*With his dual background at both the national and local levels,  
he brings a wealth of expertise and experience to the task—  
and his detailed responses to my many questions  
have put the final polish of authenticity on countless books.*

*Thank you, Tom, for your generous and gracious assistance.*

*I will be forever grateful.*

# PROLOGUE

*FIRE WAS CLEANSING. SACRIFICIAL, ALMOST.*

And soon . . . very soon . . . the flames would come.

But first, my souvenir.

I crossed to the dresser. Flipped up the lid on the jewelry box. Poked around with my latex-covered finger.

Frowned.

Where was the ring?

It had to be here. There was no way she'd let that go. Not after all she'd done to get it.

Maybe it was tucked in one of the small drawers underneath the main display area.

One by one, I pulled them out.

Ah. There it was.

I picked up the heavy ring, weighed it in my hand, and turned back to the bed.

She was still watching me, eyes wide, waves of fear rolling off her.

So satisfying.

Lips flexing, I wandered back to the bed, leaned over, and ran a finger down the side of her face.

She flinched and averted her head, whimpering behind the duct tape I'd slapped over her mouth.

Also satisfying.

I pinched her cheek for good measure. Hard.

A tear spilled past her lower lashes, and she gave me a pleading look.

Didn't work.

In fact . . .

Folding my arms, I considered her. The fire would erase evidence of surface damage, including any bruises from our tussle when I'd pinned her down to mash the chloroform-soaked rag against her face. She'd put up quite a struggle during the five minutes it took for the drug to render her unconscious, but I was bigger and much, much stronger than she was. The fire would also destroy the ligature marks from the zip ties I'd used to bind her hands and feet while she was out—along with any other cuts or contusions I might choose to inflict now.

But I wasn't a mean person.

I just wanted justice.

Leaning close again, I patted her arm. "This will be over soon."

My reassurance didn't seem to comfort her.

Nevertheless, it was true. I'd scoped out her place, studied her habits. Knew she spent every Tuesday night alone in her house after she returned from her counseling session. Now that she was a widow, her social life was in the toilet. I didn't have to rush this job.

Yet there was no reason to linger.

I picked up the second syringe I'd retrieved from her fridge and swiveled back toward the bed.

Her eyes got even bigger, and a mewling sound vibrated deep in her throat. She attempted to wriggle away, but her efforts were pathetic. The first insulin injection had already kicked in. She was sweating, and her squinting and rapid blinking suggested her vision could be blurring.

The next dose ought to give her a whopping case of hypoglycemia.

Such a shame.

Yet a distraught, grieving, diabetic widow could make mistakes with medication—and judgment. Like mixing up her fast-acting and basal insulin, and forgetting she'd already given herself one injection.

Especially after downing two prescription sleeping pills. Even if she'd needed a bit of convincing to swallow them.

My concealed carry permit had proven to be quite useful. Again.

She began to writhe with more energy, and I straddled her legs. Yanked up the bottom of her tank top. Clamped one hand against her shoulder to hold her in place as I plunged the syringe into her abdomen and injected the insulin. Pulled out the needle.

As she whimpered again, I stood and transferred the waste can from the other side of the bed to the front of the skirted nightstand, close to where she lay. Then I plucked a tissue from the box on the small table. Wadded it into a ball. Dropped it into the half-full can. Repeated the process over and over.

The tissues would provide excellent kindling.

A few other flammable items wouldn't hurt, though. Like the magazines on the dresser.

I gathered them up, reading the titles as I returned to the bed. Snorted. Every one was crammed with self-help psychobabble. However, they did provide more evidence she wasn't herself, which was useful.

After dropping three of them into the waste can, I added more tissues. Scattered the rest of the magazines on the bed.

Now for the accelerant.

I bent and rooted through my gym bag. Pulled out a bottle of hand sanitizer, opened it, and saturated the paper in the

waste can, as well as the edge of the comforter. When the bottle was half empty, I tossed it in the trash, tucked the bottom of the table skirt into the can, and checked on Pookie.

What a gag-worthy, insipid name.

Her eyelids had drifted closed, and she'd stopped thrashing.

It was possible she was already unconscious.

After I finished the setup, I'd verify that.

I moved to the window beside the bed, reached behind the blinds, flipped the lock, and raised the sash several inches. Nothing would seem amiss about an open window, not with the pleasant spring temperatures St. Louis had enjoyed over the past few days. After being confined during the endless, cold winter, everyone liked fresh air.

So did fire.

It thrived on oxygen.

I secured the long, filmy curtain to the table drape with liquid stitch. While the breeze from the open window should be sufficient to blow it into the flames—and that would be the obvious conclusion later—why take chances?

Next, I detoured to the foyer to get the partially unwrapped gift that had been my entrée tonight.

Back in the bedroom, I pulled the scented pillar candle from the festive paper, set it on the bedside table, and flicked a lighter against the wick. Within a few seconds, the scent of orange blossoms began to waft through the room.

Very pleasant.

I ought to get one of these for my own house.

Wadding up the wrapping paper, I angled toward the bed and assessed Pookie.

She was limp and pale, her breathing shallow but even. Hard to fake if you were stressed.

But just to confirm she'd slipped into a coma, I unhooked the safety pin brought for this very purpose from my shirt. Pricked her forehead.

No response.

I jabbed the point into her lower lip.

Nothing.

She was out of it.

It was safe to remove the ties and duct tape.

After tossing the gift wrap into the trash, I quickly dispensed with the restraints.

Now to finish up and get out.

I zipped the top of my gym bag, picked it up, and set the candle, on its side, in the waste can.

For a moment, the flame flickered. Then the paper caught fire as the hand sanitizer did its job. I also held the lighter to the edge of the comforter until flames began to lick along the saturation line.

Before I was finished with that task, the table drape was ablaze.

Excellent.

Everything would progress fast now, thanks to the open window, the wood and upholstered furniture, and the other combustibles in this room. But on my way out, I stopped to open the door of the double closet to help accelerate the carnage. Fabric also burned well.

Aww. She'd kept all her husband's clothes.

How sweet.

But he didn't need them. And soon, she wouldn't need hers, either.

I exited the bedroom, closed the door, jogged down the hall, and slipped out the back door, into the darkness.

No one had seen me come. No one would see me go.

Gym bag gripped in my hand, I edged along the shadows at the back of the house and peeked around the corner.

The street was deserted.

Not surprising. Most people didn't hang around outside after dark in late April. Even on balmy days, temperatures

tended to dip once the sun set. And this was a quiet neighborhood, anyway, based on the drive-throughs I'd done in preparation for tonight.

Besides, it would be difficult to spot smoke seeping from the house in the darkness, should anyone pass by or look out the window of an adjacent home.

And once the flames were visible, it would be too late.

At the corner of the property, I paused to give the small contemporary structure a final once-over. Nothing appeared to be amiss—yet. The bedroom was in the back, overlooking the shrub-enclosed yard. No one would be able to see the glow behind the blinds.

The location of the room couldn't have been better.

I started forward again, heading toward my car in the parking lot of the neighborhood quick shop less than three short blocks away.

It was a shame I couldn't hang around to enjoy the show, though. There was nothing like a fire to juice a person's adrenaline.

But successfully pulling off a risky job produced its own high.

At the street corner, I glanced back.

Still no external sign of the blaze, but at this point it would be raging inside the bedroom. It wasn't necessary to wait for visible confirmation of the inferno.

I knew how to set fires.

Smiling, I turned my back on the house and picked up my pace. This one had gone like clockwork, as had the others. It was time to enjoy the moment. Bask in the exhilaration.

And think about the final release to come, when the purge would be complete.

# ONE

## FIVE MONTHS LATER

**ARSON INVESTIGATORS WEREN'T SUPPOSED** to die in fires.

Bri Tucker shoved her hands into the pockets of her jacket and clenched her fists, the acrid smell of smoke prickling her nose. Up and down the quiet suburban St. Louis cul-de-sac of modest homes, flashing lights from emergency vehicles pierced the darkness as small clusters of neighbors watched the roaring flames consume Les Kavanaugh's house.

All at once, a dormer window on the second floor exploded. Moments later, a portion of the roof shuddered . . . buckled . . . and collapsed in a cascade of fiery sparks that rose like a swarm of demon hornets toward the inky sky.

Collectively, the onlookers recoiled.

From her spot in the shadows, Bri appraised them. All part of her job as the St. Louis Regional Bomb and Arson Unit investigator assigned to this fire. Bystanders could help her put the pieces together once the flames were extinguished. Determine if the fire was accidental or intentional.

Under any other circumstances, her money would be on the former. Ninety-five percent of residential fires were due to innocent causes.

But most didn't take place at the home of an experienced arson investigator who knew all the fire hazards and would have taken pains to eliminate them.

So if this blaze turned out to be deliberate, the spectators could be key.

Because arsonists liked to stick around and enjoy the show.

No one in the immediate vicinity raised any suspicions, however. Most were older couples, huddled close together, watching in shock as the tragedy unfolded. The few lone people were also more advanced in age, one in a bathrobe, another watching from a front porch and using a walker for support.

If this was arson, and if the guilty party was close by, they were either an atypical suspect or hiding in the shadows.

“How long have you been here?”

At the question, Bri swiveled to her right. Deep creases lined Sergeant Frank Connor’s forehead.

“A few minutes. I didn’t expect to see you tonight.” Then again, until his retirement, Les had been a fixture in the Bomb and Arson Unit. If ever her boss would show up at a fire scene, this would be the one.

“Les and I go way back. We may have clashed on occasion, but I had tremendous respect for his skills. Everyone did.”

“So I heard.” A gust of unseasonably cool September wind whipped past, and she shivered despite the heat emanating from the blazing house.

“You talked to anybody yet?”

“No bystanders, but I touched based with the captain.” She motioned toward one of the fire trucks.

“He’s next on my list. Is there any news about Les? Was he home?”

Sarge didn’t know.

Bri took a breath. Gave a slow nod. “Yes. They found him in the back of the house. Too late to save.”

A muscle tightened in Sarge’s cheek as he scanned the burning structure, and his voice hardened. “I want the ATF in on this one. They have resources we don’t. If it’s arson, let’s find out ASAP.”

The irony of a fire investigator dying in a fire must have set off an alert for him too.

“You think this was deliberate?”

“It’s possible. I imagine Les made a few enemies through the years. He was like a dog with a bone while he was on the trail of a suspect, and he didn’t worry about social niceties or political correctness in his quest for truth.”

“I heard that too.”

One side of Sarge’s mouth flexed. “He was a character. And he never left a stone unturned in an investigation. Pardon the second trite, but apt, cliché. Nor did he hesitate to pull in people he thought could help him put a case to bed.”

Hmm.

Bri averted her face from the fire as a billow of heat surged toward them. “He called me yesterday morning. Asked me to meet him. I was supposed to drop by tomorrow afternoon.”

The pleats on Sarge’s forehead deepened. “Why?”

“I don’t know.” But a ripple of unease snaked down her spine as she processed the coincidence. “I mean, he retired a month after I joined the unit, so I didn’t really get to know him. He was in wrap-up stage. I did assist once at a scene he was working, but it wasn’t like we hung out together. I was too busy learning the ropes and digging into the warehouse fire that landed on my desk a week into my job.”

“The one that could have been ruled accidental if you hadn’t found out a guy with a drone had been in the adjacent field the day before. The footage he had of the subject’s car was the turning point. That was a stellar launch to your career with the unit, in case I haven’t told you that.”

The unexpected praise sent a rush of warmth through her. Being the new kid on the block was never easy, and an occasional compliment eased the transition anxiety. Not that Sarge had given her many during her four-month tenure.

“I believe in being thorough, but there was also an element

of luck with that one. If the kid who gave me the drone tip hadn't shown up with his skateboard to practice kickflips in the empty parking lot while I was there, the owner could have gotten away with the insurance scam."

"Nevertheless, a slam dunk. Assuming the prosecuting attorney does his job." He squinted at the fire. "I wonder if that case could be why Les called you."

"How so?"

"He hated loose ends and puzzle pieces that didn't fit. Those kinds of cases ate at him. Whenever he had a spare minute, he pored over the files, searching for clues he might have missed." Sarge shrugged. "Could be he was impressed with your work on the warehouse fire and wanted to pass on to you a few of the cases that troubled him."

Like she wasn't busy enough already.

"He could have done that before he left."

"Unless he'd found a new clue."

She hiked up her eyebrows. "You think he was still working cases after he retired?"

"Wouldn't surprise me. Unofficially, of course."

"That seems like a stretch, even for someone as diligent as Les." She didn't try to hide her skepticism, though the man's out-of-the-blue call did raise questions.

"You didn't know him as well as I did. But it's a moot point now." He motioned toward one of the fire trucks. "I'm going to talk to the captain."

"And I'm going to make a circuit of the crowd. See if I can dig up any useful information."

"Keep me in the loop. I'll contact the ATF and have them get in touch with you." With a wave, he strode toward the truck.

While the flames arced against the night sky and the fire continued to hiss and crackle, Bri frowned at his retreating back.

Why was he siccing an ATF agent on her? Hadn't he just

commended her for solving the warehouse fire? Didn't he trust her to handle this one?

Shoot.

That wasn't exactly a confidence builder.

On the other hand, one of their own was dead. That made it personal. And she was new to the unit. Had admitted her quick resolution to the warehouse fire was due in part to luck.

Instead of grouching, maybe she ought to be grateful Sarge hadn't yanked her from this one and assigned a more seasoned investigator.

*Stop overanalyzing, Bri. Just do your job and quit trying to prove yourself. Your work will speak for itself.*

The pep talk she always gave herself when a new challenge arose replayed in her mind. It had served her well in her previous careers, and it would serve her well in her new job—even if she'd never quite managed to convince herself that an offer of help wasn't necessarily a criticism of her abilities.

That's what came from hanging with the alpha males in the McCall smokejumper unit, who hadn't been at all certain she could pull her weight.

But she'd proved herself more than capable of holding her own there, and she'd do the same in this job and on this case.

With or without the help of the ATF.

Refocusing on the scene, she gave the onlookers another survey and psyched herself up for the long night ahead. Some of the questioning could wait until tomorrow, but fresh impressions tended to yield more detail. That could be vital if a crime had been committed.

And in light of the timing of tonight's fire on the heels of Les's call, plus Sarge's speculation that the man may have unearthed a new clue on one of his vexing investigations, arson was feeling more and more like a reasonable possibility.

*Had Les been digging into old cases?*

If so, could that have made someone nervous enough to take drastic action?

Like commit a murder?

She swallowed past the taste of soot permeating her mouth. Moistened her heat-parched lips.

While that was far-fetched, it wasn't impossible. People who did bad things often went to great lengths to keep their crimes from surfacing.

Meaning this could be one of the rare residential arson fires.

And once the embers burned themselves out and the smoke wafted away, it would be her responsibility to sift through the charred remains of Les's home for clues about what had happened here tonight.

Well, hers and the ATF agent's.

A daunting task in any situation, but more so with such a high-profile death. Sarge would want updates every day.

So she'd dive in and pull out all the stops to come up with answers.

But as she withdrew her creds and approached the older couple on a lawn two doors down from the burning structure, her stomach clenched.

Because every instinct in her body said that solving this one wasn't going to be as simple as finding a skateboard-toting teen whose single, providential tip had given her a win in the early days of her new job.

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### **A HOUSE FIRE.**

Quashing a sigh, Marc Davis hung a right and eased back on the gas pedal as the morning light filtered through the maple trees lining the quiet street, their leaves showing the first faint hint of red.

What a comedown after four years on the ATF's National Response Team and the major investigations he'd overseen in the Chicago office for almost a decade.

But the transfer to St. Louis two weeks ago had been his choice, and as the low man on the totem pole, he couldn't expect to get all the plum assignments despite his experience and credentials.

So he'd suck it up and give his all to whatever jobs landed in his lap. And he'd do it with a smile. For Nan.

*"In fifty yards, turn right. Your destination will be on the right."*

He followed the instructions from his cell, but once he swung onto the street, he didn't need his phone to direct him to last night's fire. The blackened wreckage that had once been a house was like a smudged thumbprint on the cul-de-sac of small, well-tended homes. Much of the roof had caved in, and while the scorched brick walls were still standing, most of the windows had shattered.

As he stopped a few yards from the back bumper of the patrol car parked in front of the ruins, an officer got out of the vehicle and walked toward him.

Marc slid from behind the wheel and held out his creds. "I'm supposed to meet a fire investigator here at eight to do a walk-through. Brianne Tucker."

The officer skimmed the ID and inclined his head toward a dark sedan parked in the curve of the cul-de-sac. "That's hers. She's been here since first light. You'll find her in the back." He handed over the scene log.

"Thanks." Frowning, Marc signed in and ducked under the yellow police tape. If the County investigator had wanted to start earlier, why hadn't she told him that in her response to the text he'd sent her last night, after his boss handed off this assignment?

Tamping down his annoyance, he skirted the remains of the structure, cinders crunching under his sturdy boots. Until he

put on the rest of his safety gear, he'd keep his distance from the house. But first he'd make his presence known.

He rounded the corner. Paused.

A tall woman in loose coveralls and a hard hat was examining the back door. As she leaned closer, homing in on the lock, a breeze teased her long, wavy blond hair. She brushed it aside, leaving a smudge on her cheek.

When it became clear she didn't intend to straighten up anytime soon, he cleared his throat.

She jerked upright and spun toward him, posture coiled and taut. Like she expected trouble.

Curious.

"The officer out front told me you were back here." He closed the distance between them, held out his hand, and introduced himself.

She regarded his outstretched fingers, then lifted her gloved hand. "I don't think you want a fistful of soot. But it's nice to meet you, Agent Davis."

Was it? The words were cordial, but her tone was reserved. Wary.

Maybe she had jurisdictional issues. Not all local law enforcement officers welcomed an intrusion by the Feds.

Or was she just tired?

As he returned the sentiment, he studied her. Fine lines radiated from the corners of the cobalt-blue eyes behind the safety glasses, and faint shadows hung under her lower lashes.

One explanation for her weariness? She'd been here during the fire . . . and beyond.

"Make it Marc. How late did you stay last night?"

Her eyebrows arched a hair at his assumption, her gaze measured as she let a few beats pass. "Until the firefighters left and I was confident the scene was secure."

According to his boss, the fire had been called in about nine thirty. Meaning she'd had a late night.

“Prompted by diligence or suspicion?”

She shifted her weight. “Securing a scene is normal protocol.”

Not a direct answer. But if she did have suspicions, why not share them?

A question he’d have to explore over the coming hours—or days.

“Let me suit up and you can fill me in on what you’ve got so far.” As he pivoted and retraced his steps across the cinders littering the yard, his spirits ticked up a few notches.

Working a house fire might not be on his top ten list of exciting assignments, but doing it with someone who looked like Brianne Tucker—even if her welcome had been less than effusive—could add a bit of zing to his life for the few days it should take to wrap this up. The cause of most house fires, even ones with loss of life, could often be nailed down fast.

But while they were sorting out the pieces of the puzzle, why not also see what he could uncover about the woman in charge of investigating it? Concealing as the bulky protective gear was, it hadn’t been able to camouflage the caution in those vivid blue eyes. Nor had it masked her overly startled reaction to his approach. Why was she—

He stopped as he approached the front corner of the house. Peered down. Through the ashes stirred by a gust of wind, a small, bright object winked at him.

Marc dropped to the balls of his feet to examine it.

Next to the stone garden edging that had once protected a singed, wilted row of hostas, a piece of faceted glass glinted in the morning light like a diamond. He leaned closer. It wasn’t a broken bottle shard. The fragment appeared to be cut glass.

Worth preserving, after he had an evidence envelope in hand. Anything that seemed out of place deserved scrutiny.

He stood and continued toward his car, his thoughts shifting back to Brianne Tucker.

What was her story?

Purely an academic question, of course, since he had no time or inclination to socialize. Off the job, his priorities were Nan and settling in.

Yet as he unlocked the trunk of his car to collect his gear, it was impossible to ignore the faint flutter in his nerve endings. The kind he'd experienced once upon a time, in his early days with Serena.

Odd that it would rekindle in the most unromantic of settings, beside the burned-out hulk of a house, and thanks to a stranger who hadn't been any too happy to see him.

He shoved his legs into the dark blue coveralls.

Weird how life worked.

But as Nan was fond of saying, while God's timing was often a mystery to mere mortals, there was always a purpose behind it.

So he'd go with the flow and see how much he could learn about the blond fire investigator while the two of them sorted through the rubble. If nothing else, some personal reconnaissance could liven up an investigation that would likely pose few other challenges.

Because for whatever reason, he had a feeling the puzzle of Brianne Tucker wouldn't be solved as easily as the mystery of this house fire.