

MEN OF VALOR · 1

BURIED SECRETS

A NOVEL

IRENE HANNON



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Irene Hannon, *Buried Secrets*
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To Kay Schumert and Martha Roux,
with happy memories of our days at the BPL.
Thank you for the gift of your friendship.
It is one of my treasures.



Prologue

It was meant to be a joyride.

No one was supposed to die.

“She’s not breathing!” Erika’s shrill, hysteria-laced whisper pierced the humidity-laden air.

Heart pounding, I fisted my hands. “I can see that.”

The clammy smell of panic overpowered the scent of fresh-cut hay in the adjacent field as we huddled on our knees over the motionless figure in the ditch.

“What should we do?” Joe’s voice cracked on the last word.

They both looked at me like I had the answer. Like I knew how to make this nightmare go away.

I didn’t.

Not yet, anyway.

I was still trying to wrap my mind around what had happened. To figure out how my well-planned life could careen out of control in the space of a few heartbeats.

The answer eluded me.

But I did know one thing. Any whiff of scandal could depress the coveted job I was a breath away from getting after acing the final interview.

I couldn't let that happen.

When I didn't respond, Joe leaned across the crumpled body and grasped my shoulders, his fingers digging into my flesh like talons. "What should we do?"

I shook him off. "I heard you the first time! Give me a minute!"

I straightened up and checked out the rural Missouri road, with its undulating dips that provided high-speed thrills.

Empty.

But headlights could appear at any moment, illuminating us in twin spotlights.

If they did, we were hosed.

My fingers began to prickle.

We had to make a decision.

Fast.

"Should we try CPR?" Joe's voice was shaking now.

I surveyed the broken body. Every twisted angle said it was too late for lifesaving measures, but I pressed my fingers to her carotid artery anyway. Just in case.

Nothing.

"She's dead."

"Oh, God!" Erika began to hyperventilate, her breath coming in ragged, shallow gasps.

I gave her a hard shake. "Stop it! If you keep that up, you're going to pass out!"

"But w-what are we going to do?" Her question came out in a whimpering blubber.

Disgust soured my mouth.

I hate weak women.

If Erika's father hadn't had the kind of connections I needed, I would never have befriended her—and I wouldn't be in the middle of this mess.

Anger began to churn in my gut.

“We need to do *something*. Now!” Joe gave the deserted rural highway a spastic sweep.

“I know that! Shut up and let me think.”

I glared down at the contorted figure at my knees. I should never have let Erika invite her tonight. So what if they were roommates? So what if the girl didn’t have a lot of friends? So what if she was feeling depressed?

Those were her problems.

Except now she was *my* problem.

Despite the fury nipping at my composure, the left side of my brain began to click into gear. Logic under duress had been my father’s strong suit too—on his few good days.

But I wasn’t like my old man. There were better things in store for me. I had plans. And nothing—nothing—was going to disrupt them.

Including a dead girl.

I held the keys out to Joe. “Open the trunk.”

“What?” He stared at me, the whites of his eyes glimmering in the darkness.

“Just do it.”

“But . . . shouldn’t we call 911 or something?”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea,” Erika seconded.

What idiots.

Speaking slowly to give my words a chance to sink into their thick skulls, I explained the problem. “We’re all high as kites. Don’t think the cops won’t notice that.” I locked onto Joe. “You were driving. What do you think a charge of vehicular manslaughter would do to your Rhodes Scholarship?”

I let him mull that over while I turned to Erika. “And a squeaky-clean state senator who’s built his political career on an antidrug platform might very well disown a daughter who generates bad press that could cost him the U.S. Senate nomination. So much for that grand graduation tour of Europe you had

planned for this summer, and your fancy car.” On the shoulder above us, the hot engine of the Mercedes convertible was still pinging.

Only the sound of harsh, erratic breathing and the distant wail of a train whistle broke the silence as they digested my rationale.

I gave them ten seconds to think through the ramifications.

Then I held out the keys again.

This time Joe took them.

Since Erika had collapsed into a useless, quivering lump, I waited for Joe to return to deal with the body. “I’ll take her arms. You get her feet.”

We moved into position.

“On three. One, two, three.”

We lifted together. Erika scabbled backward as the dead girl’s head lolled forward.

I paid no attention—to either of them. I was too angry . . . at myself now as much as them.

What had possessed me to go along with their stupid joyriding scheme, anyway? I didn’t do foolish and reckless. I didn’t do *anything* that could interfere with my plans, with the future I’d mapped out for myself.

Tonight was the biggest mistake of my life.

And I never intended to make another one.

Joe and I hefted the girl into the trunk. The liner would have to be replaced—but we could deal with that tomorrow.

I closed the lid and retrieved a flashlight from the glove compartment. “We need to make sure nothing incriminating is left behind. Help me look around. And hurry.”

As I swept the light back and forth in a wide arc over the pavement and ground, they hovered at my shoulders like overzealous prison guards.

Talk about a distasteful image.

I shoved it from my mind.

Three minutes later, once I was confident that mashed-down grass was the only evidence of our unplanned stop, we piled back into Erika's convertible.

This time, I took the wheel.

"Now what?" Joe spoke from the backseat as I pulled onto the pavement, gravel crunching beneath the tires.

I'd been thinking about that, my mind working through various scenarios as we'd silently searched the roadside.

"Yeah. Now what?" Erika cowered into the corner of the seat beside me, her voice small. Scared. Tear-laced.

What a loser.

"If someone finds out . . ." Joe's words trailed off.

I clenched the wheel.

Not going to happen.

Ever.

"No one will. I'm working on a plan."

As the minutes ticked by, a strategy began to coalesce in my brain, the pieces clicking into place one by one.

It wasn't bad.

Not bad at all.

And we were lucky in one regard.

Making the girl in the trunk disappear would be far easier than disposing of anyone else we knew.

"Do you still have that state map in your glove compartment?"

I checked the rearview mirror as I directed the question to Erika. The road stretched dark and deserted behind us. Perfect.

"Y-yes." Her response came out in a choked whisper.

"Get it out."

I heard her fumbling with the latch.

"Do you have an idea?" Joe leaned forward and spoke behind my ear.

Of course I did. I always had ideas. I was the only one in

this bunch who ever did. Erika was a twit, and while Joe might be smart with numbers, he didn't have one imaginative bone in his body.

"Yeah, I have an idea."

And as the miles rolled by, I laid out my plan.

They listened in silence for the most part, especially when I reemphasized the stakes. None of us wanted to deal with the ramifications of this disaster. On that much, at least, we were in agreement.

When I finished, neither spoke.

I waited them out.

"It might work." This from Joe, though he sounded uncertain.

"It *will* work—as long as we stick together. And there's no going back once we start down this road. Understood?"

Not that we had much choice at this point. We'd already started down the road by moving the body. But I wanted their verbal buy in.

"Yeah. I'm in." Resignation flattened Joe's words.

"Me too . . . I guess." Erika sniffled.

"There's no guessing, Erika." I used my harshest tone. These two needed to get with the program. "We're either all in or it's a no-go—and we face the not-so-pleasant consequences."

"Okay, okay. I'm in."

"Good. You do remember how to get there, don't you?"

"Yeah. I can find it with the m-map. Mom and Dad have dragged me there every year s-since I was a kid."

Like I didn't know that. I'd been listening to her complain about the annual summer command performance since freshman year.

A gust of wind whipped past, and a splatter of rain stung my cheek. For once the weather people had been right. A storm was brewing.

"We need to put up the top." The road in front and behind remained dark and empty, so I pulled to the side. "Don't dawdle."

They didn't—but by the time the three of us got back in the car, my clothes were damp and sticking to me uncomfortably.

Before this night was over, though, they'd be in far worse shape.

Still, if things went according to plan, both the clothes and the incident would soon be history.

And things *would* go according to plan.

I'd make sure of that.

Whatever it took.

Present Day

Mac McGregor had no trouble finding the site, even if St. Louis was new turf for him. You didn't have to be a detective to figure out that a police cruiser, yellow crime scene tape, and a media van marked the spot.

Pulling up beside the squad car, he scanned the construction site for the police chief of the small municipality who'd put in the call to County for assistance.

An officer stood in the distance, talking to a woman and a guy in a hard hat. He seemed on the young side, based on a quick glimpse of his profile, but he was the only uniformed presence on the scene. Since Carson was more village than town, maybe they'd had to take what they could get for the chief job when they'd established the department last year.

Mac set the brake, grabbed the notebook and sport coat in the passenger seat, and slid out from behind the wheel. Once he'd slipped the jacket on, he ducked under the yellow tape and wove through the idle construction equipment.

The trio was facing away from him now, toward a slight

depression in the ground, and he stopped about four feet away.
“Chief Grant?”

All three of them turned.

He stuck out his hand toward the officer in the middle.

“I’m Chief Grant.”

The woman to the man’s right spoke, her voice brisk, businesslike—and a touch irritated.

He checked out the nameplate above the guy’s left pocket.

Officer Craig Shelton.

Whoops.

So much for making a good first impression.

He shifted his attention to the woman—and gave silent thanks for the sunglasses that hid the slight widening of his eyes.

Chief Grant was drop-dead gorgeous.

But he had a feeling she would *not* appreciate his appreciative perusal.

Too bad his so-called buddy Mitch hadn’t warned him she was smoking hot when they’d run into each other earlier in the headquarters parking lot. It was the least SEALs—or ex-SEALs—could do for each other.

“May I help you?” Chief Grant’s chilly prompt refocused him.

Clearing his throat, he moved his hand to the left. “Detective Mac McGregor. Your reinforcement from County.”

She waited just long enough to make him squirm before she grasped his fingers with a surprisingly strong grip. “Lisa Grant.”

“Nice to meet you.” He shook hands with the officer too. Like his chief’s, the man’s eyes were masked by dark glasses. “Sorry about the mistake. I assumed you’d be in uniform.”

“Or maybe you assumed I’d be a man.” Her tone was conversational, but he heard the steel underneath.

A spurt of irritation spiked his blood pressure—but he tamped it down. No doubt she’d faced her share of bias in a field long dominated by men. And he’d added to it . . . in her mind, anyway.

All at once it felt a lot hotter than it should for a first-week-of-June morning, and the temptation to loosen his tie was strong.

He resisted.

“It’s dangerous to make assumptions in this business.”

“Yeah.” She let a beat pass. “It is.”

The air temperature seemed to edge up another degree or two.

Best to get down to business.

“I understand you have some bones that may be human.”

“We have some bones that *are* human.” She angled toward the ground behind her.

He stepped closer and looked down.

The empty eye sockets of a partially unearthed skull stared back at him.

She was right.

The bones were human.

He straightened up. “You want to brief me?”

“This land is being cleared for home sites. According to Mr. Phillips, the foreman”—she indicated the guy in the hard hat—“one of his crew noticed the skull after he toppled a tree with the excavator. That yellow piece of equipment.” She pointed it out. As if he’d never seen an excavator.

He frowned as a second spurt of irritation elevated his blood pressure another notch.

The subtle tilt of her lips told him that had been her intent. “When the roots came up, they disturbed the surrounding ground. The operator spotted the edge of the skull peeking through and went to investigate. Now you know as much as I do.”

He surveyed the police tape again. “Looks like you’ve secured the site.”

“First thing. We also documented with photos and video. I got an A in Crime Scene 101.”

Man, he was putting his foot in it big time today—and she wasn’t cutting him any slack.

The uniformed officer's radio crackled to life. Perfect timing. The static and back-and-forth conversation about a fender bender with possible injuries saved him from having to come up with a PC response.

"Go." Chief Grant rubbed at the faint parallel creases in her brow. "Dave's tied up with that DWI. By the time he finishes all the paperwork, his shift will be almost over. Call if you need me to cover anything else before you wrap this up."

The younger cop signed off, slid the radio back on his belt, and nodded toward him. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise." He tucked the card the guy handed him in his pocket.

"What do you want to do about them?" Craig studied the media van. "They'll be all over me once I get past the tape."

The creases on her forehead deepened.

Nervousness or annoyance?

"They must have burned rubber getting here. You'd think they'd have more important things to cover than a couple of police cars at a construction site." She blew out a breath.

Annoyance—no question about it.

She planted her fists on her hips. "Tell them I'll be over to give a statement in a few minutes. Stick with no comment if they ask any questions. I'll handle them."

Yeah, she would. Lisa Grant didn't look much over thirty, but her seasoned manner spelled experience in capital letters.

So where had she acquired it?

"I don't mean to be disrespectful to the dead." The site foreman moved closer as the officer departed. "But I've got deadlines to meet and payrolls to make. I can't have my people stand around all day doing nothing. Can we work anywhere in the area, or do I need to reassign them?"

Chief Grant adjusted her shades. "How large is the site?"

"Twenty acres."

“If you stay clear of the couple of acres around the skull, you should be fine. We can’t have this area contaminated. My guess is the forensic anthropologist County will send won’t finish here until midday tomorrow at the earliest.” Only then did she defer to him. “Of course, Detective McGregor may have a few thoughts on that.”

He bit back the retort on the tip of his tongue.

What was with this woman, anyway? So he’d made a mistake. Big deal. How had she expected him to peg her as the chief in those khaki slacks and that soft-looking sky-blue sport shirt? She could have been on the construction crew, for all he knew. Besides, none of the police chiefs he’d ever met had killer curves or a mane of dark hair shot through with fiery sparks that glinted in the sun.

“Detective McGregor?”

At her impatient prod, he refocused. “I agree on the timing—and the need for a forensic anthropologist. I’ll put in a call to the medical examiner’s office now. If you’ll excuse me.”

He escaped before she could lob another volley at him, turning his back as he pulled his phone off his belt and speed-dialed the ME.

Once he was a safe distance away, he angled toward her again. She was still talking to the foreman. The sun was rising in the sky now, warming the air—and putting a sheen on her complexion. Interesting. With her dark hair, he’d have expected darker skin. But hers was creamy and fair. Almost too fair.

The ME’s office picked up, and while he passed on the pertinent information, he continued to watch the slender woman standing sentinel over the skull. No matter what she thought, he wasn’t a chauvinist. Not by a long shot. His mother had seen to that, with her frequent lectures to her three sons on the merits of female intelligence, spunk, and strength. And she’d modeled those qualities in spades as she’d shepherded their clan

from one corner of the globe to the next, never missing a beat as a wife, mother, and commercial artist, despite his father's frequent reassignments.

He had a feeling Mom would like Lisa Grant—even if the chief hadn't been all that cordial to her oldest son.

After wrapping up his call, he planned his strategy while checking messages. If he and Lisa Grant ended up working together, they needed to be able to communicate, not snipe. He was a pro, and his gut told him she was too. They should be able to smooth out their rocky start. Maybe they could agree he'd been less than tactful and she'd been a tad too sensitive, then kiss and make up.

A decidedly unprofessional image popped into his brain, which he suppressed at once.

Bad metaphor.

Besides, thirty-five was too old for such adolescent reactions—especially in a serious situation like this. The skull of someone who had been buried in a shallow, unmarked grave in a wooded area lay steps away.

And while he'd wait for the anthropologist and ME to weigh in, based on circumstantial evidence, the whole thing reeked of foul play.

Murder, even.

His mouth settled into a grim line, his perspective restored.

Death had a way of doing that.

Fast.



Standing guard over the construction guy's grisly discovery, Lisa kept one eye on the site and the other on the tall, broad-shouldered detective a dozen yards away. He was done with his call and fiddling with his phone. A delay tactic, perhaps? Buying himself a few more minutes before he had to face the dragon lady?

She blew out a breath.

Why on earth had she jumped all over him for a simple mistake? The man was right. She wasn't exactly dressed the part of a police chief. If she'd been in his place, she'd have headed for the one uniformed person too. Not every guy was a chauvinist—even if she'd crossed paths with more than her share.

She owed him an apology.

As he started back toward her, she rubbed her palms on her slacks and turned to meet him.

“The anthropologist should be here by eleven.” He slid the phone back onto his belt.

“Okay. Thanks.” She flexed her fingers and tipped her head back. At five-seven, she wasn't short, but the man topped her by half a foot. “Look . . . I'm sorry if I sounded a little . . .” She broke eye contact as she searched for the best word.

“Defensive?”

Her gaze jerked back to his. Unlike her closed-in stance, his posture was open and approachable. A tiny smile flirted at his lips, and his tone was relaxed—as if they were talking about the weather. If she'd offended him, he seemed to have dealt with it and moved on. In fact, she got the distinct feeling he was trying to initiate a warmer, more amiable atmosphere.

As if to verify that, he took off his concealing sunglasses.

Oh.

My.

Word.

The guy had amazing eyes. Dark brown, like his hair. Intelligent. Intent. Perceptive. And fixed on her.

She transferred her weight from one foot to the other. “That's a fair description.”

“You're not in the most female-friendly business. I expect you have reasons for reacting the way you did.”

He was empathetic too.

“That’s no excuse for rudeness. But I tend to get touchy when I’m tired.” She exhaled, then removed her own glasses and looked up at him.

For less than a millisecond, an expression she couldn’t identify flashed through his eyes. And was that a faint hitch in his breathing?

Even if exhaustion wasn’t dulling her instincts, the moment passed too fast for her to get a read on his reaction.

“Kind of early in the day to be tired, isn’t it?”

She combed her hair back with her fingers. “Not when you’ve been up most of the night working a burglary.”

And with a skull of unknown origin at her feet, catching up on shut-eye would have to wait.

“I thought you were the chief.”

She sent him a wry look. “Being chief in Carson isn’t like being chief in a big city. My boss in Chicago—let alone the chief up there—never got his hands dirty.”

“You were with the Chicago PD?”

Her spine stiffened at the hint of surprise in his voice—but she was *not* going to overreact again.

“Yes. For ten years. There, the roles were defined. Here . . . not so much. We wear many hats. I’m not only chief of police, but chief detective—though I’m teaching the other officers the ropes, so at some point I won’t have to take every midnight call that requires detective work.”

“Do you get a lot of those?”

“Very few—but last night happened to be one of them.” A yawn snuck up on her. “Sorry.”

“Hey, Chief! Can we get a statement?”

At the summons from the reporter, she grimaced. “This is the one part of the job I could do without. In Chicago I always passed the media off to someone higher up.” Shifting her weight to look past the broad shoulders and powerful chest blocking her

view of the news crew, she studied the reporter. It was the same guy who'd hounded her three weeks ago about an attempted break-in at the local hardware store. Must be low man on the totem pole if they'd assigned him to her quiet rural territory.

"I'll be with you in a minute, Rick."

He acknowledged her response with a salute.

"How did they get wind of this already, anyway?" The County detective inspected the media contingent.

"The traffic copter flew over earlier and hovered around a while. I'm guessing they passed the tip along."

"Too bad."

"It would have gotten out sooner or later. I can deal with it. That's another one of my titles, by the way—media relations coordinator. No one else in Carson has any experience with the press."

"How large is your department?"

"Me, plus five officers, an office manager, and Tally." At his raised eyebrows, she answered his unspoken question. "A stray I found hiding under my car in the office parking lot my first week on the job. He just kept hanging around. I suppose it didn't help that I gave him half of my turkey sandwich. Now he's the department mascot. He even rode in one of the squad cars during the Fourth of July parade last year, head hanging out the window, eating up all the attention. Which he gets plenty of at the station." She gave a soft laugh.

His focus dropped to her mouth, and her heart did an odd skip.

What on earth was that all about?

She flattened her smile. "Anyway, we may be small, but we try to be full service." She gestured to the skull in the ground beside them. "This, however, pushes our limits."

"County is glad to help. I'm told we're always at the disposal of smaller police departments within our jurisdiction."

“You’re told.” She cocked her head. “Does that mean you’re new?”

“To St. Louis. Not to the business.”

“How long have you been here?”

“A month.”

“That *is* new. Where were you before?”

“Norfolk.” He continued without giving her a chance to ask any follow-up questions. “Since the anthropologist won’t be here for a while and you haven’t had any sleep, why don’t you go catch a few z’s while I keep an eye on things?”

She was shaking her head before he even finished. “This scene is my responsibility. I need to make sure it stays secure.”

“I got an A in Crime Scene 101 too.”

Warmth crept across her cheeks as he parroted her snotty words back to her. “Sorry about that. I didn’t mean to imply you weren’t capable.”

“Apology accepted.”

He waited, watching her. Not pushing. Just letting his offer stand.

And she was tempted.

Very tempted.

If McGregor had been hired by County, he was more than competent. Every person she’d come into contact with there over the past year was a pro. The scene was safe in his hands—at least long enough for her to run home for a quick shower, change of clothes, and catnap.

Food first, though. The buzz in her nerve endings told her that needed to be top priority.

“Okay.” She fished her creds out of a pocket, extracted a card, and handed it over. “I’ll only be gone a couple of hours, but call me if anything comes up. I always have my cell with me—or within reach.”

“Let me give you my card too.”

As he reached for it, she bent down to tie her shoelace. All at once her vision blurred and she lost her balance.

A firm, steadying hand grasped her arm. "Careful."

She took a deep breath and straightened up. "Thanks. The ground's pretty uneven here."

Not that uneven.

He didn't say the words, but she could read them in his probing gaze.

Once more her fingers began to tingle.

It was time to go.

"I'll give the media a topline and head home. Don't forget to call if anything comes up."

"Got it."

Smoothing her slacks, she walked toward the waiting news contingent. In less than five minutes, she'd be on her way. And in two hours, she'd be rested, fed, and back on the job. Getting to the bottom of the mystery bones. Digging into this case—or watching the forensic anthropologist dig in, anyway.

And it was a case. Every instinct she'd honed over the past ten years told her that—and she trusted her instincts. They'd saved her too many times to count.

Only at the end had they failed her . . . for good reason.

But those days were over. Things were better now. The job of Carson police chief might not have been in her plans eighteen months ago, but God had planted her here for a reason.

Joining the news crew, she stole a quick glance back at Detective Mac McGregor. He was standing where she'd left him, arms folded, looking very much the formidable sentry.

And all at once she had the strangest feeling he might be part of that reason.