

Leaving everything behind to marry a man she meets on the Internet, a lonely woman's dream is unexpectedly shattered by violence. Will she pay for a second chance at love with her life?

A Tangled Web

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# **A Tangled Web**

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# **A Tangled Web**

**Ingrid McLaughlin Taylor**

## Prologue

At first she couldn't escape the pain. It wound throughout her body and crept into her soul. Crying didn't help; it just made the sensation more intense. The salt from her tears stung the raw areas on her face. During brief moments of lucid thought she tried hard to focus her mind and remember who she was. After an eternity, a vision in muted green appeared to her—a blurry smiley face that came to comfort and soothe, but first she paid the price of another sting. A second later the pain left her body, as if the smiley face had pulled the plug and drained it all away.

She opened her eyes, blinking into the dark, trying to focus on a television set that was suspended from the ceiling in a corner of the room. She looked around, her thoughts not quite making contact with reality. There was a man leaning onto her bed from a chair that had been pulled close to the railing. He was asleep in this awkward position, his head on his arm, her hand wrapped in his.

The door to her room pushed open and a man entered, dressed in green hospital scrubs. He carried a metal tray and set it on the blanket beside her. Without raising his head, he started a familiar chatter.

“How're we doin' this evenin', Miss April? Guess what it's doin' today? Snowing! That's right, just when we thought spring was...”

“Fine, thanks.” April managed a hoarse croak. “Water. Please.”

The metal tray clattered to the floor, vials and syringes scattering. When she focused in his direction, his eyes were wide as they looked directly into hers and his face broke into a familiar smile.

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"Now you just sit tight, Miss April. I'll be right back with your doctor." Smiley face bent to pick up the spilled items, scurried out of her room, and sped down the hall.

## Chapter 1

“Have you *lost* your mind?” Patti’s outburst echoed through the small bookstore. April set her sandwich down, her eyes scanning the room to see if anyone had overheard her.

“Come on, Pat, I’ve known him for months. We talk over the Internet every night. You’ve even talked to him yourself.” She defended herself in hushed tones, even though there didn’t appear to be any customers in the store.

“I thought you were crazy when you started talking to this guy, and you know it! If he’s so great, then why is he home alone every night?” Patti obviously didn’t care if a customer walked in, judging from the volume of her verbal assault. “Why hasn’t he got a girlfriend? How do you know he’s not married?”

“We’ve talked at different times of the day and no one but him has ever answered the phone or been in the background. He lives alone, just like he said. He’s a decent guy. He goes to church all the time. I believe what he says, Patti, and frankly, I really don’t care what you think.” April stood up. “If I don’t meet him, I could be passing up the best thing that ever happened to me. I’m sorry you can’t understand that.” April tossed the remainder of her lunch into a brown paper bag and mashed it furiously between her hands. She had lost her appetite and was fighting back angry tears. Criticism from her only friend ran deep. *Why can’t Patti understand that God has finally given me someone of my own to love?* She hadn’t told Patti how intense her feelings were, afraid of this very thing happening, but she hoped Patti would be happy for her and encourage the relationship, or at the very least understand it. April dropped the crumpled lunch bag into a trash can as she hurried through the fiction section of the bookstore to the ladies’ room.

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“April...Oh, *come on*, April!” Patti stood and watched April hurry away. *The poor kid is clueless when it comes to men.* Only April wasn't a kid anymore. She was almost thirty years old and still possessed an awkward shyness that most ten-year-old girls had long outgrown. Patti sat down and picked at her potato chips, remembering the April who had come to her shop five years ago. The woman who applied for the part-time job was dressed like a little grade school girl. She wore a plaid pleated skirt, white shirt, navy sweater, matching navy knee socks, and brown leather loafers. Of medium height and slight build, she had worn her shoulder-length brown hair parted in the middle and fastened with barrettes. Her large brown eyes matched the color of her hair, but she infrequently made eye contact. Not darting, deceitful eyes, but rather the kind that had no confidence. She seemed beaten down, like an abandoned puppy you wanted to scoop up into your arms and protect. In the five years April had worked with her, Patti had seen a miraculous transformation as April turned into an attractive, competent woman. Theirs was one of those talk-showed-to-death "co-dependent" relationships. Childless, Patti found someone to mother, and "April the Mouse" found someone to help her break free from her debilitating shyness.

April bolted the bathroom door and ran the cold water. Looking into the mirror, she checked to see if her eyelids had swollen, relieved that they hadn't. She splashed cold water on her eyes anyway. She still had to make it until closing time. Patti had given the other two employees Christmas Eve off, since April was always willing to work. Her life was the bookstore and the small world that Patti had opened up for her. Patti and her husband Max included April in their lives as if she were their daughter. There was no other family for April. She was the only adopted child of an older couple. She couldn't remember her adopted dad at all, and her adopted mother had



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been sick after their first couple of years together. April's physical needs had been taken care of, but never any emotional ones. *April the Mouse*. The cold water took the sting from her eyes, as well as Patti's remarks. *Why doesn't Patti understand that at long last God has given me someone of my own to love?* April had two hours left to try and convince Patti that she was doing the right thing. She was going to meet her future husband face-to-face.

Her heart raced at the thought.

## Chapter Twenty

His anger intensified with each slushy step. All other thoughts evaporated from his mind there was only her. Each step reminded him over and over that she had rejected him sexually and then humiliated him in front of the pastor, the deputy and that other guy. And who was that other guy? She had no family, so the whore must have had another boyfriend. Well, nobody treated Kenny Colt like that and got away with it. She belonged to him. He would find her and punish her. He would teach her a lesson she'd never forget.

He took no notice of the cold. The rage that boiled inside him drove him with a relentless fury. She was nothing but a tramp. After all he'd done for her, she took off with that man. Took the car that should have been his. Her money was supposed to be deposited into their joint account. She didn't do that either. He was out the money and the wheels. The woman lied to him and stole from him. Kenny stopped in his march down the wooded road as a thought hit him like a thunderbolt. It was the pastor's fault! If the pastor hadn't kept them apart when she first got here she wouldn't have found that other guy to take her away.

The pastor's house came into view as Kenny rounded the last corner of the country road in quick, angry steps. The full moon silhouetted the house and garage almost as clearly as if it were daylight. Kenny's boots crunched on the snow as he walked to the garage and pulled the door up. It opened easily and Kenny walked around the big hulk of the Buick to the driver's door and pulled on the handle. It opened easily and he slid into the driver's seat, adjusting it to his own shorter legs. He moved the rear view mirror a bit and adjusted the side one as well. Kenny bet the gas tank was full. If nothing else, the pastor was

meticulous and always prepared. Now all he needed was the car keys.

Kenny marched up the steps to the kitchen door and twisted the door knob in his hand. It, too, opened easily. Kenny laughed out loud as he entered the kitchen. The pastor was such a trusting fool. He stood for a moment, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. The car keys dangled from their hook by the door. Kenny snorted in disgust at the lack of security in the pastor's home. The old man deserved what he got for being so damned stupid. Kenny marched through the living room and into the bedroom of the sleeping couple.

"Pastor!" Kenny shouted, kicking the dresser. "Pastor! Marian! Wake up!" He could hear their startled gasps as they realized that someone was in their bedroom. "I said wake up!" Kenny screamed at the top of his lungs. He flicked on the overhead light and saw a startled and teary-eyed Marian, sitting up straight, a pillow held across the front of her chest. The pastor whispered a fervent prayer as he reached for his wife. He finally blinked his eyes open, and with something close to relief, realized who was standing in front of him.

"What's wrong, Kenny?" he asked in concern, trying to sit up. "What's happened?"

"You're the one that caused April to run off with that guy. It's your damn fault she left me! I'm going to get her. I need your car." Kenny stood in the doorway, his chest heaving, adrenaline oozing out of his pores.

"Calm down, son," the pastor said as he sat on the side of the bed. "Let's talk this out." He gathered his bathrobe and tied it around his waist as he padded toward Kenny. "Let's let Marian get back to sleep." The pastor pulled the bedroom door closed behind him, giving Marian a sideways glance toward the phone, hoping that she would understand.

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Kenny paced back and forth in the kitchen like a madman. The pastor saw the crazed look in the younger man's eyes as he continued to berate and curse the older man. Kenny paused in his tirade as he saw the red light on the digital phone in the kitchen begin to blink. Marian! Kenny ran to the bedroom and flung the door open, grabbing the handheld phone from her trembling hand. He brought the handset down repeatedly on her head as she tried to fend off his blows with her thin arms. "No!" The pastor came in and tried to pull the madman away from his wife. It did no good. Kenny's viciousness was on automatic pilot as he pummeled away at the man who had been his friend. When neither the pastor nor Marian had the strength to fight back, Kenny dropped the handset to the floor and marched into the kitchen. In the bottom drawer of one of the kitchen cabinets he found a roll of packing tape. He went back to the bedroom and roughly pushed Marian on her belly and pulled her arms behind her back. He wound the tape around her wrists several times and rolled her over on her back again. He did the same with the pastor. Next he took the packing tape and bound their ankles together. He finally ripped off a piece and smoothed his hand over the tape on their mouths, partially covering their noses.

That should keep them quiet for a while--long enough to take care of business with April and her buddies. Kenny ripped the phone plug out of the wall before pulling the covers up and over the pastor and his wife. They deserved a nice long rest, the traitors! He flicked the light switch off and closed the bedroom door behind him. He walked back to the kitchen and replaced the roll of packing tape in the drawer at the bottom of the cabinet. Turning off the kitchen light, he grabbed the car keys from the hook by the door and pulled the door closed behind him.

*Ingrid McLaughlin Taylor*

The full moon was a stark light in the black of the night sky. Kenny tried to find "the man in the moon," but couldn't. No matter, he thought as he opened the door to the Buick and slid into the driver's seat. He backed the car out onto the country road and put the car in "park." Climbing out, he walked back to the garage and pulled the door closed, leaving the place as he'd found it. Well, almost. Kenny laughed hysterically for a moment and got back into the car. Yep, he was right again. A full tank of gas. Pedal to the metal and he was on his way to teach that evil Jezebel of a woman a lesson she'd never forget.

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