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CODE OF HONOR # 2

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# HIDDEN PERIL

# IRENE HANNON



*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Irene Hannon, Hidden Peril  
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To my father, James Hannon—  
who encouraged me to write suspense.

Thank you for the countless tea-and-scones  
sessions at Starbucks to brainstorm story ideas,  
reminisce . . . and solve all the world's problems!

Your love, support, and generosity  
have enriched my life in ways too numerous to count.

No one could have a better father—and friend.

# PROLOGUE

## A MONASTERY NEAR AL HAFAR, SYRIA

Why was a light burning in the workshop at midnight?

Suppressing a shiver, Brother Michael Bennett peered at the sliver of illumination seeping under the bottom of the heavy wooden door at the end of the long, vaulted passageway.

There could be only one explanation.

The monk who'd closed up the shop for the day had forgotten to flip a switch.

He wiped a hand down his face and leaned a shoulder against the rough stone wall. That wouldn't have happened on his watch. Last chore before he left each night, he extinguished all the lights.

Eyeing the door, he gauged the distance. Could his legs handle the detour? Questionable. The bug that had felled him at noon had left his muscles wobbly as Jell-O. If his parched throat wasn't screaming for some chipped ice, he wouldn't be making this taxing trek to the kitchen.

Fuel for the workshop generator, however, was expensive.

And they had better uses for the funds entrusted to their care.

Shoring up his waning strength, he pushed off from the wall and trudged down the drafty passage, the February chill creeping into his Florida-born-and-bred bones . . . as it always did in winter.

Yet not once in the past ten years had he regretted his decision to join this simple religious community in the shadow of the Qalamoun Mountains. Christianity had flourished amid the harsh beauty of this high desert for centuries, and it was an honor and privilege to make a contribution to that tradition . . . no matter how small or insignificant.

Life might not be easy here—but it was good.

Tonight, however, he could have done with a few luxuries.

Like room service.

And heated hallways.

Another shiver rolled through him. It wasn't as cold in here as it was outside, where the temperature was probably hovering near freezing—but it couldn't be much above fifty.

Then again, no one was supposed to be wandering the halls at this hour.

He picked up his pace.

At the door to the workshop, he paused to catch his breath. All he had to do was flick off a light, continue to the kitchen for his ice, and return to his warm bed.

The sooner the better.

He twisted the knob . . . pushed the door open . . . and froze.

A dark-haired man was hunched over a workbench against the far wall, a high-pitched whine abrading the midnight stillness. It was impossible to identify him from behind.

But whoever he was, he shouldn't be here.

A prickle of unease skittered through him, and he gripped the edge of the door to steady himself. "Hello?"

His raspy greeting was no more than a hoarse whisper.

He raised his voice and tried again, wincing as the words scraped past his raw throat.

The whirring noise stopped abruptly, and the man spun around. “Khalil?” Brother Michael stared at the refugee who’d arrived on their doorstep two years ago, one of the many desperate souls who’d lost everything in this war-ravaged land. He switched to Arabic. “What are you doing here?”

Beads of sweat broke out on the twenty-six-year-old’s forehead. “I’m working.”

“At midnight?”

“I wanted to finish a . . . task.”

God knew the small contingent of brothers needed all the help they could get to keep the place running, and Khalil was a hard worker. That was one of the reasons he’d been allowed to stay on as a volunteer in exchange for room and board.

But no one expected him to toil at the expense of sleep.

“You don’t have to put in nighttime hours. You more than earn your keep as it is.” Brother Michael leaned a shoulder against the doorframe. “This can wait until tomorrow.”

“As you wish. I’ll just clean up before I leave.” The man gave a slight bow, his back brushing against the workbench.

A flutter of shavings drifted to the floor.

Too many, given the nature of the work they did here.

Odd.

And what had produced that whine he’d heard when he’d opened the door?

Certainly none of their usual equipment.

Brother Michael’s pulse quickened.

Something wasn’t right.

He needed to check that workbench.

“I’ll help you with the cleanup.” He forced himself to walk toward the bench, each step a supreme effort.

“No.” The sweat on the man’s forehead glistened in the overhead light. “You’re sick. I’ll take care of it.”

“I insist.” The workshop was his responsibility—as was Khalil.

When you pled a refugee's case with the abbot and other monks, it was your duty to ensure he abided by the rules. If the man was using the space for questionable purposes after hours, the issue needed to be addressed.

He continued toward the bench, stopping a few feet away, waiting for his protégé to give him access.

For several seconds they locked gazes. A parade of emotions darted through the younger man's eyes. Panic . . . fear . . . resignation. And then resolve.

Without a word, Khalil moved toward him, stepping aside as they exchanged places.

Now that he had a clear view of the bench, Brother Michael scanned the items on the wooden surface. Added them up. Gripped the edge of the worktable.

Dear God!

How could he have made such a terrible mistake?

Khalil wasn't here to support their mission.

He was here to . . .

A shattering pain exploded in the back of his head, and Brother Michael staggered.

Groped for the edge of the bench.

Missed.

Legs crumpling, he slumped to the stone floor.

And in the scant few moments before the darkness swirling around him snuffed out the light, he sent a silent, desperate plea to the Almighty.

*Please, God, let someone—somewhere—discover the truth and put a stop to the evil deception that is defiling this holy place.*

# 1

## SIX WEEKS LATER

Brother Michael was dead.

Kristin Dane gripped the edge of the corrugated, travel-worn shipping carton that had logged more than six thousand miles on its journey from Syria to St. Louis, blinked to clear her vision, and forced herself to reread the letter.

*Dear Ms. Dane:*

*I am pleased to send you the 50 pillar candles you ordered from our humble workshop here in the cradle of Christianity. We are grateful for your willingness to support our humanitarian work by selling the labor of our hands in your shop. As you know, every dollar we receive is used to help victims of the terrible violence here, Christians and Muslims alike. We continue to be amazed at the resilience and strength of the remarkable Syrian people, who have suffered so much.*

*And now I must pass on some sad news. Brother Michael has, quite suddenly, gone home to God. On February 22, he grew ill and took to his bed. The next morning,*



*we found him on the floor in the workshop. We believe he rose during the night and went to the shop for some reason. It appears he tripped, or perhaps grew dizzy, and fell backward, hitting his head on the corner of a workbench.*

*I know this will be a shock to you, as it was to all of us. Our American brother spoke often of your kindness to him when you met three years ago while he was visiting your city.*

*Here at the monastery, we are already missing his selfless work and the deep spirituality and trust with which he lived his life. And we grieve the shortness of his days. Forty-four seems far too young to die.*

*Please pray for the repose of his soul, as we will continue to do here in the land he adopted—and loved.*

*With gratitude in Christ,  
Abbot Jacques Gagnon*

“Kristin?”

From a distance, a voice penetrated her shock.

Refolding the single sheet of paper, she lifted her chin. Susan Collier was standing in the doorway between WorldCraft’s stockroom and the retail section of the shop.

“Are you okay?” The woman took a step toward her.

“No. I’m trying to . . . to absorb some bad news.” She relayed the contents of the letter to her part-time clerk.

“I’m so sorry.” Sympathy deepened the lines at the corners of the other woman’s eyes. “From everything you’ve told me, he was a fine man.”

“The best. A saint among us.” She traced a finger over the hand-lettered label on the box. “Meeting him was an amazing experience. He had an incredible ability to draw people in.”

“Some men are very charismatic.”

At the hint of bitterness in her words, Kristin looked at her. “I meant that in a positive, spiritual sense. Brother Michael exuded holiness. Not all men are like your ex.”

“I know.” Susan’s features relaxed a hair. “I keep reminding myself of that. Brother Michael sounded like one of the good guys.” She motioned toward the box. “Do you want me to put those on the display for you? I know you usually like to do it yourself, but you’re already cutting it close for the wedding.”

Shifting gears, Kristin checked her watch.

Her clerk was right.

In less than three hours, the bride would be walking down the aisle. And since she was one of the two people standing up for the groom, she couldn’t be late.

Letting Colin down wasn’t an option.

“Yes, thanks.” Kristin set the letter from the abbot on the desk wedged into one corner of the stockroom. “If you need me for anything later today or Monday while I’m at the small business seminar, call or text.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“I know.” She summoned up a smile. “In the year you’ve been with me, I’ve come to rely on you for much more than clerking duties. You’ve been a huge asset to WorldCraft.”

Cheeks pinkening, the mid-fortyish brunette smoothed a renegade strand of hair back into the sleek chignon at her nape. “Thanks. I appreciate you giving me the job. If it hadn’t been for you and Kate Marshall, I don’t know where I’d be.”

Kate Marshall . . . Kate Marshall. Oh, right. The director of New Start, the agency where Susan had gone for career counseling after she finally walked away from her abusive marriage.

“You would have been fine. With your background in retail, someone would have snapped you up.”

“I don’t think so. My skills were rusty after being on hold for two decades.”

“Not true. Your volunteer work with the handicraft co-op kept them fresh—and dealing with that kind of merchandise was perfect background for the fair trade goods I sell here.” She retrieved her purse from the desk drawer. “Now I’m off to be best woman.”

“You earned that title in my book the day you hired me.”

“Don’t give me so much credit.” She squeezed the woman’s arm. “I just recognized talent when I saw it. Thanks again for working extra hours on Monday to cover for me.”

“No problem. Have fun at the wedding.”

“I’ll give it my best shot.”

But as she left by the rear door and crossed to her Sentra, even the sunny skies on this second day of April couldn’t chase away the pall hanging over her.

Brother Michael was dead.

Not from militant bullets or bombs or blades as she’d always feared, but from a tragic accident.

Why would God take a man who’d left everything behind to do desperately needed work in a dangerous land?

It didn’t make sense.

And it felt all wrong.

But as Colin always reminded her when she raised such questions, trying to understand the mind of God was an exercise in futility. You had to trust in his goodness and accept that he saw the bigger picture, even if your own lens was murky.

Bottom line, at some point you had to let questions like this go.

Depressing the auto lock on her keychain, she closed the distance to her car in a few long strides, slid behind the wheel, and started the engine.

This was one of those times—at least for the next few hours. She couldn’t allow her gloom and grief to ruin the biggest day of Colin’s life. She and Rick owed their best bud total support and focus.

So she'd fix her hair, do her makeup, slip into the knockout black dress she'd splurged on for this event, and smile for the world.

Even if her heart was aching.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

Plate of hors d'oeuvres in one hand, drink in the other, Luke Carter surveyed the elegant room at the country club. Appetizing food was displayed at various stations. Tables for eight and tall cocktail rounds were draped in white linen, with candles and flowers in the center of each. A string quartet played in the background to the accompaniment of tinkling glasses and the laughter of the animated reception crowd. Outside, lanterns twinkled on the terrace, where some of the guests were taking advantage of the unseasonably balmy weather.

It was a first-class party in a beautiful setting.

And he did *not* want to be here.

But when one of your new colleagues went out of his way to invite you, not showing up would have been rude—for the reception, anyway.

The church ceremony?

Different story.

Besides, no one in this crowd would have noticed his absence for the exchange of vows.

Nor would anyone miss him if he ducked out fast tonight. Except for Sarge and a few other detectives seated at two adjacent tables across the room with spouses or girlfriends, everyone was a stranger.

And he wasn't in the mood to socialize with coworkers or make small talk with people he'd never see again.

Skirting the crowd, he kept out of his colleagues' line of sight. No reason to sit. He wasn't staying that long. The minute he

was through eating, he'd track down the bride and groom, pass on his best wishes, and beat a hasty retreat.

As he hugged the fringes of the group, he gave the place a sweep. He needed an out-of-the-way spot to deposit his plate and glass so he could chow down.

An empty cocktail table in a shadowy corner caught his eye. Perfect.

He made a beeline for it.

Ten feet away, he saw an older gent approaching it as well.

Before he could decide whether to fade back into the crowd or lengthen his stride to claim the table first, the elderly man spotted him and grinned.

"Don't even think about it, young man. You may be faster than I am, but this cane hanging off my arm can be a lethal weapon. However, I'll be happy to share."

The corners of Luke's lips flexed. The guy appeared to be good-natured, and it might not be a bad idea to take him up on his offer. Other guests might think they were together and leave them alone.

He finished the short walk and set down his plate. "Sold."

"Happy to have the company." The man held out his hand. "Stan Hawkins."

"Luke Carter." He returned the gent's firm shake.

"Friend of the bride or groom?" Stan speared a meatball with a toothpick.

"Groom. But I'm more coworker than friend. I've only been in town since January, so I'm still learning the ropes and getting acquainted."

"Ah. Another detective. You boys do good work."

"Thanks. We try. What about you?"

"I retired long ago. From accounting. It was a pleasant, steady job—but crunching numbers isn't as exciting as tracking down criminals."

Luke stifled a smile. “I meant, do you know the bride or the groom?”

“Oh. Well, of course you did.” He dabbed at the corner of his mouth with a napkin. “Both—now. But I knew Trish first. I live across the street from the house where she grew up. I had a little hand in getting the two of them together, you know.”

“Is that right?”

“Yep.” He squinted toward the front of the room, where the newlyweds were posing for a photo by the cake. “I’ll have to get a piece of that to take home to my wife. She was real disappointed to miss the wedding, but she had one of her arthritis flare-ups this morning.”

“I’ll be happy to get a couple of pieces for you after they cut it.” Luke finished a stuffed mushroom and moved on to a crab cake. As soon as he was done, he’d exchange a few words with the bride and groom, fetch Stan’s cake, and slip out the exit that was mere steps away from their table.

He ate faster.

“That’s very thoughtful of you. Navigating through a crowd is tricky with that nuisance.” He waved a hand toward the cane he’d propped against the wall. “It’s tough getting old—but better than the alternative, as they say.” The man winked at him. “So are you here by yourself?”

“Yes.” He downed his last toasted ravioli in one bite and took a swig of his drink. “I’ll go get that cake for you now.”

“I’ll save your place.”

Keeping the bride and groom in his sights, Luke circled the perimeter of the crowd and crossed to the couple.

“Luke! I’m glad you made it.” Colin shook his hand. “Let me introduce you to my bride.” He drew the woman beside him closer and went through the formalities.

It wasn’t as hard as Luke had expected to utter a few

pleasantries. Probably because they didn't look like a traditional bride and groom. Colin was in a suit, and the bride wore a fancy knee-length pale blue dress. Other than the sprig of flowers tucked into her hair and Colin's boutonniere, they could be any couple at any cocktail party.

Except . . . the love between the bride and groom was almost palpable. As it should be on a wedding day.

As it had been on his.

Swallowing past the lump in his throat, he wrapped up the conversation, snagged two pieces of cake and some paper napkins, and retreated to his table. At least talking with Stan wouldn't dredge up any painful memories.

Only the older man wasn't alone anymore.

Luke's step faltered as he approached the tucked-away spot.

A woman had joined their twosome.

Her back was to him, but he could see she was much younger than his new friend.

He gave her a quick head-to-toe. Blonde hair cut in a longish shag. A black dress with skinny straps and a low-cut draped back, the fabric molding her curves. A pair of killer legs showed off to perfection by high heels, each of which sported a small bow on the back.

So much for the safe haven he'd staked out.

Maybe he could ask one of his colleagues to deliver the cake and . . .

Stan leaned around the woman and waved him over.

Blast.

He was stuck.

But it didn't have to be for long.

He'd hand over the cake, make small talk for a minute or two, and offer some excuse to escape.

Armed with that plan, he returned to the table and set the cake and napkins in front of Stan.

“Thank you, young man. I saw the best woman wandering around and invited her to share our cozy corner.”

Best woman?

He turned his attention to their new tablemate.

The front view of the thirtysomething woman was equally arresting. Intelligent blue-gray eyes. Strong chin. A tad-too-thin nose. Prominent cheekbones.

She wasn't beautiful in a classical sense. Her features didn't have perfect proportions. But her face was . . . intriguing. Distinctive. Filled with character.

It was the kind of face that would age well. Long after the Hollywood-type beauties among her peers faded, this woman would continue to draw second looks from men.

All at once, he realized she was holding out her hand.

Uh-oh.

He must have missed Stan's introduction.

Grasping her fingers, he offered the first excuse that came to mind. “Sorry. The background noise is getting louder. Your name was . . . ?”

“Kristin Dane.”

“Luke Carter.” He squeezed her hand and released it. “Did I hear Stan say best woman?”

“Yes.” She picked up a prosciutto-wrapped spear of asparagus. “I shared the honors of standing up for Colin with another friend. The three of us have been tight for more than twenty years.” She tilted her head. “Weren't you at the wedding?”

“No. I, uh, was working a case today.” Only in the morning, though. He could have attended the ceremony if he'd wanted to be there.

“Luke's a detective too, like Colin.” Stan folded a napkin around the first piece of cake.

“Oh?” Curiosity sparked in her eyes. “I don't recall Colin mentioning your name.”



“I’m new in town.”

“That might explain it.”

Stan finished wrapping the second piece of cake, stacked it on top of the first, and reached for his cane. “Well, I’ll leave you to keep Kristin company while she eats. I want to go home and share this cake with my own bride of sixty-one years. A pleasure to meet you, young man.”

Luke smothered a groan.

He was going to have to make more small talk after all.

“Don’t worry . . . I eat fast.” Amusement glinted in Kristin’s irises as Stan headed toward the exit.

Whoops.

She’d picked up on his dismay.

“No need to hurry.” He did his best to contain the rush of warmth to his cheeks. “I’m not staying long, but I don’t have to leave yet. Shouldn’t you be at a head table somewhere, though?”

“If there *was* a head table, yes. But Colin and Trish opted to keep everything simple and low-key since it was a second wedding.”

“Colin’s been married before?”

“No. Trish has. Her first husband was killed in a car accident a few years ago.”

Ah.

That could explain why the bride had forgone the traditional white gown.

“I didn’t know that. Like I said, I’m new in town.”

“Hey, Kristin!”

A guy with a sprig of flowers in the lapel of his dark suit wove through the crowd toward them.

“That’s the best man, Rick Jordan.” She leaned closer as she shared that tidbit, and a whiff of some pleasing floral fragrance tickled his nose. “Hey, Rick.” She lifted her hand in greeting and made the introductions.

“Sorry to drag you away”—the best man gave him a visual frisk as he responded to Kristin—“but Colin wants a Treehouse Gang picture.”

Treehouse Gang?

Luke sent her a quizzical look, which she ignored.

“Sure.” Kristin popped the last meatball in her mouth, then tipped her head back and washed it down with a long swallow of soda—giving him a perfect view of her slender, graceful throat. “It was nice meeting you.” She smiled at him and picked up her tiny purse.

“Likewise.”

With that, Rick grabbed her hand and led her away.

As they disappeared into the crowd, Luke released a long, slow breath and fought back a sudden wave of melancholy.

Colin and Trish had just taken vows as husband and wife.

Stan was hurrying home to spend the rest of the evening with his companion of more than six decades.

Kristin might not have been wearing a ring, but she and Rick seemed like a couple. They’d probably boogie the night away once the small dance floor was cleared of the cake.

He was alone.

And joining his coworkers at one of their tables wasn’t going to ease his loneliness.

It was time to leave.

Turning his back on the happy crowd, he fled toward the exit. Pushed through the door. Pulled it closed behind him, separating himself from the festive atmosphere inside.

Chest tight, he surveyed the deserted parking lot.

No one but him and Stan had cut out early.

But you had to be in a party mood to enjoy a party, and he was nowhere close to that.

Shoulders drooping, he shoved his hands in his pockets and wandered toward his car.

Maybe his sister was right, and life would get easier eventually. Maybe the new job and new town were just what he needed. Maybe one of these nights coming home to an empty apartment wouldn't feel so . . . empty. And depressing.

But if things hadn't improved after three long, lonely years, he was beginning to lose hope they ever would.