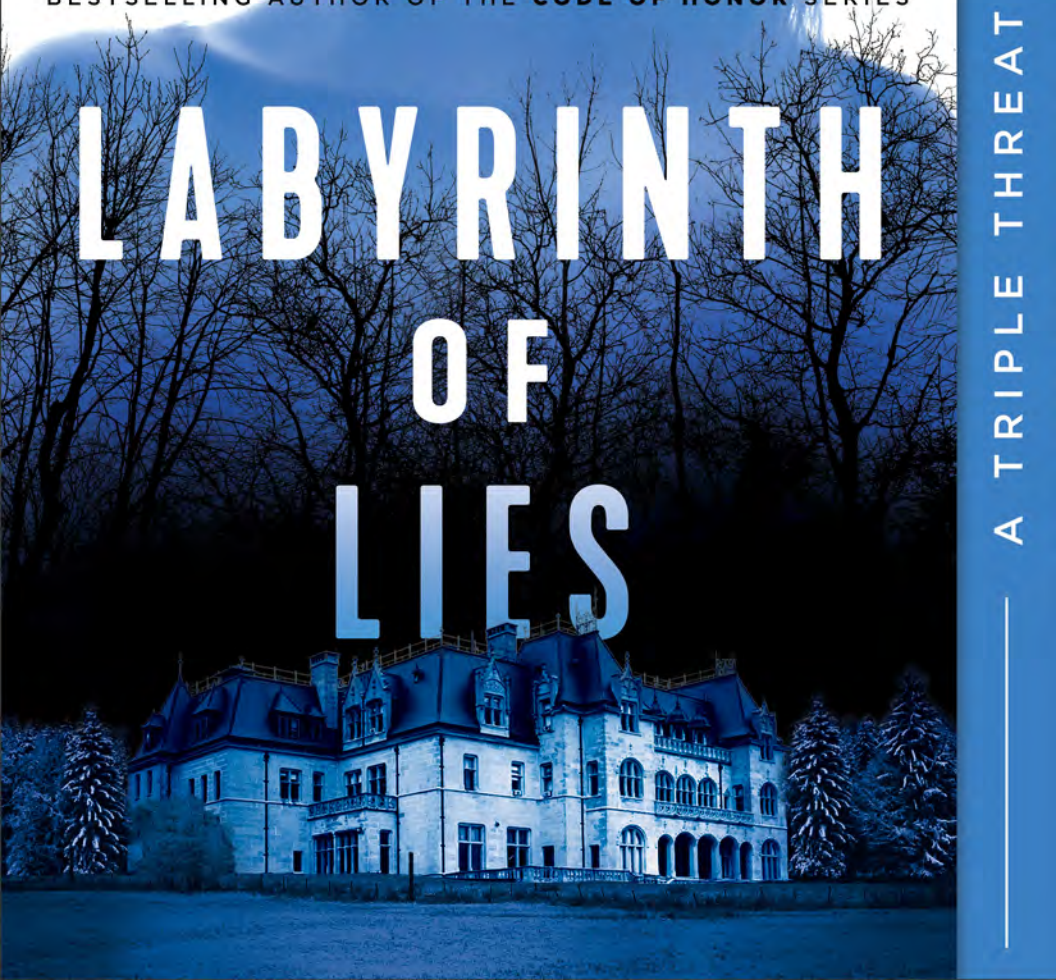




IRENE HANNON

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE CODE OF HONOR SERIES



LABYRINTH OF LIES

A TRIPLE THREAT NOVEL

Praise for *Point of Danger*

“As a general rule, men shun romance novels, while some women turn away from suspense thrillers. But in *Point of Danger*, author Irene Hannon gives readers a thriller with a persistent romantic angle.”

St. Louis Post Dispatch

“An action-packed drama that will have you hooked, trying to piece together clues until the very end.”

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Relz Reviewz

Praise for *Dark Ambitions*

“A rip-roaring crime thriller . . . electrifying.”

Publishers Weekly

“An intriguing blend of faith, romance, and suspense.”

Booklist

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Remembrancy.com

“With the perfect blend of romance and mystery, this book was unputdownable.”

Write-Read-Life

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Starfish Pier
Blackberry Beach

TRIPLE THREAT 2

LABYRINTH
OF
LIES

IRENE
HANNON



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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To Tom—
my one and only.

Happy milestone birthday!

May the years ahead be filled with
health, happiness, love . . .
and wondrous new adventures together.

For as Robert Browning said:
The best is yet to be!

THEY WANTED HER to take on another undercover gig?
No way.

Not happening.

But if both her boss and the head of the Crimes Against Persons unit were ganging up on her, getting out of the assignment would require finesse.

Brain firing on all cylinders, St. Louis County detective Cate Reilly crossed her legs, clenched her hands together in her lap, and surveyed the sergeant behind the desk—and the lieutenant seated beside her. Five seconds. That was all she needed to formulate a diplomatic, persuasive refusal.

Sarge didn't give them to her.

"We're aware you prefer not to do more undercover work, Cate. It's not for everyone, and we appreciate you giving it a try this year." He rested his forearms on his desk and linked his fingers. "But this is a . . . unique . . . situation, so I'd ask you to hear us out. Lieutenant?"

The commander of the unit picked up the cue. "It goes without saying that what we discuss here stays here, no matter how this meeting ends." He locked gazes with her.

"Of course." After ten years with the St. Louis County PD, she knew when to zip her lips.

He gave a curt nod. “Two months ago, Gabe Laurent’s seventeen-year-old daughter, Stephanie, disappeared from a private girls’ boarding school in the far western portion of our jurisdiction, along the Missouri River. You know who Laurent is, I assume.”

“Yes.” In an era when badge holders were often painted as the bad guys, every County PD employee was aware of the software executive’s staunch—and vocal—commitment to law enforcement. “Why haven’t I heard about the girl’s disappearance?”

“We were keeping it under wraps until we determined whether it was the runaway situation it appeared to be. Only the detectives assigned to the case were privy to the details.”

“Was it a runaway?”

The lieutenant shifted in his seat. “That was our conclusion. All the pieces fit. Her backpack was gone. Her boyfriend also went missing—as did *his* backpack and car. Everyone our people spoke with agreed she was troubled and unhappy. That’s why her father sent her to Ivy Hill Academy. He didn’t like the crowd she was running with—or her boyfriend, slipping grades, and attitude. In addition to being a prestigious all-girl college-prep school with high academic standards, Ivy Hill is known for its rigid discipline.”

“Is the investigation still active?”

Sarge leaned back in his chair. “We’ve been keeping an eye out for her, but it hasn’t been our highest priority.”

No, it wouldn’t be.

Teen runaways were disturbing, but the County’s heavy homicide caseload and other serious crime investigations took precedence. The detectives were already stretched thin, and the long hours couldn’t expand much more without significant fallout—like a major decline in morale or a mass exodus.

“So why are we talking about it now?”

The lieutenant rejoined the conversation. “We’ve been asked to dig deeper.”

“By whom?”

He held up a hand. “Let me back up first. Gabe Laurent wasn’t satisfied with our conclusion or our promise to continue our efforts to locate his daughter as resources allowed. He ended up hiring a PI who turned up one piece of information that suggests there may be more to the story than a mere runaway situation.”

Ouch.

That put County in an awkward position.

“What did the PI find?”

“Two days before he disappeared, the boyfriend had been in touch with a counselor at one of the community colleges about registering for the spring term.”

O-kay.

That put a whole different spin on the case.

“In other words, he may have taken the backpack for a weekend getaway with his girlfriend, but he wasn’t planning to disappear.” Cate exhaled.

“That was Gabe Laurent’s conclusion.”

“This is starting to smell like foul play.”

“I agree.”

She furrowed her brow. “How did our people miss that nugget?”

“The boyfriend—Alex Johnson—lived with a grandmother who’s in poor health and a father who comes and goes . . . mostly to the local bar. The PI happened to be at the apartment talking with the grandmother when a financial assistance application from the school arrived in the mail.”

“She knew about his plans?”

“No—nor did the father. Based on what the PI gleaned from the counselor, Alex decided the laborer job he’d taken with a roofing company after high school graduation wasn’t going to lead anywhere and intended to continue his education.”

Uncovering that key piece of intel may have been a fluke—

and a huge piece of good luck for the PI—but it was distressing nonetheless.

And Sarge and the lieutenant weren't the type to enjoy having egg on their face, deserved or not.

Still . . . an undercover operation? Those kinds of resources were usually reserved for larger-scale operations, like the human trafficking setup she'd helped investigate for her first—and she'd hoped, last—undercover assignment.

“So we're going back to take another look at the case. I get that.” She kept her inflection neutral. “What I don't get is the undercover component.”

The lieutenant stood and walked over to the window. After a few moments, he pivoted back. “Pressure is being exerted to use every available tool to expedite the investigation. Gabe Laurent wants answers.” The man clasped his hands behind his back, his expression neutral save for a flare of . . . annoyance? . . . that tightened his features for a fleeting instant. “He also happens to be a big contributor to the campaigns of his state representative and the County Executive.”

Ah.

The man had called in favors. Talked to friends in high places, who'd contacted County—not with demands, but to drop a few strong hints that the case might deserve renewed focus.

Yet it didn't explain the undercover angle.

“Why not just assign more personnel?”

The lieutenant scanned his watch and crossed to the door. “I'll let Sarge explain the particulars to you. I'm already late for another meeting.” He swung back to her. “I hope we can count on your help with this.”

Without giving her the opportunity to respond, he exited, closing the door behind him.

In the ensuing quiet, her pulse accelerated.

That hadn't been a request.

He wanted her on this job.

Why?

She laced her fingers more tightly together and redirected her attention to Sarge. “You know how I feel about undercover work.” One taste had been more than sufficient to dim any allure it may have had. Who knew why it had held such appeal for—

Mashing her lips together, she severed that line of thought. It was pointless to revisit history. Her attempt to figure out what motivated a person to live a life of deception and shadows had been a bust, and it was time to move on.

Past time.

“I know, Cate—but we need you on this one.”

She waved his comment aside. “There are plenty of detectives at County who like undercover work. Why not tap one of them?”

“Because you’re the only one who can pass for a seventeen-year-old.”

Her jaw dropped as she processed that bombshell. “You want me to go in as a *student*?”

“Yes.”

“Sarge.” She gaped at him. “Let’s be serious here. I’m thirty-three. Seventeen is a distant speck in the rearview mirror.”

“Not that distant—and age is nothing more than a number. With appropriate hairstyle and clothes, you won’t have any difficulty convincing people you’re seventeen.”

She shook her head. “This is crazy. I could be a seventeen-year-old’s *mother*.”

“Cate.” Sarge leaned forward again. “When were you last carded?”

Dang.

He would bring that up.

She cleared her throat and flicked a speck of lint off her slacks. “I don’t drink.”

“You’re avoiding the question.”

Okay.

Fine.

She did buy wine on occasion as a gift for party hosts—as Sarge knew, since she’d not only brought a bottle to the retirement barbecue he’d thrown last summer for one of the detectives but joked about having to produce her driver’s license for the clerk.

“So I get carded now and then.” Like always if she went makeup-free off duty and pulled her hair back into her usual ponytail. “So what?”

He looked at her in silence.

As seconds ticked by, sweat beaded on her upper lip. The moisture in her mouth evaporated. A wave of nausea rolled through her.

Huh.

Who knew that being backed into a corner would have the same effect on her as being trapped in a small space?

Not the best time for her latent claustrophobia to rear its head.

Chest tight, she rose and began to pace. “Maybe the school has nothing to do with this. Stephanie and Alex could have run into trouble away from the campus.”

“That’s possible—and we’ll continue to work that angle with a conventional investigation. But given the high-level interest in this case, we want to cover all the bases—and you know firsthand how much more you can learn from the inside.”

Yeah. She did.

If she hadn’t befriended the key people in the trafficking case, convinced them she was on their side, the ring would still be operating.

Instead, thanks to the evidence she’d been able to amass, the operation had been shuttered and the leaders rounded up and charged.

“Look at it this way, Cate.” Sarge leaned forward, using his most persuasive tone. “If Stephanie told another student where she and her boyfriend planned to go for the weekend—and you can get that girl to confide in you—we can realign our resources. As soon as we have a trail that leads off campus, we’ll cut you loose. That could be as fast as a week or two.”

She narrowed her eyes. “The trafficking job wasn’t supposed to last long, either.”

“It didn’t—not for an investigation like that.”

That might be true . . . but it had felt like forever.

Another reason to write off undercover work.

Hardened as she’d become to violence and gore and man’s inhumanity to man during her decade in law enforcement, it was a whole different ball game to live that seaminess every day from the inside.

But the lieutenant and Sarge had presented a compelling case.

She *was* the best candidate in the department to pass for a seventeen-year-old.

And if foul play *was* involved in the girl’s disappearance, as the new evidence suggested, they should use every tool at their disposal to track down the truth whether there was political pressure being brought to bear or not.

She let out a long, slow breath. “You’re not giving me much choice here.”

“Yes, I am. We won’t force you to take an undercover assignment. If this isn’t a role you think you can pull off, we’ll try to come up with an alternative plan. For the record, we did check to see if the school has any open staff or faculty positions. It doesn’t. But even if it did, the ideal is to place someone who can talk to the girls—especially Stephanie’s roommate—as a peer. A student is the best candidate for that.”

His rationale was difficult to refute.

She was stuck.

Much as she disliked undercover work, her passion for justice wasn't going to let her walk away from an opportunity to help solve what appeared to be a crime.

"When would I go in?"

"You'd move into the dorm January 4."

That gave her eight days to psych herself up for the assignment and get up to speed on the players—and her cover story.

"Won't it seem odd for a new student to arrive with one week's notice?" She was stalling, delaying her commitment as long as possible.

But Sarge played along, giving her a minute to adjust to the reality and accept the inevitable. "We've got it covered. Your father's been transferred here, and while he wraps up loose ends on the East Coast and makes arrangements to relocate, he's sending you ahead rather than have you join the spring semester in progress."

"From what I've heard about Ivy Hill's price tag, this operation will require significant up-front money for tuition—unless you're clueing in the administration to our presence."

"We're not—and we'll tap the reserve fund for the tuition."

She did a double take. "We have a reserve fund?"

"So says the lieutenant, and I'm not asking any questions. Finances are his problem. I just go after bad guys. So what's the verdict?"

Her brief reprieve was up.

She exhaled . . . and gave up the fight. "I'll do it."

"Great!" Sarge pushed a bulging file folder across the desk. "Case notes to date. Bone up. And this"—he slid a much slimmer file in her direction—"is your cover. The minute you walk out the door, we'll begin setting this up. We wanted to be certain you were on board first."

She picked up the latter and flipped through the material.

“A lot of work has been put into this.” She looked at him. “You knew I’d say yes, didn’t you?”

“I thought the odds were in our favor. You like challenges—and you *don’t* like puzzles with missing pieces. That’s why you’re an exceptional detective. I assumed this case would pique your interest enough to overcome your aversion to undercover work—and convince you you’re the right person for the job.”

“I’m the *only* person.”

“You’re also the right person. We want someone on this who will dig deep and ferret out the truth, and—pardon the cliché—you’re like a dog with a bone when you’re on a case.”

“I appreciate the compliment if not the analogy.” She gathered up the files.

“There is a bright side to this, you know. Going undercover at a cushy girls’ school will be a cakewalk compared to the trafficking gig.”

“That depends on what I find.”

“If there’s anything to be found. Our team on the street may end up solving this before you do.”

“Hold that thought.” She transferred the files to the crook of her arm and stood. “I’ll let you know if I have any questions after I get up to speed on all this. Any special instructions?”

“Just keep your ear to the ground—and keep this gig under wraps. We’re sharing details on a need-to-know basis. The fewer fingers in this, the less risk of leaks.” His phone began to ring, and he picked it up. “And do something fun this weekend.”

“Already on the books.”

Thank goodness.

Maybe the relaxing get-together she’d planned with her two sisters would help her shake the sense of foreboding—and dread—seeping into her pores, so pervasive it seemed almost like a premonition . . . or warning.

Which was ridiculous.

Huffing out a breath, she shifted the weight of the files in her arm and left Sarge's office.

Her nerves were kicking in, that was all. Being a bit spooked was normal in light of her aversion to the mere thought of plunging back into undercover mode.

Yet a caution sign continued to strobe in her mind—as if warning her to beware of sinister secrets lurking in the shadows at the exclusive school slated to become her temporary home.

She shook off a shudder as she entered the office she shared with a fellow detective. Dropped the files onto her desk with a thud.

Too bad she couldn't toss off this assignment as easily.

But she'd agreed to take it on, and backing out wasn't an option. If that young woman had, indeed, gone missing—and the school had played a role in her disappearance—someone posing as a student would be in an ideal position to find the truth.

As for the unnerving vibes coursing through her?

She'd control them as best she could . . . but she'd also listen to her gut.

So just in case the challenges waiting for her ended up being far more formidable than simply convincing everyone she was seventeen, she'd go into this assignment on high alert . . . and she wouldn't let her guard down until she left Ivy Hill—and her student persona—behind forever.