



DEADLY A PEARL RIVER
NOVEL
REVENGE

PATRICIA BRADLEY

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DEADLY REVENGE

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To my Lord and Savior

“Let the words of my mouth,
and the meditation of my heart,
be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD,
my strength, and my redeemer.”

Psalm 19:14

PROLOGUE

Chattanooga Detective Jenna Hart backed her ten-year-old unmarked Chevy into the church parking lot beside an even older Ford. If things went south, she could make a quick getaway. Not that she was expecting anything to go wrong.

Her confidential informant had indicated the Scorpions were meeting at the James A. Henry School tonight, and Rick Sebastian would be there. This was a first. Sebastian was slippery, and up until now, the Chattanooga Gang Unit had no hard evidence linking him to the Scorpions.

Captain Billingsley's instructions were only to gather intel and take photos. Jenna adjusted the camera on her shoulder and doused the car lights, plunging the area into darkness.

The moonless night and absence of streetlights hid her from prying eyes, but it also hid the drug dealers she'd come to monitor. Evil always preferred the darkness to light.

She climbed out of the Chevy and flinched at the screech of tires two streets over, barely relaxing when there was no follow-up crash. She scanned the area for a marked patrol car, noting a couple of working streetlights between her and the school a block away. Where was Officer Creasy? He should already be set up in case there was an opportunity for him to make an arrest.

The gang unit used two types of surveillance, passive and active, and her captain had made it plain she was only to observe and take photos, not to arrest anyone. If Jenna observed anything illegal, she was to alert Creasy, who was supposed to be in a marked patrol car two blocks away, and he could make the arrest without compromising her position.

She quickly called his cell number, and it went straight to voicemail. Jenna left him a message. "I'm here. Where are you?"

Maybe he wasn't coming. Creasy had made it plain when she'd worked in patrol that female officers should be relegated to handing out parking tickets. Jenna frowned. When she talked to him earlier, he *had* blown off her CI, saying he wasn't reliable. While she didn't think he would ignore the assignment, he could always plead that he got tied up in traffic or with another investigation.

For all she knew, Creasy could be hanging out with Phillip, her now ex-fiancé. They were buddies. Jenna had heard from one of the few friends she had at the precinct that her ex-fiancé and his cronies liked to gather at the bar, downing a few beers and coming up with new ways to make her look bad as a detective. Apparently it wasn't enough that Phillip had publicly blamed her for their breakup, even though she wasn't the one who broke off the engagement.

She clenched her jaw. Phillip wasn't going to win. She'd worked hard to become a detective, and she wasn't giving it up without a fight. She could understand if he wanted out of the relationship since they had been drifting apart, something she blamed on the long hours they both worked—her with the gang unit, and Phillip with homicide. She didn't understand why he was attacking her professionally. It was like a puzzle with pieces missing.

Where is Creasy? She didn't think the patrol officer would actually bail on her, but he was like a lot of other officers whose attitude toward the gangs was "Let 'em kill each other off."

Not that any of them ever said the words out loud. Jenna's concern was for the innocent people who got in the way.

She froze as a man in a hoodie materialized out of the darkness and jogged toward the empty school, throwing an occasional look over his shoulder. It was impossible to tell if it was Sebastian, but the jogger's lean frame was about right . . . except there was something familiar in the way the man moved.

She checked her phone again for a message from Creasy. Nothing. The meeting was going down, and if she waited, she would lose the opportunity to get intel.

Jenna was on her own, not that she actually needed the officer for backup—the whole point was to see who came to the meeting and get photos. She had no plans to do anything that would give her location away.

With a quick prayer and a deep breath, Jenna moved away from her car, rubbing her wet palm on her dark workout pants before checking her pistol. She hadn't taken time to change other than to buckle on a vest and her duty belt. She should blend in well with the dark area.

It wasn't that she had no fear of Sebastian—she did. It was rumored the drug dealer was a cold-blooded killer and responsible for the deaths of at least ten rival gang members. Jenna wanted to send him away for longer than the five years he faced if convicted on the current drug charges of cocaine possession, but rumors were all they had. Sebastian was careful, and without hard evidence and witnesses willing to testify, she had no proof of the murders, or that he even had a connection to the Scorpions.

Without that hard evidence, the DA couldn't bring up the deaths in court, not even for an indictment from a grand jury. While Jenna didn't expect to get evidence pointing to any murders tonight, she would get photographs of him with known Scorpion members. Perhaps one of them could be persuaded to

turn state's evidence. And any intel she captured could be used at trial to put Sebastian away for a lot longer than five years.

Jenna took a second to text Creasy again.

Where are you?

Getting off 27. U?

James A. Henry. If I observe anything of interest I'll radio you and you can intercept.

She blew tension from her lungs. Creasy was five minutes away. At least he was coming and should be ready by the time Jenna was in place.

She jogged toward the building, following the path of hoodie guy. Jenna turned a corner, and smack talk drew her attention. Sounded like it was coming from the apartments facing the school. She hugged the shadows of the school building and eased to where she could see what was going on.

A problem. That's what was going on. Five or six teenage boys were playing basketball under the security lights at the apartments. Jenna checked her watch. It was after midnight. Shouldn't they be in bed? Jenna didn't know why she was surprised they weren't.

After working the gang unit for two years, she shouldn't be surprised at anything. Besides, summer heat kept kids indoors during the day, and this was a way to let off steam.

Still, it complicated matters. Jenna couldn't help but worry that the teens might get caught in the crossfire if something went wrong in the meeting.

The hoodie guy stood off to one side, watching the game. Probably waiting for the drugs, so he wasn't Sebastian, but again, something about him seemed familiar. One of the boys broke away from the game and approached him. Jenna inched closer and hid in the dark shadow of the large trash receptacle.

“Hey, Ross!” The teen high-fived the man in the hoodie. “What’s up?”

Ross? She blinked and stared at the man in the hoodie. It couldn’t be.

“Not much, my man.” He turned, and his face came into full view as he scanned the empty James A. Henry parking lot.

Phillip? Jenna’s stomach plunged to her feet. *No.* She blinked, praying that she had seen wrong. But no amount of blinking would change the fact that the man was Phillip.

Maybe he was working undercover. No, Phillip headed up Chattanooga PD’s homicide division. He’d never worked undercover.

Like a bolt from the clouds lighting up the sky, clarity exploded in her brain and the puzzle pieces fell into place. Suddenly all the times that Phillip had cancelled their dates made sense. And all the times he’d pumped her for information about the gangs . . . and Sebastian. The last time she’d asked him why he wanted to know. Now she understood—he’d been keeping tabs on how close she was to arresting his partner.

What a fool she’d been.

Jenna held her breath and pressed deeper into the shadows as Phillip’s gaze swept past her hiding place before he turned back to the teenager.

“Meeting a friend,” he said, dropping his voice.

Jenna caught that part, but once Phillip turned to face the teenager, she couldn’t hear their conversation. They talked for a few minutes before the teen gave Phillip another high five.

My man. That’s what he’d called the teenager. Her legs turned to rubber, and she braced against the wall. The boy was one of Phillip’s dealers.

How had love blinded her so? Jenna hated what the gangs and drug dealers were doing to this neighborhood—just last week, two teens died in this very apartment complex from overdoses.

It was a never-ending problem that wouldn't go away until thugs like Sebastian were put in jail for good.

And Phillip was part of it. How much of what she'd passed on to him had benefited Sebastian?

Nausea hit her stomach so hard, she almost doubled over. Jenna clapped her hand over her mouth, swallowing the bile back down her throat. She had to get a grip. Sebastian would be here any minute. Jenna checked the time on her phone. Creasy should have texted he was in place by now too. No message from him, either.

Phillip turned toward her, and Jenna quickly snapped his photo with the digital single-reflex lens Canon, zooming in on his face. She was far enough away that he couldn't hear the sound the camera made. As a precaution, she used her phone to snap several and checked them. Grainy, but Phillip was identifiable.

Jenna emailed them to herself, wishing she had the same capability to send the photos on the camera. They would be clearer, which would be better for admission in court. She stayed in the shadows as the boy returned to the game and her ex remained on the sidelines.

Where was Sebastian? Minutes ago, she couldn't wait to photograph him. Now all she could think about was the fact that Phillip was somehow involved.

No wonder he'd been upset when she talked about bringing Sebastian in for questioning about the murder of a rival gang member.

"You'll never get evidence he was involved in the murder, and he'll accuse you of harassing him."

They'd argued, and he insisted it was because he was looking out for her career. She'd actually bought that when the DA agreed with him. But at least the arrest a couple of weeks ago for possession of two hundred grams of cocaine had stuck, even if he had made bail and was back on the streets within two hours. When

Sebastian was convicted—and he would be since there was no way he could wiggle out of those charges—he'd be looking at five years in a state penitentiary.

She wanted him gone for good, had been trying to nail him ever since transferring to Chattanooga's gang unit two years ago. He was like Teflon. Nothing stuck because no one had been able to get the goods on him. The message from her CI made her think that might change tonight. Jenna had to focus on that and deal with arresting Phillip when this was over.

Her heart stilled when a fancy Range Rover wheeled onto the school property and parked out of her line of sight. Three doors slammed. Probably two people in the front and one in the rear.

Jenna held her breath as Phillip jogged past her hiding place. Out of habit, she almost called out to him, thinking he would surely back her up. Evidently her mind hadn't processed the fact that her ex was a dirty cop. Once his footsteps faded, she slipped out of her hiding place and crept toward the corner of the building, then skirted what looked like a storage shed before she eased around it. Low murmuring reached her as she rounded another corner, and the Range Rover came into sight.

Instead of being near the back entrance, it was parked at the edge of the old school's parking lot in the shadows of an apartment building. The last unit with every light blazing caught her attention. *Lord, keep those people inside!*

A garbage dumpster sat near the Range Rover, and she wrinkled her nose as she caught a whiff of the sour odor emanating from it. If she could ignore the odor and reach the dumpster, she would be close enough to overhear their conversation.

Jenna hesitated. If she tried to reach it, she might give her position away, and that would blow the whole operation. Her current location would have to do. She raised the camera and framed the three men standing beside the SUV with Phillip facing them, his back to her. She zoomed in with the Canon for a good look at

their faces. One was Sebastian, one she didn't recognize, but the other was Viper, a known Scorpion member.

No one had ever been able to put Sebastian in the company of the gang. Jenna quickly snapped half a dozen shots as an ambulance wailed its way to one of the nearby hospitals, covering the sound of her camera. To be on the safe side, she took a couple of shots with her phone.

She needed a photo of Phillip and Sebastian together. She quietly shifted her position, and using her phone again, she zoomed in on Sebastian just as Phillip turned and looked over his shoulder. Bingo! Captured both of them. Jenna took a second to check the photos. Way too grainy, and Sebastian was in the shadows. Maybe a video editing program could pull out the details. Again she sent the photos to her computer before she switched back to the Canon. One man turned toward the Range Rover, opened the hatch, and took out a package.

Showtime. Suddenly a dark Grand Cherokee wheeled into the parking area on two wheels. She ducked back behind the shed as three men spilled out of the Jeep with guns blazing. The man she hadn't recognized with Sebastian dropped to the ground.

Sebastian and Viper returned fire, quickly dispatching two of the men from the other SUV as Phillip took off running. The apartment door on the last unit opened, and a small boy darted out.

"Daddy!" he yelled, running to a fallen man who lay on the ground as bullets pinged the ground in front of the boy.

No! This kid wasn't dying tonight, even if it blew her operation.

"Chattanooga PD," she yelled, stepping away from the shed. She wanted to run to the kid, but that would only draw fire his way. "Drop your weapons and get on the ground!"

The remaining gang member from the Grand Cherokee wheeled and fired at her. Jenna barely felt the sting in her arm as she returned fire. The shooter fell to the ground. Silence filled the

air. She quickly scanned the area for Phillip but didn't see him. She turned toward Sebastian and Viper.

Sebastian grabbed the boy and held a gun to his head. "Put your gun down," he ordered.

If Jenna did, she and the boy would die. Nothing like this should've happened tonight. This was supposed to be nothing more than gathering intel on Sebastian.

The boy squirmed against the drug dealer's hold.

Her surroundings fell away as she lasered in on the two. "No. Let the kid go. Put your gun down."

He shook his head. "Ain't happening."

Jenna kept her gun trained on Sebastian, but he used the boy like a shield. She couldn't take a chance on hitting the kid.

"Don't make matters worse for yourself by killing a kid and a cop." When he hesitated, she added, "Give yourself up."

A sneer formed on his lips as he turned toward her and barely shifted the gun away from the boy's head. Almost on cue, the boy screamed and flailed his arms and legs against Sebastian's body. "You killed my daddy!"

The boy wriggled out of his grip, and Jenna fired, hitting Sebastian in the chest. Instead of falling, he fired the automatic at her.

Her ears rang from gunfire. The last thing she remembered before blackness claimed her was the boy running for the apartment.

THREE YEARS LATER

A little before midnight the man pulled his vehicle off the blacktop onto an abandoned logging road in the Cumberland Plateau in Russell County, Tennessee. Seconds later he climbed out and shot a glance toward thick clouds that smothered the full moon. A gust of wind brought with it the promise of a storm. Hurriedly he slipped on the night goggles, adjusted the strap, and set out for his target.

Fifteen minutes later he emerged from the woods that abutted the property belonging to former Pearl Springs city councilman Joe Slater. He couldn't see the back of the house, but darkened windows along the front indicated no one was up. The garage was connected to the house with a covered breezeway, and he crept toward a side door. Once inside, he found Slater's fancy SUV parked beside his wife's Escalade. The GMC Hummer was the only vehicle Slater drove.

He slid under the SUV and found the nut assembly that held the tie-rod in place. Using tools he'd brought with him, he pulled the cotter pin locking the castle nut in place and let it fall to the floor while he tackled the nut. Once it was off, he wrapped it in a handkerchief.

He crawled out from under the Hummer, and his heart almost stopped at the opening click of a door. He wriggled back and snapped his flashlight off a split second before the door opened. Overhead fluorescents lit up the room. He barely breathed while he slipped his hand in his pocket, where he carried a Glock sub-compact semiautomatic.

Footsteps approached the passenger side of the Hummer. Plaid pajamas and leather house slippers came into view and stopped so close, he could grab Slater's legs if he wanted to. The man muttered something under his breath about an insurance card as he opened the truck door and fumbled in the glove box.

"Told her it was there . . ." Slater grumbled and slammed the door. "Don't know why she couldn't wait till morning."

Less than a minute later, Slater killed the lights, plunging the garage into pitch darkness. Tension eased from the man's body, and he took a shaky breath. *That was close.*

He checked his watch and forced himself to wait thirty minutes before easing out of the garage with the castle nut in his pocket. As tempting as it was to keep it for a souvenir, it might be better to toss the nut on the shoulder of the road for the cops to find—that way they would think it simply came loose and fell off.

He was halfway across the front yard when a dog yapped. An ankle biter—it figured that Slater would have the kind of dog that sneaked up behind a person and sank its teeth into their ankle when they weren't looking.

The front porch light flickered on, revealing a large "Harrison Carter for Senate" sign in the yard. He stepped back into the shadow of the garage, his jaw clenched so tight that pain shot down his neck. After a few seconds, the dog quieted and the light went dark.

A whip-poor-will's lonely call filled the June night as he entered the woods. Legend said that the bird was an omen of death.

Thunder rumbled, and he turned and stared at the dark house. Slater had lined his pocket with taxpayers' money for the last time.