



## Inside (Bulletproof series Book 1)

By Brenda Novak

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The California Department of Corrections needs someone to infiltrate another gang, one that's taking control of the state's most notorious supermax. Virgil agrees to do it under an alias—in exchange for his sister's protection.

Chief Deputy Warden Peyton Adams is opposed to having Virgil in her prison. How will she protect him if things go bad? Besides, she's far too attracted to him; she might even be falling in love with him. That makes her all the more desperate to keep him safe—and it gives *him* someone else to lose.

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## Editorial Review

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*Isolation is the sum total of wretchedness to a man.*

—Thomas Carlyle

Peyton Adams eyed the three men who'd driven to the public library with her from the prison, as well as the two they'd secretly come to meet. She knew what she had to say wouldn't be popular, especially with the warden, who was growing desperate enough to try anything, but she felt duty-bound to express her opinion. "I say no. It's too risky. Maybe if we put him in the Security Housing Unit we could protect him, but not in general population. No way."

Simeon Bennett, the person whose life she was attempting to save, sat across the conference table and hardly seemed grateful for her intervention. "You disagree?" she said when he narrowed his ice-blue eyes.

"I'm confident I can complete the assignment or I wouldn't be sitting here," he said.

An employee of Department 6, a company she'd never heard of but which was apparently a private security contractor out of L.A., he looked as tough as any inmate she'd seen in the sixteen years she'd been working corrections. Somewhere in the neighborhood of six feet four inches tall and two hundred and twenty-five pounds, he could've been hewn out of stone. With biceps and pecs that bulged beneath his carefully ironed dress shirt, and his blond hair shaved in a precise military haircut, he had an intimidating appearance. But it would take a lot more than muscle and a malevolent stare to survive inside Pelican Bay if he happened to spook the wrong inmate.

"I don't think you understand what it's like." She motioned at the door, which they'd just closed, to signify the prison, even though it was eight miles northeast of the library and shrouded in fog on such a cold January day.

It was plain that he wanted to argue with what she'd said but, for whatever reason, he leashed the impulse. Maybe he was saving up for the final salvo. Rick Wallace, an associate director at the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and the man who'd brought him, took up the argument instead.

"I know what we're proposing is unprecedented, but the problems at Pelican Bay are reaching critical proportions. Something's got to be done. The director is determined to uncover and prosecute whoever's responsible for murdering Judge Garcia." Forever conscious of his appearance, he straightened his expensive yet conservative tie. "Secretary Hinckley and the governor are both behind him on this. What with various newspapers around the state taking up the cry that Pelican Bay is a headquarters for gang violence, we've got to act and act decisively." A heavy-looking gold ring flashed as he motioned to Simeon. "Mr. Bennett

understands the risks involved. Although he's in the private sector, he's been working in the criminal justice world for the past decade or so. I say we give him a shot."

The tranquility of the library seemed to mock Peyton's agitation as she stood. "It's great that he has some experience at—where did you say?—this Department 6, but I'm sure nothing he's done in the past could prepare him for this. Besides, do you think he can handle the job alone?"

Simeon rocked back and gazed up at her with enough cool reserve to make her believe he was already an inmate, but maintained his silence.

"He won't be alone," Wallace said. "He'll have your full support, right?"

"You mean what little I can give him from the administration building, *right*? Once he's been knifed I can certainly see that he gets medical care, but—"

Wallace snapped open the slim leather briefcase he'd carried in with him. "Are you telling me you can't keep the inmates in your prison safe, Chief Deputy Warden?"

"Prisons are built to keep those on the *outside* safe, and that's where I suggest Mr. Bennett stay," she replied. "If he's dropped into our population and asks too many of the wrong questions, he won't live through the first week. And even if he does—"

"Your objection has been noted, Peyton." Finally deigning to speak, Warden Fischer cut her off and indicated that she should return to her seat. He'd been at the helm of California's most notorious supermax for only three years but, at sixty-one, he'd been in corrections twice as long as she had. He'd worked at Corcoran and San Quentin before Pelican Bay, was a personal friend of Arnold Schwarzenegger, the governor who'd appointed him, and ruled his prison with an iron fist. A product of the get-tough-on-crime sentiment that'd swept across the nation in the '70s and '80s—the precursor to prisons like

Pelican Bay—Fischer wasn't well liked by either staff or inmates. Stocky, with a barrel chest, bowed legs and a scratchy voice, he reminded her of a grizzled hermit. But Peyton did her best to ignore his rough edges. As far as she was concerned, he confused rehabilitation with punishment. She was merely biding her time until he retired. As second in command, she hoped to take his place, at which point she planned to guide the prison in a much more enlightened direction.

"Rosenburg, what do *you* think?" The warden turned to the much younger man on his left.

Senior Investigator of the prison's four-member police force, Officer Frank Rosenburg was in his late thirties and wore a police uniform instead of a suit. Charged with monitoring all drug and gang activity, as well as investigating any other crime perpetrated in or originating from Pelican Bay—including homicide, money laundering, bank robberies, home invasions, even pros-titution—Rosenburg and his men had their hands full. With 3,343 inmates incarcerated in the supermax, most of whom were level four—"the worst of the worst," to use a catchphrase Peyton had heard ad nauseam since accepting her position there six months ago—the ratio of investigators to inmates definitely wasn't optimal.

The Security Housing Unit, or SHU, was supposed to level the playing field. Approximately 1,200 of Pelican Bay's inmates resided in complete isolation with no break from their eight-by-twelve-foot concrete cells except for one hour a day when they were allowed to pace, alone, in a cement box the size of a racquetball court. Despite being constantly monitored and having no privileges, they managed to run extensive criminal

organizations that affected people inside *and* outside the prison.

Fingering his dark brown goatee, Frank scowled. "You know how it is, boss. We're working our asses off, but it takes hours and hours each day just to go through inmate communications. The bad guys are winning. I believe the Hells Fury are responsible for the death of Judge Garcia. Detric Whitehead or someone else put out the hit. Garcia was about to preside at Chester Wellington's trial, and the Hells Fury didn't want that. But I can't explain exactly how they pulled it off. And proving it? That'll be even tougher."

"So you like this idea," Warden Fischer prompted.

Barely five feet eight inches, an inch taller than Peyton, Frank glanced at Simeon. It was clear he *didn't* like the idea, but in deference to the corrections department, he was trying not to reject it out of hand. "I'd rather hire a few more officers who'd work under my command so we could handle this in-house."

"There's no money to hire additional staff. You know that." The warden drummed his yellowed fingernails on the table.

"We could ally ourselves with the Santa Rosa police, set up another task force, like they did for Operation Black Widow," Frank said.

The warden had begun to chuckle before Frank could even get the words out. "*That's* your answer? Operation Black Widow encompassed thirty government agencies, including the FBI. It took nearly three years and was one of the largest, most expensive investigations of a U.S. gang to date. If this state doesn't have the funds to hire a few more cops, it sure doesn't have the funds for another Operation Black Widow. You can bet the feds won't bankroll it. They have too many of their own problems right now."

Not pleased with this response, Frank sat taller.

"What we can't afford is a misstep. If we screw up, the Hells Fury will gain even more power. I don't have to tell you they're growing at an unprecedented rate, on both sides of the fence."

Wallace jumped in again. "Operation Black Widow succeeded because of an informant. That's what kicked off the whole thing, and that's what we're missing here. Without information—names, dates, places—we have nothing except a new gang that's quickly taking over Pelican Bay and moving into the streets of Northern California."

"Maybe we can get someone to flip," Peyton said. "Someone who's about to be paroled and wants to enjoy his freedom instead of becoming a foot soldier in some street regiment for the Hells Fury, which will only land him back in prison."

Relief eased the worry in Rosenberg's face. "Buzz Criven is due out next month. If we could offer him a deal—"

"Even if you offer him a deal and he accepts it, there's no guarantee he'd keep up his end." Warden Fischer pinched his nostrils, pulled and let go—one of his less attractive habits. "You know what's at stake for him, how those bastards lie."

"That's why I'm suggesting we create a mole," Wallace said.

*But at what cost?* Peyton wondered. Since when was a human life worth less than the expense of an ordinary investigation? If Simeon Bennett thought he'd be trusted by the Hells Fury just because he was white and appeared to be a fellow inmate, he was sadly mistaken. Gangs didn't work that way.

"Blood in, blood out. That's the code gangs live by, at least most of the gangs in Pelican Bay." She focused exclusively on Simeon. "You know what that means, don't you?"

Placing his hands on the table, he clasped them in front of him. They had enough knicks and scars to suggest he'd been in more than a few fights, but it was the words *love* and *hate* tattooed on his knuckles that caught Peyton's eye. Obviously he wasn't a typical cop—technically he wasn't a cop at all—but that didn't mean he'd be safe housed with convicted rapists, murderers and gangbangers.

"What, you want to give me some sort of gang quiz?" he asked. "Make sure I know the lingo?"

She straightened the jacket of her suit, a navy blue pinstripe with a pencil skirt she'd bought on her last trip to San Francisco. "You're saying you're willing to stab someone to get in? Because if *that's* true, I'll reserve a cell for you this minute."

He winked at her. "Now we're getting somewhere."

Peyton felt her mouth drop open. "*This* is who you want to put inside our prison?" she said to Wallace.

"Perfect, isn't he?" he replied with a grin.

To avoid an angry, knee-jerk reaction, she made a pretense of smoothing her hair, which was, as always, sleekly arranged in a tight knot at her nape—an efficient style that enabled her to feel slightly fashionable, despite working in a world where fashion played no part. "You *liked* his response?"

As calm, cool and collected as a politician, even when he was under fire, Wallace met her gaze with a level stare. "I think he's believable. And that's what we need."

In an effort to be as clear as possible, she leaned forward. "The point I was trying to make is this: it takes more than *words* to pass a gang initiation."

"Simeon and I have already discussed it," he responded. "We could stage certain...events. It'll require some cooperation from you, of course, but we can make a stabbing or... whatever else appear real."

Peyton picked up a pen someone else had left on the table to punctuate her words. "You don't get it. You can't choose who you stab. The Hells Fury set the mark."

"We'll figure it out." Wallace looked at Fischer as if to say, *Are you going to let her continue to fight us?* and Fischer spoke again, but he didn't rebuke Peyton. He seemed more interested in clarification.

"The department will pay for the investigation?"

Wallace hurried to confirm it. "That's correct. Why not? It'll be a bargain compared to what we'll need just to stop the bleeding if we don't head off this problem."

The warden was under constant pressure to trim the operating budget—every warden was, especially with

the economic problems facing California. This state had a higher percentage of its population locked up than any other and was struggling to support what it had created. But Peyton didn't believe saving money justified jeopardizing a man's life, even if that man was foolhardy enough to get involved in such a dangerous operation. She hoped the fifth person at the table—Joseph Perry, one of the associate wardens below her and the third man who'd ridden over with her to meet Wallace and Bennett—would speak up as she had. If he agreed with her, maybe Fischer would listen.

But she should've known better than to count on Perry. When she arched an eyebrow at him, asking for his opinion, he shoved his wire-rimmed glasses higher and remained mum.

"You don't have anything to say?" she pressed.

With a sniff—he battled constant allergies—he finally spoke in a characteristically nasal voice. "I, ah, I suppose it can work."

In other words, he didn't give a damn if it didn't. It wasn't his neck on the line.

Peyton turned to the warden. "At least take some time to think this over, sir."

"That's exactly what I've been doing." Fischer studied Simeon. "You sure you've got the balls for this, son?"

One side of his mouth twisted in the semblance of a grin, Bennett rolled up his sleeve to expose a tattoo that looked like a prisoner ID number.

"You're an ex-con?" Peyton cried.

Bennett didn't rush to explain. Buttoning his sleeve, he nodded.

"Oh, that's great." She leaned back so she could cross her legs. "That really makes me feel I can rely on you." What inmate tattooed his prison number on his arm? Only a very belligerent one...

He didn't seem to find her sarcasm warranted. "Considering your reservations, I'm more worried about being able to rely on *you*."

Peyton would have offered a retort, but the warden spoke before she could. "Why'd they put you behind bars?"

"Murder one." His gaze never wavered from her face, even though she wasn't the one who'd asked the question. He was interested in her reaction. Too stunned to speak, she gaped at him.

Rosenburg's chair raked the carpet as he shoved himself away from the table. "How long were you in?"

Simeon had read her shock and repugnance; Peyton could tell. His lips maintained that mocking grin, but this time he looked at Frank when he answered. "Nearly six years."

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