

KILLERS OF A CERTAIN AGE

a novel



It's kill or be killed,
but they've been at this
a long time....

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**KILLERS
OF A
CERTAIN
AGE**

Deanna Raybourn

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For P. You were right. I could. And I did.

I have wintered into wisdom.

—*Beowulf*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Some of the dates are misleading; some of the names are lies. I'm not trying to protect the innocent. I'm trying to protect the guilty. You'll understand soon enough.

CHAPTER ONE

NOVEMBER 1979

“MY MOTHER ALWAYS SAYS IT’S COMMON AS PIG TRACKS TO GO AROUND WITH A RUN IN YOUR STOCKING,” Helen says, eyeing Billie’s ripped hosiery critically.

Billie rolls her eyes. “Helen, it’s murder, not cotillion.”

“It’s not *murder*,” Helen corrects. “It’s an assassination, and you can make an effort to look nice. Besides, they’re supposed to believe we’re stewardesses and no stewardess would be caught dead with torn pantyhose.” Helen brandishes a familiar plastic egg. “I brought spares. Please go change while you still have time. I’ll start the coffee.”

The run is so tiny only Helen would have noticed it. Billie opens her mouth to argue and closes it again when she sees the tightness around Helen’s lips. Helen is nervous and that means her eye for detail is hyperfocused, searching out things to worry about. Better for her to fuss about snagged pantyhose than any of the thousand other things that could go wrong on their first mission, Billie decides.

“Mary Alice is on coffee detail. You go check on Nat,” Billie says, plucking the egg from Helen’s hand. She pops into the lavatory just long enough to strip off her ruined hose and shimmy into a fresh pair, emerging to hear the conversation from the cockpit. Movies again—of course. When Gilchrist and Sweeney aren’t debating the odds of getting Goldie Hawn into bed, they are trying to stump each other with film quotes.

“‘A deer has to be taken with one shot. I try to tell people that, but they don’t listen.’” The pilot waits while his copilot pauses the preflight check, screwing up his eyes in thought.

“*Monty Python and the Holy Grail?*” he guesses.

The pilot rolls his eyes. “Jesus, Sweeney, no, it’s not *Monty Python*. Did that line sound funny to you?”

Sweeney shrugs. "It could be." The copilot jerks his head towards the galley. "Skirt!" he calls.

Billie steps into the doorway of the cockpit.

"Yes, Sweeney?" she asks.

He pulls his mouth to the side, doing his best Bogart as he looks her up and down. "She missed being beautiful by just a hair, but the voice more than made up for it. It was low and smoky, the sort of voice that ordered whiskey neat and told the bartender to keep the change."

"I don't remember that in *The Maltese Falcon*," she says.

His expression is outraged. "It's original! Come on, I make a great Sam Spade."

"Don't quit your day job. What did you ring for?"

Sweeney repeats the quote. "What movie is it from? Vance just threw that one out and acted like I'd punched his grandmother when I didn't know it."

"*The Deer Hunter*," she tells Sweeney. She points to the pilot. "And his next line will be from *The Godfather*."

The pilot grins. "How do you know that?"

"Every other one of your quotes is from *The Godfather*," she says. She pauses and the pilot gives her an assessing look. She is perfectly turned out, from the crisp, uncreased uniform to the smooth, dark blond hair tucked into a neat French pleat. Her hands don't shake and her eyes don't dart around. But she is nervous—or excited. Something is thrumming under her skin, he can almost smell it. And it is his job to settle her down.

"You got this, Billie," he says in a low voice. "You and the others are good or they wouldn't have given you the job."

She smiles. "Thanks, Gilchrist."

He shrugs. "I've given you a lot of shit in training, but the four of you are alright—provided you make it through tonight," he adds with a heartless grin.

"That's comforting," she tells him as Sweeney laughs.

"Just remember the mission and you'll be fine," Gilchrist assures her. "Sweeney and I will be keeping the bird steady, so you girls are on your own back there unless something goes seriously to shit." His expression

says it better not, and she promises herself then that she'd sooner open a vein with a paper clip than ask him for help.

"Got it," she tells him. She watches him for a second as his hands move over the switches and levers, working through the preflight check. He is at ease, loose as an athlete who has trained and drilled until there's nothing left but the big game.

Sweeney draws her attention by giving her a nudge. "Tell the brunette I want a drink when this is all over."

"You know the rules. No fraternizing," Gilchrist reminds him.

Sweeney makes a noise like a wounded puppy. "Easy for you to say. You've got Anthea." He drags the name out on three syllables. "Ahhhhn-theeee-aaaah," he repeats in a country club drawl.

"You got a steady girl? Good for you," Billie says to the pilot.

He pulls down the visor to show a small snapshot of a girl with a dark flip like Jackie O's, a serious expression in her wide eyes.

"Pretty," Billie says.

"And riiiiiiiiich," Sweeney adds in a sulky tone.

"What's your problem, Sweeney?" she asks.

"I'm jealous, of course. He's got a rich, pretty debutante and all I've got is a stiffy for the little brunette with the curly hair out there."

"The little brunette has a name," Billie tells him. "Natalie."

"The future Mrs. Charles McSween," Sweeney says solemnly. "At least for this weekend." He raises a warning hand. "And don't tell me it's forbidden. That just makes it more exciting. It's like they're *daring* me to take her out."

Billie looks from one to the other. "I'm surprised neither of you is chasing Helen," she says. "She's the prettiest of us."

They both shrug. "Pretty, yes," Gilchrist admits. "Beautiful even. But she's what we Canadians call a Winnipeg winter."

"A Winnipeg winter?"

"Great natural beauty but capable of freezing your dick off if you're stupid enough to get naked," Sweeney explains. He surveys Billie with a practiced eye. "Of course, you would just—"

Billie holds up a hand. "Never mind. I don't want to know. Coffee is brewing. I'll have Mary Alice bring you some."

Mary Alice is pouring two fresh cups when Billie enters the galley. The air smells of burnt coffee and Mary Alice gives her an apologetic look. “I spilled some on the burner.”

Billie waves a hand. “Who cares?” She reaches for the foil-wrapped package of mixed nuts and sticks it into the warming drawer.

Mary Alice nods towards the cockpit. “How are our fearless leaders?”

“Quoting films and trying to decide which one of us they get to take home for the weekend.”

Mary Alice pulls a face. “God, I hate them.”

Billie lifts an eyebrow. “They’re not all bad. Vance Gilchrist just gave me a vote of confidence, a little pep talk for the evening’s adventure.”

Mary Alice snorts. “Only because he’s in charge and if we screw up, it’s on his head.”

“Probably,” Billie agrees. She reaches out and straightens Mary Alice’s name tag. It is printed with the name MARGARET ANN. Her own name tag reads BRIDGET.

Always choose an alias with your own initials, their mentor has told them. At some point, you will be tired or distracted or simply human and you will start to write or say your real name instead of your alias. It is far easier to correct your mistake without arousing suspicions if you have at least begun with the proper letter. Also, it means never having to change your monogram. Remember, ladies, your lives are lies now, but the fewer you tell, the simpler it is to keep them straight.

Helen appears, poised and unruffled although her eyes are unusually bright. “Showtime,” she tells them. “The Bulgarians are here.” Natalie joins them as they hurry to the side of the plane, watching through the round windows as the long black bulk of a limousine approaches.

“Oh god,” Natalie murmurs. “It’s happening. Finally.”

Helen lays a hand on her wrist. “Breathe, Nat.”

Nat pulls in a long breath, flaring her nostrils as she watches the car glide to a halt. The expected quartet of passengers gets out: the principal—a man they refer to only as X—his private secretary, and a pair of bodyguards.

“Oh shit,” Mary Alice says suddenly.

Billie leans forward, pressing her nose to the glass. The bodyguards carry nothing, hands free should they need to draw their weapons. They look like bears, heavily bearded and shaggy-haired, unlike the secretary, with his neatly shaven face and slicked-back hair. He has a calfskin case in his hands, slim body hunched over it to shield it from the light greasy rain that has begun to fall. X himself is cradling a small dog in his arms, an apricot poodle with a tuft of hair gathered into a silk bow.

“Nobody said anything about a dog,” Helen says faintly.

“I’m not killing a dog.” Nat rears back from the window, eyes wide. “I can’t do it.”

“You won’t have to,” Billie promises her. The others stare, and she realizes the flaw in the plan. The four of them have their orders and are supposed to be under Gilchrist’s command. But he will be secure in the cockpit, locked away from whatever happens in the cabin. And in the cabin, they are going to need leadership. It isn’t like their organization to make such a basic mistake, and Billie wonders if it has been done deliberately, a way to test them on their coolness under pressure.

Billie steps up. “The dog is a complication. But it’s not a now problem. It’s a later problem. The now problem is getting our guests on board and settled. Stations. Let’s go.”

To her astonishment, the other three obey, hurrying forward to arrange themselves attractively as the principal starts up the staircase of the aircraft. He is the sort of man who should have been flying on a luxury jet, a Beechcraft or a Gulfstream, something with sleek teakwood interiors and the latest gadgets. But his dossier says he is old-school, preferring twin-engine turboprops, the bigger the better. This one has two engines mounted in front of each wing, and they rumble to life as the propellers begin to move.

The quartet of stewardesses smile at X, a dour-looking man in his fifties who snaps his fingers as he stands just inside the open doorway, shaking the rain from his hair. His secretary waits patiently behind him, still shielding the case with his body. One bodyguard brings up the rear, standing with bovine stillness on the stairs while the other moves into the cabin. His neck is thick and his gaze is flat and unfriendly as he pokes a head into the cockpit for a quick inspection.

The pilots turn and Gilchrist flashes him a genial grin. “Jesus, you should warn a person.” He waits for an answering smile that isn’t forthcoming. Then he shrugs and turns back to his preflight check.

“You are not Henderson,” the bodyguard says in an accusing tone.

Gilchrist’s reply is cheerful. “Nope. Poor bastard got food poisoning. I warned him not to eat the bouillabaisse, but he wanted to go native. Now he’s crouched in the bathroom at the Hilton, spewing out of both ends.” He finishes with a laugh and looks at Sweeney, who joins in laughing half a beat too late.

“You are not Henderson,” the bodyguard repeats.

“Wow, you’re quick,” Gilchrist says, giving a good impression of a man whose patience is wearing thin.

“We don’t take off without Henderson,” the bodyguard tells him.

The principal pushes his way forward. “What’s the trouble?”

The bodyguard makes a gesture. “This is not Henderson.”

Gilchrist rolls his eyes. “Look, can we skip the rerun? No, I’m not Henderson. Henderson is sick and the agency called me. My credentials are right there,” he adds, pointing to the laminated ID clipped to his shirt.

“Let me see,” the bodyguard says, making a beckoning gesture with his hand.

“Christ,” the pilot mutters, handing over his ID. It is a fake, of course, but a good one, and Gilchrist isn’t worried. Sweeney continues to work methodically through the check, focusing on his clipboard and his instrument panel while the little drama plays out. The bodyguard scrutinizes the ID.

“Vincent Griffin,” he reads slowly.

“Excellent,” Vance Gilchrist tells him. “I see someone’s gotten the message that Reading Is Fundamental.” He gives the bodyguard a thin smile. Usually Gilchrist prefers an easygoing approach, but sometimes playing the jerk gets better results. And it is always more fun.

He puts out his hand for the ID but the bodyguard holds it close.

“What are you going to do, press it in your diary before you ask me to prom?” Gilchrist demands. “That’s my ID. If you have a problem, get on the radio. Otherwise, hand it over.”

They stare at each other, bristling like dogs. From behind the principal, Billie speaks up.

“Excuse the interruption, Captain, but I need your order and the copilot’s,” she says, drawing every man’s attention.

The principal turns to look and she gives him a cool smile. “Good evening, sir. Can I get you something from the galley before we take off?” She inches from him and he steps back to take a better look at all five and a half feet of her. The uniform, dark grey and severe, does her the favor of showing off a fair bit of shadowed cleavage and a knee he wants to get to know better.

He returns the smile with his lips but his eyes are cold and small. “Vodka,” he tells her. “On the rocks, and no cheap shit. I pay for the good stuff.”

“Of course, sir,” she says, holding his gaze a moment longer than necessary. “Would you care to take your seat? My colleague is preparing a selection of snacks and dinner will be served within an hour of takeoff.”

She holds out her arm, indicating the cabin behind her. The bodyguard makes a noise of protest, but the principal waves him off with a few choice words in Bulgarian. Billie leads the way to the first row of leather armchairs. The secretary has already taken a seat in the second row, wiping at the rain-spotted calfskin case with a towel Helen provides. Natalie is on her tiptoes, struggling to close an overhead locker while the second bodyguard watches with enthusiasm for the way her breasts bounce against her uniform shirt.

He says something in Bulgarian to the secretary, finishing with a rough laugh, but the secretary prims his mouth. Mary Alice is in the galley, pouring drinks and garnishing small bowls of warm nuts with salt to make the men thirsty. She smooths the uniform skirt over her curvaceous hips and carries out the tray, presenting the refreshments with a smile. She makes certain that the bodyguards have a hefty glass of something cold and encourages them to drink up quickly before the plane takes off.

“Something for every taste,” the principal says as he takes his seat, but he isn’t looking at the nuts. Billie motions towards the seat belt and he waves a dismissive finger.

“I know the drill. Vodka,” he reminds her. He settles the dog onto his lap, working his thick fingers into its coat. The backs of his hands are pale and she can see the veins, heavy blue ridges under the skin. She thinks of everything she has read about those hands, the things they have done, things they can never undo.

He glances up to find Billie watching him and he raises a grey brow at her, imperious, silently reminding her that her place is to serve. She smiles and the poodle lifts its head, giving her a superior look before it turns away. Even his dog is an asshole.

Billie gives him a deferential nod. “Of course, sir.” She goes into the galley and emerges a moment later with an icy glass and a napkin. She dips her knees, keeping them together as she lowers the glass to his tray. It is a technique the Playboy Bunnies use, graceful and attractive and a bitch on the knees, she thinks as she rises smoothly. “Is there anything else before we take off?”

He says nothing but drops a lazy hand to cup her ass as she turns. For an instant she stops, her eyes wide. Helen gives a short, sharp shake of the head and Billie collects herself, easing out of his grip with a vague smile that promises him a very companionable trip.

The men exchange a few more rough pleasantries in Bulgarian as the attendants buckle themselves into their seats in the rear. Mary Alice sits next to Natalie while Billie and Helen take seats opposite. Helen touches Billie’s hand while she clips herself into the seat.

“Keep it together,” she whispers.

Billie nods once, taking in a deep breath. It is all part of the job and she knows it. Nobody has pretended they won’t be harassed or groped or propositioned with ugly words and uglier intentions. In fact, they’ve been assured of it.

“We knew what we were signing up for,” she answers shortly. The phone on the bulkhead behind her rings once and she reaches for the receiver.

“Cabin,” she answers.

“Buckle up, skirts,” Sweeney says cheerfully. “Captain says we’re a go.”

“Yes, sir,” she says, slamming the receiver down a little harder than necessary as the engines begin to scream. They move forward, slowly at first, then gaining speed as Gilchrist opens the throttle, hurtling them down the runway and up into the twilight sky.

When they level out over the Mediterranean Sea, Gilchrist himself phones. Helen gives Billie a narrow look and takes the call. “Yes, Captain?”

“Cruising altitude. It’s time,” Gilchrist says shortly.

Helen hangs up without a word and nods to the other three. In unison, they rise, smoothing the creases out of their skirts. Mary Alice produces a case and unzips it. Inside are four hypodermic syringes, filled and capped. It was Nat’s idea to use the syringes; Mary Alice chose the payload. Sodium thiopental. In proper doses and administered intravenously, it is an anesthetic. Injected directly into the muscle in a massive amount, it will kill within a few minutes, a gentle, painless death that affords at least a little dignity. And it has the advantage of being quick and tidy, unlike other methods they might have used, Billie reflects, remembering Nat’s original suggestion of ice picks.

One by one, they pluck their hypodermics from the case. Helen hesitates, her fingers just brushing her syringe. She is the only one who asked in the briefing why it was even necessary to kill them, given what was going to happen afterwards.

Because one must never leave anything to chance, Miss Randolph, their mentor explained. This is the only job where overkill is a good thing.

Helen takes her hypodermic from the case and the four exchange one last look. Holding their syringes carefully, they turn to the front of the plane. Ahead of them, their passengers are nodding quietly, the chloral hydrate in their drinks taking effect. The principal stirs as they approach, putting out a hand to Billie, gripping her wrist. He lifts his lids halfway, struggling to form words against the heavy weight of the chloral mixed with alcohol.

“Why?” he demands thickly.

Billie reaches out with one smooth gesture and slides the hypodermic into his neck, pushing down on the plunger. “I think you know.”

He makes to claw at his neck, but the sodium thiopental is doing its work. His eyelids drop. She watches him slide into oblivion, easing his grip on her wrist as he lets go of life. She glances at the others, who are watching their targets with the same detached interest. After a minute, each puts a fingertip to the neck of her mark.

“Clear,” Billie calls.

“Clear,” Natalie replies.

“Clear,” Helen says at the same time.

“Shit!” Mary Alice rears back, the bodyguard’s hand at her throat, squeezing as he surges forward, the hypodermic dangling from his neck. He wrenches it out, flinging it in an arc that lands it at Billie’s feet. She sees at a glance that the syringe is still full. Mary Alice hasn’t depressed the plunger and the needle has broken off.

Mary Alice goes down hard, the bodyguard on top of her, throttling her as her face turns purple. The dog, startled by the commotion, starts to bark, jumping in circles. Helen scoops it up as Nat launches herself at the bodyguard on top of Mary Alice, landing on his back with as much impact as a flea landing on a dog. He raises one hand to bat her away, shoving Nat hard into the tray table and knocking the wind out of her. She whoops a few times, sucking in air as the dog continues to bark hysterically, struggling in Helen’s arms. The smooth, carefully plotted mission has turned into a goddamned circus, Billie realizes, and it is up to her to salvage it.

She reaches down, grabbing the slit in her skirt with both hands, yanking hard to tear it up and open to the waist. Strapped to her thigh is a knife, and she pulls it free as she straddles the bodyguard. Thank god his hair needs trimming, she thinks as she wraps it around her hand and pulls sharply. His head snaps back, exposing his neck. One quick thrust and she is in, severing the jugular as neatly as slicing a piece of steak. A twist of the wrist and she has the carotid as well, both vessels spurting blood in a fountain that sprays Mary Alice where she lies, gasping for air as she rolls out from under him.

“Jesus,” Helen says. The dog in her arms suddenly goes still and sends up a mournful howl.

“Don’t put the dog down,” Billie instructs. “It will lick up the blood.”