

THE PUZZLE WITHIN

THE GAME MASTERS | BOOK ONE

GINA HOLDER



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"Gina Holder has created a flawless tale of suspense in *The Puzzle Within*. Holder will keep readers racing through the pages until the final surprise ending. Highly recommended!"

— MARY ALFORD, *USA TODAY* BEST-SELLING
AUTHOR

"A heart-pounding, fast-paced, wonderfully twisty new series opener! In this gripping romantic suspense, professional stakes turn personal as two experts are thrust into what seems to be a straightforward assignment—but nothing in this story is simple, and complexity builds by the minute. As everything unravels, both characters find the healing they never knew they needed. I couldn't wait to see how it all connected, and Holder brought all the moving parts full circle with a breathtaking climax."

— JOANNA DAVIDSON POLITANO, CAROL
AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

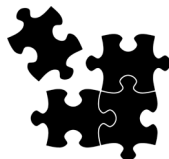
"Fasten your seat belts--*The Puzzle Within* will take you on a spin with hairpin twists and turns you won't see coming."

— PATRICIA BRADLEY, *USA TODAY*
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF ROMANTIC
SUSPENSE

*To my grandma, Elaine Allison.
I wish you were here to see this.
Thank you for always believing in me.*

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9 KJV).

CHAPTER 1



Friday, 02 February
1700 Hours

Ari planted her palms flat against the desktop and locked gazes with Senior Special Agent Matt Updike. *I didn't become a federal agent to babysit a diplomat's spoiled daughter.*

"Come on, Matt. Don't do this to me. I deserve a second chance."

"This is your second chance."

"I can't do this assignment."

Matt thrust the chair backward, rounded the desk, then closed the distance between them in two steps. "You don't have a choice."

His stale coffee breath blasted her in the face.

She wrinkled her nose, crossed her arms, and refused to back down. "I'll take it to the top."

A muscle twitched in his cheek. "Assignment came from the top. Director Carlton's orders. Shrink doesn't think you're ready." His expression softened. "Not yet."

"Not ready? How am I not ready? It's been six months."

Six months since her life spiraled out of control.

Matt raised his hands, palms out. "I know that, but there's nothing I can do."

She tried another angle. "Why isn't the Bureau of Diplomatic Security handling the situation? That's their jurisdiction, isn't it?"

He cleared his throat and returned to his seat.

"Matt?" A knot formed in her stomach.

"DSS is handling it." His gaze darted to a manila folder on the desk. "They're borrowing you." He air quoted the word *borrowing*.

"What am I, a library book? Why me?"

"Ambassador Nathan Van Sloan personally requested you. That's the only reason the director hasn't placed you on permanent leave. Carlton is not convinced you're fit for active duty." He jutted his chin toward the folder. "Don't make this any more difficult than necessary."

With a sigh, Ari perched on the desk and flipped through the contents of the file. A two-page report outlined the threats Ambassador Van Sloan had received of late. The most recent threat targeted his daughter, Bridgette.

Ari read the photographed note.

Daughters are life's greatest gift. Time with yours has ended.

-Enigma

She raised her head. "What do we know about this Enigma person?"

"Very little. That's the third threat Van Sloan has received signed that way, but no one's seen the perpetrator. No fingerprints. Nothing."

"Where was this message located?"

"Miss Van Sloan's bedroom. On her pillow."

Ari ran her finger over the 8x10 glossy of Bridgette Van Sloan, the ambassador's only child. The girl had been adorable as a toddler, but now at nineteen, she was stunning. Long blonde

hair fell in soft curls over the shoulders of a blue prom dress. Her arched eyebrows and duck lips matched the flirty persona she gave off to the world, but a smidgen of sadness reflected in her round brown eyes. Ari hadn't seen Bridgette in fifteen years. If half of what the media reported was true—the young woman hadn't changed a bit.

Ari closed the folder. "I still don't understand why it has to be me. I'm not Secret Service. I investigate child abductions."

"Look." Matt reclined. "Consider it a trial period. You keep Bridgette Van Sloan safe, and I'll speak to the director about getting you reassigned to CARD."

CARD—the Child Abduction Rapid Deployment team. Her dream job ever since her high school teacher had violated her trust and somehow skirted punishment. But what if the shrink was right? What if she wasn't ready to return to the field?

She shook off her insecurities. "When do I start?"

"Report to the Diplomatic Security Service's resident office here in Platte City first thing Monday morning. Ask for Nicholas Trueheart."

Ari coughed. "Trueheart? Seriously?"

Her boss arched an eyebrow. "You're in no position to judge. *Arizona Powers*. I put my neck on the line to get you this assignment. Don't make me regret it."

"I won't." She turned to leave.

"Hey, Ari?"

"Yeah?"

"For what it's worth, you're a good agent. Don't forget that."

"Thanks." She resisted the urge to slam the door behind her.

I can handle this. Keep the coddled coed safe until Enigma is apprehended. How hard could it be?

The Colorado sky blazed brilliant hues of pink and orange over Platte City as Ari maneuvered her teal MINI Cooper Convertible

onto the quiet residential street. She signaled, slowed, then made a left turn into the driveway of her two-story townhouse.

Barren rosebushes followed the concrete walk between the drive and her fiery-red front door. Two empty terracotta pots decorated the covered porch. The xeriscaped lawn required minimal attention, a necessity in her line of work.

Ari left the car in the driveway and entered the house through the well-organized garage. She carried her purse and takeout bag inside, then rapped the button on the mudroom wall. The garage door descended, blocking out the rest of the world. Inhaling, she closed the interior door and tried not to flinch when the lock clicked in place. Uneasy goosebumps raised on her arms. Would she ever feel safe enough to park inside the garage?

After setting her purse and dinner on the kitchen counter, she followed her normal routine, moving throughout the house, firearm in hand, checking exits and turning on lights, pausing only to adjust the thermostat, knowing it wasn't the chill in the air that made her shiver. Maybe if the nightmares went away, she could have trusted that nothing would harm her, but until then, she checked and rechecked.

Satisfied that everything was in order, she entered the home office, placed her weapon in the desk drawer, and pressed the on button for her whole-house audio system, starting her playlist.

Elvis's *Love Me Tender* vocalized over the speakers.

She changed into an oversized sweatshirt and leggings, then jogged downstairs to the kitchen, opened the takeout, and took a whiff of the Pad Thai she'd picked up on the way home. Her stomach growled.

The song changed to *Are You Lonesome Tonight?*

She shoved the plastic container into the microwave, set the timer, and pressed the start button. Even the soulful vocalizing of "The King" couldn't drown out the profound silence of living alone. She had gone on a few dates, but her demanding career always drove them away.

At least, that's what she told herself.

The microwave beeped.

Ari's cell phone rang.

Holding the electronic device in place with her shoulder, she retrieved her dinner. "Hey, what's up?"

"How went the meeting with Updike?" Aunt Sheila's voice carried over the line.

The background music morphed into *Hound Dog*.

As Deputy Secretary of Threat Investigations for the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, Aunt Sheila had the necessary security clearance to be informed of the assignment.

"Matt isn't giving me my job back. I'm being loaned out to DSS to protect Bridgette Van Sloan." Ari trudged into the living room, turned on the TV, muted the evening news, and settled onto the couch, tucking one leg under her.

"I know it's not what you wanted, but it's better than being let go, right?"

Ari slurped noodles. "That's one way to look at it."

"What's the problem? Is security detail beneath your pay grade?"

Ari jabbed at a sliver of red bell pepper. "No, it's not that. It's just not ... you know ... it's not what I do." She stabbed the vegetable with the fork tines.

"Which is what?"

Her head formed one answer, but her heart gave another. Unfortunately, her head and lips were on better speaking terms. "I track down the bad guys and throw them in jail."

Aunt Sheila coughed. "I thought you rescued missing children."

"That, too."

Ari's thoughts shot to all her open case files that had been reassigned to other agents after she had been admitted to the mental facility. Were any of them still active? Her mind wandered back to that last investigation—the one where everything went wrong.

"You there?"

Ari blinked. "I'm here. What were you saying?"

"I said it sounds like you're focusing on the wrong thing. Be patient. God isn't finished with you."

"I don't think He's paying much attention to us down here."

A heavy sigh carried over the phone. They'd had this argument before. "We have to believe He knows what He's doing, even when we don't understand."

Ari bit her lip and tasted blood. "A good God would never allow wicked men to get away with their crimes."

If I don't stop the bad guys, who will?

There was a long pause, then Aunt Sheila's voice broke the silence. "He will punish evil. Someday."

"Not soon enough for me."

A mortifying thought entered Ari's mind. "You didn't have anything to do with me getting this assignment, did you?"

Her aunt cleared her throat. "I might have made a recommendation."

"But Matt said Van Sloan requested me."

"He did. At my suggestion."

Ari groaned. "Aunt Sheila!"

"I was just trying to help."

"What happens when people find out? You'll be accused of nepotism."

"I can live with that."

Ari stuffed her mouth full of noodles, chewed, then swallowed. "Want me to stop by your office on my way in?"

"I won't be there. I'm out of town for the next couple of weeks. My office knows how to get in touch with me, if needed."

"What can you tell me about this agent, Nicholas Trueheart?"

Might as well get the four-one-one while she was at it.

"He's—hold on."

Voices chattered in the background. Aunt Sheila's voice grew soft, then louder again. "Sorry, I have to go. Can we talk later?"

"Sure."

"I'll be praying."

Ari appreciated the sentiment. Even if it was unnecessary. "Love you, Aunt Sheila."

"Love you, too."

The call ended. Ari placed her phone in her lap and turned up the volume on the television. She finished her lukewarm stir fry and set the empty container on the coffee table, then wiped her mouth with a paper napkin.

The Channel Four logo swirled around the screen, and the female newscaster began the evening report. "Local authorities have reopened the investigation into the death of Jayda Roach—wife of Raymond Roach, the CEO of AegisTech Solutions, and the daughter of retired General Cal Burgess.

"Four years ago, Roach was tragically murdered in her home. Local law enforcement identified no viable leads or suspects, leaving the case unresolved. However, new evidence has surfaced, reigniting the hope for justice and holds the potential to uncover the truth and lead to an arrest. When approached for a statement, Chief Wayland had this to say."

Police Chief Wayland's face appeared on the screen, where he stood behind a podium surrounded by microphones.

"We are committed to bringing closure to this tragic incident and ensuring that justice will be served. This discovery has provided us with a renewed sense of determination and a promising lead. We will spare no effort in our pursuit of the truth and will hold those responsible accountable for their actions."

The chief disappeared, and the camera returned to the newscaster.

"As the investigation continues, the community eagerly awaits further updates and remains hopeful that this new evidence will finally shed light on the mysterious circumstances surrounding Jayda Roach's untimely demise. Stay tuned for more developments as this story unfolds."

Ari changed the channel to a mind-numbing sitcom, then

rolled to her side. With her head on a throw pillow, knees bent, and feet tucked against her, she closed her eyes, allowing the droning voices on the television to lull her into a fitful sleep.

The ice-cold, pitch-black cellar stank like urine. Stone walls surrounded her on all four sides. A tiny, darkened window prevented anyone from seeing in or out. The little girl, curled on the stained, thin mattress, wouldn't stop crying. An eerie melody resonated from a wooden music box in her tiny hands.

Ari tried to soothe her. "Shh, it's okay. It'll be okay."

She touched the girl's soft cheek.

Eyes lifted to meet Ari's.

Ari's own face stared back at her.

With a scream, Ari bolted upright. Cold sweat soaked her hair, and her pulse raced. Her lungs demanded oxygen. Her skin crawled, and the scent of mildew burned her nostrils. The texture of sandpaper scratched her throat. Another nightmare.

Would they ever stop?

Hands trembling, she swiped her glass from the coffee table and gulped down the lukewarm water. She clutched the glass to her chest and rocked, her heart pounding against her ribcage. The disturbing dream lingered with an unease she couldn't shake.

Closing her eyes, she drew a deep breath, attempting to block out the depressing scene.

According to the doctor, the weight of her failures and of the horrors she'd witnessed over the years had left a heavy burden on her psyche, generating the hallucinations. Her brain was attempting to resolve the painful circumstances those victims endured.

Only ...

The nightmares had existed long before she'd become an FBI agent.

While the sitcom on the television continued its pointless blather, Ari forced herself to focus. She would face whatever challenges this assignment presented, just like she always had. She couldn't let personal problems or haunting dreams distract her from doing what needed to be done.

With a determined sigh, she set the glass on the table and stood. After stretching her stiff muscles, she shuffled into the kitchen to make a fresh pot of coffee. The night was young, and she had preparations to make and people to research before Monday.

Psychoanalyzing her nightmares would have to wait for another day.