

SECRETS OF THE GOLD by Baer Charlton

EXCERPT

Eight Years Before

Someone unexpected at the front door is exciting—for a nine-year-old girl. But time and experience change people.

“I’ll get it,” she squealed.

The sound of cheap sneakers slapped on the cheap flooring. Military housing, even off-base, has never changed. Expensive big toys were always more exciting for congressional representatives than looking after the troops and their families.

“Check the peephole before you open the door.”

The polished brass belt buckles dully reflected the peeling white of the door. The dark blue of the uniforms wasn’t what she was used to seeing around the base, but she had seen them occasionally.

Pulling on the door, she yelled over her shoulder. “It’s a couple of marines like Daddy.”

The enormous crash at the back of the small apartment ricocheted off the rigid walls and out the open door. It hit the two lieutenants hard.

One with their mouth half open.

The man looked at his female companion as she hurried into the apartment. The man reached for the girl’s arm.

“Mom?”

* * *

The California sun did nothing to brighten the day. The two lieutenants in dress blues stood a short distance away. The casket sat draped with flowers, but only two adults and a young girl filled the fourteen chairs.

The girl's hazel eyes appeared washed out—more watery-blue than green. The swell of her lower lip slowly sucked in and then released over and over. The blink had nothing to do with what the chaplain was saying. It had nothing to do with her world. The black dress didn't fit her, but at least it covered the scrapes and scars on her knees. The long sleeves performed the same service for her arms. The rusty blonde hair, chopped at the center of her neck, was the only acknowledgment of her being less than delicate.

The deep low rumble of the officer's voice left his Minnesota lips motionless. The sound carried only to his partner. "What now?"

The woman shrugged slightly.

"Any relatives at all?"

The woman turned her head slightly. "There's an older uncle. He'll be available, possibly in ten to fifteen—if he behaves this time."

The man frowned and looked out from the side of his eye. They had worked together long enough for the silent shorthand.

"Aggravated homicide with extenuating circumstances."

His eyes didn't move. He was waiting for the boot to drop.

"Beat his wife and then cut off her breasts and legs to let her bleed out." Her eyes moved to lock on his. "He caught her in bed with his best friend."

The man's frown furrowed deep. "And his friend? What did he do to him?"

The woman's eyes snapped to a distant tableau—seven marines with seven rifles for a different burial. "You mean *her*. His best friend since high school. He beat her to death with the waffle iron."

They both came to attention and saluted the three-shot salute of the honor guard from across the cemetery. The other funeral was well attended, even though it was unusual for military internment with honors to be held in a civilian cemetery. The passing thought was that the funeral was for a much-loved senior member of a large family.

"Did they cross-check the weapon of choice for a match...?"

If the dead were not theirs or family, they were fair game for lighthearted banter.

"The prints matched. The iron was still hot when he struck."

The last rifle volley faded away as three riflemen gave their squad leader a cartridge. The two officers watched as the squad leader marched over to the casket and began folding the flag with the

rest of the honor guards. The three shells folded into the flag forever. Some thought the seven riflemen firing three volleys was a twenty-one gun salute. But the tradition didn't come from salutes of Man-O-War dreadnaughts but to let an opposing army know they had cleared the field of battle of *their* dead. The three spent shells also had a simpler meaning than many thought—the flag was from a military funeral. Nothing more. They presented the folded flag to the soldier's spouse or parent.

The two officers couldn't tell the woman's age through the black veil. The man nodded his chin toward the small girl, who looked frightened by the whole proceeding. After that, they resumed standing at ease.

The female lieutenant spoke softly. "Child Services is picking her up this afternoon."

"None of the family friends could take her? Keep her in the same school or with people she knows?"

The woman rolled her eyes shut and opened them again as she faced the man. "You grew up a navy brat. How many new schools did you go to before you got out of high school?"

"Fifteen or sixteen." He looked back at the woman. "Dad was on the fast track. We lived on sixteen bases in seven different countries. He wanted dragons on both arms."

She nodded. "Yeah. A double shellback. I've seen a few. The tattoos become muddy, ugly, and smeared by the time you're eighty. But by then, who cares?"