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# RILEY SAGER

A NOVEL

# WITH A VENGEANCE

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# WITH A VENGEANCE

A NOVEL

RILEY SAGER



DUTTON





An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC  
1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019  
[penguinrandomhouse.com](http://penguinrandomhouse.com)



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Cover design by Tyriq Moore

Cover photo of Vintage 1930s Flying Scotsman Rail Train Poster by Shawshots/Alamy  
Stock Photo

BOOK DESIGN BY GEORGE TOWNE, ADAPTED FOR EBOOK

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Sager, Riley, author.

Title: With a vengeance : a novel / Riley Sager.

Description: New York, NY : Dutton, 2025.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024056777 | ISBN 9780593472408 (hardcover) |  
ISBN 9780593472415 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Thrillers (Fiction) | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3618.I79 W58 2025 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20250103

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024056777>

Ebook ISBN 9780593472415

Export ISBN 9798217046379

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland,  
<https://eu-contact.penguin.ie>.

ep\_prh\_7.1a\_151560562\_c0\_r0

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## Arrival

Acknowledgments

About the Author

\_151560562\_

*For my family*

# DEPARTURE

THE TRAIN ISN'T empty, although it certainly feels that way. Whole sections currently sit unused. Coach cars. Dining car. Sleeper. All are vacant and silent save for the echo of the train itself clickety-clacking over the tracks. This train that can hold dozens, even hundreds, is occupied by only eight people.

Seven are alive.

One is dead.

That wasn't the case a minute ago, when the whole lot of them were very much alive. But unexpected things happen when traveling by train, and this, apparently, is one of them. It certainly took Anna Matheson off guard. Her reaction makes it clear this isn't the plan at all. She seems honestly distressed by the body now splayed flat-backed on the floor of the first-class lounge.

A strange reaction.

Anna has every reason to want the others dead.

Those others, by the way, are the six people aboard this train at her invitation. One that, had they known who was doing the inviting, all would have declined.

Your singular presence is requested on an overnight rail journey from Philadelphia to Chicago beginning the evening of December 14 aboard the Philadelphia Phoenix

Departing Philadelphia at 7 P.M. EST  
Arriving in Chicago at 7 A.M. CST

Not particularly compelling, as invitations go. It's 1954, after all. No one wants to spend thirteen hours on a train when United Air Lines can get you to Chicago in just under three. Anna knew this, of course, which was why she added a handwritten message on the back, specific to each recipient. Although their misdeeds are the same, their secrets are different.

Those individualized notes were all it took to get the six of them here. They didn't care that they had no idea who the invitation came from or why it was extended to them. Nor were they bothered by the lack of a way to RSVP. They all showed up at the scheduled departure time, invitation in

hand. Now here they are—five guests, one hostess, her accomplice, and a corpse.

Not enough time has passed for color to drain from the dead person's face. Their eyes are wide open and aimed at the ceiling, and flecks of crimson stain the foam still bubbling at the edges of their mouth.

This, it's clear, was not a natural death.

Nor was it painless.

At least it was quick, the time between the first sign that something was amiss and sudden death totaling less than a minute. The victim didn't even have a chance to let go of the white linen yanked off a cocktail table as they fell. One end of the tablecloth remains gripped in lifeless fingers. The rest of it still clings to the table, soaked through with gin spilled from an overturned martini glass.

In another minute, someone will have the good sense to use a dry tablecloth to cover the corpse. Until then, everyone stares at it in combinations of shock and disbelief, none more so than Anna, over whose face ripple a thousand emotions. The biggest of them, though, is fear.

Because now that one of the passengers has been murdered—by someone else in that very car—she fears it's only a matter of time before it happens again.

**7 P.M.**

**THIRTEEN HOURS TO  
CHICAGO**



# ONE

ANNA MATHESON CLEARS her throat, straightens her spine, and steadies her trembling hands. She pictures herself as a statue, rigid and impenetrable. Anything to make her look like she's not afraid, when in truth she's been scared for so long that fear has seeped into her marrow.

Still, when she begins to speak, her voice is firm and clear.

"You know who I am. Just as you know why I've gathered you here. If you haven't figured it out yet, you will very soon."

Anna pauses, just as she'd rehearsed, the length timed to the millisecond to allow any unlikely stragglers to catch up.

"By now, you've recognized each other. Maybe you've even had a chance to chat a bit. Likely long enough to suspect that you've been brought here under false pretenses. That suspicion is correct. The reason for this journey is simple. I'm here to—"

Just then, the train lurches, sending Anna off balance. In the tiny bathroom of her room, she watches her reflection sway in the equally tiny mirror. The first time she'd been on the Philadelphia Phoenix, everything had felt enormous. Not just the room, but the train itself. Every car seemed endless, as if walking the entire length of the train constituted a journey of miles.

Then again, Anna had been eleven at the time, and trains loomed large in her life. Especially ones run by the Union Atlantic Railroad. Unlike most rail lines of the day, Union Atlantic had been privately owned. Her father had inherited the family business when her grandfather passed away. In another bit of unconventionality, it hadn't relied on an outside company like Pullman to build its cars and locomotives. Union Atlantic designed and manufactured its own in-house at a facility in Philadelphia, including the Phoenix. Anna's mother had even designed the interiors, filling them with her favorite fabrics and colors. Velvet drapes, chenille upholstery, damask

walls. All in shades of peacock blue, emerald green, and rich ivory surrounded by walnut and gold leaf and bronze.

After her mother, her brother, and Anna herself, the Philadelphia Phoenix had been her father's pride and joy. Debuting in 1937, it wasn't the first streamliner train, nor was it the fastest or the most famous. But those superlatives didn't matter. The Phoenix was still a gleaming marvel that offered both jaw-dropping speed and unparalleled luxury.

Plus, her father loved it, which is the main reason Anna chose it for the night's journey. It serves as a reminder to the others of all that had been taken from her.

The train lurches again, this time with purpose. A moment later, someone raps four times on the door.

Seamus.

Here to tell her what she already knows.

The train is in motion.

There's no turning back now.

Anna hurries to the door, feeling the train picking up speed beneath her bare feet. A strange sensation that, for a second, wreaks havoc on her balance and makes her reach for the wall to steady herself. No matter how many times she travels by train, it always takes Anna a moment to navigate that unwieldy combination of standing on solid ground while also being in motion. "Train legs," her father had called them.

Removing her hand from the wall, she stands in the middle of the room, waiting for her legs to learn how to absorb the gentle rocking of the train. Once they do, she's able to reach for the door, unlock it, and pull it open.

As expected, Seamus is on the other side, filling the narrow corridor that runs the length of the car. The windows behind him show nothing but blackness. They are now in the tunnel on their way out of the city.

"Everything going as planned?" Anna asks, unconcerned that she's standing at the door wearing only her slip. Seamus has seen her in far less.

"So far."

"And the engineer? Is it still Burt Chapman at the controls?"

Seamus responds with a nod. "Yeah. Watched him climb into the locomotive myself."

A relief. Burt Chapman has been guiding the Phoenix since the very start. He is, Anna knows, a good man. He sent a condolence card when her father died. It was the only one Anna and her mother had received. That act

of kindness made her think Burt could be trusted to take them to Chicago without any hiccups. The massive amount of money she paid him certainly helped.

“You’re certain he’s capable of doing it by himself?” Seamus says. “Thirteen hours is a long shift without any breaks.”

“Burt will be fine. He’s run this route so many times that he could probably do it with one hand tied behind his back. What about the rest of the crew?”

“They’ve been taken care of,” Seamus says. “Every conductor, cook, porter, and brakeman. Here’s hoping they still have jobs after this.”

Anna lets the comment pass. Seamus had made clear his concerns that the night might ruin the livelihoods of the innocent men who work on the train. Anna had considered it, too. Concluding that there was no other choice, she provided all of them with ample compensation. Three months’ salary, in cash, with a little extra going to those most vulnerable to punishment from their boss.

But the fates of the train’s workers are the least of Anna’s worries. She’s more concerned about its passengers.

“And the others?” she says. “Did everyone come?”

Seamus scowls, which worries Anna. Although he rarely smiles, Seamus’s scowl is equally elusive. Without it, she would have assumed the answer was yes. She knows these people. She knows what they can and cannot resist. But the look on Seamus’s face suggests something has already gone wrong.

And this is a journey during which nothing can go wrong.

“Yeah,” Seamus says, hedging. “But there’s a wrinkle.”

“What kind of wrinkle?”

Just then, a voice rises from the door at the end of the car. A man. Clearly impatient and self-important. Jack Lapsford, Anna guesses.

“Can I get some goddamn help over here?”

Anna ducks back into her room. He can’t see her. None of them can. Not yet. She nods to a still-scowling Seamus, reminding him that, for now, he needs to keep pretending he works for the railroad.

“Coming, sir,” he says, forcing an obsequious smile.

Anna closes the door and presses her ear against it, listening to Seamus make his way to the end of the car.

“How may I be of assistance?”

“You can start by telling me where all the damn porters went.”

With that comment, Anna knows with certainty that the man is Lapsford. The entitled cretin.

She locks the door, this time also using the dead bolt. She needs to be extra cautious now that she knows everyone is onboard. When she returns to the center of the room, her legs remain unsteady. This time, the culprit is Jack Lapsford’s voice. Hearing it reminds Anna of the enormity of this journey. What she intends to do. What she *needs* to do. How, after so much planning, it is now underway.

Anna picks up the manifest sitting atop the bed, reviewing the names and assigned room numbers of the six passengers invited onboard.

Sal Lawrence, Car 12, Room A  
Lt. Col. Jack Lapsford, Car 12, Room B  
Kenneth Wentworth, Car 12, Room C  
Herb Pulaski, Car 13, Room A  
Edith Gerhardt, Car 13, Room B  
Judd Dodge, Car 13, Room C

Each name ignites a flare of rage in Anna’s chest. These people—these six rotten, repulsive, *evil* people—are on this train at this very moment. If she wanted to, Anna could go down the line, moving from door to door, killing them all one by one.

And she very much wants to.

Which is why she and Seamus occupy Rooms A and B in the train’s eleventh car, leaving the third room there vacant. It serves as a buffer of sorts, protecting everyone from her worst instincts.

Anna drops the page and looks to the window, surprised to realize they’re out of the tunnel and moving steadily away from the city. For so long, she’d thought this night would never come. Now that it has, it seems to be going by faster than she ever expected.

The lights in the room flicker out for a moment. Not an uncommon occurrence on the Phoenix, which requires more power than most trains because of its luxurious trappings. Still, the moment of darkness is a concern, especially when it provides Anna with a clearer view out the window. The train now moves under a dark sky punctuated by large flecks of snow.

Anna had followed the weather reports and knew they'd likely be encountering snow. She just didn't expect it to be so early, assuming instead that the first flakes wouldn't be seen until the train was halfway across Pennsylvania. Now she worries about how large a storm awaits them as they move west—and if it will be enough to stop the Phoenix.

Because under no circumstances can the train stop.

To do so, even for thirty seconds, could completely ruin Anna's plan.

The lights flash back on, obscuring the view out the window. Forcing her legs into motion, Anna dresses quickly, assembling the look she'd worked so hard to cultivate.

Red dress.

Demure yet curve-hugging. Tailored to fit her like a suit of armor but with just enough give that she can run in it, if it comes to that. She suspects it might.

Red mules.

A necessary evil. The advantage is that the heels make her look taller, more formidable. The downside is that they could become a problem if she does need to start running.

Red lipstick.

Just because.

Blond hair pinned into a vaguely unflattering bun, a choice made with function and not fashion in mind. Anna doesn't want her shoulder-length hair getting in the way. It's the same with her jewelry. That means no necklaces, bracelets, or anything else that someone could latch onto. Other than diamond studs in her ears, the only accessory she wears is a single lapel pin that belonged to her father.

A tiny silver train engine pinned at her bodice, closest to her heart.

Then there's the knife. Flat-handled and boasting a four-inch blade, it's hidden beneath her dress, slid into a sheath strapped to her upper thigh. Anna thought it necessary, just in case she reaches a point when running isn't even an option.

As she studies her ensemble in the bathroom mirror, Aunt Retta's voice rings through her thoughts, bright with satisfaction.

*Now that, my darling, is how you dress for revenge.*

That was always Anna's intention. But even she's surprised by her appearance. She looks resplendent. One of her mother's favorite words, probably because it described her perfectly. Margaret Matheson had

possessed an elegant grace most women only dream about, Anna included. Her mother had that magical ability to make everything—from the most expensive of gowns to jeans and a flannel work shirt—look like it was fresh off the Paris runway, designed specifically for her.

Her parents' courtship had been brief but intense, with a mere two weeks between first meeting and being wed by a justice of the peace. The speed in which it happened prompted rumors of a shotgun marriage. Tommy's birth eight months later did nothing to quell them. The reason it didn't become a society scandal was twofold. Most of Main Line Philadelphia didn't openly engage in such gossip, and the few who did could see how besotted Arthur Matheson was with his new bride.

Oh, how Anna's father had gazed at her mother. Everyone did, of course. They couldn't help it. Anna, in particular, found herself frequently awestruck by her mother's sheer loveliness. But no one looked at his wife quite like Arthur Matheson. Every time he saw her, his face would go slack for a moment before lighting up with joy. And her mother would beam right back.

For a few months when she was very young, Anna had become convinced her mother was a movie star, for only people in the movies glowed that same way. Her friends' mothers certainly didn't. More often than not, they just looked dour and sad. But her mother? She positively shimmered. Which is why every time Anna went to the movies, she expected to see her mother's face flickering across that silver screen.

Even when that childish notion left her, Anna still believed her mother could have been a star, had she chosen to pursue it. Tommy, too, who had inherited her good looks and dazzling smile. He carried himself with the ease of a matinee idol.

It never bothered Anna that she took after her father, a man of unremarkable appearance. She grew up pretty but plain, displaying none of the sparkle her mother and brother possessed. To Anna, it didn't matter. She knew her family shared a charmed life.

For a little bit anyway.

Soon it was all gone. Tommy first. Then her father. Then her mother, whose light at that point had long been extinguished.

Anna forces herself not to think about all of that. She knew the journey would dredge up all those awful memories. She just didn't think it would happen this quickly. There'll be plenty of time to dwell on the past later. For

now, she has to finish getting ready for her grand entrance, an act she anticipates and dreads in equal measure. In the mirror, she flicks her gaze to the reflection of the open bathroom door behind her and the room beyond it. A chair sits by the night-shrouded window, designed to swivel so the passenger sitting in it can properly take in the passing scenery. Right now, though, the chair is turned to the bathroom, holding not a passenger but a black leather briefcase.

Inside it is Anna's past.

And, she hopes, her future.

Turning back to her own reflection, Anna quickly applies a second coat of lipstick. As her lips gleam crimson, she mouths the part of her speech that had been cut off by the train's sudden lurch into motion.

"The reason for this journey is simple," she says, staring into the mirror but picturing the men and women she has lured onto the train. "I'm here to get justice. Because I have irrefutable proof that the six of you are responsible for destroying my family."