

A GERRIT O'ROURKE NOVEL

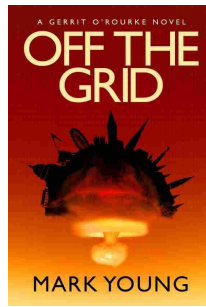
OFF THE GRID



MARK YOUNG

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A Gerrit O'Rourke Novel



By Mark Young

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Joseph Costello
A man who peered into the future
And understood the good and the bad

Prologue

Fallujah, Al Anbar Province, Iraq, December 2004

They were on their own.

Diesel growls from M1A1 Abrams tanks beckoned from a distance. Tanks circled the city like lumbering metal horses of war, though their mighty firepower could do him and his men no good here. Narrow city streets permitted only pedestrians and small vehicular traffic to squeeze through. No room for armored cavalry to maneuver, only small arms and hand-to-hand combat worked in these tight places.

Gerrit O'Rourke eased himself to the dusty floor, quietly resting his rifle against the wall. Gazing upward, a black cavernous hole in the ceiling, carved out some time ago by an explosive fist from an artillery shell, offered him a glimpse of a blue heaven. Next to him, a stairwell led to where his men stood watch on the second floor after they ate. His turn for a break after a long tense watch.

A puppy—caked with dust the color of sandstone—clambered over rubble. Gerrit eyed the dog as he heated his MRE, Meals Ready to Eat, featuring chicken with salsa. He studied the four-legged creature as it cautiously drew closer. A tiny rib cage, poking through matted fur, announced just how hungry the animal might be. Dark, mournful eyes stared at Gerrit's meal.

He lowered a green plastic pouch and squeezed out a few morsels of meat onto a flat stone. "Hey dog, wanna try a little spice in your life?"

The puppy snapped them up like a hungry bird, then sat on its haunches whimpering for more.

He squeezed out another hunk of meat just as an enemy sniper opened up.

Gerrit scrambled for his M16 assault rifle and sprinted up the stairwell to the second floor. As he low-crawled toward an open window, he glanced at the rest of his team, sprawled out below several other windows, to make sure everyone was present and accounted for.

"You see where it came from?" Gerrit whispered, pressing against the wall and slowly peering around the window frame.

"Yeah, Lieutenant. Somewhere at twelve o'clock. Don't think he spotted us." The Marine—a gangly young man from Georgia nicknamed *Peaches*—lay on his side, glancing at Gerrit. Peaches carried one of the radios for the team. "I think he was shooting away from us, sir. In that direction." He pointed in the direction where the sniper lay hidden, toward the west, where the late-afternoon sun slowly sank toward the horizon.

Nodding, Gerrit edged his head higher, scanning the rooftops beyond. No movement. They had been sitting here since before daybreak, easing into position during the chilly predawn darkness.

Something nudged his leg. Looking down, he saw the puppy sniffing his pockets. Somehow, those short legs made it up the stairs.

Peaches grinned. "Hey, Lieutenant, who's your friend?"

Gerrit reached down and patted the puppy's head. The dog peered up, tail wagging, too young to be afraid. "This little guy is hungry."

He surveyed the street—scarcely more than an alley—as it cut a canyon between low, squat buildings, a dusty corridor draped in shadows and protected from the onslaught of the afternoon sun. Movement on the street made him tighten his grip on the M16. He spied several figures moving in single file fifty yards away, sneaking toward his position.

"We've got company," he whispered, pointing toward the gunmen. "At least five, heavily armed."

No, wait. There are more. Plenty more, coming our way.”

He motioned toward his radioman, carrying one of the unit’s AN/PRC-148 radios. Peaches handed over the external handset. Gerrit grabbed it and in a few moments forwarded their coordinates and the direction and travel of the enemy.

Yesterday, he and his men from the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion had been ordered to sit tight and report without contact—if possible. Eyes and ears only. Intelligence believed they would be greatly outnumbered in this part of the city, with other Marines too far away to help. After a month-long push of door-to-door combat, a small lull had crept across the war-torn city as Operation Phantom Fury bore down on this ancient city. Some old-timers were comparing this battle to the U.S. Marine operation in Hue City during the Vietnam War because of the nature of the operation and the high number of casualties.

Gerrit crawled over to his men. “Get ready to rock and roll. We have units moving into place. They want us to hunker down. Just be ready to fly if need be.”

The others nodded and spread across the room as quietly as possible.

The puppy nudged Gerrit’s pocket, whimpering.

He stroked the animal’s matted fur, hoping this would keep the puppy quiet. More movement caught his attention. An Iraqi resistance fighter, dressed in loose-fitting clothing and carrying several bandoliers of ammunition, loomed into view, an AK-47 held at the ready. He stealthily moved out of Gerrit’s line of sight in the direction of the other fighters.

Just as a second fighter crept by, the puppy yelped. The gunman jerked his head up toward the window.

Tensing, Gerrit waited. He did not think the man could see him from the street, but just in case he gripped his rifle and withdrew into the shadows of the room.

Motionless, Gerrit watched the fighter scan the building, rifle pointed toward their position. His mouth felt dry as he waited to see if the man might spot them.

Finally, the gunman lowered his gaze and moved out of sight as another combatant followed close behind on his heels. And another. And another. A minute slipped by. Silence filled the dry, warm air as the waning sun still baked the clay walls. He could hear footsteps below and saw more men moving in single file.

Soon, the street appeared empty. The enemy had moved farther down the street. He estimated about twenty men had slipped past their position. Maybe more.

Booom! The crunching sound of a mortar round hit about a hundred yards away. Other rounds quickly followed until it seemed one explosion blended into the next with a continuous blast.

Peaches rolled over and tapped Gerrit. “Sir, how’d you give out those coordinates without looking at a map? I’ve seen ya do this before, but I forgot to ask.”

Gerrit glanced toward the explosions. “I memorized them when we set up here. Just recalculated where the Ali Babas would intersect with our units.”

“Man, that’s so cool.”

Gerrit shrugged. “Let’s get ready to move. As soon as it gets dark enough, we’re pulling out.”

Peaches juttled out his chin. “Lieutenant, you got a new recruit.”

Looking down, Gerrit saw the puppy huddling next to his leg, explosions making the tiny animal shake. The louder the sounds, the more the dog shoved against Gerrit’s leg trying to find a place to hide. He scooped up the dog and held it against him. The puppy wiggled deeper, burying its dirty head into the crook of Gerrit’s arm.

“I think it loves ya, Lieutenant. Whatcha going to call him...Devil Dog?”

Gerrit laughed. “Nah. How ’bout Bones? Look at those ribs sticking out.”

The younger man smiled. “That dog is one heap o’ bones.”

Explosions from incoming mortars suddenly ceased. An eerie silence followed until he heard the sound of men running down below. He signaled a warning to the others. Suddenly, a man's head popped up on the rooftop directly across the street. A turbaned gunman, rifle in hand, peered toward where the mortars had struck earlier. If the fighter turned toward them, he could see right through the window where Gerrit and the others lay.

Gerrit lowered the puppy and raised his rifle just as the man glanced down. Squeezing off several rounds, Gerrit saw the man jerk back and drop out of sight.

Gerrit sat up. "Let's get out of here. We've been spotted. There must be others."

Another head emerged. One of Gerrit's teammates fired back. The team scooped up their gear and scrambled toward the stairs. Gerrit realized he'd snatched up the puppy without thinking. For a moment, he thought of flinging it away to leave his arms free. Instead, he yanked open a thigh pocket on his pants and shoved the puppy inside as he ran.

Just as he reached the stairs, several rounds slammed into the wall next to him as he hustled through the doorway. One team member fired back as the others dashed to safety. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the last team member make it safely through the doorway as they single-filed down the stairs to ground level.

"Do not engage unless there is no other option," he yelled. More fighters were moving into the area. A sweep would be coming their way, and he didn't want his men caught in the cross fire. "Let's move out."

They began moving away from the sound of enemy gunfire. The building opened up on a parallel street, a large hole punched by an artillery shell. One of his men poked his head through the hole, glancing both ways down the street before crossing. Another Marine moved in to cover, as the first team member charged across the street and kicked in the front door to another dwelling.

The team cleared the next building and leapfrogged their way from building to building. They worked their way about another hundred yards before they felt comfortable the enemy had given up pursuit.

In the last building they came to, Gerrit found an interior courtyard built around a small fountain of cobblestones creating a small pool. The water, barely running, seemed fresh. Oddly, in this war-torn city, this courtyard seemed to offer a moment of tranquility.

Gerrit motioned the others to gather round. "Okay. Let's sit tight until dark. Then we'll make our way back home." He directed several of the team members to clear the building above them to make sure they were alone and directed two guys to stand watch on the top floor. The others spread throughout the building to stand guard.

Bones squirmed as he tried to thrust his nose through the pocket flap. Gerrit smiled as he reached down to withdraw the puppy and carefully set it next to the water. The puppy thirstily lapped it up, stopping for a moment to glance back at Gerrit.

He shook his head. "What am I going to do with you, Bones?" The puppy seemed to have enough water and sniffed around Gerrit's boots. The dog lifted a leg and peed on his boot. "That's how you show me gratitude, you fur ball?"

Peaches, sprawled a few feet away, tried to stifle a laugh. "Hey, Bones. Y'all got to learn a little respect."

Warily, the Recon unit slipped into headquarters just before dawn. They'd crept through the city as quietly as ghosts, using night-vision goggles to navigate their way until they hooked up with the transport unit back to this compound.

The men plodded to their cots, anxious to catch some shut-eye before starting out again. Gerrit handed Bones off to the radioman. "Since you think the dog's so funny, you baby-sit this mutt till

report in. The comm. center says the old man wants to see me.”

“Yes sir.” Peaches held the dog as far away as possible. “Man, this here dog stinks to high heaven. What kinda dawg is he?”

“Looks like a cross between a mud-colored lab and a who-knows-what breed. He’s a mutt.”

Peaches seemed to be reading his mind. “Please, Lieutenant. Don’t make me do it.”

Smiling, Gerrit shook his head. “Just keep an eye on him. I’ll clean this freeloader up when I get back.”

Peaches opened up an empty locker—left behind by another Marine who just shipped out—and gingerly lowered the animal inside. “Okay, dog. You can pee all you want until the lieutenant gets back—just don’t poop.”

Peaches always made him smile. The team slapped that nickname on him over beers after he drunkenly boasted that Georgia girls thought he was “sweeter than peaches and cream.” No matter how hard he tried, Peaches couldn’t shake that handle. It stuck to him like Super Glue.

Gerrit made his way to the CO’s hooch, raised in the middle of the compound the Marines had taken over for the duration of Operation Phantom Fury. Enclosed in concertina wire and earthen bunkers, the battalions’ nerve center consisted of green-canvassed tents enclosed by waist-high sandbag walls. Headquarters seemed to be drowning in waves of dust raised by passing trucks, Humvees, and other motorized vehicles.

Gerrit rapped on the door to the major’s quarters, a plywood entryway that led to the commander’s tent. “Permission to enter, sir.”

A growled response from within led him to believe permission had been granted. Inside, Major Jack Thompson sat at a folding table, maps spread out in front of him.

“Sir, received your message. My unit just returned.”

“Take a load off, Lieutenant.” Major Thompson pointed his chin toward a folding chair next to his desk. He peeled off his reading glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Close-cropped dark hair dusted with gray and a wrinkled weather-tanned face gave no hint as to Thompson’s age. “G2 update me on your run-in yesterday. Good job calling it in, sitting tight, and keeping your troops out of harm’s way.”

“Thanks, sir. Good men. Good Marines.”

Thompson frowned. “They are, but that’s not why I called you here, Gerrit.”

Hearing the major call him by his first name made Gerrit tense. He waited for the man to continue.

“I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news.” Thompson turned, facing him. “There’s no easy way to say this, so I’ll just spit it out. I’ve just been advised your folks were killed in a car bomb two weeks ago. Somewhere in the Seattle area. And your uncle ... he turned up missing.”

A chill grabbed Gerrit’s chest, icy fingers refusing to let go. His world seemed to slow down and the sound became distorted. Numbly, he stared at Thompson, finding words hard to form. “Why? Do...do they know who did this?”

Thompson shook his head. “I made a few calls and learned that Seattle PD’s running point on this case. The feds are assisting. So far, they don’t have squat.” The major leaned forward. “I’ve cut orders to send you back home.” He paused, looking down at his hands for a moment. “I’m sorry to add to the weight on your load...but they couldn’t wait on the funeral. Those idiots couldn’t seem to find you. A closed casket affair. A few of your dad’s friends got together from MIT and buried them near your home in Boston.”

Thompson’s face seemed to soften. “Son, I want you to go home. Make your peace.”

Gerrit felt the chill disappear. “Sir, my men...the operation.”

The major waved his hand. “Our operation here in Fallujah is winding down, and orders will be coming down to rotate some of you guys in 1st Recon Battalion stateside anyway. In your case

rotation just came a bit early.” He stood. “Go home, Gerrit. Take care of your family.”

Gerrit eased to his feet. “Sir, I have no more family. Everyone’s dead or missing.”

Thompson placed a hand on Gerrit’s shoulder. “You got your father’s Irish looks and his ruddy brown hair, but you have your mother’s smile. They were good folks.”

Gerrit shot him a quizzical look. He never knew the major knew his folks.

“I met them years ago at one of those highfalutin’ D.C. parties. We kept in touch over the years. Once your dad learned I was your CO, he’d drop me a line once in a while to see how you were holding up.”

Something seemed to make the older man draw back. After a moment, Thompson continued. “Come home and take care of the dead, son. Your mission here’s finished.”

“But—”

“That’s an order, Marine.”

Gerrit stiffened and saluted before turning to leave.

“And may God have your back.”

Gerrit closed the door behind him without responding.

The sun was just rising, casting a golden hue as it chased the shadows of night toward the west. Black, acrid smoke rose in the distance. He heard a helicopter whirl past. An overpowering smell of diesel fuel hung in the air, a part of the stench of war wherever men and machines clashed in battle.

Unclenching his fist, he reached into his pocket and withdrew a pocket watch his father gave him the day he received his doctorate degree from MIT. He flicked the watch open and gritted his teeth as he studied the photo of his mother and father attached to the lid, protected by glass. They were smiling back, proud of their son, enjoying a moment of academic achievement as the last remaining member of the O’Rourke clan earned the right to be called *doctor*. They could call each other that now—but they never did. Status did not mean much inside their family circle.

And then—with a grimace—he remembered the last time he saw his dad. The day before he shipped out to Iraq for this last tour of duty. Angrily, his father implored him to remain at the university, to help him with a research project clouded in secrecy. “I have connections; I can get you assigned to work here with me.”

When Gerrit pressed for details, his father refused to divulge the nature of the research without Gerrit’s promise to help. Instead, Gerrit refused to allow his father to intercede. He knew he was needed here—in Iraq—serving with his men. It would be the last time he and his father spoke to each other in this life.

Whatever path Gerrit traveled, death and war seemed to hover. Now this dismal road led to Seattle. Car bomb? Why? How?

He trudged toward the tent where his men were most likely fast asleep. Tiredness and sadness unbearably weighed him down. The major’s news had just shaken Gerrit’s world off its axis, and that final jolt, he felt all alone. He was the one who should have been in harm’s way. Not his folks. Not in America.

As he reached his tent, Gerrit paused and looked at the rising sun before reaching for the door. He must start packing for the trip home, even though only the dead waited for him there.

Chapter 1

Seattle, Washington, December, Present Day

A sense of trouble seemed to bear down on him as hard as the chilly blast of wind off the water. Gerrit O'Rourke pulled his navy-blue pea coat tighter, fending off a face-numbing gust straight off the Puget Sound. Leaning over the railing, he appeared to be watching the ferry's bow plowing through swelling waves. Instead, he stole a look along the deck, studying other red-faced strangers in the crowd, small groups of commuters and tourists.

No informant yet. No killers trailing behind.

A comforting bulge beneath his coat—a holstered semi-auto .40 Smith & Wesson—gave him confidence as he thought of Nico Petrosky and the man's trigger-happy goons. The Russian crime boss planted eyes and ears everywhere—even in law enforcement.

The informant's voice had sounded tense over the phone. Gerrit agreed to this meeting because he sensed trouble. On the flip side, it would not be the first time this guy, plastered on drugs or alcohol, feigned danger while demanding more money.

Nico Petrosky was an animal. A wealthy animal. The man had been in Gerrit's sights ever since he joined the police department. Even before he was hired though, he never revealed this fact to the background investigators. The name emerged again a few years back when Gerrit, alerted by a tip from the LAPD's vice squad, found a shipping container stored on the docks in Seattle, waiting for transport to San Francisco. Inside, they found twenty Russian girls—ages ten to fifteen—cowering inside, half starved. The girls were bound for the sexual slave market on both the East and West coasts.

He found the body of one girl—barely ten years old—curled up in a ball. The coroner would later determine that the girl died from pneumonia and starvation. The sight still haunted him. He swore that day to hunt down those responsible for this atrocity. The girl's death and leads from the container led to Nico Petrosky. He knew this dirtbag benefited from these crimes, but so far, Gerrit's unit had not been able to prove it.

A chrome-glazed December sky hovered as if warning of pending trouble, darkness only a few hours away. He cast a glance toward sheltered passengers, comfortably ensconced behind thick-plate windows, customers bellying up to the bar for another round to ward off the cold. No one looked familiar. Beyond, Seattle's skyline twinkled with illumination across the waves, beacons of light spewing from high-rises, growing brighter by the moment across a darkening sky.

The city's silhouette brought a knot to his stomach, a reminder of the past that drew him to the seaport. Painful memories muscled in on him like the jostling crowd he was watching right now. Wrenching his attention back to the present, Gerrit suppressed those memories, pushing them deep inside. He glanced around once more for the informant.

"Maybe a no-show?" he whispered into a mike hidden near his shirt collar.

Looking toward the upper deck, he spotted Mark Taylor, another Seattle PD detective, shaking his head. Taylor's rich, dark skin stood out among the crowd of pale white commuters standing around him, the only African American assigned to the squad when Gerrit joined the unit.

It had been seven years since Gerrit left the military and surprised everyone when he applied as a police officer with Seattle. He'd worked his way into special assignments, always focusing on positioning himself within the department to investigate his parent's bombing. And now he was working

intelligence. The first day they teamed up together, Taylor took one look at him and shook his head.

~~“This ain’t gonna work, bro. A military guy with a college degree and a *brotha* from Chicago Southside just smacks of trouble.”~~ They worked out their differences over time, Gerrit finally managing to overcome Taylor’s suspicions.

Gerrit keyed his mike. “Did you know that of the 70 percent of people who died in boating accidents in 2009, 84 percent did not wear life jackets?”

Taylor’s voice came through a transmitter lodged in Gerrit’s right ear. “What are the stats on how many cops shot their partners while traveling on a ferry boat? Do you realize how cold it is up here?”

“Chill out. Until today, zero cops have fired on their partners while riding on any watercraft.”

“If we don’t end this soon, I may change those stats. How ’bout we call it quits? This guy’s in the wind.”

Gerrit turned away, resting his arms on the wooden railing. “Might as well stay with it until we hit the dock.” They were about fifteen minutes out of Seattle’s Pier 50 terminal, heading to Bainbridge Island.

He glanced over the crowd one more time and saw a familiar face sliding through the throng. “G’em, Mark. Coming my way at three o’clock. Where did this guy come from? Hiding in the john?”

Two clicks signaled Taylor understood. Gerrit pushed off the railing, one hand ready to reach under his coat for his S&W.

The informant—a gaunt, birdlike creature with raven-black hair and even darker eyes—sidled alongside a moment later. Clothes hung on the man like a straw-filled scarecrow in the middle of a cornfield. A tanned fleece jacket with blotches of dark grease flapped in the gusty wind like a seagull trying to take off.

As Birdman leaned closer, Gerrit caught a whiff of skid-row perfume—wine and urine—overpowered by fear-drenching sweat. Birdman, real name *Gregori* in the snitch file, seemed to be coming unglued.

Cautiously, Gerrit eyed the informant, watching the guy’s eyes and hands for any sign of danger. “What happened to you? You’re a mess.”

The man next to him did not even resemble the lab rat Gerrit had rolled as an informant. He studied Gregori’s lifestyle, his appetites, and found the man’s Achilles heel: money and a promise of a new life. The man standing before him seemed to have lost his nerve after stealing from Nico. Gerrit had not heard from him in weeks. Now he knew where Gregori must have been hiding. In a bottle somewhere deep in a skid-row sewer.

“I th-think someone’s on to m-me. I run,” the informant stuttered, his lips cracked and dry. “I think dis whole thing mistake.” His Russian accent and wine-influenced English dropped and smashed words together like a giant blender.

“Gregori, stay cool. You’re the one who called me. Said you made copies of what Nico stole. Sometimes he needed to speak to the informant as if he were communicating with a child. “If you’re not blowing smoke, then we’re almost to the finish line. And you’re off to Witness Protection and a new life. Don’t blow it now.”

Birdman straightened. “You ... You drop me in danger. They like sharks. They smell my blood. They ...oh, man, I wish we never met. They know! I feel it.”

“How can they, unless you let it slip?” Gerrit glanced beyond him, eyeing the throng once more. Something really spooked this guy. He looked for a face that might raise a warning flag. Normal crowd. Normal commuters. Bainbridge only ten minutes away. “Tell me why this was worth my time.”

The man reached into his grimy jacket and withdrew a thumb drive. “Download all dis stuff. A right here.”

Gerrit started to reach for it, but the man jerked back, clenching it in his fist. “First, you, how you say, immunize me. And protection. I dead man if this gets out.” He waved the clenched fist holding the computer drive.

A clicking noise chirped in Gerrit’s earpiece alerting him that Taylor was about to transmit. “We got a boat tailing us forty yards off starboard. They’ve been following us for several minutes.”

A sport-fishing vessel with jet engines ran parallel to the ferry. Two men on board. Their engines throttled down to keep abreast of the bigger, lumbering vessel. “I see ’em.” Gerrit leaned away from the informant to speak. “Keep your eyes on them until I finish up here.”

Gregori’s eyes flickered, fear widening his pupils. “What happening?”

“Nothing.” He flicked his hand as if it was nothing. “And, my friend, it’s called *immunity* unless you’ve caught some disease I don’t know about. Let’s get down to business.”

“The boat’s dropping back. Looks like they might be trailing us to the dock, matching our speed. Maybe picking up a friend?”

Glancing up at Taylor, Gerrit nodded. He did not want to spook the informant.

Gregori followed his gaze. “That one of you guys?”

Gerrit deadpanned, “Like I said, don’t worry about it. We’ve got this covered.”

“No way, man. Something wrong—” Birdman glanced over Gerrit’s shoulder in horror.

Gerrit reached for his weapon. He whipped around, seeing a man a few yards away armed with a gun. He shoved Gregori to the deck with one hand just as the gunman fired off two compressed shots. The first shot splintered the deck, and the second seemed to go wild when a bystander fell into him.

A silencer. The shots sounded like compressed air hissing angry spit wads.

The gunman seemed to be trying to follow Gregori’s path to the ground with his weapon. A few bystanders bolted when they saw the guns. A woman screamed, starting more of a panic. The attacker seemed to realize his chance to kill Gregori just vanished as each shot caused more chaos.

Gerrit positioned himself to protect Gregori, but he could not take a shot due to the number of innocent people. Grimacing, the shooter—a lithe man in blue denim trousers and a dark, bull terrier sweatshirt—turned and roughly shoved his way through the crowd, forcing at least one woman to lose her balance. The gunman dashed toward the stern.

“Hey,” Gerrit yelled, trying to draw the shooter’s attention. The informant hovered on the ground, chest still heaving. Gerrit activated his radio. “Taylor. We’re Code 4 on this end. Shooter heading away through the crowd. See him?”

“Gotcha. On my way.”

Quickly, Gerrit knelt. “You okay?”

Gregori nodded.

Gerrit grabbed the thumb drive from the man’s grasp and slipped it into his pocket. “I’ll take this for safekeeping. Stay down and don’t move.”

Gregori mutely nodded again.

People crowded around, eyeing the man on the ground like this was some television show. One woman edged closer and saw Gerrit holding a gun. He yanked out his badge just as the woman screamed. He flashed it at the crowd.

“Police! Everyone take cover. Man with a gun.” He jabbed a finger toward the stern. A young girl stared at his right hand, still holding the S&W. “Another man with a gun,” he said, looking away, searching for the gunman.

People began clearing a path as he pushed through the lingering crowd. Some still crouched in place. Others ran for the enclosed bar and lunchroom inside.

Taylor’s voice blared across the radio. “The shooter’s on the railing. He...he jumped overboard. Frustration was evident in his voice. “I can’t get to him, Gerrit. Caught in this crowd topside.”

Gerrit neared the railing and spotted the attacker bobbing between waves. The fishing boat Taylor spotted earlier drew alongside. One of the crew members hurled a life preserver, attached to a nylon rope, into the water, waiting until the gunman grasped it. Once set, the crewman yanked on the rope like he was hauling in a large fish. Fist over fist until the man in the water reached the edge of the craft. The shooter clambered up a metal ladder as the vessel pulled away.

The bow rose as the boat picked up speed, heading toward the Seattle shoreline. The fishing vessel would soon be lost on the far shore. Air support was too far out, and ground units could never respond in time.

He reholstered the weapon and pounded the railing with a clenched fist.

Chapter 2

Bainbridge Island, Washington

“Here it comes,” Gerrit muttered to his partner. “The inquisition has begun.”

Their one-sided gun battle aboard the ferry sparked a police investigation even though they never fired a shot. And internal affairs would be panting in the wings, waiting their turn to roast Gerrit and Taylor, if any procedural irregularities turned up. A paunchy investigator from the Washington State Patrol motioned Gerrit toward a makeshift office inside the terminal.

Gerrit started toward the officer until the man held up a hand, cell phone planted in one ear. The man straightened and glanced toward Gerrit while shaking his head, jaw tightening as he ended the call.

“My boss told me to stand down.” The officer glared at Gerrit. “Said some feds are on their way to talk to you guys.”

Gerrit nodded. “I’m going to step outside for some fresh air.” He gestured at his partner heading toward an exit door and followed Taylor outside.

Earlier, officers from the Washington state police tried to keep the two of them apart until investigators arrived, but in the confusion over supervision and the number of eyewitnesses milling around, Gerrit and Taylor met up and stayed together. Now, the state troopers probably thought they had already worked out their stories, so what’s the point in keeping them sequestered.

He found Taylor standing in the dark a few feet from the doorway. Light from his cigarette illuminated his face as he took a deep drag.

Gerrit stood upwind from the smoke. “Task force heading our way. Probably want to do damage control before WSP gets too far into this investigation. I figure Marilyn just threw around her federal weight at the locals.” Marilyn Summers spearheaded the investigation for the federal prosecutor’s office.

Taylor shook his head, the cigarette bobbing in the dark. “I’ll bet Summers wants to handle this herself. One of our informants almost gets wasted by a hitter right in front of us, then the shooter vanishes off a boat.” He winced, his dark skin and clipped Chicago accent seeming out of place here in Washington. “I hope this doesn’t come out of our paycheck. Brothers always seem to wind up in more trouble than you white guys.” Taylor grinned at him before taking another hit on the cigarette.

Gerrit laughed. “White or black, we’re both in trouble, partner. Don’t play that race card with me. It won’t fly.”

Taylor chuckled. It was a politically incorrect game they played with each other, since they had become tighter than brothers. Taylor knew Gerrit would always have his back. And Taylor always backed his play even when they got into serious jams. “Where’s the snitch?”

“I gave him a few bills and sent him on his way. No use letting him sit around here and give the shooter a second chance. Right now, he has a better chance running on his own than sticking around for police protection.”

Blades from an incoming helicopter beat the air behind them. Gerrit turned just as the craft emerged, rotors whirling through the night like a giant wind machine. The aircraft hovered, slowly settling to roost somewhere behind the terminal building.

“Here they come. Get ready for them to turn up the heat.” Taylor dropped the cigarette butt on the ground, grinding it with his heel. “Well, Einstein, did you tell the state troopers about the *evidence*?”

you snatched?"

Gerrit shook his head, leaning against a concrete pole, hands thrust in his trouser pockets. Taylor's self-appointed nickname irked Gerrit. His right hand circled around the thumb drive. "No need to complicate their investigation."

Taylor snorted, reaching for another cigarette.

A door opened, thrusting shafts of white iridescence from inside the building across the black asphalt. It was the same WSP investigator who had been ordered to wait before interviewing them. He leaned through the doorway, one hand resting on the knob. "They want to see you inside." He thrust his chin in Gerrit's direction.

Pushing off the pole, Gerrit glanced at his partner. Taylor returned the look. "Good luck, my man."

"As far as I'm concerned, no harm, no foul. No one's dead. No one got hurt."

"Yeah, but shots were fired and you scared the crap out of everyone on that boat. I'm sure the whole thing will wind up on YouTube before we get interviewed."

Gerrit shrugged before entering the building behind the trooper. Once inside, he paused for a moment to allow his eyes to adjust. A man and a woman stood at the top of a flight of stairs to his right. The man wore a dark-blue suit and red tie, obviously FBI. The woman—Marilynn Summers—turned and glanced down at him.

"Detective, why don't you join me up here where we can talk...privately." She gestured toward a door a few yards away from where she stood. As he climbed the stairs, Marilynn turned toward the FBI agent. "Why don't you contact the other detective and have him debrief you on the incident. We'll compare notes after I'm through with Gerrit."

He tried to mask his irritation while Marilynn and the agent continued chatting. She glanced at him but still conversing with the other man. Her soft blond hair, cut shoulder length, added a certain softness to her navy-blue skirt and black waist-length leather jacket. Any softness coming from this woman was merely a means to an end.

As he reached the top landing, she gave him one more look. "Okay, Detective. Follow me and let's get this over with."

"Yes, sir."

Marilynn seemed oblivious to his comment as she opened the office door and gestured him inside. Gerrit strode into the room and leaned against the only desk, a gray metallic bruiser positioned dead center in a large, vacuous office.

She closed and locked the door from inside. A slow smile emerged as she advanced toward him. "Well, honey. I wish we could make good use of this *private office*. Door's locked and the window shades are drawn." She pulled off her jacket and flung it across the desk, pushing herself against him. Her arms encircled his waist as she moved in close. "Can't wait to get you home."

Gerrit raised himself up, grasping her shoulders. "Get a grip, Marilynn. I almost lost an informant out there, and I know my boss will be planting his boot up my butt over this. We need to get our stories straight."

"*Our* stories? Don't draw me into this. You and your partner wanna play cowboy and meet an informant without backup knowing Nico's lurking out there...well, that's your problem. Not mine."

He eased away, putting distance between them. Since when did she start playing it safe? Her willingness to take chances, to walk a fine line between the law and the lawless, to get the job done had been the magnet that drew them together. Gerrit never stomached unnecessary rules. Even worse, he hated rule makers sitting behind a desk and coming up with reasons why the job couldn't get done. Impatience always drove Gerrit to scale these obstacles any way he could.

He thought he'd found a kindred spirit in Marilynn, whose job as a federal prosecutor gave her many more rules to bend or break. Sometimes, she seemed willing to go a lot further than Gerrit.

Lately, he began to have second thoughts.

And now, she wanted to distance herself from this incident. Why?

“Come on, Marilynn. We haven’t much time before the suits show up to figure out who gets to tee into me first.” He eyed her for a moment before continuing. “Just because your old man is a senator doesn’t protect the rest of us when things go sideways. I’ve got to be careful. Can’t afford any more mistakes.”

“Okay. Have it your way.” She brushed a strand of blond hair from her brown eyes giving him an irritated look. “Did you salvage anything from this screw-up with our informant?”

He circled the desk, trying to gain control. This woman seemed to know how to set him off. Spending time with Marilynn was like throwing a lighted match into a pool of gasoline. Someone always got scorched. He should have stopped this relationship a long time ago. Tonight was not the right time.

“*Our* informant?” he said. “I’m the one who recruited him months ago while working undercover. Remember? A bottle of vodka, a sympathetic ear, and a promise of a better life earned me fresh eyes and ears into Petrosky’s organization. Mark and I—with Gregori’s help—turned up leads to Nico’s criminal enterprise. Smuggling. Narcotics. Call girls. Even stolen gasoline sold on the black market tax free.”

And one bombing in Seattle. But he would never reveal that to anyone. They might question why he focused on the Russian in the first place.

“Old news,” Marilynn said, her face turning red.

“I’m reminding you of this because the guy who made this case almost got killed. Because I pushed Gregori discovered Nico stepped up to the big time. Selling technology on the black market. More money. Less exposure. The guy taking all the chances,” Gerrit said, “has a name. Gregori Vasiliyevich Pyotor.”

“Now, there’s a mouthful.” She smirked. “In any event, he survived.”

Gerrit paused, clenching his teeth. “I almost got him killed because I missed something. And now the suits will want to crucify me for all this bad publicity. Wild shots on a ferryboat full of passengers. Almost getting my informant wasted. Letting the gunman slip away. Violating protocol—although whoever made up these rules never worked out in the field.”

“That’s why you always wind up in trouble. Making it an ‘us against them’ thing. That just sends people off, Gerrit—including me.” She folded her arms, giving him her prosecutorial stare as if cross-examining a hostile witness. “*Your* informant has been exposed because you screwed up. Because you did not follow the rules.” She let that hang for a moment. “Let’s just hope you can salvage something out of this mess that’ll make my boss happy. Otherwise...”

He withdrew the thumb drive from his pocket. “This ought to make him jump for joy. Gregori pulled this off Nico’s own computer before my guy got cold feet and started running. Nico must have gotten suspicious and had his people watching us to see if Gregori showed up. Taylor and I didn’t see the tail until it was too late.”

A smile softened the hard lines around Marilynn’s eyes as she reached for the drive. “Well, the gadget changes everything, sweetheart. This just might buy you a ticket out of the doghouse.”

Gerrit tightened his jaw. Gregori’s sacrifice seemed lost on her. “Yeah. My ticket almost cost another man his life.” He saw a sudden coldness enter her eyes, a look he couldn’t define. It flickered for a second, and then it was gone as quick as if she batted an eyelash.

Marilynn edged closer. “Did I ever tell you how much you turn me on when—”

A fist beat on the door. “Gerrit, you in there? Open up. Now.”

He pushed Marilynn away, working his way toward the door. He recognized that voice. Trouble just seemed to follow him today. He unlocked the door and grasped the handle.

Lieutenant Stan Cromwell launched himself into the room, first glancing at Gerrit, then eyeing Marilyn's jacket still draped across the desk. "What the...?" He wheeled around to face Gerrit. "Taylor tells me you guys are being questioned by...these *feds*?" Each word doused with a heavy dose of contempt.

"Now, see here, Lieutenant. Gerrit's assigned—"

"I'm not speaking to you right now, Summers. You'll get your chance to flap your gums in a minute. Right now I wanna hear from my detective." Thirty-five years on the street weathered Cromwell's face like a desert sun beating down on parched land. He seemed to carry the weight of the department on his shoulder, broad muscular limbs matching his thick neck, fists the size of football helmets strong enough to send an all-pro linebacker crashing to the turf but gentle enough to comfort a frightened child. Right now, the lieutenant did not look comforting. His neck swelled over his tight collar, veins pulsating a warning sign to anyone close enough to see.

Marilynn paused, thin lips pressing back a retort.

Gerrit faced his boss and filled him in.

"Where was your backup?"

Gerrit rested against the desk, his momentary silence making Cromwell's face turn even more threatening. "We wanted to low-key this. It was just supposed to be a simple meet and talk."

"A simple meet? Your informant almost gets blasted, the would-be killer and a couple other bad guys disappear, shots fired into a crowd...and you call this simple?"

"How were we to—?"

"You're expected to think these operations through, O'Rourke. No more of your lone cowboy stuff. That's what keeps getting you in trouble. It's why I warned them about letting you..." He stopped, as if suddenly realizing they were not alone.

Putting on her jacket, Marilyn faced Cromwell. "We picked Gerrit because of his...special abilities."

Cromwell watched as she buttoned up the jacket. "He's special, all right. A special pain in the ass."

Marilynn crossed her arms. "You know what I'm talking about, Lieutenant. His language skills, his MIT background. That's why we went to your chief to ask he be assigned to us. And besides, he and his partner were already working on Nico."

Gerrit shifted his feet. "Hey, I'm standing right here."

The lieutenant peeled his attention away from Marilyn. "I know you have a lot to offer, O'Rourke. That's why I let them talk me into creating this specialized unit. But if I feel things are starting to come unglued, I'm pulling the plug. I don't care how many high-value targets you guys take down. I won't jeopardize the department, even for you."

Almost imperceptibly, Cromwell's craggy face softened. All the officers knew Cromwell's rise in rank came at the direction of the chief; each rise up the ladder had been forced on this man. Cromwell just wanted to work cases, to work the street. Respect from the rank and file allowed him to lash out at his officers when they screwed up, where other supervisors might have wound up in the hospital with a broken nose. It was why Gerrit kept his mouth shut right now.

Cromwell seemed to relax for the first time since entering the room. "You're the best we have, O'Rourke. I know that. But I can't have you going off the reservation and taking matters into your own hands. That's how you'll wind up dead, and maybe take your partner down with you. Understand?"

Gerrit nodded.

"You're like a son to me."

Gerrit smiled.

A look of irritation flashed across Cromwell's face. "What's so funny?"

“You’re fifty-four. You’re only ten years older than I am—if that.”

“That’s not how I feel at the moment.” His features relaxed until he glanced at Marilyn. He turned as if to ignore her, his voice lowering. “I know why you do what you do. That’s why I have my eye on you.”

Marilynn glanced at Cromwell with a puzzled look.

“I understand, Lieutenant. I never thought we’d have to call out the cavalry on this.”

“Let’s just get you through this mess. I hope something good can come out of it. Were you able to get anything from the snitch?”

Gerrit told him about the computer drive.

“Well, start using that brain of yours and get this Russian crook behind bars.” Cromwell turned to face Marilyn. “Get this guy cleared as soon as possible. I’ll handle the details on my end. And bring this case to a close before I’m forced to pull the plug on our participation. Understand?”

Marilynn nodded, giving him a look that said he just made an enemy. “I understand perfectly. So, you will excuse us, Gerrit and I need to finish our conversation.”

Cromwell glared at her, then glanced over at Gerrit. Without saying another word, the lieutenant wheeled around and marched out of the room.

Chapter 3

La Jolla, California

Darkness drenched the Pacific Ocean beyond the shoreline, the moon allowing just enough light from the shore to highlight specks of sea foam churned by pounding waves. Gerrit caught a glimpse of the water before the van door closed.

Taylor eased into the seat next to him. “Okay, SWAT’s in place and Marilyn just came through with warrants. Agents en route from San Diego’s federal building with the paper. They should be here in twenty.”

“Marilyn’s not bringing the warrants?”

“Nope. Cromwell called and said she jumped on a red-eye back to D.C. as soon as a federal judge put his John Henry on the paper.”

“Cromwell? I thought he was still up in Seattle.”

Taylor shrugged.

Gerrit glanced up as the monitor tapped into the target’s security system. The last two months since the ferry shooting had passed with a blur of activity, almost as blurry as his relationship with Marilyn. They’d been together a couple times since that last tense meeting with Cromwell. And those few times they were together—beyond the physical—they lived like strangers going through the motions.

“Okay, I’ve accessed the primary suspect’s computer.” Gerrit typed a command on the keyboard in front of him. “Once I get into his system, I’ll be able to see what he’s looking at. Thanks to Gregor we’ve got all of Nico’s codes.”

Taylor watched him hit the final strokes as the screen opened up. “Man, you always freak me out with this stuff. Learned all this when you went to that fancy school back east? How to hack into other people’s business?”

“MIT. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. One of the best schools to learn how to hack and track whomever you choose. By the way, I canceled your dinner date for next week.”

“How’d you know...?” Taylor glared at him.

Gerrit smirked.

“Yeah, yeah. I know. Pulling my leg again. With all your computer savvy, I never know whether you’re on the up-and-up.” Taylor shifted in his seat. “I can’t figure you out, bro. You walk away with a doctorate in some kind of technology I can’t even pronounce—to become a cop? They should’ve bounced you on the psychological. Must have bribed somebody in the department to pass that test. real mental case.”

Taylor leaned over and poked him with a finger. “If I was you, I’d be making a killing in the private sector—all that nano mumbo jumbo everyone’s talking about. Instead, you’re hanging around in a van with the likes of me. Personally, I think you’ve got a screw loose.”

Gerrit glanced up at a monitor, and a man with a rifle slung over his shoulder loomed on the screen. “Okay, we’re in business.” He clicked through a number of camera locations inside the suspect’s dwelling. “I count five men walking security. I think Nico’s in his office or bedroom, but his security system doesn’t monitor either location. I saw him walk in that direction a moment ago.”

Taylor nodded. “How’d you get access to his computer, Einstein?”

“If I told you, I’d have to shoot you.” He leaned closer, studying the monitor. “Same technology

you can buy off the market to monitor your kids or employees—but a lot more sophisticated. Rigg up so the suspect doesn't know we climbed into his system.”

Another monitor in the van caught his attention. A red dot blinked on and off. “There, he’s in the master bedroom...wait a minute. We have another marker going off.” Headlights flashed on yet another screen. A car pulled into Nico’s gated driveway. “Uh-oh. We got trouble.”

“I hate it when you say that.” Taylor pulled closer.

“See that second dot? That’s one of Nico’s cars.”

“If Nico is in the bedroom, who’s using his wheels?”

“His family—wife and daughter. I thought they were supposed to be away for the weekend. Up at their place in Tahoe.”

“Must be a change in plans.”

Gerrit leaned back in the swivel chair. “This complicates everything. SWAT’s going to hit the place in just a few minutes. And now we have two innocents in the way. One of them a five-year-old girl.” He snatched up the portable. “Team leader to Alpha One.”

“Go, Team Leader.” Special Agent Peter Finch, SWAT leader, continued. “We just moved into the place. Ready to move out?”

“Stand down until further notice. I’ll eighty-seven you in two.”

Finch keyed the mike twice in acknowledgment.

Taylor leaned over. “Where you going, Gerrit? The entry team’s all set. Just waiting for the warrants to get here.”

“I’m going in with them. Need to protect that child. This jerk might use his own child as leverage.”

“Oh, man, Gerrit. Can’t you just let someone else handle this?”

“Stats just changed, Mark. Before, our safety margin was high—90 percent chance of our people staying safe with shock and awe. Now, that just changed. With innocent people on board, our chance dropped 50 percent because our guys might have to hold back their firepower. I’ve got an idea to change that threat ratio.”

Gerrit snatched up his Heckler & Koch MP5 submachine gun and several extra magazines, slipping out the door before his partner started in again. The salty night breeze swept up the hillside, off the ocean, like a cool sweep of a hand. He inserted an extension wire to his portable, plugging an earpiece in place before clipping the radio to his belt.

He scrambled toward the SWAT van a block ahead. He tapped twice on the rear door and climbed in. The target residence stood another fifty yards away, hidden by a dense cluster of trees.

Inside, Peter Finch, greased up for war, edged in Gerrit’s direction. “For crying out loud, Gerrit, we’re ready to go in right now.”

Gerrit pulled out a portable monitor, showing GPS markers blinking in the darkened command van. “The target’s family just showed up. We have to adjust our entry and takedown.”

Muted red illumination inside the vehicle did little to conceal the tenseness in Finch’s face. “We can’t change our plans. My men will separate the family from Nico when we hit the place.”

“Not good enough. I have to know that the woman and child are safe. I’m going in with you, Finch.”

The FBI agent bristled. “No way. You haven’t—”

“Served with the U.S. Marines in three wars—Gulf War, Afghanistan, and Second Gulf War. Member of Seattle PD’s SWAT team. I think I can handle a simple entry. Besides, it’s my decision—not yours.”

Finch surrendered. “Stay behind the entry team until we cross the threshold. Right on my butt. We’ll snatch the wife and child together.”

It was Gerrit’s turn to relent. Nodding, he glanced at the mobile monitor patched in from the other van. A red dot emanated from the car inside the garage. “Family may already be inside. Give me

updated readings from our heat sensors showing where everyone's located. I don't have Nico locked down. Taylor just advised the paper is in hand."

Finch whispered into his mike, waited a few seconds, then nodded. "You're right. A woman and child just went upstairs where Nico might be. There are five other bad guys; one at the top of the stairs and four downstairs. It's time to move out...now!"

Gerrit nodded.

Finch broadcasted his orders. As Gerrit followed him out the van, his cell phone vibrated. He pulled it out. *Marilynn*. "Hold up. AUSA calling in."

Finch let out a groan at the assistant U.S. attorney's timing.

Gerrit raised the phone to his ear. "What's up, Marilyn? We're on the move."

"I need you here in D.C. immediately. Something's come up."

"Unless it's about this operation, I don't have time to chat."

Marilynn's voice cut in before he could kill the connection. "Have Taylor connect with the FBI. They can run the show without you. I need you on a plane tonight."

"Forget it. I'm going in with the entry team. Everything's in play."

"This is much more important, Gerrit. Hand it off. That's an order."

"Marilynn, you don't call the shots on these operations." He killed the connection and jammed the phone into his pocket. Something about her voice sounded odd. Not Marilyn's normal confidence coming through. She seemed worried.

Gerrit grasped his MP5 and signaled Finch it was a go. Time to take care of business.

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