

THE COST OF CRUDE:
A GWYNN REZNICK MYSTERY

by
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PROLOGUE & CHAPTER 1

PROLOGUE

“You won’t get off this platform!” Kirk yelled as his attackers dragged him by his feet across the rough steel mat. The ridges dug into his flesh.

“You are wrong, sir; we will,” the attacker replied in a heavy Slavic accent.

Kirk breathed heavily, almost heaving. Searing pain rippled through his torso from the blows he had endured. He felt blood gushing from his nose. He tried to raise his arms in protest but couldn’t summon the strength.

“What’s going on out here?” a male voice asked.

Something struck Kirk in the head. Everything went black.

Twenty minutes later, Kirk groaned, opening his swollen eyes. Through foggy vision he saw a gray tarp covering his body. He felt its coarseness against the bruised skin on his face as he turned, gasping for air.

“They don’t want us to do anything about him?” he heard his Slavic attacker say. The scarred-faced man Kirk feared the most. He gave the orders. He delivered the first blow.

Kirk assumed they were talking about him. He briefly closed his eyes just as a sharp pain erupted in his leg. He clamped his teeth together in a determined effort not to make a sound.

“No,” another male voice replied. “He’ll leave the oil platform tomorrow. He knows what will happen if he says anything. Luke’s been embedded with the workers for over a week. He’ll let us know if the man talks.”

“Why take that risk?” the Slavic attacker replied.

“They don’t want any more casualties on the platform or at any work sites. It might draw too much attention. And the guy doesn’t know what we accomplished here.”

Chills swept up Kirk’s spine as he realized they weren’t talking about him. With all the strength he could muster, Kirk pulled the edge of the tarp away from his eyes. His heart hammered against his ribs. Every beat sent surging pain through his chest.

“Be still,” whispered another man, dangerously close.

Kirk saw a dark silhouette lurking amongst the shadows. He wondered if the man came to help him or if he was another enemy. Fearful, Kirk remained silent while he waited for the man to reveal himself. He heard heavy footsteps pounding toward him from another direction. Kirk swallowed hard and his hands trembled. The dark figure lingered in the shadows, immobile.

The tarp flew from his body, yanked off by two of his attackers. Kirk’s hopes of surviving vanished as they grabbed his arms.

“It’s time,” the Slavic attacker said.

Kirk was thrown over the side. He took a deep breath, held it, and felt the cold water splash around him. Sinking into what seemed like the depths of hell, he raised his head and forced his legs to kick. Spasms shot through his bruised muscles. His throat burned. Slowly, he rose to the surface. He inhaled, savoring the fresh air. Kirk attempted to swim to the platform. His damaged limbs were no match to the rough waves engulfing his body, sucking him under. The last bubble escaped from his lungs. He belonged to the sea.

CHAPTER 1

When the glare of Houston's morning sun hit Julie's windshield, she flinched and blindly lowered the visor. She breathed deeply to relax her nerves, blinked to clear her sight, and felt her stomach churning. This would be the first time she had ever showed up at work so early. It would also be the first time she had spied. Her oversized purse held the necessary equipment: three microphone bugs and one receiver, borrowed from a friend.

Today, John McIntyre, Wilton Oil's CEO, was having a meeting with some executives from CT Oil and Gas Company, Wilton's chief rival. Julie only knew about it because she was covering for Pam, McIntyre's secretary. She had asked her boss, Steve Hadley, vice president of Public Affairs, what the meeting was about. He didn't have a clue, and he was visibly irritated since he hadn't been invited. That was when she thought it might be the beginning of merger talks. There had been several in the oil industry recently and Wilton's stockholders were up in arms over the meager size of last year's dividends and demanding changes. Julie also suspected there was something unusual about this meeting since McIntyre didn't want it documented.

She knew merger talks started behind closed doors with only the key players in attendance, and only those in attendance knew what was discussed. Julie had been through a particularly brutal one at her last job that dragged on for over a year. Every day people wondered who was going to get the axe next. Some of her friends were laid off. A few lost their homes. Her boss had a heart attack and died. One guy committed suicide. No one talked about anything else. In the end, the company moved its headquarters to Denver, and she found herself unemployed. She never wanted to go through that again.

Stepping out of the elevator, she ran into Neil, a six-foot-six, brawny security guard in his mid-thirties.

"What are you doing here this early?" he asked as he quickly scanned her—twenty-nine, five-feet-eight, a slender, curvy body, big pale blue eyes, rosy cheeks, full lips, and wavy blonde hair that flowed down over her shoulders. He thought about her often and wished she'd dump her boyfriend.

"McIntyre's having a meeting this morning, and I just wanted to make sure everything was set up." She smiled at him. Then she felt uneasy when she noticed his eyebrows slant, giving her a suspicious look.

"Pam's not coming in today?"

"No. She's dealing with a family problem."

“So you’ll be up here all day?”

“Yes,” she said, walking away. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Neil still standing in the middle of the aisle, watching her.

Reaching Pam’s desk, Julie’s eyes darted around searching for other employees. She didn’t spot anyone. Feeling a queasy sensation in the pit of her stomach, she took the bugs out of her purse. She held them securely hidden in her hands, tucked a steno pad under her arm, and then proceeded to the conference room. A large oak, oval-shaped table stood in the center surrounded by fourteen office chairs. On one side of the room was a long counter with cabinets above and below it. Colorful maps of oil fields hung on the other walls.

After Julie had two bugs in place, she began attaching the third. It slid out of her palm, tumbled to the floor, and rolled under the table. Pushing a chair out of her way, she heard heavy footsteps behind her.

“Is something wrong with the chair?” McIntyre asked. He was a tall, handsome man in his early forties, who appeared to be in great shape, with chestnut brown hair, graying at the temples. He had been married four times with the last marriage ending a few months prior. Several of the secretaries had joked about wanting to be wife number five.

Julie flinched, eased down into the chair, and hid the bug under her foot. “No, Mr. McIntyre,” she said, pushing the words out past the lump in her throat. “It just seemed a little stiff so I wanted to make sure the rollers worked.”

McIntyre glimpsed at the steno pad lying in front of her. “Julie, I’ve already told you that you won’t be taking minutes during the meeting.”

She swallowed hard. “I know. I just want to make sure everything is set up okay.” As she rose to her feet, she carefully kicked the bug away from his line of vision, and inched the chair snugly against the table, covering the small device. She straightened pens, pencils, and miscellaneous items on the counter, trying to look busy while she watched him out of the corner of her eye. He paced around the room, stopped at the head of the table, and tapped his fingers on the back of the armchair. McIntyre had a sophisticated, polished demeanor and seldom showed any emotion, but today he seemed nervous. This further convinced Julie that it was not going to be a normal business meeting.

“Is there anything you would like me to prepare for the meeting?” she asked.

“No. I have everything.”

A middle-aged woman wearing a white cafeteria uniform entered pushing a cart containing refreshments—breakfast rolls, juice, and coffee. McIntyre turned on his heels and headed out the door while the woman arranged the refreshments on the counter.

Julie lifted up the steno pad and dropped it on the floor, making sure it landed at the base of the chair concealing the bug. She stooped down to retrieve it, quickly attached the bug to the table’s metal support, and stood up with her pad in her hand. Her muscles tightened and her heart beat rapidly as she brushed her hair away from her forehead. “Can I help you with anything?” she asked the woman, trying to appear calm.

“No, thank you. I’m almost finished.”

Julie hurried to Pam’s desk as her eyes swept over the area looking for McIntyre. Sinking down into the chair, she sighed when she didn’t see him and noticed his door was closed. She plugged her earbuds into the receiver hidden in her purse. She also planned to record the meeting in case she needed to answer the phone or step away from the desk. Julie lightly swung her foot back and forth and squirmed in her seat as she checked her emails and waited for the meeting to begin.

Within a few minutes, Wilton’s senior vice president Kent Fardown, a short, frail man in his early fifties, walked toward the conference room with three men. Julie assumed they were CT Oil executives and scrutinized their appearance. All three men looked to be in their forties. She knew from an article she had read that the CEO of CT Oil was in his sixties. He wasn’t one of them. Two of the men were

tall with slender builds; one had a dark complexion. She thought he could be of Middle-Eastern descent. The third man was short and stocky. He appeared to be the oldest and, of the three, had the most pleasant expression on his face. Fardown smiled at her as he passed, talking to the men.

She turned toward the conference room. Her eyes remained fixed on the door until it closed. Of the seven in the room, only two were executives from Wilton: McIntyre and Fardown. McIntyre had entered with two men. One was Ethan Lemus, a tall, lean, former Wilton employee in his early sixties with recessed silver-gray hair. Julie wondered if he now worked for CT as she recalled seeing him having a heated discussion with Hadley, her boss, right before he left Wilton. The other man she didn't recognize. He was in his early forties and had a brawny, muscular build.

Julie began to listen. No introductions were made. She still managed to pick up four names—Abir, Ramza, Michael, and Luke. The phone rang, startling her. From the caller ID she knew it was her best friend, Gwynn, who worked in accounting. Julie didn't want to take out her earbuds, yet she had no choice.

“Hi, Gwynn. I'm pretty busy; can I talk to you later?”

“I'll make it quick. Did Taylor call or send you any emails over the weekend?”

“No. Why?”

“Cindy's been making the rounds. She wants to know if anyone heard from him. She just left my cubicle and asked me to call you.”

“Why didn't she call me?”

“Her boss is giving her the evil eye because she's been chatting ever since she got to work. Anyway, Taylor never talked to her after he got fired. He didn't talk to any of us. She went to his apartment, and he's moved out. She thought he might have gone to his mom's, but he didn't. She's worried about him.”

Julie felt anxious to listen to the meeting, but Taylor and Cindy were among her close friends. “That doesn't make sense. Cindy and Taylor were inseparable. He wouldn't just up and leave without saying anything to her. Did they have a fight?”

“She says they didn't. I'm starting to wonder,” Gwynn said. “She received a package from him. It didn't have a personal note or anything like that in it.”

“What was in it?”

“She didn't want to talk about it at work. She'll tell us tonight. You're still planning on going to Brody's after work, aren't you?”

“I'll be there.”

“Good. I'm curious about the package and can't understand why no one has heard from Taylor.”

Julie's eyes dropped to the desk. She stared at the earbuds, itching to slip them back on and find out about the meeting behind the closed door.

“Julie, you still there?”

“Yeah. I just have a lot of work to do.” A red button flashed on the phone base unit as it rang. “I need to answer McIntyre's phone. See you after work.” She disconnected, and then pushed the flashing button. “Mr. McIntyre's office. May I help you?”

After taking two phone messages, Julie stuck in her earbuds. Her eyes opened wider, her hands trembled as she listened. Frightened and confused at what she heard, she removed the earpieces and tucked them into her purse. She wished they had been discussing a merger; *that* she could handle.

“Are you okay?” Pam asked, standing next to the desk.

Julie jumped. She hadn't even noticed her approaching. “Oh ... ah ... I'm fine,” she stuttered. “I was told you weren't coming in today.”

“I had planned to stay longer in San Diego, but I thought John might need me. Is he still in the meeting?”

Julie nodded, “Yes.”

“Since you’re not taking minutes, John must be recording it.”

Julie cleared her throat. “He told me he wasn’t going to record it.”

Pam pressed her lips together while she briefly glanced at the conference room door. “He’s probably taking notes and planning to dictate them to me later. John wants minutes of all his meetings.”

Not this one, Julie thought as she grabbed her purse, stood up, and tried to focus on the phone messages. She handed them to Pam. “Neither one left a number. They both said Mr. McIntyre already had them. I still wrote down the numbers on the caller ID.”

Pam glanced at the messages. “John has their numbers. Thanks for helping out.”

Holding tightly onto her purse, Julie headed to the elevator as she wondered how she could retrieve the bugs from the conference room with Pam sitting that close to the door. She couldn’t watch for Pam to leave since her boss’s office was on the floor below McIntyre’s.

Settling into her chair, she inhaled deeply and clutched her hands together on her lap, hoping to stop them from trembling. When she felt her fingers relaxing, she pulled the receiver out of her purse, and slipped it in a drawer. Now she understood why McIntyre hadn’t invited Hadley to the meeting. Every time there was a public outcry over something Wilton Oil had done, Hadley took care of the problem. McIntyre would profess he didn’t know anything about it—he was always innocent. Hadley was known in the industry as the miracle man. It didn’t matter how bad the problem; Wilton Oil always came through unscathed.

“I thought you were going to be at Pam’s desk all day,” Hadley said, stepping out of his office.

“She showed up,” Julie replied.

“Did you find out what the meeting was about?”

“No. All I did was sit at Pam’s desk. Mr. McIntyre didn’t have me take minutes or do any work for him.” Julie wanted to tell Hadley the truth about the meeting, but she wasn’t ready to confess how she knew. Also, she wanted to hear the recording from the beginning in case she had misinterpreted something.

“So, you’ve had an easy morning,” he smiled. “I’ll have to make up for that.” He dumped a huge stack of paperwork on her desk.

Later, when Hadley went to lunch, Julie connected the receiver to her computer and recorded the audio through line-in to a disk, and then she erased the meeting from the receiver. She planned to return the equipment to Barb, her friend, that evening. She put the disk in an envelope and mailed it to herself. That was the only way she was sure it would leave the building since Wilton had beefed up their security. The security guards did spot checks of employees’ briefcases, purses, computer bags, and every container entering and leaving the building. Her purse had only been checked once, but she didn’t want to take a chance. If the guards decided to look through it, they’d find the receiver and bugs. She’d tell them the truth—she was returning the stuff to a friend. If they turned on the receiver, they’d only hear the sound in the lobby being picked up by the bugs.

After she had listened to the disk and verified she hadn’t misinterpreted anything, she planned to share it with Hadley and tell him how she managed to record the meeting. Even if that meant she’d be fired, she wanted to expose McIntyre, the “innocent.”

She ate a stale, bland sandwich from the vending machine while she worked on Hadley’s projects and felt grateful she’d be busy all afternoon as she waited to retrieve the bugs.

“Julie,” Hadley said as he was ready to leave the office, “you don’t need to finish everything today.”

She glanced at her watch. It was past 5:30. “I just want to finish this letter.”

“Okay, see you tomorrow,” he said, strolling away.

When he was out of sight, she cleared off her desk, and hoped it was safe to go back up to the conference room. She figured that Gwynn was already at Brody’s waiting for her. She called and said she’d be there soon.

After Julie stepped out of the elevator on the fortieth floor, she didn't see any employees as she walked toward the conference room. She noticed Pam's desk was cleared off and assumed she had gone for the day. McIntyre's office door was closed. It was like that most of time when he was at work, so she wasn't sure if he had left. The lights automatically went on when she entered the conference room. She recouped the bug hidden under the table. Then panic struck when she discovered the other two were missing.

"Is this what you're looking for?" she heard a man's deep, gruff voice behind her. She turned around and saw the dark, icy eyes of the brawny, muscular man McIntyre had escorted into the meeting. He glared at her as he held up the microphones. She clutched the third bug in her palm and stood frozen while he moved toward her, sending a shiver up her spine.

"Open your hand," he ordered. Julie kept her fist tightly closed. She'd give it to the security guards, but not to this man approaching her. Slowly, she took a few steps backwards. He inched closer. When she reached the corner of the room, her hands uncontrollably shook as she peered up at the stone-faced man hovering above her.

"Open your hand!" he demanded again as his eyes narrowed, boring into her. "Do you want me to take it from you?"

Julie knew that would be easy for him since he was built like a football player—his broad shoulders, his thick neck, and his muscles stretching out the fabric of his shirt. She swallowed hard. "Why don't you call the security guards?"

"That won't be necessary."

Reluctantly, she opened her fist and felt his rough, coarse, calloused hand as he grabbed the bug.

"I left one attached to the table so we could determine who put it there." He continued glaring at her. "Where's the receiver?"

"In my purse," she replied, suspecting he wouldn't let her leave until he had it.

The man snatched her purse from her shoulder, yanked out the receiver, and dumped out the remaining contents on the table. He ran his hands through all of it. Julie wanted to tell him he had everything, yet knew that wouldn't stop him. "So, you're a spy," he surmised.

"No. I'm not a spy," she said, her voice quivering. She sucked in a ragged breath and bit her lower lip.

"I could have located the receiver earlier, but it was turned off. Why?"

She didn't respond as she stood motionless, staring at his face.

"Who do you work for?"

"Wilton, no one else," she replied, sounding meek and scared.

"It will be easier on you if you tell the truth," he said in an even tone.

"That is the truth." She fidgeted with her fingers and felt her heart thumping against her ribs. "I only eavesdropped for personal reasons to find out if Wilton and CT were going to merge," she confessed. "That's all."

"I don't believe you. What do you want from us?"

"Nothing," she murmured, wondering who "us" was. Then she noticed McIntyre standing in the doorway and sighed with relief, until she saw the cold, hard expression on his face.

