

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF SIERRA SIX

# MARK GREANEY

A [GRAY MAN] NOVEL

# BURNER





**TITLES BY MARK GREANEY**

THE GRAY MAN  
ON TARGET  
BALLISTIC  
DEAD EYE  
BACK BLAST  
GUNMETAL GRAY  
AGENT IN PLACE  
MISSION CRITICAL  
ONE MINUTE OUT  
RELENTLESS  
SIERRA SIX  
BURNER

RED METAL

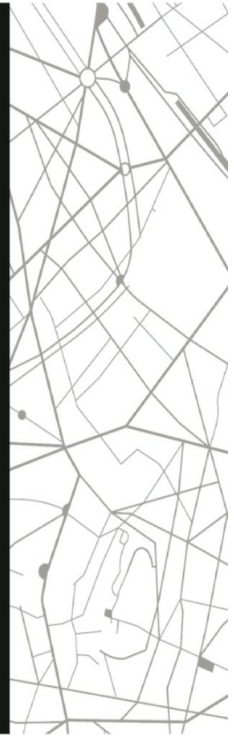
(with Lt. Col. H. Ripley Rawlings IV, USMC)

ARMORED

**BURNER**



**MARK  
GREANEY**



**BERKLEY  
NEW YORK**

BERKLEY

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Slava Ukraini



We know they are lying.

They know they are lying.

They know that we know that they are lying.

We know that they know that we know that they know they are lying.

And still . . . they continue to lie.

**-ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN**

# CHARACTERS

**COURTLAND “COURT” GENTRY:** aka Violator, aka Six, aka the Gray Man; freelance intelligence asset; former CIA contract officer; former CIA Special Activities Division (Ground Branch) paramilitary operations officer

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**ALEXANDER VELESKY:** banker for Brucker Söhne Holdings, Zurich, Switzerland

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**ULAN BAKIYEV:** starshina (first sergeant), GRU (Russian military intelligence), Unit 29155

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**SUZANNE BREWER:** special assistant to the deputy director for operations, CIA

**JAY KIRBY:** Director, CIA

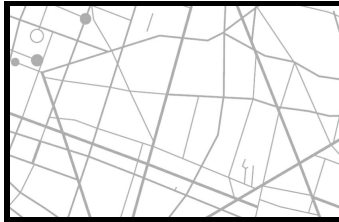
**ZOYA ZAKHAROVA:** code name Banshee; freelance intelligence asset; former SVR (Russian foreign intelligence) operative; former CIA contract asset

**BRUCKER SÖHNE HOLDINGS:** Zurich-based Swiss private bank

**GARNIER ET MOREAU CIE.:** Geneva-based Swiss private bank

**DPR:** Donetsk People's Republic; pro-Russian eastern Ukrainian separatist region

**DPR SSB:** Donetsk People's Republic Security Service Battalion; intelligence service of the DPR



# ONE

These Russians weren't fucking around tonight.

One dozen men were arrayed on the 281-foot mega yacht, all armed with new polymer-framed AK-12 rifles, two-thousand-lumen tactical flashlights, and communications gear that kept them in contact with one another wherever they were positioned on or around the huge watercraft. The *Lyra Drakos* stood at anchor, far out in English Harbour off the island of Antigua in the eastern Caribbean, and the sentries on board scanned the black water with their bright beams, made regular radio checks with the night watch on the bridge, and kept themselves amped up through the dark hours with coffee, cigarettes, energy drinks, and speed.

In addition to the expansive nighttime deck watch, three more armed men slowly circled the vessel in a twenty-seven-foot tender with a 250-horsepower engine. And below the surface, yet another pair patrolled underwater in wet suits, dive gear, and sea scooters: handheld devices with enclosed propellers that pulled them along at up to 2.5 miles per hour. These men carried flashlights, spearguns on their backs, and long knives strapped to their thighs.

The men and women on board the yacht had been at this high level of readiness for nearly two weeks, and it was grueling work, but the man paying the guards' salaries compensated them well.

The owner of the yacht and his security detail were ramped up like this because of two separate incidents the previous month in Asia. Three and a half weeks earlier, a 96-meter ship called *Pura Vida* sank off the Maldives in the Indian Ocean. The boat had been linked to a Russian oligarch who had somehow managed to avoid having his offshore property confiscated



like most of his fellow billionaire countrymen after the invasion of Ukraine began a year earlier. The cause of the sinking had not been revealed by local authorities, but most of the Russians with boats still in their possession presumed it to be sabotage.

Their assumptions seemed assured just nine days later when a second vessel, a 104-meter yacht with two helicopter landing pads owned by a byzantine collection of shell corporations and trusts but ultimately the property of the impossibly wealthy internal security chief of the Russian president, suffered the same fate in Dubai, sinking to the bottom of Jebel Ali, the largest human-made harbor in the world.

No one had been killed or even injured in either incident, but the destruction of the property itself was more than enough to have the remaining oligarchs with ships afloat both incensed and on alert.

The fear here in Antigua, understandably, was that the *Lyra Drakos* would end up in the bottom of the bay like the ships in the Maldives and Dubai incidents. The *Lyra* was a Greek-named vessel registered in the Seychelles to a front company in the UK belonging to a shell in Cyprus that was owned by a blind trust in Hong Kong that itself was owned by another blind trust in Panama. But she was, ultimately and in truth, the property of Constantine Pasternak, a sixty-three-year-old billionaire from Saint Petersburg and the former minister of natural resources and environment of the Russian Federation.

The *Lyra Drakos* was not as ostentatious as many of the other mega yachts that had been owned by wealthy Russians and seized after the invasion of Ukraine began. With a price tag of 120 million USD and an annual operating cost of just over ten million dollars, she was half the size and a fourth the cost of some of the biggest vessels on the sea. Still, she was currently listed as the 105th largest yacht in the world, and though Constantine Pasternak had hidden his ownership well, he suspected his ship might eventually be a target of whoever was sabotaging Russian-owned property.

All had been quiet in the mega yacht world for two weeks now, but Pasternak and the few men like him who still owned anything that hadn't been seized or sunk had thrown all their guests off their vessels and then replenished them with well-trained and heavily armed goons. This was

survival mode now, and everyone was just waiting either to be hit or, preferably, to catch some group in the act of trying.

Hence the *Lyra Drakos* was anchored a full kilometer away from any other vessel in the harbor here in Antigua, and constantly patrolled both above and below the waterline. The soft mood lighting that normally ringed the ship had been replaced with glaring floods. The security crew was made up of men from Stravinsky, a Russian military contracting firm, and divers kept their watch, making sure no explosives were attached to the hull of Pasternak's last remaining prized possession outside the Russian Federation.

These men were former special forces members and they were prepared to repel any attack, and the events in Dubai and the Maldives had only honed their attention to a finer point.

The seventeen security assets on duty tonight presented an incredibly imposing show of force to any would-be aggressor, and to a man, they were utterly and unshakably confident of one thing.

Nobody . . . *nobody* . . . was going to come here and fuck with Constantine Pasternak tonight.

. . .

Court Gentry had come here to fuck with Constantine Pasternak tonight.

He knelt on the sandy ocean floor, fifty-six feet below the waterline and behind a cluster of six-foot-tall barrel sponges, peering through his night vision monocular. Five-foot-long tarpons circled him languidly, casually interested in the strange creature who'd encroached on their nighttime feeding grounds.

Soon Court flipped his underwater night observation device up away from his mask and squinted into the bright lights around the *Lyra Drakos* above him and just thirty yards to the north.

He'd spotted the divers the night before on his first visit to his target location, and again ten minutes ago, immediately after arriving this evening. The men were too far away for him to see them in any detail, but their lights sweeping against the hull of the yacht as they patrolled independently were unmistakable. They were two in number, just as there had been last night, and Court was doing his best to study their protocols,

though he knew he couldn't wait around for long. His bottom time at sixty feet was less than twenty minutes; after that, he'd run the risk of decompression sickness as he headed back to the surface.

Last night he'd been ready to act but decided there was too much security to go forward without a better understanding of their patterns of movement, so he'd returned to his own boat, ready to reboot for another attempt this evening.

Court's sinking of the *Pura Vida* in the Maldives three and a half weeks ago had proved to be a relatively easy task. The boat's security practices seemed to be focused on the surface, and coming up below it and placing three small magnetic charges in critical areas had been no great feat.

The attack in Dubai had been a more difficult job. The *Ormurin Langi* was a larger vessel, and after the Maldives incident, word was out in the community that someone was gunning for the oligarchs' big toys. The owner of the *Ormurin* had upgraded his security; speedboats patrolled the water around the vessel, and underwater cameras had been placed fore and aft. Still, Court managed to avoid the cameras using his night vision monocular, and he minimized tipping anyone off above the waterline to his presence by diving with a Dräger RBD 5000 rebreather as part of his gear, effectively eliminating any bubbles escaping and rising upwards to the surface.

He'd placed three charges on the *Ormurin Langi*, same as with the *Pura Vida*, and he cleared the area forty-five minutes before the small but critically placed detonations erupted, damaging the mega yacht and ultimately sending it to the floor of the bay some thirteen hours later.

Now Court was here, on the other side of the world, and just as he'd imagined, security seemed exponentially more robust around this vessel.

The enemy was adapting to his tactics, that was clear, but Court wasn't worried.

He'd adapt right the fuck back.

Courtland Gentry was American, a former CIA officer, and then a former CIA asset—a contract agent. Now he worked freelance intelligence jobs, only taking contracts he thought to be principled.

He'd been living on his boat down here in the Caribbean, hoping for some action that would leave him feeling like he'd made a difference in this increasingly cold, black world. He was contacted on the dark web by an expat Ukrainian oligarch named Andrei Melnyk, who had escaped the war and now lived in Romania. Melnyk was a thug and a crook, Court had no doubt, but Court worked for thugs and crooks as a matter of course when he believed the mission to be righteous, and the job the Ukrainian offered him seemed both doable and noble, so he accepted.

Melnyk boasted access to one thing Court needed: intelligence product. The Ukrainian oligarch had contacts in the world of international finance who could connect the dots along the way between wealthy Russians and their property in the West.

Now Court worked for Melnyk, ridding the Earth of the last of the vanity luxury belongings of the criminal Russians who served as the enemy of the Ukrainian's homeland as well as his competition in business.

Court Gentry, in short, had become a professional saboteur.

Currently, the Ukrainian's list named nine yachts. They were all uninsured because of the threats of them being seized by governments, and the vessels' Russian owners had been uncovered via high-level forensic accounting. Six more boats after this one meant steady work for Court Gentry, and once he brought down the *Lyra Drakos*, he had plans to lay low here in the Caribbean for a week or two before heading down to Port of Spain in Trinidad and Tobago and sinking a seventy-two-meter vessel moored there that was owned by the deputy prime minister of Belarus.

Court suffered no illusions that he was changing the world with any of this. This was simply inconveniencing and pissing off some very bad people who had been party to unspeakable crimes against humanity.

He'd much rather be in Crimea or Moscow or Saint Petersburg or Minsk or wherever-the-fuck, shoving stilettos or ice picks or screwdrivers or two-handed swords between the ribs of these bastards—all of these bastards. But his Ukrainian benefactor was a money man who employed money men. He only knew how to follow the money. He did not possess the intelligence capacity, the logistics, or the connections to put Court within reach of anyone of military or intelligence value within Russia or its satellites.



Simply destroying some rich dickhead's water toy felt like weak sauce to Court, but it was *something*, and as far as he was concerned, this work was nevertheless an honorable endeavor.

He checked the computer on his wrist and told himself he'd better get to it. He didn't expect any problems on his ascent, and as long as he could see the two flashlight beams on the hull, he thought he'd have no trouble avoiding the divers while working around a vessel nearly the length of a football field.

He lifted a mesh bag containing three limpet mines from where it had been lying on the sand next to him. Each mine weighed twelve pounds, and he reattached the bag to his buoyancy control device, then added some air from his tank into his jacket. Slowly he began to lift off the ocean floor, the air in the jacket more than making up for the addition of the thirty-six pounds.

He ascended slowly, closing on the yacht at its stern, his eyes shifting back and forth towards the two moving lights he saw bouncing off the hull of the *Lyra Drakos*. He hadn't gotten a good look at the divers; he'd only seen their shadows and silhouettes, but he could imagine they would be carrying either spearguns or Russian APSs, gas-powered underwater submachine guns that fired 5.66-millimeter rounds through unrifled barrels.

Court was armed only with a pair of knives: a six-inch serrated stainless steel Mares fixed-blade dagger in a sheath on the chest of his BCD, and a three-and-a-half-inch titanium ScubaPro Mako with a tanto tip, this strapped to his calf. He *couldn't* get into any shootouts tonight and didn't *want* to get in any knife fights down here under the waves, so he told himself remaining covert would be key.

At thirty-five feet he heard the buzzing sound of an outboard motor churning above him; he looked up and picked out a large tender lazily sweeping around the stern and heading up the starboard side.

The motorboat in the water was not his concern; it was the divers. But still, he liked his chances. The divers' job wouldn't be to scan the black water in all directions for aggressors; it would be to keep an eye on the hull to make sure no devices had been attached. It took each man over ten

minutes to circle the vessel, and since they were more or less equidistant, he knew he had five good minutes at each location to place a mine.

At seventeen feet below the surface, he reached out and put his hand on the hull at the stern, just in front of the massive propeller, and he reached into the bag to grab the first limpet. The mine operated with an electromagnet, so he placed it carefully on the aluminum hull and then initiated a secure connection between the weapon and the target. He checked around again for the divers' flashlights and saw that they were shining on the port and starboard sides but more than halfway up the length of the hull, so he carefully put his hand on the tab connected to the limpet mine's chemical fuse.

Then he took a couple of calming breaths, using the moment to think about his situation.

For his attacks in the Maldives and in Dubai he'd set his fuses for one hour, but after coming here last night and seeing the divers actively searching for mines, he'd trimmed them down so that they would detonate after only twelve minutes.

With a twelve-minute fuse, even if the mines were detected, it was highly unlikely the divers would be able to remove or disable them before it was too late.

Court hadn't killed or even injured anyone on the first two attacks, but tonight he knew it was likely that at least a couple of assholes would lose their lives, and he really didn't give a shit.

These guys worked for Russian oligarchs, crooked beneficiaries of a monstrous regime with targets on their heads.

*Fuck these divers,* Court told himself as he pulled the tab.

He left the first limpet and advanced forward under the hull, using the small keel at the center as a shield by moving to port to hide from a sweeping light on the starboard side, then ducking under the keel again to hide himself from the light on the port side. It was slow going; while there was a pattern to the divers' movements, they weren't perfectly synchronized, so he had to concentrate fully.

When the starboard-side diver made his way back towards the stern, Court himself went under the keel to starboard and quickly attached the limpet on the hull just below the surface, swimming up the side just after

the diver passed, heading aft. Court's operating theory was that it would be five minutes before the diver on the port side made it around here, and once he did, there was a good chance he would miss something almost at the water-line, since he'd be mainly scanning lower down the yacht's seventeen-foot draft.

With two limpets attached and their fuses initiated, he swam back to port and in the direction of the bow. He could see the port-side diver's light sweeping, but he'd lost sight of the light from the man at the stern now. He assumed that either the diver back there had gone to the surface to communicate with men on deck, or else his light just wasn't visible from where Court was positioned below the hull.

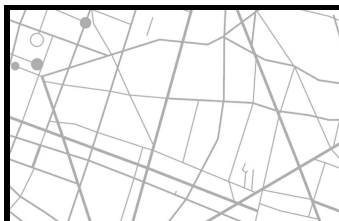
Placement of this last device, Court knew, could be lower in the water than the mine on the starboard side, because by the time the man made it up here within thirty feet of the bow, the first mine would have detonated. At that point, anyone in the water this close would be not only severely concussed but much more focused on getting the hell out of the way of any subsequent blasts than trying to disarm any remaining mines.

Court placed the third limpet, pulled the fuse tab, then looked down to his dive computer. It had been over eight minutes since he'd triggered the first mine's fuse; it would take him a full minute of swimming to ensure that he was clear of the blast radius, so he had less than three minutes to get himself out of here.

He inverted his body in the water and kicked, descending to go back under the keel and then to continue down to the ocean floor and swim away as fast as possible.

He passed under the keel; he was twenty feet below the surface under the hull in the dark area the deck lighting didn't reach when, from out of nowhere, a bright white beam flashed him in the eyes.

Court was blinded and stunned by the light instantly, but despite the sudden danger and disorientation, he retained awareness of the fact that he had only two minutes and forty-five seconds to get his ass the hell out of there before the mines began to blow.



## TWO

Instinctively Court spun away from the bright beam. The light would be in the hand of a man with a weapon, and since Court couldn't tell how far away his opponent was, he worried he'd get shot if he didn't put something between himself and an attack.

As soon as his back was to the light, he felt and heard a powerful *clang* off his equipment behind him. From the sound it seemed as if a spear had hit his steel tank and glanced off.

Court knew the shooter would need time to reload his speargun, so he kicked as hard as he could out in front of him, sending himself backwards in the direction of the danger with his tank still between him and the threat.

As he did this, he drew the big knife on his chest and, when he collided with a man under the hull, he immediately spun around and slashed out.

His blade made no contact with his enemy, but the diver's light spun in the water and began to fall away.

Still partially blinded from getting zapped in the eyes, Court lunged forward with his blade now, stabbing out, but the other diver had himself kicked away to put some distance between the two of them, and Court missed his mark again.

There was so little light here under the hull, and his retinas were still recovering from the sharp beam that had flared them, so Court knew he wasn't much of an effective fighter at the moment. He reached up and pulled down his night vision monocular, assuming this would give him the advantage he needed, but once he looked through the narrow forty-degree tube, he saw not only the diver racing towards him with a long knife but also a night vision system over the man's eyes.