



AN NYPD NEGOTIATORS NOVEL

“Tense and tightly plotted, *Exit Strategy* pulls you in and doesn’t let go.

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CHAPTER 1

*T*he bridge stretched far into the East River, rising slowly into a steel-gray sky roiling with dark clouds. Railings flashed by in a matching shade of grimy gunmetal, broken only by ragged wheals of rust where industrial paint had long ago been stripped by wind and weather as rot took hold.

They called it the “Bridge of Pain” and said it led only to violence, misery, and isolation.

Those destined to stay within its walls emerged changed. Broken. Having left an integral part of themselves behind in a desperate bid to survive.

Gemma Capello’s time there would be short compared to many, but a part of her dreaded not only what brought her there, but what would keep her.

Rikers Island.

Widely known as one of the worst jails in America, Rikers was considered a blight on New York City. So much so, the city had committed to shuttering it in 2026.

Many said the closure couldn’t come fast enough.

Some NYPD and Department of Corrections officers disagreed. In their minds, inmates were incarcerated because they’d broken the law, and Rikers was part of the justice system’s effort to right that wrong. Maybe it was in part because of Gemma’s calling and her innate ability to burrow inside the mindset of others, but she saw those inmates more clearly as fallible human beings than

many of her fellow officers. She also recognized that sometimes justice rolled roughshod over human rights. In her mind, Rikers was a very public example of that abuse.

Moments before, she'd pulled up to the security booth on the Queens side of the Francis R. Buono Memorial Bridge. Immediately, an extra show of force was evident in the additional correction officers stationed there to thoroughly question anyone wishing to gain access to the island and to turn back those found unacceptable. The island was on lockdown and visitation rights would have to wait for another day. The Otis Bantum Correctional Center was in crisis and every available man was on-site, leaving the other buildings potentially short-staffed in case of emergency.

Gemma had waited patiently as they examined her ID and then waved her through with calls of "Good luck!" She could practically hear the silent *You're going to need it* as she drove away, the grim tone chasing her onto the bridge.

She glanced over the right railing, across the wind-tossed choppy waters of the East River to the eastern side of the island. On the southern edge, a low, multicolored smear marked the visitor and employee parking lot, with the pale streak of the Control Building—the administrative facility where visitors and most employees entered the island and then boarded buses to travel to any of the ten jails—behind it. In the distance, taller detention centers rose into the sky.

Gemma had been to Rikers before, but each time it was like entering a war zone. She never felt like she could draw an easy breath until she was back on terra firma in Queens. It was said Rikers Island was sinking; geologists meant that literally, but in her mind, it was sinking straight into the blackness of despair.

Now she was called to report in at the Otis Bantum Correctional Center where, a little over an hour before, a riot had erupted and a group of inmates had taken control of one of the secured units. That was bad enough, but the eight correction officers they'd taken hostage had called for the big guns: the NYPD HNT—the Hostage Negotiation Team. Lieutenant Garcia, the commander of the team, had called her in, but even with lights and sirens, it

had taken her nearly a half hour to fight her way through mid-afternoon traffic to the island.

In a few more minutes she'd be over the bridge and faced with additional layers of security—some standard, some likely extra layers in response to the crisis—to get onto the island proper. Then it was just a matter of finding the right jail and getting to work.

A low roar drew her gaze out the passenger window and her heart lurched into her throat at the sight of a massive jet speeding directly toward her on one of LaGuardia's two runways, less than a half mile to the east. The plane left the runway, banking upward at a steep angle to rumble ferociously overhead. Heavy vibrations rattled Gemma's breastbone as it jetted away from New York City and into the overcast sky.

She crossed the apex of the bridge and coasted down toward land. Spread out before her, Rikers covered the entire breadth of the island in clusters of buildings, each contained behind rows of chain link and razor wire. On the far side of the island, a quintet of stacks from the power plant pumped out billows of charcoal smoke to meld into the low-lying cloud cover.

Coming off the bridge, she joined a short line at the next set of security booths. When it was her turn, she pulled up to the booth, put down her window, and extended her identification. "Detective Gemma Capello, NYPD Hostage Negotiation Team."

The burly corrections officer leaned in to inspect the picture on her ID, then her face, and then the ID again. He gave a curt nod. "Go on through to the next booth."

One more round of identification and inspection and then Gemma had her directions—stay on Hazen Street straight ahead and follow the road as it curved to the left into Hillside Avenue. The Otis Bantum Correctional Center, or OBCC in officer shorthand, would be on the left. But as Gemma closed in on the OBCC, she realized directions weren't required. All she needed to do was follow the emergency vehicles and flashing lights. It felt like every Department of Corrections worker and NYPD cop not already on duty had converged on the site.

The OBCC was a frenzy of activity—people streamed across the

front parking lot, and emergency vehicles, both Department of Corrections and NYPD, lined the roadway. Gemma overshot the facility and found a parking spot on the far side of the road near the western edge of the island next to a small storage building. Getting out of the car, she buttoned her blazer and jogged back down the road, thankful for the flat-soled boots she paired with her tailored suits for just this reason.

She ran along the fence line where it towered ten feet overhead, curls of vicious razor wire twisted in loops over the top. Fifteen feet away, a second line of fencing ran parallel to the outer ring to dissuade anyone with hopes of escape—if the inner fence didn't tear their flesh to shreds, the outer one would. High-tech security could be hacked, but there was nothing like good, old-fashioned agony to dash the hopes of anyone wishing for freedom outside the walls of the jail.

Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.

Gemma dropped into a walk as she arrived at the parking lot. She scanned the buzzing activity, searching for Garcia's salt-and-pepper hair among mostly younger officers, her ears attuned for any familiar voice, but the surrounding furor had an edge of unfamiliar desperation to it. To save time, she pulled out her cell phone and texted her lieutenant of her arrival. Seconds later, she received instructions to meet him under the trees just north of the main entrance. She cut to her right and, pushing past a cluster of correction officers, spotted Garcia standing with three other men with their backs to her.

She didn't need to see his face to identify Trevor McFarland—his boxy charcoal suit hanging drunkenly as if he'd recently shed weight too quickly gave him away, as did the bulky equipment bag on his shoulder. He hadn't suffered a drastic weight loss; he just never seemed to care that the off-the-rack suits he wore on the job didn't actually fit him. It was the same reason he kept his fair hair buzzed short—so he didn't need to fuss with it or worry about departmental regulations. McFarland was always more concerned with the job than the trappings of it, a sentiment with which Gemma wholeheartedly agreed.

At a word from Garcia, all three men glanced back toward her, allowing Gemma to quickly identify the rest of the team. Fresh-faced and with a cheerful grin as he pushed his bone-straight black hair out of his eyes, Jimmy Chen wore a suit and tie in an identical shade of navy blue. He was one of the newer members of the team, but even HNT rookies had at least a dozen years on the force. In the months since he'd joined the HNT, he'd shown himself to be intuitive, a quick thinker, and, thanks to his Asian-American roots, an asset in situations dealing with sensitive racial issues when a suspect didn't want to deal with yet another white guy who didn't understand his specific problem. The third man was Kurt Williams, a senior member of the team, his neatly trimmed beard liberally sprinkled with gray, his hazel eyes behind his boxy, wire-rimmed glasses serious and steady. He'd paired a subtle hunter green and navy blazer with dark trousers, giving him an elder statesman/professorial air.

Garcia's put together a solid team for this.

Once again, Gemma was the only woman on the team. When under twenty percent of the entire NYPD force was female, this wasn't a surprise. Unlike some of the women on the force who tried to blend into the male background, Gemma never tried to hide her gender. She might wear simple, tailored suits and sensible footwear like the guys, but she let her curly hair tumble to her shoulders, and she wouldn't think of walking out of her apartment before framing her brown eyes with a swoop of eyeliner and a few flicks of mascara.

Of only medium stature, but with serious muscle behind his bulk, Garcia stepped out from the group and motioned Gemma over.

Gemma sidestepped around a bench where a uniformed correction officer was seated, attended by a paramedic who held a wad of gauze over his left eye while blood oozed down his cheek. "Sorry I'm late. I got here as fast as I could." She nodded at the other detectives in greeting.

"We're still waiting," McFarland said. "DOC admin wants to be in on the briefing."

The Department of Corrections was ultimately responsible for all activity on Rikers Island, so this wasn't a surprise. "The commissioner's on her way?"

"Expected shortly. Your father's already inside."

Tony Capello, a forty-year veteran of the NYPD, was the current Chief of Special Operations. As such, he oversaw the many units inside the division requiring specific training to respond by land, air, water, horseback, or for crisis situations requiring specialized skills or equipment. Considering the Emergency Services Unit and the HNT were under his purview, it was no surprise he'd want to be here to help establish the NYPD's presence within Rikers.

Gemma glanced toward the main entrance. "I should have known."

"Considering the media circus this could become, he'd want in on this from the beginning to help steer the story." Garcia's gaze shifted abruptly to focus on something over Gemma's shoulder.

She turned to find the Apprehension Tactical Team had arrived. The A-Team, as they were more commonly called, was the NYPD Emergency Services Unit's tactical outfit, and were often called into hostage situations. As usual, they looked ready for a siege, suited up in unrelieved black with heavy body armor, boots, helmets, and safety glasses. Each officer carried not only a handgun at his hip but an M4 carbine on a sling strap against his chest. "Who's leading the team?" Gemma asked.

"Cartwright."

"Good." When Garcia turned to fix her with a pointed stare, she shrugged. "Sometimes Sanders can be a little hotheaded." *They don't call him Shoot-'em-up Sanders for nothing.* "Cartwright's a slower burn, which is what this situation is going to need, especially if there might be a clash with Rikers's own emergency team."

"That's for Cartwright to manage. Rikers ERSU can't be occupied with this situation for days." Rikers's Emergency Response Service Unit—the ERSU—was the DOC's tactical team. "They need to be available in case of crisis anywhere else on the island. If their

people get spread too thin because of this situation, they're going to end up with another crisis."

Gemma scanned the A-Team officers, but at this distance and with helmets on, she couldn't distinguish one officer from another.

If Logan was part of the team, she couldn't tell.

Detective Sean Logan, who'd gone through the academy with her. Who'd been always a rival, sometimes a friend, usually a pain in the ass, and, for a single night about fifteen years ago, her lover. Who'd been ordered to the rooftop across the street from Saint Patrick's Old Cathedral two months earlier and had ignored her personal plea to save the life of John Boyle, the retired cop who'd vented his grief after losing his son by taking hostages at New York City Hall.

Who'd fired the fatal shot.

Logan had followed Sanders's orders to take the shot if he felt Gemma or her brother Alex had been threatened by Boyle. But she understood with that kind of order, Logan relied on his own judgment of the situation to decide whether to take a life.

It was unreasonable to still be angry over what had happened in the cemetery, but months later she still couldn't shake it off. In her heart, she knew Boyle was trying for suicide by cop, but there hadn't been enough time to convince Logan that Boyle wasn't a threat to anyone but himself. She'd depended on their history for Logan to trust her implicitly.

A man had lost his life because, clearly, Logan didn't trust her judgment over his own, even when she'd spent hours with the suspect, getting to know how he ticked.

She hadn't worked with Logan since that night. But sooner or later, he was going to circle back into her orbit. And with a situation of this size, unless he'd recently gone off shift, as one of the A-Team's most competent officers, he'd be here.

She'd just have to deal with it.

She turned away from the A-Team and toward Garcia. "When's the briefing?"

"In ten." Garcia shot back his cuff and checked the time on his

watch. “Whether the commissioner is here or not. They’re giving her time, but they can only afford so much.” He pointed at the industrial cement steps leading to a door where the parking lot curved around the building. “We still have to get through another round of security, so let’s move or we’ll be late.”

It was time to find out how bad the situation was. They’d know soon whether this would be a standoff that could be negotiated in a single day, or whether this would take over their lives for days, or maybe a week, or more.

Negotiating was already hard enough, but when it was with inmates already looking at life sentences with absolutely nothing to lose, the cost of a team’s lack of success might be paid in human lives.