

COLD

BARREL

ZERO

A NOVEL BY THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE 500* AND *THE DIRECTIVE*

MATTHEW QUIRK

**COLD
BARREL
ZERO**

MATTHEW QUIRK



MULHOLLAND BOOKS

Little, Brown and Company
New York Boston Toronto

*For my father,
Commander R. Gregory Quirk, USN (Ret.)
Reveille! Reveille! Reveille!*

THEY WOULD COME for him at night, so Hayes was awake. He finished with his codes and laid his Bible on a makeshift table: a plank set across two splintering crates. He never really slept anymore, just rested for a few hours during the day, lying dressed on the floor on top of a thin blanket.

He brushed a mosquito from his arm where a patch of rough scar showed under the sleeve of his T-shirt. Once it had been a tattoo—a combat diver and jump wings, the seal of the First Force Reconnaissance Marines—but two years ago he'd had to take it off.

A sparrow perched on the branch of a tree outside. As Hayes watched it, his thoughts drifted back to the dead.

It flew off. Another bird followed, then a dozen more. The rustle of wings surrounded the hut as hundreds of them rose, filled the sky, and blotted out the stars.

Hayes stood, slung his rifle over his shoulder, grabbed his bag, and sprinted through the door of his compound, leaving the light

MATTHEW QUIRK

on behind him. He stopped after seventy-five meters—danger-close range for the Hellfires—and ducked behind the trunk of a Meru oak. He could have gone farther, but he needed cover between him and the sky.

Drones are silent, despite all the myths locals like to believe about death buzzing over their heads. If the machines allow themselves to be heard, it's a show of intimidation. When they come to kill, they stay high and make no noise. Hellfires move faster than sound, so the target dies unaware that he has been hit.

He knew it was futile, but he scanned the sky anyway. The odds of catching a reflection from the sensor ball were almost nil.

A hare bolted across the savanna. Above him, a sparrow returned, looked at him hiding behind the tree, and cocked its head.

"I know," Hayes said, and took a deep breath. Too long running. Too long alone. The paranoia was getting to him. He'd been speaking a mix of Egyptian Arabic and French with a Belgian accent for the last month, passing himself off as a mineral engineer. He needed to get across the border.

The rest of the flock settled. He relieved himself against the tree, then started back toward the house. Three seconds later, a sonic boom punched him in the stomach and ears. It felt like a small, close explosion.

The shock wave from the blast knocked him back on his heels. Flames licked red through the rising cloud of black smoke. As the debris showered down, he threw himself behind a tree and waited a moment for the disorientation to pass.

He stayed there until the smoke expanded enough to cover him from above, then ducked low and stepped through the wreckage toward his truck, an ancient Land Rover Defender.

Strong winds blew from the east. The smoke would lift in a few seconds and the drone would see him with its infrared cameras.

COLD BARREL ZERO

He'd run the drill himself dozens of times, calling in strikes with an infrared laser. The drone would circle back and then clean up the squirts with its second missile.

A smoldering piece of plywood lay on the ground beside him, a foot from the waist-high grass that surrounded the compound. He needed cover. The fire might work, or it might kill him. There was no time to think twice. He kicked the wood into the brush. White smoke twined up and joined the last black fumes from the demolished house.

He stepped into the truck. The natural instinct was to speed from the blast, from the eyes above, but he waited, calm.

The wind caught the embers, and the grass became a wall of fire rushing toward him. He started the engine but didn't move. Only when the flames reached the rear bumper did he touch the throttle and begin to roll along slowly, keeping a few feet ahead of the blaze roaring behind him. The heat wavered the air in his mirrors. The curtain of smoke and heat would conceal everything the Predator had, visual and IR. He would be safe as long as he stayed cradled in the fire. It grew, faster now, and he just outpaced it, bucking at twenty, thirty, forty miles an hour over the rutted tracks through the grasslands, moving with the flames toward the wooded foothills and highlands beyond.

The fire jumped ahead. He checked the speedometer. Any faster and he would break an axle.

The rear window blew out from the heat.

The forest was close. It would give him cover. There were too many ways in and out to find him. The fire leaped ahead and swallowed the truck.

He pressed the pedal to the floor. He had to get through to warn the others.

The hunt had begun.

CHAPTER I

MORET YAWNED AS she walked past the only grocery store in town, a Chinese-run market. Dust caked her skin. She had been on the highlands for three days and nights. She spent most of her time hunting, both to feed herself and to cover her expenses with guide work, trophies, and bounties. A pool of brown, foul water filled half the square. She circled around it.

She left her dog, a boxer mutt, in the passenger seat of the truck with the window cracked and headed for a storefront off the main path. She came every week. *Fax* and *ADSL* were hand-painted on the window below Arabic script. She pulled her headscarf forward, looked away from the security camera, and took a terminal in the far back. She opened up the browser and went to Hotmail.

She double-checked the date—the twelfth of October. From her shoulder bag, she pulled out a small volume with a cloth cover over the original leather. It was a Bible, the most common book in the world, the King James Version.

They were using a book cipher based on the date. The twelfth;

COLD BARREL ZERO

she counted off twelve books, which brought her to the Second Book of Kings. October, the tenth month; she went down ten chapters. And, finally, she used the last two digits of the current year to count down verses. Her finger rested on the page:

And he said, Take them alive. And they took them alive, and slew them at the pit of the shearing house, even two and forty men; neither left he any of them.

She took the first letters of the first ten words and typed them in as her username: *absttaattt@hotmail.com*. Then she proceeded to the next verse and used the number and the first ten letters as her password: *15AwhwdthloJ*.

She had done this every Sunday for the past two years, and every Sunday she had found nothing. She was starting to hate this ritual. It felt like rolling over in the morning and reaching for a spouse long dead.

Each account was used only once. She clicked on the spam folder and skimmed the page. There wasn't much because of the randomness of the username. Then she saw it—the fourth message down. She thought at first it must be a mistake, but no; it was what she had been waiting for. It read like any other prescription-pill come-on, but for two years she had been waiting to see this sender's name: John Okoye27.

She clicked on the e-mail. *Best and Cheapest Premier Pharmacy!* the text read. What interested her was the embedded JPEG file at the bottom of the screen. It showed a blue diamond-shaped pill. The colors looked normal to the naked eye, but the pixel data had been manipulated, with extra bits written over the least significant color codes.

Photos modified with this embedding technique, called steganography, appeared as normal file attachments. An encrypted message wouldn't be able to withstand the NSA's deciphering tools, and en-

MATTHEW QUIRK

ryption would only draw attention to it. That was why Moret's instructions masqueraded as spam, hiding in plain sight, just one more drop in the sea of garbage coursing through the web.

She downloaded an open-source program from the Internet and extracted the message embedded in the photo. It was a sequence of fourteen letters and numbers, which she broke into grid-zone designator, 100,000-meter square ID, and position north and east, down to the meter. They were MGRS coordinates, the military's version of latitude and longitude.

She memorized them, then took a disc from her bag and inserted it in the computer. It spun and began wiping the machine's hard drive.

She returned to her truck, a rusting Toyota Hilux. She kept everything she owned in it. A battered Pelican case behind the seats contained an Mk 11 Mod 0 sniper rifle, a nightscope, and a suppressor. She'd removed the passenger airbag to make room for a hidden compartment, known as a trap. The only way to open it was to press down both window buttons and the hazard lights for three seconds. Inside there was \$90,000 in U.S. currency, five passports, and a 1911 pistol with no serial number.

The boxer cocked his head at her. She opened the door and led him out of the car. She ran her hand over his head a few times, then climbed back in and drove off. In the rearview, she watched the dog fall back, sprinting after her through the mud, disappearing slowly in the distance.

Seventy-five hundred miles away, a screwdriver rested on the open pages of Speed's Bible. Electronics and machinery spilled their insides over every horizontal surface of his one-bedroom house. It hadn't taken long for word to spread through the peninsula about his ability to fix anything. The pocket watch in his hands had been

COLD BARREL ZERO

a labor of love; he'd carefully tweezed apart the workings, even milled a new balance staff. He had been planning to drop it off at the apartment above the billiards hall on his way out of town when someone knocked on his door. He wiped the sweat from his face, drew back the mosquito netting, and answered, as always, with a pistol drawn.

It was Emiliano. The people in the village loved to watch Speed work, piecing together gears and screws a few millimeters wide, his long fingers moving like spiders. But today he just handed the boy the watch through the partly open door, refused the crumpled pesos, and sent him away. He packed his tools and a few leather cases marked *Falle* in his backpack, walked the half a mile to the coast road, and waited an hour to catch the fifty-year-old yellow school bus that now served as the intercity line.

Speed found a seat. His bag held two kilos of HDX high explosive. He set it down between his feet next to an old woman's purse and a sack of red potatoes.

At the same moment that Sunday, in a time zone eight hours ahead, Green locked the front door to his Communist-era apartment building. He took the key off his ring and dropped it through the grate of a sewer. He had been planning to move on anyway. He had helped out his neighbor's daughter first, resetting a badly broken radius and ulna. Soon more came, because they couldn't afford a doctor, or because they couldn't afford to draw attention to their injuries. Too many people were looking for him, and more and more were showing up with professionally laid-on bruises and welts, which meant internal security, which meant trouble.

He rounded the corner and saw the girl climbing in the apartment complex's playground. The arm had healed nicely. She waved

MATTHEW QUIRK

to him from the top of the slide. He waved back as he passed through the gate, then he tucked his chin down against the freezing wind and headed for the footbridge over the highway.

One by one they opened their Bibles and made their way to the stashes: cash, explosives, small arms, frequency-hopping radios, false papers, instructions on the target, and specifics of how to slip across the U.S. border.

They knew the stakes if they were caught. Aiding the enemy was punishable by death. But that didn't matter. They were coming home, all of them. He was calling. It was time.

CHAPTER 2

A MAN SOME called Hayes put his spotting scope down on the passenger seat. The skin on his forearm was mostly healed from when he'd burned it in the brushfire.

Hayes had been waiting for the moment for a long time. They were on the kill list. He knew the routine all too well: find, fix, finish. They would be tracked down one by one. That's why he had sent the messages, why he had gathered them together. He was already inside the United States. So was Green. The time for running was past. He had to make a stand, to take them down from the inside. And soon he would have the means.

But first, he had to see her, even though he knew it was a mistake. He crossed Orchard Road, then skirted the split-rail fence. Daytime, suburbs, male; he'd picked clothes to blend in. He wore Dickies and a short-sleeved button-down, just another contractor, pest control if stopped. The movements came automatically as he closed the distance: fast when the wind blew and the rustling leaves covered the noise of his steps, tall and relaxed through the dead space

MATTHEW QUIRK

behind a knoll, slow when out of cover. He stayed downwind, moving closer and closer, everything he'd learned in the stalk, everything he'd taught to so many. He missed the weight of his rifle.

At the edge of the trees, he paused and looked over the house, a ranch on two acres. A basket of black-eyed Susan vines hung in the kitchen window. Lauren's clothes swayed gently on the drying line in the back. It was as if nothing had changed. She had parked the F-150 so the two passenger-side wheels rested on the curb. He saw her walk away from it, balancing the oil pan with both hands. Her hair was up in a ponytail, and she was wearing one of his old flannel work shirts.

He saw movement fifty feet away; at the edge of the backyard, a two-year-old girl in a puffy vest climbed up a pile of mulch.

Hayes thrived on stress, enjoyed the stimulation. It's why he was chosen, how he survived, through selection and a dozen deployments. He could regulate his breathing, lower his heartbeat, manage his cortisol levels. But suddenly he didn't trust his body, doubted his control.

The girl jumped off the top, landed hard, fell, and came up with dirt all along her right side. She examined her arm for a moment, then looked his way and began walking straight toward him. He was a little disappointed that after everyone he had killed, unseen, with one shot from a cold barrel, he'd just been made by a toddler. It was impossible, unless he'd wanted to be seen.

Hayes felt his heart rate rise, easily past a hundred and ten now. This was a mistake. He was putting himself in danger, which didn't matter, but he was putting them in danger too.

She moved closer, picked up a long stick, and dragged it behind her. She stood fifteen feet away. Hayes watched her. He didn't move, couldn't move. She had his mother's eyes. He prayed for strength.

COLD BARREL ZERO

She turned her head to the side. “Who?” she said.

“Hey, kiddo.” He’d never seen her before and now she was in front of him, speaking. His pulse raced, past counting. He swallowed and it caught in his throat.

The girl looked back to her mother, then to Hayes.

“Mom!” she shouted. “Stranger!”

Good girl, Hayes thought. He watched her mother as she came around the corner of the house. Lauren looked older, with more gray in her hair than anyone deserved to have earned in two years, but still as beautiful, even more so.

How had she survived the shame he had brought her? He wanted to tell her how sorry he was, how the regret burned in him like a disease. He wanted more than anything to hold her, to feel their breath rise and fall together. But he had already gone too far. They didn’t deserve any more pain. And she was most likely armed and liable to call in the FBI.

No. He stepped back into the shadows. He couldn’t live like this, but the answer wasn’t here. He would use any means necessary to get back to them. He would do what he had been trained for, ingrained after so many years. Develop the situation. Increase the tempo. Audacity above all.

He slid through the woods, silent as sunlight, until he reached his box truck. He opened up the back door and pushed a camera with a telephoto lens to the side, then picked his radio up off a coil of detonation cord. Everything was ready. He’d be home soon, in this life or the next. The time had come to find out which.

CHAPTER 3

HELEN McREARY WAS always the first to arrive at the Applications Personnel Support Office. The pain in her hands tended to wake her before dawn and by then her terrier was whining at the side of the bed. She looked forward to the quiet of the empty office, sitting at her desk with a travel mug of strong black coffee from home.

She opened the door, entered the bland front foyer, and brought her right eye a few inches from a plastic and steel box on the wall. The bolt retracted with a clunk. She stepped inside a short hallway and took a sip of coffee. As soon as the door behind her closed, the door ahead unlocked.

The gray slush outside had soaked her sneakers. She took them off, slid them under her desk, and pulled a pair of flats from her shoulder bag. She dialed the combination into her filing cabinet, opened the drawer, and flipped the sign stuck in the handle from the red side marked Closed to the green marked Open.

She took her hard drive from the drawer and inserted it into the

COLD BARREL ZERO

dock on her computer. As it powered up, she put her smart card into the reader and logged in with her PIN. Once her terminal was ready, she checked her messages and navigated a secure database, noting on an index card the paper files she would need to pull that morning. She shut and locked the drawer, flipped the sign back, took her keys from her bag, picked up her mug, and crossed the office.

A fine metal mesh was embedded in the walls, floor, and ceiling, and copper contacts were built into the doorjambs. These transformed the entire suite into a Faraday cage, from which no electronic or radio signals could emerge. The outlets were filtered for the same reason, and there were no connections to the public Internet.

At the far end of the room, she turned her key in a lock, opened a steel door, and entered a corridor. Along one side were vault doors. She walked to the fourth and dialed in the combination. Five revolutions right, four left, three right, two left, and then a final spin until it stopped, which meant the bolt had drawn. The door opened slowly due to its weight. She flicked on the fluorescent lights, consulted her card, searched out the appropriate file drawer, and pulled it open.

The coffee mug slipped from her hand as she let out an uncharacteristically foul obscenity. As she grabbed for the falling mug, a gush of hot liquid ran over her hand. She ignored the burn, picked the cup off the floor, and stared into the drawer.

The cabinet was three feet wide and one foot deep. The thousand folders that normally filled it had been filed left to right. Now it was empty. She tried the one above it: empty. The next one over: gone.

She went to the vault door. The lock was intact, perfect. There hadn't been a single thing out of place. It was as if the documents had simply vanished.

MATTHEW QUIRK

She entered the corridor and opened the next vault. The racks were empty; they had taken the hard drives too. She needed to make the call. At her desk, she pulled a directory from her drawer and picked up the phone. She looked under Joint Special Operations and dialed the Special Security office.

“I need rapid response at APSO. The records are gone.”

“Which records?”

“All of them.”

“I don’t understand. Is this urgent?”

McReary dropped the index card into the burn bag. “This is your career on the line. Put me through now.”

The command in her voice was unmistakable.

“Hold, please.”

She waited a moment as she was transferred and then explained what had happened.

“So this was a break-in?”

“There must have been a breach, but I don’t understand,” she said as she scanned the room. “There’s no trace. The biometrics are fine, the locks, the vault doors too. It’s like it all just disappeared.”

Six hours later, Cox knelt at the vault and examined the dial of the Sargent and Greenleaf combination lock. It was perfect, with no sign of any manipulation or forced entry, none of the marrings characteristic of a robot dialer. Cox’s formal title was special assistant to the secretary of defense. His job was to make problems go away. He was a brigadier general but traveled in civilian clothes.

The officer with direct oversight of APSO, Lieutenant Colonel Barnard, had come from Bragg and stood over him, arms held loosely behind his back. Cox had flown from DC on a C-20, the navy’s version of a Gulfstream jet, normally used only by general officers. That set Barnard on edge. Cox made no mention of his

COLD BARREL ZERO

own rank. He found it easier to read people when they weren't kissing his ass.

"If there's no damage, we must have an inside job," Barnard said. He put his hands on his hips, a tic to project authority. "Do we have the audit logs? We'll simply find who entered and then case closed."

Cox removed the last screw and pulled the back off the safe lock. "We already did." Without standing up, Cox held a printout over his shoulder.

Barnard took it, scanned the entries for the previous night, and saw only his own name. "Me?" He made a noise that was a cross between laughing and clearing his throat. "I wasn't here. This is impossible."

"Not quite impossible. A high-res shot of your iris, superimposed over a live pupil; either a contact lens or a good printout could do it." He unscrewed the wheel pack from the threaded rod. "What worries me is the Abloy Protec up front and the Sargent and Greenleaf here. There is no sign of picking or bypass."

He held up a long threaded rod with the safe dial on the end, shone a light on it, and lifted his glasses to examine it up close. "I almost missed it. It's too perfect. Zero wear. This is a new spindle and a new dial."

"Well, let's get the camera footage and see who it is."

"That won't help. I checked. They did the whole thing in the dark."

"You're telling me that anyone can just waltz in here and defeat four layers of the hardest security the U.S. government and Joint Special Operations Command can manage?"

"Not anyone. No." Cox stood and wiped off his hands. "Only one of our guys could do it. The night-vision, the Abloy decoder, the tools for the safe bypass; we have them. No locksmiths. Only USG, a few teams at JSOC, the NSA, the CIA, and the FBI."

MATTHEW QUIRK

This office had two names, one official and one known only to a few. That is why a C-20 had been sent to the front of the line on the tarmac at Joint Base Andrews with Cox on board. Applications Personnel Support Office was a cover, something for the org charts and paychecks. It was a name that could be handed out when an employee needed to list a reference for a bank or a landlord.

In reality, this office housed the security roster of the Defense Cover Program, which provided false identities to members of classified units within the Joint Special Operations Command. Their records were pulled from the normal military personnel system and stored here under lock and key with any connection between present and past erased. The members of these special mission units lived as civilians, under cover. That allowed the president to disavow any tier-one assets who were caught working behind enemy lines. It also firewalled the day-to-day identities of the soldiers in order to protect them and their families from enemy reprisals during and after their service.

“Good, then,” Barnard said. “That gives us a short list to work from. We’ll just narrow it down.”

“They stole everything we’d need to make that list. That’s probably the point.”

“You know we have assets unaccounted for. We lost track of Hayes and his team after the air strikes,” Barnard said. “But that would be insane, to enter the lion’s den.”

“If it is them, it’s brilliant.”

“We need to find these people.”

“Every cover identity available to them, every passport, every safe house, every cache of arms and currency is now lost to us. We barely know their real names.”

“But this entire program is designed for deniability, to protect us against them.”

COLD BARREL ZERO

“Now it’s working the other way. And the measures to guard their families against the bad guys are going to hide them from us. They stole the records of everything we’d use to find them in the United States: next of kin, associates, means of support.”

“For Christ’s sake. Someone has to know who these people are,” Barnard said. “We have the material from the investigations.”

“The annexes were kept here.” It had been Barnard’s order, a way to control the political damage to JSOC by limiting access to the details of Hayes’s crimes.

“You’re telling me that we have war criminals loose in the United States and they are goddamn ghosts! You know what these men are capable of.”

“I do,” Cox said. This was what these soldiers had been trained to do: assume a name, a face, a life. Hide out for years if necessary. “We can work backward. Everyone leaves a trace, even if the paper’s gone. We know he came from Marine Special Operations. We can go back to his old unit. He stole his personal file, but we can pull the unit rosters by hand, talk to those who served alongside him, commanded him, reconstruct what we can about where he is likely to go and who is likely to help him stateside. He’ll need support.

“Some of it may be on magnetic tape in a bunker, though that’ll take weeks to drag up. It’s going to be a lot of legwork.”

“Well, we should get started.”

Cox already had. “I will.”

“Jesus,” Barnard said, surveying the empty file drawers. “They took the files for every cover identity in the field. They could sell those to our enemies. It would be a slaughter. Worse than Hanssen, worse than Ames.”

“There’s that,” Cox said.

“You don’t think that’s his game?”

MATTHEW QUIRK

“If he hadn’t taken all of them, we would know where to start. He had no choice.”

“So he’s covering his tracks. He’s on the run. This could be his last step, a disappearing act.”

Cox shook his head. “No. He can disappear anywhere. This is overkill. He’d take a risk this great only to avoid a greater one later.”

“Say what you mean.”

“He’s back in the U.S. It’s suicidal, but that’s his psychology, why we selected him: he’ll always choose duty over self-preservation. He’s coming for us. He’s going to finish this. And now”—he waved his hand at the empty racks—“we won’t be able to see him coming.”

“You’re on top of this?”

“Yes. And it would be wise to let Colonel Riggs know, so he can take precautions.”

“I’d like to keep this close to the vest,” Barnard said. Behind his back, he held the printout with the record of his biometric entry into the office.

“Hayes nearly killed Riggs. He is likely to finish the job.”

Barnard nodded. “You’re right. You find them, under whatever names, whatever lies they are living, and then we go after them with everything we have.”

“I will,” Cox said, and he was already in motion, striding away with the safe dial in one hand and his phone in the other.

As soon as his cell got a signal, he punched in a number, put the phone to his ear, and said, “Give me MARSOC.”

CHAPTER 4

IN THE BACK of a box truck, Hayes laid two packets down on a steel shelf. The magnets inside clunked onto the metal. He picked up a simple Nokia cell phone, dialed a number, and placed it beside the devices.

Each packet was about the size of a hardcover book and had a Nokia bound to the top with electrical tape. The phones' plastic cases had been pried open, and a small piece of breadboard circuitry covered each keypad. As both phones rang, Hayes held the probes of a multimeter across the open wires and checked the current. It was plenty. He reattached the wires to the detonators and went through the continuity on the circuits one last time. Then he handed the packets back to Speed.

“Strong work,” he said.

Speed gave them a last once-over, kept one for himself, and handed the second to Moret. They stowed their packages in messenger bags and hopped out of the back of the truck. Two motorcycles were parked beside it. They climbed on. Green waited

MATTHEW QUIRK

behind the wheel of a Nissan pickup, and Foley drove the Ford Taurus.

The bikes pulled out, nearly silent. The two other vehicles followed behind as they left through the gated entrance to the lot. The convoy disappeared around the corner, past a truck-repair depot that was closed for the night.

The box truck would stay behind for a few minutes. Cook stood guard outside. Ward was in the cargo area, leaning over a laptop on top of the communications rack. She handled comms and the tracking of the GPS in the packets. Hayes crouched beside her. He ran his finger over the gold cross embossed in leather on the cover of his Bible, then opened it and laid it on his knees.

His headlamp glowed red on the book of Matthew, the betrayal of Jesus. He read the passage where a disciple cuts off the ear of a servant of the high priest: *Then said Jesus unto him, Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish by the sword.*

Hayes turned to the Gospel according to Mark, then Luke, then John. Only Matthew mentioned that line.

He thumbed back to the Last Supper and Jesus's instructions: *And he that hath no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one.*

The last verse he found with no trouble. The spine was creased and the pages seemed to open to it on their own. It was from Matthew: *Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.*

Hayes ran the back of his hand along his chin and read it again.

"More codes?" Ward asked.

He watched her for a moment before he spoke. "In a way. Reading, mainly."

"Don't spoil the ending for me. We found the target. They're at the airport."

COLD BARREL ZERO

“On the move?”

“Yeah.”

Hayes closed the book. He had waited years for this. It was vulnerable in transit. He had one chance.

“Execute.”

The armored truck rumbled along Sepulveda Boulevard, approaching the tunnel where the road passed under the runways of Los Angeles International Airport. The man at the passenger window reached his hand into the bag from In-N-Out Burger. He shoved three fries in his mouth as he gazed at the multicolored towers rising one hundred feet into the night sky around LAX.

“The loose ones are the best, man,” he said as they inched through traffic into the tunnel. He was the messenger. In a normal armored truck, he would make the pickups. The man in the middle was the guard; he would stand outside the truck with his gun drawn and provide cover. The driver would stay with the truck, the most lethal weapon any of them had. This, however, wasn't a normal truck. The selectors on their firearms went from single-shot to full auto. Only a handful of security companies in the United States were authorized to use those guns. Most of the ones who did deal with nuclear facilities.

“Whoa,” said the driver as he stood on the brake. “Look lively.”

Horns blared. Brake lights lit the tunnel red. The Nissan truck in front of them slammed to a stop. It had brushed fenders with a Ford Taurus that was trying to change lanes. The drivers argued through their open windows, blocking the path ahead. Traffic stalled, hemmed in the armored truck on all sides. A plane landed on the airstrip overhead, and the screech of tires filled the tunnel.

“We're sitting in a kill zone,” the guard said. “Get around them.”

MATTHEW QUIRK

The messenger dropped the paper bag to the floor and lifted his MP7 across his chest. The driver twisted the wheel to force his way into traffic, but two motorcycles were coming up fast on either side, between traffic, splitting the lanes.

“Where the hell did they come from?” With all its armor, the truck had huge blind spots. But he hadn’t heard a thing as they approached. The bikes’ headlights glared in the side-views, blinding the three men in the truck.

“Just my luck, getting killed for an empty truck.” The messenger slid a metal tab to his right and rested the muzzle of his submachine gun in the gun port.

The pickup’s reverse lights lit up, and it backed toward them. “He’s going to hit us!” the guard shouted.

The Nissan’s bumper stopped a foot from the front of the armored truck just as the motorcycles passed on either side. The one on the left swerved around the pickup as it shifted into drive and pulled ahead. The driver of the Taurus shouted a few more curses at the Nissan as it drove off, then he continued on as well.

The traffic eased, and the armored truck went with it, out of the tunnel. The messenger kept his gun up, his eyes darting around.

“Relax, dude,” the driver said. “Shut the port. We’ve got run-flats and armor good up to fifty-cal.”

The messenger let his gun fall to the end of its sling, then lifted the manifest that detailed what they were supposed to be picking up.

“A coffer?” He turned to the guard. “What is that?”

“I think it’s like a dresser or a trunk.”

The driver pulled through the airport gates and drove along the tarmac. He glanced at the manifest, the photocopied bill of lading written in a language he couldn’t understand.

“I thought it was a safe.”

COLD BARREL ZERO

A squad of armed guards waited around the plane. The messenger laughed as he saw them and the weapons they were carrying.

“This better be some dresser.”

He reached down for the paper bag between his feet, but by now the fries were cold.

The cost of security on an armored truck is dead space. The narrow, high windows blind those in the cab to anything that comes close alongside. The convex mirrors bolted onto the side-views help, but in the tunnel they had been blinded by the bikes' headlights. As an added measure, Green in the Nissan pickup had distracted the guards by nearly reversing into their front bumper. There was no way that anyone inside the truck could have seen the motorcyclists attach the devices to the rear wheel wells.

CHAPTER 5

THE BOX TRUCK parked outside the cargo terminals. A blue vinyl sign on its side read *A&S Fire Protection Systems*. Hayes jumped out, pulled a ramp down from the rear, and waited. The cargo offices were closed. He looked through an open gate to the runway. The perimeter security was a joke.

Two headlights appeared at the end of the access road. Speed and Moret cruised toward the truck on their motorcycles and drove straight up the ramp into the back. Moret pulled her helmet off and let her hair down. It flowed past her shoulders.

“Both wheels?” Hayes asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“They never stopped, never checked,” Speed said. “We’re good.”

Foley drove up in the Taurus, the Nissan pickup right behind him, as Hayes lifted his spotting scope and watched the armored truck enter the cargo area through a gate a quarter of a mile away. It cleared security and parked beside an Emirates SkyCargo plane,

COLD BARREL ZERO

a triple-seven freighter. The ground crew parked a scissor lift beside the hold and began to unload it.

Hayes examined the guards. He noted the MP7s on slings, pistols on chest rigs, stances at once relaxed and commanding. They looked like operators, not ten-dollar-an-hour security. His scope passed over the guard who stood outside the armored truck, then he brought his attention back and fine-tuned the focus.

“Hmm. Little Bill,” Hayes said.

“Is that ironic?” Moret asked. None of the guards looked like they weighed less than two hundred pounds.

“No. His dad’s also Bill. I oversaw his SERE course at Swick. He’s former Special Forces. Good guy; twenty-four with four kids when I met him.”

Hayes would have preferred more easily rolled opponents. He did have the advantage of having designed a lot of their training. He could account for them, and, most important, they would recognize a detonator when they saw one.

Thirty minutes later, the ground crew rolled a crate onto the lift, lowered it, then loaded it into the back of the armored truck.

Disguising the shipment was good tactics, but when you do the low-value, hide-in-plain-sight trick, you have to go all the way. When Hayes worked with the Secret Service on presidential security overseas, he had a chance to watch the Brits do it right. Americans would never settle for less than a sixteen-car package for the president, while the Royal Protection Branch liked to shuttle the queen around London in an unmarked Vauxhall sedan. These men didn’t have the nerve to go that far with tonight’s shipment. It had gone regular cargo out of the Emirates, but the extra security on the ground stateside gave it away.

Getting to the wheel wells had been the decisive point of the

MATTHEW QUIRK

operation. Hayes had timed it for when their guard was down, when the truck was empty.

He stepped into the back of the box truck. “Any crypto?” he asked Ward.

“No,” she said. “It’s all single-channel. Easy to listen in. They’re bringing it back to the compound. No word on the route. You want to wait?”

He considered doing it here. Urban terrain favors the guerrilla. It’s ideal for ambushes, for melting away. The truck exited the cargo area, riding noticeably lower on its springs. Hayes had spent enough time in LA to know that one of the favorite local sports, up there with Lakers basketball, was car chases. It seemed like there was one on the news every night, and a half a dozen helos could be found overhead at any moment.

Hayes checked the maps of the mountains to the east. He knew that Riggs’s primary compound was in rural Riverside County. There were two main routes the truck could take to reach it. Both ran through foothills, miles of sparsely populated terrain. He traced the roads, the switchback approaches to the passes. There were plenty of spots.

“Yes. Fall in behind them. Stay out of sight. We’ll hit them in the country.”

The three vehicles—box truck, pickup, and sedan—let the armored truck go ahead and then picked up the pursuit. They were two minutes behind it on the 105. They had GPS on the truck now, and Ward could track the radio signals as well.

The truck continued inland and eventually began winding its way through the hills. It was clear which route it would take.

Hayes pored over the maps, tracing topographic lines in the Santa Ana Mountains. The highway ahead narrowed to two lanes. Hayes checked the contours. The 5 percent grade would slow the

COLD BARREL ZERO

truck. Two switchbacks would give cover, and the steep pitch on either side of the road would block the escape routes. He knew the men in the armored truck were seasoned. They must have known, or figured out by now, that they were carrying a high-value shipment. The usual tricks—fake cop, stranded woman—would send them straight into evasive action. Hayes and his team had to take them head-on, one shot.

“Green, go ahead,” Hayes said into the radio. The pickup accelerated. In a minute, Green caught sight of the armored truck. He passed it easily as it labored up the hill and then raced off ahead.

Hayes took one more look at the map, then his GPS.

“Two minutes,” he said, and he glanced into a corner of the truck. “Wake him up.”

Speed had folded himself up between the wall and the motorcycle and was snoring. Ward kicked the wall a foot from his head. He stirred, wiped the corner of his mouth, and made a noise like he’d just had a really good meal.

There was little double-checking or fussing. They’d test-fired their weapons before they headed out. This was routine infantry against armor ambush: blind, halt, destroy. They had drilled it, done it, and taught it for so long it was about as exciting as parallel parking.

Speed rubbed his eyes, pulled a silver and orange can from his pack, drank it down, and shivered.

Hayes waited at the rear door beside Cook. “Any fishing while you were out in the wilderness?”

“Yeah,” Cook said. “Pretty much lived off dogfish.”

They didn’t talk much about where they had been, never shared specifics. It was better to keep things in compartments.

“One minute,” Hayes announced. The team lined up behind him. “I thought those were trash fish.”

MATTHEW QUIRK

“Ugly, sure, but I love them. Did you get out on the water?”

They pulled onto the shoulder of the highway, a quarter mile behind the armored truck.

“Free diving. Lobster, mainly. Did some spear too.”

Hayes reached down and threw open the door.

“Remember, we need them alive,” he said and jumped onto the gravel as the truck came to a stop. They hauled out the ramps. Cook climbed on one of the bikes inside the truck. Hayes rode behind him in order to keep his hands free.

“Did you hear about the dog that does magic?” Cook asked Hayes.

“Things are bad enough without your jokes.”

“It’s a Labracadabrador.” He smiled and flipped down the night-vision goggles on his helmet.

“I can’t believe I actually missed you, man.”

Moret straddled the other bike. Speed looked like he was going to complain about sitting behind a woman, but after one glare from Moret, he let it go and climbed on.

They were dual-sports, essentially street-legal dirt bikes with high clearance and long-travel suspensions. Cook started the engine. It never failed to impress Hayes. The bikes were electric, with baffled motors, nearly silent. He’d first used them in Kunar. Cook and Moret flicked switches for the headlights. Nothing happened. The lights were infrared, visible only through the NVGs. To anyone else, the bikes were blacked out, invisible.

“Block the road,” Hayes said into his radio.

Behind them, Foley pulled the Taurus across both lanes. He’d fastened an Oversize Load sign to its bumper and clapped a flashing amber dome light onto the roof. The road switchbacked up the mountains. The armored truck had gone around a steep curve and was on the far side of the ridge above them, proceeding slowly

COLD BARREL ZERO

up the grade. Two miles ahead, Green pulled his pickup across the road and put his flashers on. The armored truck was cut off.

The two bikes took off straight up the ridge. They would come over it through a gully to avoid being silhouetted against the sky as they approached the truck. The landscape glowed green through their goggles.

All Hayes could hear was the rush of the tires and the wind past his ears. They ran through a slot between two peaks and closed in on the armored truck from its blind spot at five o'clock. The country was more open than Hayes had expected. He was glad to be silent and unseen.

The safe standoff distance for the IEDs was two hundred and fifty meters, but Hayes's crew needed to get closer before they blew. They would be vulnerable to gunfire until they were in the dead space around the truck, almost touching it, which would make the firing angles from the gun ports impossible.

Hayes pulled out a cell phone as they bounced along the chaparral. He'd been in trucks hit with these kinds of explosives before. They were a twenty-first-century update to the sticky bomb. One had blown the legs and genitals off a radioman beside him. There was no time to think of the men inside the truck. Blow the IEDs, race to the dead space. That was all.

He lifted the phone and pressed the green Call button. The screen read: *Call 1 ... dialing.*

Flames flared twelve feet out from the rear tires of the armored truck. Hayes watched the pressure wave spread across the ground, driving a wall of dust and flattening the scrub until it smacked him in the chest as hard as a phone book.

Both motorcycle drivers accelerated, half blind from the flying sand. The bikes rocked back as the electric motors gave instant torque. They had six seconds to get inside the dead space.

MATTHEW QUIRK

A truck tire rolled toward them. Fire trailed from the rubber as it wobbled and then jumped end over end. Cook swerved around it, banked the bike hard. The armored truck plowed the asphalt as it dragged its back end and came to a stop at the edge of the highway.

They curved in through the smoke onto the road. Before the men inside the truck could react, all four members of Hayes's squad were standing in the dead space, feeling the heat from the blast.

Muzzles flared through the gun ports in three-round bursts of automatic fire. The bullets came within feet of the team outside but couldn't reach them. The rear-wheel-drive truck had been reduced to a stalled prison. The men inside were at Hayes's mercy.

Speed walked to the back of the truck in a crouch, then stepped on the bumper and started laying explosives along the four hinges of the rear doors. They were linear-shaped charges, thick strips of C-4 explosive fixed to a long V-shaped piece of copper about an inch wide. The open end of the V pressed against the plate steel.

Only one shooter inside the truck continued to waste rounds firing at them. He was probably too worked up to know better. Speed paid no mind as he finished his task. The explosives would deform the copper and send it shooting out at twenty-two thousand miles per hour, essentially squeezing it into a liquid razor that would slice through the metal before the explosion had a chance to melt the copper. He plugged two detonators into each charge, then stepped down and tossed the wires to Hayes, crouched alongside the truck.

Hayes plugged the wires into his detonator, then crawled under the passenger-side gun port and stepped out a dozen feet in front of the truck, fully lit by its headlights. He normally used a smaller trigger, but tonight he'd picked a multiline unit with a key and a red button. Theatrics mattered for this one.

COLD BARREL ZERO

The driver hit the gas again. What was left of the rear axle and differential ground uselessly against the road. The damaged metal tore against itself and shrieked. Next to the truck, Cook and Speed helped boost Moret onto the roof. The noise and shuddering from the drivetrain succeeded in covering the sound of her movements as Moret dragged herself along the top of the vehicle until she was over the cab.

Hayes lifted the detonator into view, pointed to the doors, and mimed an explosion with his hand. He turned the key and raised his right hand, fingers outstretched to start the countdown.

First five, then four.

The men in the cab watched him. He could see them talking, still composed despite the explosion. The man in the middle reached down—for a heavier weapon, Hayes guessed. The other two lifted their MP7s. He wished they hadn't. They were readying for an assault. He wanted them alive. He'd spent a lot of time with Speed working through the charge calculations and precisely splitting sticks of M112 to avoid juicing the guards. Killing them would have been much easier, but it would muddy Hayes's message, and the message was all that mattered in unconventional warfare.

Little Bill's mouth dropped open as he locked eyes with Hayes, his old instructor.

Hayes held up three fingers.

Hands on doors inside the cab. He could tell by their eyes, the way the muscles in their faces tightened: they were coming out fighting.

He tapped the radio mounted on his shoulder.

"Moret, get the bang ready. Doors are opening."

He raised two fingers, holding it for a long count to buy time as Moret took a grenade off her vest, pulled the pin, and held the spoon.

MATTHEW QUIRK

The doors opened. Moret let the spoon fly, tossed the grenade in the cab, and rolled back across the roof of the truck just as all three men inside jumped out, guns ready.

White light filled the cab as the explosion deafened them. The concussion grenade hit with enough force to disorient them for ten seconds. The driver, blind, kept moving, then tripped and fell hard. Little Bill leaned back against the truck and crumpled, hands over his ears, while the messenger staggered in a half circle, groping for the shotgun he had dropped.

Cook, Speed, and Moret rushed them and had all three guards facedown on the ground with flex cuffs biting into their wrists before their senses returned. Hayes's crew knelt on the men's backs and dug pistols into the bases of their skulls.

"I tossed the keys, assholes," the driver said. "You'll never—"

Hayes hit the detonator. The hills flashed bright as midday. As the crack echoed, quieter with each distant canyon, the rear door fell off the truck and shook the ground.

"That won't be a problem," Hayes said. He radioed to Ward to bring the box truck.

The guard was talking nonstop between panicked breaths. "Is this? Are these the goddamn guys? We're dead. We're—"

"They'd have killed us already if they wanted to," the driver said. "You'll wish they had."

Little Bill said nothing. He watched Hayes with hate in his eyes.

"Just calm down," Hayes told them. "Hey, Bill, you all right?"

He didn't respond.

"You know who I am?" Hayes asked.

"Yes."

"Good. That'll save time. You notice you're all still alive."

"Am I supposed to thank you for not killing me?"

COLD BARREL ZERO

Hayes knelt next to him. “No. Just tell your boss: We have what we need. The past is coming for him.”

Less than three minutes had elapsed since the first explosion. Ward arrived in the box truck and backed it up to the armored vehicle, out of sight of the captives. The team ran the ramps straight across and rolled the crate out of the wrecked truck.

Hayes radioed Foley and Green to pull back the traffic-control points. Foley had detoured one car without incident.

The ramps flexed under the thirteen-hundred-pound weight of the shipment. Once it was in the truck, Ward and Hayes pulled a copper mesh over the crate to block any GPS or RFID signals. Hayes pulled the vinyl wrap signage from the side of the box truck, leaving it white, and swapped its stolen plates for a new set. With the crate inside, there was barely room to stand.

Green pulled up in the Nissan truck. After they loaded the bikes into the bed, the team split up among the three vehicles and drove deeper into the mountains. They left the three men trussed by the side of the armored truck. The explosions were bound to draw attention. It wouldn't be long until someone came by.

There was no backslapping among Hayes's squad. As they drove off, it was like the raid had never happened. They took separate routes, then reconnected in a valley forty miles away, at the end of a long service road between groves of almond trees.

The team gathered at the back of the box truck. Desert air blew dry and cool. Moret rubbed her shoulder. It had been banging against the crate the whole drive.

“I give,” she said, shining a light over the customs form stapled to the raw pine. “So, what is it, some kind of artifact?”

Hayes had kept the details to a minimum as they organized the op. Cells were the safest way to operate, here at home, behind

MATTHEW QUIRK

enemy lines. They all trusted him absolutely. They deserved a look. And to be honest, Hayes wanted to see it too. He pulled back the mesh, then wedged his knife in under the top of the crate, pried back a corner, and worked his way up the lid. Ward helped him pull the top off with a squeal of nails against wood. He lifted some of the packing.

“Is that ivory?”

“Bone.”

Speed was resting, slumped against the bulkhead. The others crowded in.

Hayes reached down and lifted the inner lid. They stared at it for a moment.

Green turned to Hayes. “Holy shit.”

“Sell your cloak and buy a sword,” Hayes replied, and he ran his hand over the shipment. “Now the real work starts.”

Thank you for reading this sample.

Cold Barrel Zero is now available for pre-order at
[Amazon](#) and [Barnes & Noble](#).