

# DEAD MAN SWITCH

MATTHEW QUIRK

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*For Michael*

# CHAPTER I

JOHN HAYES STEPPED from the rear door of the two-and-half-ton truck. Four gunmen covered him, their Kalashnikov rifles braced against their shoulders.

He ignored them and looked to the sky. It was a good night for an execution, summer in the high alpine. The snow was soft, and the crevasses in the ice spread wide enough to make a man's body disappear.

He'd spent nine hours crammed in the back of the truck, and his legs were rubber. They had switchbacked up the valleys all night on a gravel path so narrow and pitted by old shell craters that the rear of the vehicle hung over empty space through each hairpin turn.

The highest pass had been well above fourteen thousand feet. They were slightly lower on the southern slopes now, and Hayes felt the blood that had frozen while trickling from his nose starting to melt again. He wiped it off, a long smear on the back of his hand.

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“Let’s go,” the driver barked in Pashto, and the slanted muzzle brake of the rifle jabbed into Hayes’s ribs just beside his spine. The cold burned his face as they marched him through a rolling door set in the hillside. They entered through a thick concrete portal into an underground garage. He climbed the steps, feeling the blood flush in his legs, the muscles regain their strength, the relatively rich air revive him.

A steel door opened at the far end of the garage, and they walked into an open courtyard. He had expected a mud-walled hut, or even a cave complex, but not this: an interior courtyard paved in marble with Moorish arches.

A man strode toward him, his hair gleaming. At first Hayes assumed the shine was due to the pomades popular among the officers in this country—he was wearing his regimental dress—but then Hayes realized that it was simply wet.

“I hope I didn’t keep you,” the man said as he stretched his right shoulder. “I was finishing a game.”

Squash. It was a fetish among Pakistani military commanders. Imran Kashani was formerly ISI, the Pakistani intelligence service, an uneasy ally of the United States that still kept close ties with the Taliban and militant groups. But Kashani had gone to work for himself and become a power broker—a warlord, essentially—in the ungoverned lands along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. He commanded a militia the size of a small army.

“Come in,” he said.

This man had killed dozens of Americans. Hayes was here to make a deal with him.

They stepped through a long parlor into an office lined with books. Huge mirrors dominated one wall, windows with closed red drapes the other.

“English is okay?” Kashani said.

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“That’s fine.”

“Excellent. I spent a year in college in the States. Arizona State University.”

He sat back down at a desk at the front of the room, and Hayes stood between two guards on the carpet before him.

“Are you hungry? Tea?”

“No,” Hayes said. He wasn’t going to waste time on ceremony in this guano-reeking mansion. Kashani shrugged, and a moment later a third guard placed a glass cup of tea on the desk next to him. Kashani took a sip and examined Hayes.

“All business. Very American. I’ll get to the point. What do you know about Cold Harvest?”

Hayes knew it well. It was a small group, culled from the U.S. military’s classified special operations units and the CIA’s paramilitary forces. They were kill teams, in essence, run as independent contractors with no official relationship to their home government. They pursued the gravest threats to national security in countries, most of them American allies, where the U.S. would never be allowed to perform lethal missions. They were a last resort.

Hayes had once been a leader, a legend in those elite tiers of American special operations, but he had spent years in exile, hunted by his old teammates.

“What do you want to know?” he asked Kashani.

“I want to know their names. I want to know where they live.”

“Their outposts? Safe houses? Covers?”

“No. I want their addresses inside the United States. Their homes. We have some, but not enough.”

Hayes considered it, ran the back of his hand along his chin, felt the stubble scratch.

“I can get you that information.”

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“For how many?”

“All of them, give or take a few of the most recent additions.”

Kashani let out a short, startled laugh, like he'd just won something. The two men had no idea that from a hilltop a kilometer and a half away, they were being watched.

At the top of a glacial cirque overlooking Kashani's compound, Connor Burke slammed his gloved hand against his thigh, trying to warm up his fingers. After a minute he could feel pain buried somewhere in all the cold numb flesh. He huddled against his partner, Bryan Sanders. They were both former SEALs, senior chiefs in Team Six, but now they worked as contractors for the CIA. That allowed them to operate in the borderlands of a country like Pakistan, a nation with which the U.S. wasn't technically at war.

Sanders held the laser microphone steady and aimed it at the window of the formal office so he could pick up the conversations in the compound while Burke kept watch. They each had an earbud in and could hear everything Hayes and the other man said.

“I can get you that information.”

“For how many?”

“All of them.”

Sanders looked to Burke, eyes wide. Burke recognized the voice. He brushed the accumulating snow from his earpiece and raised the volume. Like most seasoned operators, they were half deaf from the tens of thousands of rounds they expended every year. But it was unmistakable. It was John Hayes. Burke had fought with him in Fallujah. It was Burke's second deployment, and Hayes had led the team through a baptism by fire in urban operations. Burke had since heard the rumors: Hayes had gone over to the enemy.

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But Burke couldn't believe what he was hearing now. The flurries built into a steady fall, cutting through the laser's path and interfering with the microphone's operation. The audio broke up into static.

"Is Hayes going to sell them the names of our operators?" Sanders asked.

"More than that. The homes. The families. Jesus Christ. It's a kill list."

"It can't be. He was a good man."

"Was," Burke said.

Sanders looked over the compound, well defended and built into the side of the slope.

"I don't like it. Do we have the authority to kill an American if it comes to that?"

The batteries in the radios were dead. The cold drained them at twice the normal speed. They had been in the field for three days. There was no way to get authorization from above.

"You do the math. One life for how many? We've got to stop him."

Sanders nodded.

Burke slammed his hands together and flexed open his fingers. He lifted his rifle and started down the ridge.

In the office, Hayes waited for Kashani to absorb the full measure of what he was offering: a trove of intelligence that would allow him to destroy, root and branch, America's most effective defense against asymmetric threats.

Kashani's cool pose disappeared. He started blinking quickly and leaned forward.

"All of them? That information wouldn't be trusted to one man, or even put on one list."



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“It’s my business to know. They have been trying to kill me for a long time.”

“Where is it?”

Hayes gestured to his temple.

“Memorized? All the names? Addresses?”

“Yes.”

Kashani laughed again, regaining some confidence. “I guess you think that means I can’t kill you?”

He said something in a dialect Hayes didn’t understand, then waved a finger to the guard to Hayes’s right, who approached Hayes from the side. Hayes’s hand shot out, seized his wrist, and twisted it, wrenching the shoulder. A piece of black-and-tan-patterned fabric fell from the man’s hand and landed on the floor. It was a *shemagh*, an Afghan scarf often worn by fighters over the head and neck.

The other two raised their rifles, but Kashani called them off.

“What is this?” Hayes demanded.

“Have you read Kipling?”

“It’s been a while.”

“It seems appropriate, given the circumstances. A test of your memory, to see if you can offer what you claim. Kim’s Game,” Kashani said. “Our instructors at the Farm used to use it.”

Kashani had been trained in intelligence work by the CIA at its facility in Virginia, thirty years ago in this never-ending war. He had shaken hands with the vice president of the United States.

Hayes reached for the scarf. Kim’s Game was a standard training exercise for spies and special operators. They would be flashed images of objects and told to recall them, or they’d simply be blindfolded for a quiz at random moments. They practiced until their senses were hyperaware and they could retain photographic memories of their surroundings at any time, recording every threat

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and exploitable piece of intelligence. It came from an old spy novel by Kipling called *Kim*, set not too far from these mountain passes.

If Hayes failed, they would most likely kill him. He folded the fabric into a long strip and tied it over his eyes.

“Arches in the courtyard?” Kashani asked.

“Thirty.”

“Weapons on the guard to your right.”

“AK-74M rifle. Beretta pistol on his hip. SOG dagger on his chest.”

“Fruit on the table?”

“Four apples.”

“Which direction are you facing?”

“Southwest.”

“The red book on the shelf behind me. Is it to my left or my right?”

“There is no red book.”

“Very good. And where are you?”

Nine hours driving in the dark, and Hayes had spent the entire time fixed on navigation: land speed, altitude, and the twisting azimuths of the stars that served as an endless unerring compass over his head.

When he stepped out of the truck he saw the Spin Ghar Mountains silhouetted against the sky: Sikaram, Barkirdar Sar, Tarakai. They might as well have been street signs as he lined them up and fixed his location.

He knew where he was down to a few kilometers. Enough for an air strike. And he suspected Kashani knew he knew it too. The test was not only to evaluate his memory but to see how observant he was, to determine if he could identify this compound. If this deal fell through, there was no way he was going to make it out of here alive.

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“You understand, I want the names of everyone in Cold Harvest.”

“I’m not going to give them to you.”

Kashani’s jaw tightened.

“I’m only going to deal with whoever you’re working for.”

“There is no one above me.”

“You’re a go-between. This is too big for you to handle on your own.”

Kashani rolled his cup between his hands. “John Hayes,” he said, shaking his head. “I have to say, you live up to the stories. Follow me.”

The guards led Hayes back through the hallway, underground, and down a long concrete corridor. Then they left him in a room with a simple table and chair lit by a dim desk lamp.

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HE SAT THERE for forty-five minutes, wondering what the odds were that this gamble would work, that he might be about to meet the real power behind Kashani.

Finally, the door opened, and the bright light from the corridor blinded him for a moment. Kashani stepped in. “This way,” he told Hayes. “There’s someone you should see.”

Hayes followed Kashani and two guards toward the underground garage. He wondered if they were moving him again or if the leader was there, in a safe room. A guard pushed open a heavy steel door.

Hayes peered inside. There was no chief here, only two soldiers sitting against the wall bound hand and foot. They wore *pakols*—round-topped wool caps—and loose-fitting robes in the local style, but their gear was clearly American special operations’.

Under the glaring fluorescent light overhead, Hayes could see blood trailing from the ear of one of the men, and judging from the cuts on his cheek, Hayes guessed he’d been injured by a grenade frag at just outside of the lethal range.

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“Who are they?” Hayes asked.

“Some of your American killers. We found them closing in on the house. Good tactics. We wouldn’t have seen them coming, but they triggered a slide of snow below the peak.”

“They came to kill you?”

“We think they came to kill *you*.”

Kashani took a handgun from a guard and entered the room. He kicked one man, knocking him over, then stepped on his neck, driving his face into the floor, and aimed the pistol at the back of his head.

Hayes followed him in, and the guards posted up in the corners.

“If you are what you say you are, surely you won’t mind,” Kashani said.

Hayes said nothing. He had expected a test of faith.

He recognized the American that Kashani was threatening with the gun, a man with a reddish-brown beard and a few minor cuts on his face. His name was Burke. Hayes had fought with him in Fallujah, back when Burke was a SEAL, a kid on his second deployment; he had trained him in house-to-house fighting, and Burke had gone on to Green—the special operations shorthand for the unit commonly known as SEAL Team Six.

“Hayes?” Burke said. “Jesus. It’s true. You son of a bitch.” Hayes knew that if he tried to stop Kashani, the Pakistani would kill them all.

Kashani put his finger on the trigger.

“Wait,” Hayes said. He stepped toward Kashani, who was smiling like a man who had called someone’s bluff. The guards lifted their rifles.

Hayes gestured for the pistol. “How does the saying go? It’s better that I kill my brother than a rival take him.” It was a *tapa*, a two-line Pashtun poem often sung by soldiers or grieving wives.

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"I've heard it," Kashani said. "Keep it in the family, you would say."

Hayes nodded. "Let me take care of this."

Kashani smiled and stepped back, then offered the pistol to Hayes. The guards kept their rifles at low ready, and Hayes traced the tendons standing tense along the backs of their hands.

Hayes stood over his former student. Burke arched back to look him in the eye as Hayes lined up the shot.

"I never believed what they said about you. Until now. Go ahead. You'll burn for this."

Once, things had been simple for Hayes. There were commanders and rules of engagement, opposing forces and friendlies. But now he was on his own, and he understood the terrible weight of choice, of his own calculations of the greater evil, of trading lives like coins.

"You don't know me. What they put me through." He cracked Burke in the mouth with the slide of the pistol and put his foot on his back.

He wrapped his finger around the trigger and brought the gun before him, facing away from Kashani.

He raised it, and pulled the trigger.

The light blew out with a pop and a rain of glass. The room went black. But in his mind, Hayes could still see where each man stood. Kim's Game. He ducked to the left and aimed the pistol at the first guard.

Burke felt the hot glass scratch his neck as the lightbulb exploded, and he rolled onto his feet. The images came like strobes in the orange flash of Hayes's firing pistol: one guard flinching back, struck by gunfire, then the other. Hayes sidestepped left to right, and six shots flared in the dark. Kashani spun with a pistol and shot. The muzzle flame reached out toward empty space and lit up Hayes behind him, his knife out.

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The dark returned. A body hit the ground. A flashlight cut through the room, then came the cinching and popping of the cords as someone cut Burke's hands free, drawing the knife a half inch from the skin on his wrist.

Hayes pulled the injured soldier's arm over his shoulder and helped him up. He was dazed.

"Burke," Hayes said. "Sorry about the jaw. I had to sell it. Are you good to walk?"

Burke fought back against the shock. "I think so," he said.

"I'm here undercover. I was trying to find out who he was working for, who wants those names."

Hayes aimed a flashlight that he'd pulled from one of the guards at the ceiling. "We've got to roll before they get backup."

Hayes grabbed Sanders's sniper rifle and rucksack, and Burke took his carbine. They exited into the garage. There were two Pinzgauer 6x6s parked along the back wall. A Swiss-built mountain truck, the Pinz was an ugly green box on six wheels that could climb a 100 percent slope. Hayes and Burke took the cockpit seats, and Sanders, conscious but still unsteady, got in the back.

Hayes gunned it up the ramp leading out of the underground garage. The vehicle rose high on its springs and was nearly airborne when it came off the ramp onto the long driveway.

Burke pointed to the passes to the east.

"We make it through there, and we're out of the badlands."

Hayes watched the mirrors while Burke cycled through the radio he'd pulled from the room.

"We could have killed you back there," Burke said.

"You couldn't have known. No one in the command knew I was here."

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Burke looked at the house. He didn't see anyone coming.

"You have a QRF?" Hayes asked. A quick-reaction force: a team of soldiers ready to come in to back up the smaller special operations units.

"No. We have to get through the pass on our own," Burke said. "There's an extraction point ten kilometers out. But if we get there after twenty-one-hundred hours, we're done. They won't be back until tomorrow."

That was in an hour, and they wouldn't survive if they were stuck here overnight. The notch in the mountains loomed closer and closer as Hayes fought the wheel. He looked through his side window. To call it a jeep track was generous; it was more like a goat path. It was so narrow, he couldn't see road, just his side panel hanging over a ravine that dropped away two hundred feet.

The snow grew thicker as they rose toward the pass, and the Pinz smeared through the turns, kicking debris off the cliffs.

"Almost there, Sanders," Burke said.

The pass opened high to their right as the path curved toward it. The black of the peak gave way to a blanket of stars to the north, but weather was moving in fast from the other direction. Sheets of white snow blew across Hayes's sight lines like static.

Over the grind of the Pinz's diesel, a deep rumble echoed through the pass. It loosed a curtain of snow high above them, and chunks of ice slammed into the side of the vehicle. Hayes forced the wheel toward the steep bank.

"Get out!" Hayes said.

"What?"

"Out! Now! Incoming!"

Only Hayes had identified the source of the noise, but it became clear a second later. A helicopter, banking hard, crossed the pass and disappeared behind the far peak.



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“They’re circling back.”

It was a Bell Cobra, an older American-designed and -built attack helicopter with a 20-millimeter Gatling gun and a weapon pod on either side.

“We need to disperse and draw them in. Drop down the ridge ten or twenty feet. It’s our only shot.”

He grabbed the sniper rifle, opened his door. “Take the M4,” Hayes told Burke. The carbine had a 40-millimeter grenade-launcher attachment under the barrel. “Hit the tail rotor or the pilots through the side glass. Wait for it to come over us. If they use the Gatling guns only, we might survive.”

He left a blue light stick glowing in the cabin of the Pinz and climbed out. Burke and Sanders flailed down the snow on one side of the ridge. Hayes dropped six feet down the steep hill on the other and then cut wide across for cover. He dug in, the snow up to his waist, with a boulder between himself and the helo, then raised the rifle, snugged it hard against his cheek and shoulder, and took aim.

The chugging blades grew louder and louder. He watched the white snow blown by the rotor wash come at him like a band of storm clouds.

*Hold... hold... hold.*

The helicopter swept overhead, the rip of the Gatlings tearing the night in two as they shot up the Pinz. Hayes heard a low *pock* as Burke launched a grenade. The helo banked and flared to avoid it, and as it slowed, Hayes put one round, two, three, into the tail rotor. Fluid blew out in a spume, and from the other side of the ridge, Burke sent a hail of bullets through the Plexiglas into the cockpit.

It spun as it came over, out of control, losing precious altitude in that thin air. Hayes dove for cover. The ground shook, and he knew the helo was down.

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He put his leg forward and postholed it in the deep snow. Another blast shook the hillside, and before he could even register relief at having taken the helicopter, the snow beneath his feet fell away. He dropped with it, clawed against it, but the whole hillside was liquid now, pouring into his mouth and down his shirt, tilting him over. The mountain peaks spun in his vision as he rag-dolled down, helpless.

High up, near the pass, a red light filled the night. A boom echoed along the range, but it was lost to him as blows came to his head and his body kept falling. He didn't know how long he tumbled, but it seemed like forever. And then he hit, and he was buried in a bank of snow.

His hands shot to his face and he clawed away the powder. Snow can melt and refreeze around the face, asphyxiating the avalanche victim in what's known as the mask of death. After he cleared the snow from around his head and shoulders, he started to dig himself out.

He hauled himself out of the bank, and after the dizziness passed, he was shocked to feel *okay*. His pack was six feet above him on the steep slope. The snow was too deep to walk in normally, so he crawled up, gaining only inches as he dragged the snow on top of him. He took time to pack down the powder and then tried to stand. His leg crumpled, and he fell to the side. He tested that leg again, putting weight on it, and it collapsed under him once more. Between the cold and the adrenaline, he felt no pain, only the queasy sense of his limb bending the wrong way. He'd torn something.

The driving snow scoured the exposed skin of his neck and cheek, becoming heavier and heavier until it was a whiteout. The flakes flew past him, down and to the left, a shimmering curtain so total that vertigo set in, and he couldn't fight the feeling that he

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was flying up and away, as if the snow were still and his body was in motion.

He shut his eyes, and the wind closed around him; snow drifted to his chin, spilled down his collar, filled his ear.

His first movements only dug him in deeper, but then he climbed deliberately, raising himself with his good leg and driving his bad knee into the steep snow to brace himself for another step. Remaining calm was the only way to survive. When he reached the pack, he pulled off part of the frame and two nylon straps and splinted his knee as best as he could.

Hayes had spent a lot of time in the mountains, and every fifteen minutes or so the blood flushed his face and hands—the hunter’s response, an acquired physiological reflex to keep frostbite at bay.

He continued up the slope but knew he wasn’t going fast enough to warm himself. And as the minutes turned to hours, the cold moved from outside in. The shivering began, crescendoed into a violent tremble, rattling his teeth in his skull. His muscles numbed and tightened, refused to obey. And even his brain slowed down, the thoughts of survival running in frantic, confused loops.

He didn’t know how far he had traveled. The world was a white sphere. All he wanted was sleep. There was no ridge, no extraction point, no helicopter, only the fog of his breath turning into ice on his skin.

It didn’t make any sense to work so hard when he could just sit down. He stopped and stared into the blizzard. He hadn’t thought about how beautiful it was. He let his mind drift into the white.

And he was home in Virginia, in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The night was a chorus of insects, and the room was drafty, but the comforter was white and thick with down. He pulled his wife, Lauren, to him in bed and held her tight. The stu-

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por closed in. He welcomed it. The pain disappeared. His body disappeared, bit by bit. He felt warm . . . so warm . . . and he let the peace take him.

On the opposite side of the ridge from where Hayes had fallen, a U.S. Air Force pararescue jumper and a combat controller—members of the two elite specialties of that branch—had found Burke and Sanders.

They immobilized Burke's head and neck, strapped him to the backboard, and hauled him through the door of the helicopter. He had fallen far enough down the valley that they had been able to see his signal panel—a square of fabric that shines like a beacon when viewed through infrared optics—from the extraction point.

“Turn on the lights,” Burke said, staring at the interior of the helicopter. Pain stabbed through his skull. He had slammed his face on a boulder as he and Sanders slipped down the ridge after Kashani's helicopter exploded.

“Don't worry about the lights, Burke. We've got you.”

“And Sanders?”

“We have him. He's alive. Was there anyone else?”

“Hayes—he went the other way. Might have fallen into the other valley. He could have made it.”

Burke heard the radio chatter fill the helicopter. The voices, like the pain, seemed to be coming from a room at the end of a long hallway. They had given him something, probably morphine. He brought his hand near his face. His eyes were open. He just couldn't see anything.

*I'm blind*, he thought, then he heard the combat controller's voice: “This man is going to lose his sight, probably die if we don't pull out now.”

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“We have to go back,” Burke said.

“The command wants us out of here. If we’re caught in this country, it’ll cause an international crisis. We don’t have stealth. And the visibility’s going to zero. We’ll all die if we don’t pull up.”

“Hayes is out there,” Burke said. “We have to get him.”

But no one answered. The engines revved up and drowned out every other noise.

Hayes drove his good leg down into the snow on the far side of the ridge, his brain barely functioning. One thought had broken him out of his trance: *They want the names*. The enemy was coming for Hayes’s people at home, where they slept, where their families slept. He thought of his daughter, pictured her standing backlit at the end of the hall, needing him to do a last check under the bed. He had to go on, to warn them.

The world reduced to left foot, right foot. How many times had it come down to this, him exhausted past all reckoning and relying on simple will not to stop? In the end, he was a good soldier not because of any heroics, but because he refused to die and never stopped trudging toward his goal. And there was no pain anymore, even as he watched his knee twist strangely in the splint, the snow dragging him back a foot for every two he climbed.

He checked his watch. One minute until the extraction. The exposed skin on his wrist was red and waxy white with frostbite.

Left, right, left, right. He moved like a windup toy, like this was all he had done for his whole life, like it was all he would do forever.

Rotors echoed below him. He stepped toward the edge of the snowfield and realized he was at the lip of a cornice, hanging over a hundred-foot fall at the top of the ridge. He could see the helo moving through the blizzard below like a shadow.

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He pulled an infrared panel he had taken from the pack, then dropped it. He put his hand down on it, but he couldn't close his fingers. The extremity was like a block of wood, and the wind hauled the panel down the cliff, turning it over like a falling leaf as Hayes shouted at the rising aircraft.

The helicopter spun and nosed down to the south, leaving Hayes in the snow and the dark. He was a black dot on a ridge, just a shadow against countless more mountain silhouettes extending back toward Afghanistan. And over the wind and diesel grind, of course no one could hear his voice.

## CHAPTER 3

SAMUEL COX SAT behind a desk in a cramped West Wing basement office, signing a letter. Though a brigadier general, Cox almost never wore a uniform. He was Hayes's handler and a special adviser to the secretary of defense. He had no formal portfolio, and his real job wasn't on any org chart: he made problems go away. It was in that capacity that he had come to serve as the link between Hayes and the command.

He had borrowed this office, down the hall from the Situation Room, to help coordinate the rescue of Hayes and the other men. He had been working nonstop for twenty-four hours and was waiting for a callback from the CIA station chief in Islamabad.

He looked at the personnel photo of a smiling Army Ranger, twenty-four years old, who had died in North Africa the week before on a classified mission against human traffickers that Cox had helped run through the Joint Special Operations Command. He put the photo to the side, then took off his glasses and placed the signed letter in his outbox. It was addressed to the man's wife,

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the next of kin. Cox always wrote them himself. He could offer no details, only his grief, and he knew that wasn't worth much.

As he shut the file folder, a man with close-cropped silver hair stuck his head in the doorway. Cox stood.

"Any word on our guys, Sam?"

"We got the recon team out of Pakistan, sir. It's all deniable. Sanders is still in surgery. Burke will live. Probably never see again. Hayes is still missing."

Cox checked his watch. Hayes had been out there for nearly twenty-six hours. Most men would be dead from exposure after one night in those mountains.

"Have you called the family?"

"I know the wife. We gave her word that he'll be out longer than we expected. But she doesn't know anything about the mission. There's no sense in worrying her any further until we know if he's alive or dead."

"Whatever you decide. I'm going to the residence. Let me know if anything changes."

"I will, sir. Is Elizabeth back from school?"

"Yes. She's upstairs. Cramming for finals."

"Give her my best."

"Do you want to come up for dinner?"

Cox looked at the phone. He had work to do here.

"Of course." The visitor turned and started up the steps to the main hallway through the West Wing.

Cox could hear the Marine guard at the top of the stairs. "Good evening, Mr. President," echoed down the marble hall as Cox seated his glasses back on his nose and dialed up the regional Joint Special Operations commander for Afghanistan and Pakistan.



## CHAPTER 4

LAUREN HAYES, JOHN Hayes's wife, raised the hammer and gave the nail a tap, then swung it back and drove the nail in its full length. *Tap-crack, tap-crack, tap-crack.* She finished laying in the trim on the second floor, letting the task fill her mind so she wouldn't look at her phone every five seconds. She had worked a twelve-hour shift at the hospital and would pick up Maggie from her aunt's house in the morning. But even after a day that long, she couldn't sleep, not until she heard her husband was safe. Something was wrong. She could tell, could read between the lines of the bullshit call they had made to her.

She and Hayes had started building this house together.

"I always come back," Hayes had said before he left.

He was two weeks late. This was going to be the first time he would be home for his daughter's birthday. It was in five days. And this wasn't like the other operations, when he was part of a special mission unit. There were no other wives holding vigil, stacking food high on counters and in the freezer. There was no chaplain on watch.

## DEAD MAN SWITCH

Hayes was working alone now. When he was here, the phone would ring, showing all zeros, and he would go meet with some shadows in suits who had come down from Washington.

*Tap-crack. Tap-crack.*

The phone rang and it shook her like a close blast. She missed the nail and split a long piece of molding.

She walked to the phone. The caller ID showed all zeros.

“Hello.” The hammer hung down by her side.

“Lauren? This is Samuel Cox.”

“Is he alive?”

## CHAPTER 5

HAYES WOKE, AND the past two days felt like a dream. He had been in and out of consciousness, and all he could remember was a doctor standing over him in scrubs and a few of the words he had spoken: “Warm and dead.”

He tried to sit up, but he was strapped down. The skin of his hands and his toes and his face felt like it was on fire. He was in a hospital room. He looked to his left and saw two lines running out from the veins in his arm.

“Take it easy,” a voice said, and Hayes turned his head to the right. A man in a wrinkled navy suit sat in a chair under the window. It was Samuel Cox.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“It’s so hot. Is that the frostbite?”

“Probably. But it’s also just hot. We’re on Masirah.”

Masirah was an island off the coast of Oman in the Arabian Sea that classified units often staged out of. It had been the base from which they’d launched the doomed Iranian hostage-rescue mission

## DEAD MAN SWITCH

in 1980. That disaster ultimately led to the creation of the Joint Special Operations Command—a secretive headquarters known as JSOC (pronounced “jay-sock”) that controlled Team Six, Delta, and a host of other black units. It had been Hayes’s employer for more than a decade.

“How are the other guys?”

“Sanders just came out of surgery. He and Burke are both stable. They told me about what you did to get them out of there, the shots you took on that tail rotor. I guess you’re the right guy to bring a helicopter down.”

Hayes was notorious for having crashed in every type of helicopter used by special operations. He thought that meant he was lucky, since he’d survived. But those who knew about it usually took the opposite view and a seat on a different helo than Hayes if they could.

“What the hell were you doing in Pakistan?” Cox went on. “You were just supposed to be gathering intelligence.”

Years before, Hayes had been falsely accused of turning against his own soldiers while running a special operations team. He went into self-imposed exile overseas. He had survived two years on the run as an enemy of the United States and ultimately stopped the men who had framed him from launching an attack on Washington, DC.

After Hayes had cleared his name, the command didn’t publicize his innocence or his return to special operations. That allowed him to go undercover using his old contacts from his time on the run, shielded by people’s belief that he was still being hunted by the United States. He had started the operation that led to Kashani strictly to find out more information on the people who had sponsored the DC attack.

“That’s all I had planned. But people were asking *me* questions.

MATTHEW QUIRK

They wanted information on our spec ops teams, and not just the usual intelligence about where they were deployed and what informants they were using. The enemy was gathering names and photos. It sounded like they were putting together a kill list. I had to see who was behind it, so I dangled the information and set up a meeting.”

“You didn’t think to tell us?”

“The surveillance was too thick. There was no way without breaking cover. They’re trying to find out about everyone who’s in Cold Harvest. Not just where they are working overseas. Where they live in the United States. Their homes.”

Cox shut his eyes for a moment. It was everyone’s worst fear.

“Kashani?”

“I had to kill him before we could find anything else out, but he wasn’t the main guy. You know he’s only interested in his own region. He was a cutout. There’s someone above him. They’re using our tricks against us, profiling the special operations community the way we would an enemy terror network.” Hayes swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry as paper. Cox handed him the plastic tumbler of water and he drank.

“We have to get ahead of them,” Hayes said. “They’re after Cold Harvest. Double-down on the security of every name; protect our people. The covers. They can’t find them.”

“I’m on it. You need to rest.”

Cox’s eyes went to a machine beside his bed; it was the size of a hotel luggage cart and had multiple monitors above a collection of tubes and transparent pumps.

“What is that?” Hayes asked.

“It warmed up your blood.”

He looked at his bandaged hands. “Did I lose any fingers?”

“They think you can keep them all. You’re lucky you froze.”

## DEAD MAN SWITCH

Hayes touched his nose and winced. “This is lucky?”

“You can last a while longer when your core temp goes down. The docs say you’re not officially dead until you’re warm and dead.”

“Does Lauren know I’m okay?”

“Yeah. You’ll be back home in three days.”

“Thanks, Cox. They want the names.” Just a few minutes of talking had left Hayes exhausted. His eyes closed, and he leaned his head back. “Look out for our people.”

“I will. You rest. I’m going to check on the others.”

Cox walked down the hallway and looked in on another room. Burke lay in bed, his head and eyes covered in bandages. The head trauma had damaged the optic nerve.

He moved with a start.

“Who’s there?”

“Samuel Cox. I’m from the Office of the Secretary of Defense.”

“Oh, Jesus. Look, I didn’t know that he was undercover. I didn’t mean to crash his op.”

“That’s our fault. You’re not in trouble. Do you know the man who saved you?”

“John Hayes. He was attached to our team at First Fallujah.”

“I need you to forget it. You never saw him. You’re going to take the credit for this, for rescuing Sanders.”

“No way. It was Hayes.”

“Hayes was never there.”

“Is it true? Was Hayes undercover? Did he stop the DC attack?”

Cox knew the rumors that circulated about Hayes. The non-commissioned officers’ networks spread information faster than CNN. Some people even believed he had been responsible for the attack in Washington, DC, the one that he had, in fact, stopped.

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The darker legends about Hayes contributed to his strength, his ability to slip in and move among the enemy.

“What I’m telling you, you can’t tell anyone. Understood?”

“Understood.”

“It’s true.”

“Then let the poor bastard go. Why don’t you tell everyone the truth and clear his name?”

“It’s more valuable dirty.”

“The guy’s a hero. He’s done his time.”

“I agree,” Cox said as his phone buzzed in his pocket. “But it’s more complicated than that.”

## CHAPTER 6

*San Diego, Two Months Later*

BURKE FELL ONTO his back on the bed, his eyes open wide, and took a long breath. He reached to the side and pulled Tara close. He had been home for five weeks and loved nothing more than being in this bungalow in Ocean Beach listening to the waves crash against the bluffs.

Her cheek rested against his.

“Hon, are you crying?”

“Yes.” She laughed. “But it’s good.” She put her hand on his chest and looked into his eyes. “I didn’t think you were going to make it home.”

The sheets were in a tangled pile near their feet. Burke listened to the baby monitor—silence.

“God bless that kid.” Their daughter was a sound sleeper, and their twin boys were staying over at a friend’s house.

Tara sat up and gathered the sheets around her. Burke stood and started to walk across the hardwood floor.



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“Look out for my shoes,” Tara said. But he had already stepped over them.

“You always leave them there.” He headed toward the door, hand in front of him, moving quickly, confidently in the dark. The house was familiar, and for years he had fought in the night, so for him, not being able to see wasn’t as odd as it might have been for someone else.

The baby’s cry came from the monitor.

“I’ll take care of her,” Tara said.

“After that let’s watch a movie.”

“But—”

“Stay up with me. I’ll go to the Redbox and get us something.”

“You?”

“Yeah, me. Take care of June, and I’ll be right back.” His fingers glided over the wall, found the corner. He reached down and picked up the hiking stick he used instead of a white cane. The last thing he wanted was to look like a goddamn blind guy.

“You’ll be careful.”

“Always. For six years, I was doing things in the dark that were much sketchier than going to get a movie. Don’t worry.”

She said nothing.

“You can’t hold my hand forever. Come on. I’ll get you a Kit Kat too.”

“For a Kit Kat,” she said, “sure.” She was trying to make light of it, but he could hear the strain in her voice as she let him go.

The wood grain of the door passed under his fingertips. He found the knob, turned it, and felt the tip of his stick tapping on the concrete, then the open air. He stepped down, followed the front path to the sidewalk, and started toward the little

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downtown. Cars rushed by on Sunset Cliffs Boulevard ahead of him.

There was a man above Kashani, a man acquiring the identities of everyone in Cold Harvest. His name was Niko Hynd. He stood in the dark on the side of the road opposite Burke's house.

He was invisible on this quiet American street. Inside, the televisions threw dancing colors on the walls, and he watched people in their homes like they were animals in exhibits: daughters changing clothes, old men sleeping in their recliners, a young couple making love—Burke and his wife—only glimpsed in the cracks beside the blinds as she buried her face in his neck, trying to keep from waking the baby.

This didn't seem like a country at war, its soldiers on the other side of the world kicking down doors and tearing men and women from their families, raining death from above and killing in the dark.

No. What these people saw were American flags in car commercials. They were fat and happy. And why wouldn't they be? They didn't know the pain of wars unfolding in places they couldn't find on a map. It would never stop. They didn't see it. Didn't feel it. But that was about to change. It was only fair.

Hynd had lost a trusted associate when they'd killed Kashani. He and Kashani were both freelancers, small businessmen in the world of conflict. Hynd worked for hire and specialized in a particular kind of lethal operation: finding and finishing those whom no one else could locate. Kashani had been trying to acquire the names of Cold Harvest members on Hynd's behalf—for a price, of course—but he hadn't been careful enough.

Hynd had used the Pakistani as a middleman because he fit the Americans' narrow perception of a bad guy and would draw

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suspicion away from himself. They always feared the usual suspects and rarely considered the unexpected. That gave Hynd avenues to penetrate their defenses.

He couldn't afford any more mistakes, and that's why he was here to do the work himself. He had enough names to keep going, and each death would yield more targets. Kashani's men had kept a photo of Burke, and Hynd had used publicly available online-image-matching software—the same technology that tagged faces in family photos posted on the web—to find an older photo of him, from before he went to the classified units, and then to trace him here.

The front door opened. A man emerged, feeling his way along with a stick. It was Burke. He had survived but lost his sight.

The wife and child were alone. Hynd checked the brass in the suppressed .22-caliber handgun and put it in the holster tight against his hip, then stepped out of the car and began tailing the man as he made his unsteady way down the street.

Burke stopped at the corner. Sounds had never seemed so clear. The cars' engines, as loud as the grind of Chinook helicopter blades, cut in and out as they passed, reflecting off the parked vehicles. He could hear the waves crashing in the distance.

He used to take a daily run here. He and Tara had walked along the old route a few times since he'd returned home, Tara burying her fingers in his forearm with fear every time he came near the edge of the cliffs. He took a deep breath, tasted the salt in the air.

A transformer buzzed to his right.

He listened, then took a step off the curb. The stick tapped along the ground. He tensed, anticipating hitting the opposite curb or a parked car's tire, but nothing came.

## DEAD MAN SWITCH

Did he have the angle wrong? He moved faster. Maybe he was in the middle of the intersection or had started up a cross street. He stopped and listened, lost.

A V-8 growled, throttle open, and grew louder. The sounds bounced off the buildings. Burke moved quickly to his left while the horn blared.

A rush of wind. The truck's engine note dropped in tone as it flew by.

Burke stumbled. The curb. Thank God. He had made it across the busiest road. He stepped up, felt the soft grass under his feet, and cursed.

It was only six blocks. "I just want to get a fucking movie for my wife," he said out loud. He put both hands on top of the stick and brought his head down for a moment, then straightened up. He listened for the ocean, oriented himself.

To hell with it. He'd figure it out. He started off again, closer to the water now. Del Mar Avenue, heading toward Coronado. He had this. It was a straight shot down Bacon Street to the Redbox. He laughed about what a small thing it was, and how big, to be able to bring a movie back home.

A whimpering noise came from his left. He stopped. A man moaned, said something pleading, but Burke couldn't understand the words.

"Hello?"

"Help. Please!"

He walked toward the voice. "Are you okay?"

"No. I fell. Help!"

Hynd was crying for help. He watched as Burke moved quickly toward the railing beside the cliffs with more confidence than he'd had before. He must have forgotten to be afraid. These Americans

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believed in heroes and happy endings. That's what made them so easy to kill.

Hynd circled around quietly, the crash of waves covering his footsteps on the soft grass until he was behind Burke. The blind man placed his hand on the metal rail. Hynd stepped closer.

The handrail under Burke's palm was cold and wet. The ground shook as the waves crashed below. "Hello?" Burke said. "Are you okay?"

The pleading voice was gone. Burke reached into his pocket for his cell phone, a simple model with physical keys, not a touch-screen, that he could operate by feel. He ran his thumb over the plastic buttons, but then the phone jumped from his hand.

He reached for it, felt the railing press against his hip, and heard the plastic crack against the stone, farther and farther away, falling on the boulders at the base of the cliffs.

He heard footsteps behind him, pivoted, and swung his hand through the air. He was still fast. Whoever it was was on his other side now. He lunged in that direction but touched nothing, and as he came to the end of the blow, with all his weight on his forward foot, he felt the arms come in around his thighs. A quick wrestler's takedown from behind raised him in the air. He threw his elbow back, felt it crack against bone and heard the cry of pain, but by then it was too late. The railing hit his shins. His stomach went light, and the fall seemed so slow, so long.

Hynd walked down the worn concrete steps to the small boulder-strewn beach below the cliffs. Burke dragged himself along the sand, groaning in pain. His phone was only a foot away, but he was moving in the wrong direction. His legs were useless. Perhaps

## DEAD MAN SWITCH

Burke had injured his spine near the waist in the fall. His arm was clearly broken.

“Who’s there?” Burke growled.

“What does that matter now?”

“What do you want?”

“The names of two men in Cold Harvest. For that I’ll let you live.”

Hynd loved these moments. People spent their whole lives trusting in myths, abstractions like honor and sacrifice that the powerful feed to the weak-minded to control them.

Only when faced with death were they able to see what they really believed in, to cut through all the bullshit.

“What?”

“Two names. Give me men without families. You deserve to live, surely, after everything they took from you.”

Hynd considered himself a student of human nature. It was his greatest weapon. If he could dissect his opponents’ beliefs, their most deeply held fears, then he could predict their behavior, and if he could predict that, he could control them and kill them. This moment before death was his laboratory.

Honor or your life. That was the choice. It was a fate worse than death for many of the victims, to abandon their values and realize in the end that they were hypocrites.

Hynd watched Burke as he dragged himself closer.

“I’m going to kill you,” Burke said.

Bluster. Typical. Hynd grabbed the man’s collar and the sleeve of his good arm and pulled him along the sand. Even injured as he was, Burke fought back with the broken limb, and Hynd heard it grind. He hauled him into the shallow surf. It surged past them with each breaking wave. The moon was full, and the tide would rise six feet by morning.

## MATTHEW QUIRK

Hynd leaned over and held him under the cool water while he struggled, fighting until the end.

It took four minutes.

Hynd climbed the stairs and returned to his car. His legs were still cold and damp with salt water. He drove off, and a moment later, he saw a flashlight bobbing four blocks from where Burke had fallen. It was the man's young wife with her baby cradled to her chest in a sling. Hynd doubted she would find the body before the sea claimed it.

A symphony played on the radio. He turned the volume up as the woodwinds picked up the melody from the strings. He pressed down on the gas and took a curving road over the hills of the peninsula toward the freeway.

He had the list of targets memorized, and in his mind he scratched out one name.

## CHAPTER 7

THE CLASSIFIED PHONE rang, a distinctive warble. Hayes put down his coping saw and trotted across the upstairs hall to his office. The pain radiated out from his knee, a manageable but insistent sting. He'd torn his medial collateral ligament. It hurt ten times more than tearing the ACL but it was a quicker rehab. He spent two hours a day on the exercises and was well ahead of the protocols.

"It's Cox." A pause. "Burke is dead."

Hayes let out a long breath as the coldness spread through him, that strange instant of numbness whenever he heard of a fellow teammate down.

"How?"

"Fell off the cliffs near his house."

"Foul play?"

"No clear evidence. He might have fallen, or he might've taken his life."

"I can't see him doing that."

Hayes and Burke were members of a small community of



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special operations soldiers. They had cross-trained with the CIA and acquired the tradecraft needed to perform operations undercover and alone.

The line between spy and fighter had blurred to the point where it disappeared. The CIA would borrow or hire the most experienced military shooters from the classified units for its direct-action branch, and spec ops would temporarily use CIA authority when it needed to go into nations where there was no state of war, a practice known as sheep-dipping. There were even cases where the legal authority was written so that teams could switch back and forth between military and CIA control as they moved across borders on a single mission.

Some of the best graduated to Cold Harvest, and they had no legal authority. Their only protection was their own tradecraft. There were no more than fifty.

Ever since Hayes had come home, it had bothered him, the number of Cold Harvest deaths over the past couple of years. Five that he knew about. One member had died from a heart attack, another in a motorcycle accident. The latter was depressingly common in the military. Motorcycles killed more good soldiers than enemy fire. But now Burke was gone, so soon after he had come across Kashani's plans.

"Was he involved with Cold Harvest?" Hayes asked.

"He worked with them on a few operations."

Maybe they had ID'd him somehow while he was in custody in Pakistan and traced him here.

"This wasn't an accident. I told you to protect those covers."

Hayes heard a scratching on the hardwood floor outside his office.

"We did everything we could," Cox said. "We don't know how they found him."

## DEAD MAN SWITCH

“But this isn’t the first death.”

“I know,” Cox said.

“It can’t be a coincidence. Do you think someone has gotten inside the classified programs, inside Cold Harvest? That our enemies have the names somehow?”

For a moment there was no response except for the sound of Cox’s breathing, and then finally he said, “Yes.”

Hayes’s first instinct was to drop the phone, get his Mossberg shotgun, take Lauren and Maggie and put them in an interior room. But he had always been careful; he lived here at home with as much caution as he had abroad, undercover. He never stopped watching for surveillance.

No one but Cox and a few other friends he’d had for decades knew where he lived. Every time he went out to a base, he ran a countersurveillance route when he returned to make sure no one was tracking him to his home.

He had Lauren take precautions as well and taught her how to spot someone following her. He knew she resented it, the air of paranoia, as she should, but it was to protect them all. Even when Hayes left the war behind, the war never left him.

“I didn’t want to call,” Cox said.

“It didn’t stop you. You want me on this?”

“I thought it should go to you first. A lot of these people came up under you. And . . .” He hesitated.

“I can think like a killer. You’re not going to hurt my feelings.” Hayes had never actually been part of the program, though he’d helped train its first members.

He heard rustling from the door.

“We need you on this. It’s Black One.” Code for the highest priority, from the president, although there was never any recorded link between the White House and Cold Harvest.

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“This is ugly, Hayes. Someone might have penetrated the program. I want you to have open eyes. If you take this job, you’ll be a target as well.”

The scratching grew louder.

“When is Burke’s funeral?”

“Two days.”

“I’ll have an answer for you then.”

He ended the call, went to the door, opened it, and quickly buttonhooked around the door frame. Old room-clearing instincts, drilled into him in the training facilities known as kill houses. A cardboard box sat in front of the door, shaking left to right and giggling.

Then his daughter jumped up and screamed, “Surprise!”

Hayes rubbed his forehead and took a few deep breaths. Lauren came up the stairs and stood at the end of the hallway, stifling a laugh.

“I had nothing to do with it. I swear.”

He picked up his grinning daughter. “Did I scare you?” she asked.

“You sure did, sweetie.”

Nothing better for a man with poorly managed low-grade PTSD than a preschooler who loved surprises.

Hayes lowered her to her feet. “Why don’t you go pick out a story.”

She ran down the hall.

“Work?” Lauren asked.

“Yes.”

“You’re going back?”

“I haven’t decided.”

Half his toes were still black, the skin continuing to come off in pieces. He had just taken off the knee brace.

## DEAD MAN SWITCH

“I won’t tell you what to do. That was never our arrangement.”

She knew what it meant to him, to protect the people he worked alongside. They were as close to him as brothers and sisters.

Maggie came out with a Dr. Seuss book.

“Daddy!”

Black One. The highest priority.

Hayes lifted his daughter.

No, not the highest.

## CHAPTER 8

HAYES KNELT IN front of the casket. It looked like Burke. They had done a good job, all in all, but there was something off about the hands, like they were two wooden paddles. They never got the hands right. Hayes had buried a lot of his boys. He hated funerals, hated the way the dead men's faces always looked old and tranquil, at peace. He'd never seen Burke rest easy. Even asleep, he'd been like a coiled spring.

Hayes rose from the kneeler. The funeral would take place at Arlington later that day. Burke's father and grandfather were buried there. This was an early visitation being held for classified personnel at Fort Belvoir, a base on the Potomac south of DC with a long history of black army intelligence work. Lauren and Maggie were in the sitting room just outside. As Hayes waited to speak to Burke's widow, he saw an old teammate, a man named Drew Ochoa. He had come up to Team Six through the navy's explosive-ordnance disposal programs, and he and Hayes had worked together hunting down high-value targets and chemical weapons in Syria.

## DEAD MAN SWITCH

“Good to see you,” Drew said, then he took Hayes’s hand and wrapped his arm around him. When Drew stepped back, Hayes glanced down at the man’s fingers. Drew flexed them and smiled slightly.

Drew had been taken by the enemy while on a patrol in the eastern deserts, and Hayes had pulled him half dead out of an al-Nusra cell, literally a metal cage, twelve days later. His captors had bound his wrists so tight with battery wire, they’d nearly cut the radial nerve on one hand. The medic thought he might never be able to use it again. Hayes hadn’t run into him since, so he was glad to see it was working.

“Thanks,” Drew said.

“Of course.” Hayes reached up and squeezed his shoulder.

That was it. They didn’t do much talking about the past. Drew dipped his head toward Burke’s wife, Tara, who sat at the end of the front row of chairs on the far side of the coffin. It was Hayes’s turn to offer his condolences. He walked to her.

“I’m John Hayes. I worked with Connor. I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you for coming,” she said, and then she looked at him more closely. “You were with him...” She raised her hand to her eyes.

“I was.”

“You were one of the men he saved.”

“Yes. I’ll never be able to repay him.”

Her gaze drifted toward the casket. Hayes looked at the last few mourners behind him, waiting. But Tara reached out and touched his arm, raised her face to his. There was something about Hayes that made people trust him.

“People are saying that he jumped,” she said.

“That doesn’t sound like Connor.”

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“Then why would he go near those cliffs?”

“I don’t know. But he never gave up and never backed down from anything.”

Five other men had been killed. Burke had been murdered too. He wanted to tell her that he would hunt down whoever had done this. But there was nothing Hayes could say. He had sworn, and sharing these secrets was dangerous.

Hayes hated the evasions, hated holding information back from Lauren, disappearing, waking covered in sweat and not being able to talk about the memories that stalked his sleep. The men he had killed, the men who had left him to die. Deceiving the ones he loved seemed colder than the violence he faced downrange. He could never get used to it.

Tara Burke’s eyes narrowed and she looked at Hayes with something like disdain.

“I know that face. What aren’t you telling me?” She shook her head and looked at his wedding ring. “You men and your lies. Honor isn’t going to raise my kids. You were supposed to protect him. Get out now. Be with your family. The rest is just—”

She buried her face in her hands and took four long breaths.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t know what I’m saying.”

Hayes laid his hand on her shoulder. “It’s okay.”

“He was a good guy,” she said.

“The best.” Hayes put his arm around her and she cried quietly for a moment, then straightened up.

“Thank you for coming,” she said in a flat tone. She was bottling everything up, pushing him away.

Hayes left her with the next mourner. In the entry hall, outside the viewing room, one of Burke’s boys was playing with Hayes’s daughter. He slipped his arm out of the sleeve of his small blazer and then started turning in circles, trying to get it back in.

## DEAD MAN SWITCH

“How many kids does she have?” Lauren asked Hayes when he joined her.

“Three.”

She shook her head slowly.

“I know. The team wives will take care of her out there, though she might come back to the East Coast to be closer to her family.”

“It doesn’t make sense,” Lauren said. She had been to too many funerals, seen too many young widows. “What’s happening, John?”

He took her to the side.

“Someone is hunting us down. The command wants me to come back,” he said. “To find out who’s behind this, to stop them.”

Hayes had been in exile when his daughter was born. He didn’t see her until she was two, when he was finally able to return home. It took him months to break through with her, for her to stop hiding behind her mother’s legs when he came into the room.

He knew the risks; he didn’t want to leave his wife a widow, like Tara and the others. But he couldn’t stay at home and wait for another silent kill. What if they came for his family? He’d lost the closest thing he had to a father to the network behind the DC attack, and they had threatened his wife and daughter.

Now the enemy was inside the United States. Hayes couldn’t protect his family by sitting on his hands at home. He could protect them by closing on whoever was behind this and putting him in the ground. He knew it would make him a target, that the killers might never stop coming after him. So be it.

His wife was strong. She had family not too far away. She and Maggie had been okay without him. He might not get to see Maggie grow up, but he was willing to pay that price to keep her safe.

“I’m going after them,” he said.



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She pressed her lips together tightly and, after a moment, nodded. “All right. I get it. I’ve been to too many of these things, seen too many of these girls wearing black. I can handle it . . .”

She trailed off, but he knew. She could handle the family solo—for now, forever—if it meant that no more of these young women would have to go through this. Her strength was his.

“Do what you do, John. They need you.”

His daughter walked toward him, and he took her hand. He saw Tara, Burke’s widow, through the open doors as they left.

In the parking lot, Lauren and Maggie went to the car while Hayes hung back. He watched Lauren lift Maggie into the car seat as he took out his phone.

Cox answered on the fourth ring.

“It’s Hayes. I’m in.”

The morning sun was still low in the sky. As Hayes spoke, there was no way he could see the man in the woods on the far side of the highway, watching him and his family through a long lens. He worked for Niko Hynd.

## CHAPTER 9

KILLING IS DRUDGERY. Hours of scouting, of learning patterns.

Hynd stepped silently down the hall. Carpet. That was good. A patch of moonlight from the living-room window angled across him. Water ran at the end of the corridor. A toilet flushed. He heard her spit out toothpaste.

She wasn't ready for him. Soon. A few more minutes. She was a widow, and this was unfinished business. The key to Cold Harvest lay with this woman.

He eased the door open in silence and examined the third bedroom. It was set up as a guest room and home office. Dust swirled in the light edging around the blinds and settled on the desk, a photographer's workspace. Racks of hard drives, cameras, and lenses in Pelican cases stacked against the wall. He looked over the photos; there was one of a man fly-fishing in a river under aspen trees and another of a group on touring skis making their way across the top of a snow-covered cliff. The room was empty. It had sat untouched for a long time. He stepped out.

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Light leaked from under the door of the master bedroom, then disappeared. He heard the creak of springs. He lingered in the hallway.

The house was an L-shaped ranch set back in the woods off a country road that snaked through the mountains outside Charlottesville. The nearest neighbor down the street went to bed at 11:35, after the nightly news. The newspaper was delivered by a man in a rusted-out Mercury wagon at 5:30 a.m. There were no late-night guests, no sexual partners. She slept alone in a home built for a family. He had bugged her phone, a process as simple as clipping into the telephone wires on the outside of the house.

He opened the door to the second bedroom. It would have been good for a child. They'd wanted roots here, had never planned to leave.

Did she know how her husband had died? Did she suspect the truth? Did she hope, in these long nights alone, to join him?

He checked his watch and returned to the hallway. Toe, heel, toe, heel. He stepped carefully, keeping the weight on the trailing leg, slowly applying it to the front, almost like a toddler's walk, in order to remain silent. Awkward, but he had grown used to it, could do it quickly. He stood outside her door, listening to her breathe, waiting however long was necessary for her to fall fully asleep.

Hynd had others helping him. An operation this complex required many hands. Most were already inside this country. He had backup nearby, but he and his team were still working through stealth, disguising the murders, and stealth was easiest with one man.

Killing was his profession, and this job was simple: eliminate everyone in Cold Harvest. But he was more than a gun for hire.

## DEAD MAN SWITCH

This cause was personal, and there was nothing he enjoyed more than the flush of adrenaline in his veins.

After so many hours of surveillance, he would begin to feel invincible: The woman down the street would walk the dog, the trash trucks would trundle by, the lights of the other houses in the valley would go on and off, all by his cue, and all the work would be rewarded. He would know the secret script of this environment, and soon he would feel like he was summoning it all, controlling it all himself.

Until this moment.

Because at some point, you have to put yourself in danger.

It was time. He twisted the knob and stepped into the room where she slept. The hardwood floor flexed gently as he shifted his weight to his forward foot. He leaned back, tried a spot a few inches over, and proceeded in silence.

When he came around, he could see her face, the mouth tight as if in anger. This was his next target, Carol Duncan, an executive recruiter. Her hands rested near the pillow, and she lay on her side. Her chest rose and fell, rose and fell, beneath the covers—deep sleep.

He took a breath in and could smell her: a clean, lotion-y fragrance. He put his hands on the foot of the bed. She turned slightly, more on her back, her face toward him.

There were easier ways to kill than this approach.

When you first teach soldiers to shoot, you make the target an abstraction. It's not hard to fire at someone from a distance, to aim at a man or woman who might as well be a paper target.

When fighters get up close, the instinctive human revulsion at killing paralyzes most of them. They won't take the shot even if their own lives are in danger. But the intimate work was his specialty. It took decades to unlearn every moral instinct.

This was the moment he loved, after all the silent watching. To

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get so close to that time where there was no script, only danger, only death, breathing the same air.

His shadow moved up the bare skin of her arm, toward her chest and neck.

He knew her now as well as anyone. He'd been watching her for days and had seen patterns she might not recognize herself. He'd gotten close to her, so close that he knew her mind, her reactions.

That was the hardest thing. You had to open yourself to the targets, to understand them at the most intimate, human level; in a way, to love them.

And then you had to kill them without hesitation or remorse and stare into their eyes while their lives drained away.

He felt the latex glove, clammy against his skin, as he closed his fingers around the barrel of the syringe. She whimpered and rolled onto her back, and then he reached out toward her.

## CHAPTER 10

IN THE BED, Carol Duncan was dreaming of the cop in town again, a deputy sheriff named Tim. She imagined them together in this room as he lifted her, laid her on the bed, and kissed her. But as she lay back, she saw her husband's photo on the nightstand.

She'd had similar dreams before. They always turned into nightmares about the car fire that killed her husband. She tried to wake herself but couldn't. The scene blurred and she was in the smoking rubble with him, crawling through collapsed concrete blocks and joists with barely enough room for her shoulders. The rough debris tore at the skin on her knees as she pushed in farther. Sweat dripped down her forehead and stung her eyes. And she could hear the cries—her husband, shouting in pain somewhere ahead.

Smoke poured through the broken stone. The hot fumes scorched her lungs. No room now. She dragged herself forward on her belly. There was a crack ahead. She pushed her head and arm in. The ground pressed against her cheek. She tried to force her way through, to get smaller, emptying her lungs, as her husband called her name.

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The wreckage pressed in. Her lungs couldn't fill. She couldn't back up, couldn't go farther, couldn't see anything in the blackness.

The shouting grew faint. She heard her name one last time, and then his voice was gone.

Carol jerked upright in bed and took a long gasping breath. The clock read 5:30 a.m. She pressed her hands to her face and felt the sweat on her cheeks.

She lived alone, but every time she shut her eyes to sleep, she was sure there was someone else in the house watching, hovering over her.

Carol hadn't been right since her husband died. She kept his semiautomatic pistol in a drawer in the nightstand. She found it in the dark now, entered the lockbox code by feel, and lifted up the gun, taking care to keep her finger out of the trigger guard. She patted the nightstand where she usually put her glasses. They were gone.

There was a rustling noise from deep in the house.

The pistol felt heavy, and the grip was too big for her hands. But the weight reassured her as she walked blindly in the dark, navigating the room by memory.

What would her clients think, she wondered, of a woman scaring herself awake with bad dreams, and taking a twenty-year-old loaded .45 with the safety off to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night?

She hit the lights and flinched to the side when she saw a figure.

But as her eyes adjusted, she realized it was just her bathrobe hanging from a hook behind the door. She found her glasses on the sink, and, with her heart pounding, she checked inside the shower.

Next, she started up the hallway, telling herself this was

## DEAD MAN SWITCH

ridiculous but not believing it. The rest of the house was clear, but she had saved Paul's office for last.

She wrapped her fingers around the cold knob and opened the door. She never came in here anymore. She looked over the strange bottles of liquor labeled in languages she couldn't understand—from Luanda and Baku and God knew where else. The photos looked down through a layer of dust: her husband at Camp 4 in the Yosemite Valley, the mecca for rock climbing; fishing in Paradise Valley; skiing in the San Juan Mountains of southwest Colorado.

She stopped next to one. Paul was wearing body armor and a helmet, PRESS written on his chest, riding a mule through a bombed-out mountain pass. His saddle was slipping to the side as the mule reached for some high grass on the trail, and he was laughing, arms thrown out, trying to keep his balance. He was a freelance photographer and did mostly nature shots and some combat work.

She could hear him laugh as clearly as if he were in the room. Her legs froze, and she felt like her throat was swelling shut. She pressed her thumbs into the corners of her eyes and swallowed, and then walked quickly back into the hall.

She couldn't stay in there. Not yet. She touched the ring on her finger. She hadn't taken it off. Hadn't moved it to the right hand, though she had started wondering what was the decent interval. She pulled the door shut, walked back to her bedroom, entered the bathroom, and put down the pistol.

Carol dropped her pajama bottoms to the floor and started the shower. As the steam clouded the mirrors, she remembered the gun, took it off the counter, and walked back to the nightstand.

The edge had gone off the fear, and she looked at that lethal hunk of metal, shining with its light coat of oil. "A weapon you



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won't use is less than worthless," Paul had said once. *Would I be able to pull the trigger if I found someone there, hiding behind the door? Or would he just take the gun from me while I stood paralyzed by fear?*

She left it on the bed and returned to the shower. The water ran hot, almost scalding her skin until the heat was all she could feel, washing that sticky-sour smell of panic off her body. By the time she was finished, she could hear the birds calling outside. Dawn wouldn't be too far behind. She stretched her hand out the shower door, grabbed her towel, and laughed at the bathrobe hanging off the door like a specter.

Crack and squeal, then silence. Crack and squeal. She knew the noise; it was the gate in the backyard. It was cheap, and the wind pried it open. It was still dark, and there was no way she was going out there.

In the foggy mirror, she looked at the lines around her eyes and beside her lips, and she touched the skin of her neck. A hard year since Paul had died, but it showed only in the circles under her eyes and in the set of her jaw. She didn't look as bad as she felt, and she could see the men in town casually glancing at the ring, waiting for it to disappear.

A quarter mile away, on a steep side street, Hynd slipped into the passenger seat of a sedan and laid the syringe on his leg. A woman sat behind the wheel, her black hair pulled into a tight bun. Her strength was evident even in the loose-fitting clothes she was wearing. She was Vera Choriev, one of Hynd's two deputies on this operation. Her mixed European and Asian features gave her a stark beauty, though few who saw her would come away with that as their first impression. They were left only with coldness.

"Is it done?"

## DEAD MAN SWITCH

“No,” he said. “She woke. It would have been messy, would have left too much evidence in her home.”

They waited, watching the house, until an eight-year-old BMW rolled down the driveway and turned onto the two-lane road through the valley; Carol’s car. Vera called to their backup vehicle on an encrypted radio. “She’s heading south. Pick up the tail.”

She brought the car around and raced after.

## CHAPTER 11

THE DAWN BROKE, and Carol stopped at a traffic light on the way to her little town. She had started answering e-mails at the kitchen table with a cup of yogurt and a loaded gun next to the laptop and then thought, *What the hell am I doing? I have to get out of this house.* She decided to head to the bakery on Main Street. The pastries would be fresh, and she liked to catch up over coffee with the woman who ran the shop.

She didn't notice the Toyota pickup that pulled out behind her BMW. She saw Tim, the cop from her dream, stepping out of the mini-mart attached to the Exxon station with a cup of coffee in his hand.

He gave her a wave. He was one of the guys who would check, when he thought she wasn't looking, to see if the ring had been taken off her finger. She didn't mind. It was nice to be noticed by a decent man, not to feel so alone. She felt the color rise in her cheeks as she thought about the night before, the dream.

Pollen drifted through the slanting morning light, and a line of black clouds over the mountain promised a break in the heat.

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There was construction on the highway, so she went on the back roads. It was a longer route, little used, but she liked to drive it, twisting through a hollow with hills banking up on both sides. Forest roads branched off into the woods. She came to a Y intersection and pulled up to the stop sign.

Metal crunched. Her car jumped forward, and her skull snapped against the headrest. She looked in the rearview. A Toyota truck loomed behind her. It had rear-ended her. She couldn't see the driver. He had stepped out and was behind the door.

She opened hers, put one foot on the asphalt, and then saw the gun barrel leveled at her face between the cab and the open driver door of the Toyota. She leaped back in the car as her window glass blew out, tinkling across the country road.

She threw the shifter into first, punched the gas, and dropped the clutch. She stayed low as the acceleration slammed her door shut.

Another shot. The rear window exploded. Glass cut into the skin of her neck. Fat drops of rain plunked against the roof.

Her eyes were just barely above the wheel as she turned right at a fork. Time seemed to slow, like in a dream, as her rear tires screeched, kicking gravel out as they veered off the road and a yellow traction-control light flashed on her dashboard. She was still reeling from the collision. The Toyota pulled up closer.

Blood dripped down her neck, soaked into her collar.

The movements seemed to come automatically as she watched the tachometer drift toward the red line and slightly past with each gear shift. As the first curve came, she drifted wide, then cut the corner as closely as she could, branches scraping her window, and exited wide again. The Toyota shrank in her rearview and disappeared around the curve. She didn't know this road. It narrowed, and the broken-up asphalt shook the car, cracked her teeth together over the washboard surface.

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The truck had the advantage with its high clearance and four-wheel drive. It would catch her soon. There was no time to think. Fighting the wheel took all her attention. It was a long, sweeping curve. A rise sent the car weightless, giving her a sick feeling in her stomach for a moment until the front end crashed down and her head whipped forward and the car slid sideways and threatened to roll into the ditch. She could hear the Toyota's engine in the hills behind her.

There was no time. She saw a forest road ahead, leading back toward town. She came into it at speed, a ninety-degree turn, and slowed the car. As she turned the wheel, she stabbed the clutch and the gas and dropped the stick into second gear. The rear tires came loose as the car began to spin, and all she could see through the windshield were the second-growth trees twelve feet in front of her. She palmed her wheel into the skid. The rear tires bit just as the car ended up pointed down the unpaved side road, and she shot off over the rough surface.

She kept on, hoping the man in the Toyota would continue past on the main road. Her phone showed no signal. Rain showered down. For a moment there was quiet, then something rumbled low behind her.

She checked the rearview. No. He was coming. As she took the first curve, the tires smeared through the mud, and she brought the wheel around, fighting the skid. The road curved away from town, up the mountain. In the mirror, she could see the Toyota's headlights, its grille growing larger and larger. She didn't have a chance. Her BMW dipped into a rut. Brown water splashed on the windshield and for a second her tires spun uselessly as the car slipped toward the high dirt walls laced with branches.

The truck's lights knifed through the woods behind her. She pulled her husband's gun from the glove box, stumbled out, and

## DEAD MAN SWITCH

clambered up the bank on her hands and knees. The rain soaked her hair, her clothes, dripped down the small of her back. She ran. The brambles tore at her shins, and a vine dragged thorns along her neck. It was an ugly forest here, overgrown and immature, and she could barely manage more than a walking pace despite all her exertions.

A door opened and slammed shut behind her. She cut to the left, thinking in a half a dozen directions at once. He would guess she'd run away, so maybe she could get around him, circle back to her car.

The mud filled her shoes, sucked them down. She reached her hand in to free her foot and stumbled another twenty yards, then stood behind a wide oak and rested her head against its bark. Her breath came fast and ragged. Wet hair was pasted to her cheek. She looked back the way she had come and saw it: broken branches, huge smears of footprints through the red clay, mud streaked over the downed trees she had jumped over.

The trail was so obvious. He would find her.

"Come out and I won't hurt you!" The voice sounded like it was just on the other side of the tree. It was a man's voice, loud and calm, accustomed to being obeyed.

Footsteps slopping through the mud, closer now.

"I just want to talk to you. Come on out."

Even closer. Off to her left. He would see her any second. She pressed against the tree, wished she could shrink down to nothing.

She ducked down and saw him. He was tall and thin, wearing a simple dark blue suit, striding through the torrent in the woods like it was the most normal thing in the world. A short rifle hung from his shoulder, and as his eyes fixed on her, he brought it forward.

*You're going to fucking die!* the voice screamed in her head.

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*Run! Use the gun!* It hung at the end of her trembling arm, but her hands were numb, bloodless from the fear. Her legs felt like concrete, planted there in the ground.

*A weapon you won't use is less than worthless.*

She fell to one knee on the red clay, and he took aim.

Four gunshots cracked the air.

## CHAPTER 12

WHEN YOU'RE WEAK, play strong, and when you're strong, play weak. Hayes had taught her that a long time ago, when he was training her for Cold Harvest. If you're undercover in a hostile city and someone follows you and corners you, don't draw and then ask questions. That's for the movies.

Shoot him in the face and exit the situation.

Her name wasn't Carol Duncan, it was Claire Rhodes. And she was a headhunter, but she didn't recruit executives. Long ago she'd learned that the only way to sell a lie is to believe it in your bones, to live it as the truth, to inhabit the persona, because you never know who's watching.

She'd worked for Cold Harvest until a year ago, when her husband was killed, and the teammates closest to her started dying, and the commanders that had turned her into this machine cut her loose.

She sat back over her right heel with her left leg slightly in front of her, her left knee bracing the pistol in the most accurate



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kneeling firing position. The pungent smell of burned propellant drifted from the .45 and tingled in her nose.

She had fired all four shots.

The target dropped into the undergrowth. She moved quickly, flanking left, following her pistol, and jumped over a downed tree. The carbine had fallen to the man's side. She dragged it away with her foot by the sling as she stepped over him and patted him down for hidden weapons.

"Who are you?" she said.

Two bullets had hit him in the eye, destroying the socket. He lay on his side.

Claire shook her head. Rusty. The first two shots had missed. In another situation that would have cost her her life.

She pressed her fingertips to the side of his neck. The pulse was barely palpable. His chest was still. His remaining eye fixed on her desperately as he clung to the last seconds of life. Sirens cried deep in the woods behind her: the police.

Even if he could talk, there was no time for intel. The authorities would be here any second.

"It's okay," she said. "It's over."

She aimed the gun at him, turned her head away to avoid the spray, and fired, destroying his brain stem. She scanned the woods for any accomplices, then ducked down and searched his pockets. The sirens were closer now. She had only minutes, but she needed any clue she could find about who had sent this man to kill her.

She pulled a wallet from his chest pocket and opened it. There was a badge with a five-pointed star on one side and an ID on the other.

"Department of Justice. James Grier. Deputy U.S. Marshal."

She muttered a curse. She had just killed a federal agent. The FBI had watched her for a while after Paul was killed. She knew

## DEAD MAN SWITCH

they suspected her. But why now? Why like this? Why not announce themselves?

Panic rose in her; her thinking became disordered.

“Carol! Carol!”

She looked back to the roadway. A police cruiser had stopped behind the Toyota. It was Tim’s patrol car. She saw him walking through the woods, his sidearm out.

*Just turn around, Tim. This game is too dangerous for you. It goes too high.*

But he strode on, coming to save her.

She picked up the carbine and crouched beside the lifeless body. Blood ran through the red mud, swirled over the leaves. She pulled back the charging handle, checked that there was a round in the chamber, then dropped the magazine and felt its weight in her hand. Plenty of ammo. She slammed it back in, rested the barrel on the downed tree, and looked through the sight.

Tim moved closer, glanced down, and saw the tracks through the mud.

“Carol! Are you okay?”

He kept the pistol at a low ready. It had been his father’s in Vietnam. He’d never used it on duty, only at the range. She remembered him talking about it at the bakery, talking about his father.

She pressed her cheek against the stock and placed the crosshairs on his heart, moving with him as the trees passed like shadows between them. She’d just shot a federal agent, and now she might have to shoot Tim to get away.

“Carol!”

*Turn around, Tim. Please. I don’t want to kill anymore.*

He stepped closer. He’d always been kind to her, could see when she was hurting and was there, not demanding, but ready for

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whenever she wanted to talk, whenever she needed someone to listen. She never did. This is why she had to live the lie. Because when people found out the truth about her, they ended up dead.

Her finger curled around the trigger, and she tracked him as he moved closer. She'd shoot when he stopped.

“Carol!” He turned and looked directly over her head.

*Good-bye, Tim. I'm sorry.*

## CHAPTER 13

BLACK TIPS. THAT'S what saved his life. When she had checked the rounds in the rifle's magazine, she saw they had black tips. M995 ammunition. The bullet was made of lead wrapped around a large ultra-hard tungsten carbide penetrator, good for punching through a bulletproof vest or killing someone inside an armored car. It was illegal in the United States, and the only Feds who used it were special teams guarding nuclear materials in transit.

It took her a moment to put it together. There was no way a marshal would use it in a duty weapon. They used jacketed soft points so the rounds wouldn't penetrate walls and hurt bystanders. Nothing would stop this bullet. It was rare and difficult to acquire, an assassin's round.

No U.S. Marshal would have bumped her car, stalked her in her house, shot at her without warning, no matter how dangerous people thought she was. There *were* units that might, like

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her former employer. But the dead man had been an impostor; he wasn't a Fed, so there was no need for her to shoot her way out of this.

She ditched the gun, and her face changed as she began to cry quietly, forced a tremble in her hands, and let Tim find her. The dab of black on that bullet had saved his life.

"Carol! Back away!" He stalked toward the body. She had nearly killed him when it was obvious that she hadn't needed to. Too much killing—her answer to every puzzle. The old ways.

"Are there others?"

"No," she said.

He put his arm around her shoulders.

"Is he dead?" she asked.

"He's gone. You're safe."

Forty-five minutes later, she sat in the back of the ambulance, covered in a foil blanket, with a bandage tugging on the skin of her neck, a blood pressure cuff on her arm, and a pulse oximeter on her finger.

Like she was the one who'd been shot.

Tim stepped into the back door.

"Can I come up?"

"Sure."

"You mind if I sit?"

"Course not."

He was asking questions, seeking permission, making her feel in control; proper victim management. He was a good cop.

"How are you feeling?"

"I can't believe this happened to me." That's what victims always said, over and over.

"Take your time with it. You're safe now. Carol?"

## DEAD MAN SWITCH

He ran his fingers over the leather cover of his notebook, kneading it, worried.

“Yes.”

“Is there anything else you want to tell me?”

“I think that was it. Thank God you came along. Why?”

“Bill Drummond was up on the ridge. He heard the shots and called it in. He saw some of the chase, too.”

She watched him, waited it out.

“Where did you learn to drive like that?”

“I was scared. I tried to keep it under control as best I could.”

“Drifting a corner?”

“Turn into the skid. Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do?”

“Yes,” he said, and he looked down.

“What is it?” she asked.

He looked at the monitor that showed her pulse rate; she guessed he was checking to see if she could handle the questions.

“You shot him twice in the eye, through the same hole.”

“God.” She raised her hand to her mouth.

“Even professionals can’t do that. Your brass was twenty-five yards away from his body. That’s U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit stuff.”

She fixed her eyes on him, forcing him to bully her, using his decency against him, but she was doing him a favor. The truth would only hurt him.

“Is there anything you want to tell me, Carol? Are you in some kind of trouble?”

She put her hand on his and squeezed it gently.

“Can I go home?” She gave him a soft look. “Please.”

“Of course. I’m glad you’re okay, Carol.”

*You too.*

“Thanks,” she said.

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\* \* \*

Tim dropped her at home. “Do you want me to stay?” he asked. “Until you get settled? Or I can take you to the station or some family nearby?”

“I just want to lie down.”

“Sure.”

He walked her to the door, and she opened it and then wrapped her arms around him.

“It’s best if you stay close to home until we get this settled,” he said. “I’m sure it will check out, but we might need to interview you again.”

She had a clean truck in a garage twenty minutes away with two prepaid phones, an M4 rifle, and a Glock 26 in the trunk. Everything she needed to run.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said. “Thank you, Tim.”

She shut the door.

There were four cover identities ready to go. The passports were hidden with the guns in the truck, but she knew the faces. She remembered the photos, taken when she was a couple of years younger. She stood in front of the mirror in the master bedroom and watched her face change as she recalled the false personas available to her.

She would become Sasha Behrend, privileged, ridden with social anxiety, hiding behind her scarves and glasses. Her cheeks went hollow. Her eyes narrowed. Her posture straightened. She had a dancer’s carriage. Her neck seemed to grow, and her feet turned out slightly.

Music helped. Carol Duncan was plainspoken, salt of the earth, unpretentious. She liked Patty Griffin and Diana Krall. Sasha

## DEAD MAN SWITCH

Behrend was classical, difficult; Schoenberg, Debussy. Oboes played in her head as she studied her reflection.

“Hello. I’m Sasha Behrend. What gate is flight four ninety-six?” The words came fast; she was rushing through the exchange. She tried it a few more times. Carol was gone. Sasha looked back at her. She felt different.

She wasn’t Carol. She wasn’t Sasha. She wasn’t any of them. And she was. She’d been living this way so long that these names and faces were all she had left. Whoever she’d been when she’d started was dead, destroyed like burned paper.

Because you have to live the lie, forget the past, the truth, yourself. Or else people get hurt. They see the way you drive. They notice two bullets through one hole. They ask questions. The answers are fatal.

She remembered the last days with her husband.

“Is there anything you want to tell me?” Paul had asked. She had wanted to tell him everything. She had wanted all the killing to end so she could remember the person she had been before all this.

Her husband asked questions. He was the last person to find out who she really was, and in short order he was dead.

The reflection stared back at her, and she didn’t recognize the woman in the glass as she opened her mouth and began to speak.

“I did not kill my husband.” She said it with utter conviction. She believed it in her bones.

There was only one way out. All the suspicions, the paranoia, the midnight fears—they were all well founded. Someone had come to execute her—a former enemy, a former boss, perhaps a former friend. And he would be back to finish the job.

Unless she got him first. She stopped outside Paul’s office, listened to the silence for a moment, and then moved to the rear of the house and put her hand on the screen door.



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This had been her home for five years. For five years she had lived as Carol Duncan; she had married Paul under that name. But he was gone, and she would most likely never return to this home. Carol Duncan was dead too.

She slipped out the back door, eyes on the patrol car parked down the street, then sprinted for the edge of the woods.

End of the sample. Thanks for reading!  
Dead Man Switch is available for order  
at Amazon ([link](#)) and Barnes & Noble ([link](#)).