

# THE NIGHT AGENT

A Novel

Matthew Quirk

*wm*

WILLIAM MORROW

*An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers*

Peter Sutherland stalked through the trees wearing a navy suit, white shirt, and black oxfords polished to a high gloss. Everything about him was FBI standard, the code he had followed so carefully for so long. A perfect square.

The ax in his hand was new, though, as was the borrowed pistol on his hip with no serial number.

Bruises and cuts covered the side of his throat. He hadn't slept in twenty-four hours.

The ax was a beauty, its steel blade gleaming like a razor at the end of thirty-six inches of American ash.

He walked toward the red brick mansion, studying it. Peter knew how to get in and out of a home without leaving a trace. That was his job. Surveillance. Tracking. Seeing without being seen.

But the time for hiding was over. He moved across the soft grass of the lawn, toward the back of the house.

The day was cool, but his cheeks were flushed. His heartbeat washed in his ears like crashing surf. He welcomed it, welcomed the adrenaline flooding down his spine as he took the steps of the rear deck two at a time to the door.

The house surely had an alarm system, but he didn't care. Let them come. All of them. Police. Secret Service. The cold assassins masquerading as intelligence officers.

Peter had always been so careful about the rules. He had to be. His father had betrayed his country. Suspicion had trailed Peter for most of his life. No matter how faultless he was, he couldn't escape it, and now they had branded him as a traitor, too.

He didn't break his stride as he tilted his wrist down and let

## 2 MATTHEW QUIRK

the ax slip through his fingers to its full length, grabbing it at the end of the handle. He closed his left hand on the wood grain just above his right and swung the tool back, over his head, the four-pound blade arcing until it nearly touched his spine. He whipped it forward with every muscle in his body.

Fourteen years of anger repressed, fourteen years of playing by their hypocrite rules, all the fury of watching the helpless die at the hands of the powerful—he put it all into that blow. Enough with the Boy Scout shit.

The blade hissed through the air, hit the door near its edge, and blew it apart like a breaching charge. The lock and handle splintered out.

He kicked the door open. A camera was straight ahead.

Perfect. He wanted them to see. Raise the alarm at the White House.

He marched upstairs looking for the safe.

The traitors had murdered innocents and waged war against their own country, a quiet coup. Soon they would have control. Soon more would die if he didn't make his stand. It might cost him his life. He knew that.

He knew he might have to kill someone here. That would have been unthinkable just a day before, but he had never known treachery like this, never felt anger like this. He didn't know who he was anymore, but he knew what he needed to do. This ended only one way. Looking down the barrel of a gun.

# 1

## *Six Days Earlier*

**PETER'S OXFORDS STOOD** outside the closet door. A freshly pressed shirt hung on the knob along with a navy suit. His alarm chirped. It was five P.M.

He rolled out of bed and opened the shades, then brought the sheet and comforter back up, and tucked them in with neat corners.

The sun dipped low in the sky and disappeared behind the trees and apartment buildings near the National Cathedral.

Night was coming and his day was just getting started. He worked for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and through a series of events he still couldn't quite fathom, he had been detailed to the White House. He staffed a night action desk in the Situation Room, a twelve-hour shift from seven P.M. to seven A.M.

His job, in brief, was to stand by an emergency line all night every night, waiting for a call that might never come.

The bus took him down to Lafayette Square, and he headed south as the setting sun painted the White House red.

He crossed to G Street and ducked into Tonic, a bar in Foggy Bottom. He scanned the room for a colleague of his from the West Wing, Brian, who had told him to come by.

Walking along the back wall of the bar gave him a clear view of the entire space. He caught himself studying the other patrons, noting height and weight, distinguishing characteristics and unusual behavior, silently recording it all.

He could never turn off the old habits. For years watching had been his job. He started out in the FBI as a surveillance specialist, known within the bureau as a G.

He slipped along the edge of the crowd. Peter stood out at six six and a lean two hundred and twenty pounds, but he liked to avoid attention and knew how to get around without drawing too much notice.

He caught the eye of Brian, who waved him over. “You want a beer?”

“Thanks,” Peter said. “But I’m heading in. I wanted to stop by for a bit.”

“You’re still on nights?”

Peter pretended to sleep on his feet, then opened his eyes, startled. “Sorry, what?”

Brian laughed, then took a sip. His suit was well-cut, modish, too expensive for his salary. He was an easygoing Connecticut prep who worked days in the office of the national security advisor. They had played basketball together a handful of times. He had a habit of attaching the name of a person he had just met to the end of each sentence—“And where did you go to school, *Peter*?”—that Peter took as a sign of an inveterate networker, filing names away in his mental Rolodex.

Peter recognized the man next to Brian from a barbecue that summer. He worked in the director's office.

"Hey, Theo," Peter said and shook his hand.

"Go ahead," Brian said to Theo, who cast his eyes around the room warily.

"What's up?" Peter asked.

"Theo saw the promotion and transfer lists."

It was a favorite topic of gossip among the bureau drones.

"Do you want to know if you're getting one?" Brian asked Peter, grinning.

"Of course," Peter said, and as Theo leaned in, Peter held up his hand. "But don't tell me."

"What?"

"I'll find out soon."

"You don't want to know?"

"It's cool. I'll wait."

Theo straightened up, and the pleasant air of shared secrets disappeared.

"It's not a big deal," Theo said, defensive now. And it wasn't. Bosses would often drop hints, and most of the raises and promotions were telegraphed well in advance.

"I'm not trying to give you a hard time," Peter said. "It's fine. But I don't want to know."

"You're making me out like some kind of sneak? *You?*"

Peter was careful about even the slightest hint of impropriety. People had been watching him, too, for much of his life, looking for the slightest breach. Maybe that's why surveillance and countersurveillance came so naturally.

He'd always hewed carefully to those rules, hoping they might let him escape the taint of his father's crimes, might save him from who he was.

"No," Peter said calmly. "But leave me out of it."

Theo let out a nasty laugh. “You play it so straight, but everybody knows . . .” He looked away.

“Knows what?” Peter asked.

Theo scanned the room to his left as if he were looking for someone better to talk to. He muttered something about *dad* and *spy*.

Peter stepped closer and looked Theo in the eye.

“Is there something you would like to say?”

Theo puffed up and stared back in silence for a moment. The others went quiet.

“I don’t mind, really. I’ve heard it all,” Peter went on. He’d been dealing with this garbage his whole life. You just had to face it down, show that you’re your own man, with nothing to hide.

A pleasant rush coursed through Peter’s body, the kind he used to feel before a big game, or when a surveillance target tried to lose him. He’d been cooped up at a desk for months. He longed for action.

He ran his thumbnail along the side of his middle finger and then pressed it in, hard, at the knuckle. The stab of pain braced him. It was an old habit, a way to break himself out of the moment. *Easy, Sutherland. Easy.* He took two deep breaths and then smiled.

That unnerved Theo, who shook his head and stepped away without another word.

Brian grimaced at Peter. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Peter said, as the conversations around them picked back up. “I should get going anyway.”

“You sure you don’t want anything? Cup of coffee?”

“I’m good. Thanks.”

Peter turned toward the door, and Brian raised his glass. “An honest man in Washington.”

“I know.” Peter smiled. “I’m screwed.”

# 2

**THAT NIGHT IN** the Situation Room started like any other. Peter stepped into the West Wing and a Secret Service officer checked his badge for access.

“How you shooting these days, Bear?” Peter’s nickname from college ball.

“A little rusty,” Peter said. “I need to get out there more.”

“They still have you in that basement?”

“Yes, sir.”

He let out a chuckle. The guard seemed to find the plight of a big man in a small room a source of endless humor. “What are those ceilings down there? Eight feet? Seven?”

“Lower every night,” Peter said, gave the desk a friendly tap, and started down the corridor.

Peter’s boss, James Hawkins, marched past, reading something on his phone. A senior advisor and veteran of the FBI’s national security division, he served as the president’s in-house man on counterintelligence and terrorism. He seemed to catch sight of Peter, though his only response was a slight knitting of his brows.

Hawkins was big, built like a laborer, balding with black hair cut close to his skull and a trim beard.

Now that Peter was in the White House, so close to the president, he noticed people watching him more carefully than ever, saw the concern flash across their faces when they figured out who he was.

Hawkins had known his father before the scandal, and it didn't help that Peter bore such a strong physical resemblance to his dad.

Hawkins—divorced, lapsed Catholic, workaholic—typically moved through the building like a black cloud. He greeted subordinates, if he greeted them at all, with a lift of the head and a faint “hey” that sounded like the noise he would make if he were moving an injured limb. Maybe it was the toll from a lifetime of classified work, of carrying too many secrets, but he seemed especially cold toward Peter.

There were times when the suspicions got to Peter, made him feel like an impostor, an inside threat that had somehow managed to cheat its way into the heart of the government.

But tonight Peter didn't let Hawkins's glare trouble him. He paused by the windows at the end of the hall and looked out over the Rose Garden, and the glowing windows of the White House mansion. This was why he had been so careful for so long. He had earned a spot here, trusted with the nation's most closely held confidences.

He loved these limbo hours in the evenings and early mornings, when the political staff had mostly gone home. The desks were empty, the phones silent, the hallways still. In those moments, the White House was no longer a field of crises and partisan battle. All he could feel was the tradition and ceremony of the place.

His blue badge gave him all access, and sometimes he would

roam the White House at night, have the first floors to himself. Even after almost a year of working here and even knowing intimately the costs and treachery of political life—few knew it better than he did—it still filled him with awe to have a desk in this place and to be able to play his part, however small.

His father had once had trust like this, and when he lost it, it killed him.

“You look like shit, Sutherland.”

The chief of staff, Diane Farr, came around the corner behind him, a mug in her hand. “Just because I already buried you down there doesn’t mean you can die on me, okay?”

“Understood.”

That kind of access to the chief of staff was unusual, but so was everything else about Peter’s job, working an emergency line that went straight to her and Hawkins, that only they knew about. Farr had hired him, brought him to the White House, given him this chance to prove himself.

She worked tirelessly, seven days a week, with a sharp-tongued relentlessness that always made him think of a gruff newspaper editor in a movie from the thirties. She was striking, with chin-length black hair and bangs, green eyes, and fair skin with the slightest touch of olive.

Running the White House was a job for masochists—chiefs of staff often left the West Wing via stroke or heart attack—but she seemed to survive it with a faint air of amusement, like she was watching all of this drama from the mezzanine. She had cycled in and out of the private sector, never married. Whenever she wanted, she could bail out to a high-end finance gig in New York, and coast on her connections.

“Are you getting any sleep?” she asked, leaning in slightly to examine the circles under his eyes.

“Here and there.”

“How long have we had you on the desk?”

“About ten months.” He looked at her mug: black coffee, steam rising off the top like smoke. She was settling in for a long night. “Though I don’t know why you need a watch officer if you never go home.”

“Only a couple more hours.” She smiled and turned to go.

Peter took the stairs down to the ground floor. A plaque on a mahogany door said White House Situation Room—Restricted Area.

Peter rolled his shoulders back slightly and stood his full height. Even after a lifetime of being careful, there was nowhere he was more vigilant than in this room, the sanctum of America’s secrets.

He carried himself differently here, because he carried his own secrets, those special orders that could be shared only with his two superiors, Hawkins and Farr, secrets he didn’t understand himself: why they needed him on the watch, and who might come calling on the phone line he stood by every night.

He swiped his ID and stepped inside.

# 3

**STRAIGHT AHEAD, PAST** the reception area, the watch officers sat at a long desk, eyes fixed on their triple monitors.

The night watch was all business. Peter's entry merited little more than a raised hand from Mark who worked at the CIA and "What's up, Sutherland," from Jessica, the watch officer from the Pentagon. She was from Puerto Rico, a former marine intelligence officer, who would often join Peter for midnight lunch.

The Situation Room isn't a room. It's a suite of offices under the West Wing, a warren of watch desks and displays and partitions. What people think of when they think of the Situation Room—the command center with the long oak table and the clocks ticking down seconds in time zones around the world—was through a door to his left. It's where they defused the Cuban missile crisis and planned the mission to kill Bin Laden. For all its gravitas, down here it went by a simple name: large conference room.

Updates from operations streamed in from military and diplomatic sources around the world, fleshed out by signals in-

telligence and field reports from CIA officers and their agents. The watch officers' attention circled the globe with the rising sun, as adversaries woke up. Morning was hitting Southeast Asia when Peter arrived.

At any moment, President Michael Travers might walk in and all would stand. An officer could find himself or herself as POTUS's first source on a breaking crisis, taken aside into the president's breakout room with glass walls that turned white for privacy at the touch of a button.

Peter walked past the long desks of the main watch center, past the president's chair, and continued to the far end of the suite, to his cube, not much more than a shelf in the back corner with a waist-high partition beside it.

There was the phone, the emergency line. It sat on his desk in silence as it had nearly all of his last 284 nights on the watch. In those endless hours between dusk and dawn, he would stare at it, willing it to ring.

He took his seat, and put his ID card into the reader on his desk to unlock his computer.

Every night Farr or her deputy would send him a list of late-breaking events and questions, and he would scour open-source news and the intel databases and pull together answers and analyses.

He often wondered if that work was simply putting him to good use, and the real job was waiting, watching that phone.

Everyone in the Situation Room was cleared top secret, but they all had confidences they kept from each other, loyalties to their home agencies, special access programs and codeword intelligence that required even stricter handling than TS.

That phone was Peter's secret. If it rang, any information that came through it was to go "eyes only" to Hawkins and Farr.

The Sit Room was built from the ground up for that kind of discretion. Each desk was fitted with a small button that activated a speaker overhead, and sent out a noise-canceling wave of static. It sounded like the faintest hiss, but it was so effective that as you watched the speaker's lips move and heard no sound come out, for a moment you thought you had been rendered deaf.

Along one wall ran the Superman tubes, as everyone referred to them, cylindrical phone booths, sealed off with curving plexiglass for calls that absolutely couldn't be heard elsewhere within the room. They made the place look like a sci-fi set.

Even Peter didn't know what his phone line was for. The callers were supposed to use codes to indicate priority and subject matter. His job was simply to be a voice on the receiving end, to route the messages to his superiors, and make sure they picked up in an emergency.

When Farr and Hawkins had first briefed him, they seemed surprised that he hadn't pressed them for more information about the phone line. Of course he wanted to know, but he was careful and strict, and respected the rules on classified information as if lives depended on it, because they did. He knew all too well what happened when those rules were broken.

The whole thing sounded like a thrill at the start. He had even imagined a true crisis coming on the line and saw himself making the long walk through the gallery to the residence to wake POTUS himself.

That was 284 nights ago.

The Situation Room was small, far drabber than the slick mock-ups on television, and every night it seemed to shrink a bit more.

Even the keyhole intercepts and Superman tubes had lost

their novelty. Ten months of living on a vampire schedule wears you down until you feel like an automaton fueled by the thin, bitter, hours-old coffee from the White House Mess.

He missed action, the endless hard physical training of college athletics, the rush of the chase from his days as a surveillance specialist in Boston.

In all his time on the watch, the phone had rung only once. A man's voice came on the line, composed, but with a trace of desperation behind it: "This is a night action," he said.

"Can you verify that, please," Peter replied, as he had been instructed.

"Pen. Clock. Door. Fire."

It was a mnemonic key that confirmed the status and legitimacy of the call.

The caller hadn't said a word after that. He hadn't needed to. "Night action" was a standard term in the op centers and watch desks around DC. It meant a crisis, call, or cable that was so urgent that the principal, be it the CIA director or the defense secretary, needed to be woken up.

Peter had called Hawkins and Farr, and when neither picked up, per protocol, he went to the Secret Service office down the hall. They sent a car to Farr's house and woke her, and she connected on the line twelve minutes later. After that, Peter was off the call. On the desk for 284 nights and twelve minutes of action.

He'd passed almost a year of his life down here, a hard year, chained to this phone that never rang for reasons he didn't understand.

The work had cost him more than he liked to think about. He still wore the Hamilton Field watch with the leather band, but he never looked at the inscription on the back: P+L, Forever.

His ex-fiancée, Leah. She had wanted him to get out of government. He had been lucky to get the White House job through Farr, but the FBI higher-ups would never fully accept him, let him rise through the ranks. Leah would always ask him why he worked so hard for so little for a bureau that didn't want him. He had his reasons. Peter remembered the night his father died, remembered an unanswered call.

He liked nights. Liked the discipline. He sat beside that silent phone, scanned on his monitor a satellite photo of a troop buildup on the Latvian-Russian border, and let the work fill his mind.

Nine P.M., ten. The minutes crawled by. Click, scroll, type, repeat. By eleven, he fell into a groove, and forgot the clock.

At 1:05 A.M. his phone rang. Peter stared at it for an instant as if it was a hallucination, then lifted the handset to his ear. It was the emergency line.

"Go ahead."

"Hello?" a young woman asked, her voice wavering, the terror plain.

"Yes. Go ahead."

"Night action. They told me to tell you that. That you would know what to do. My name is Rose Larkin—" Two muffled cracks broke out in the background. "He's here. He's inside. He's going to kill me."