

**STEPHEN
COONTS'**

**DEEP
BLACK:**

CONSPIRACY

Written by Stephen Coonts
and Jim DeFelice



St. Martin's Paperbacks

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STEPHEN COONTS’ DEEP BLACK: CONSPIRACY

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For information address St. Martin’s Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

ISBN: 0-312-93700-8

EAN: 978-0-312-93700-3

Printed in the United States of America

St. Martin’s Paperbacks edition / June 2008

St. Martin’s Paperbacks are published by St. Martin’s Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

EVEN THROUGH THE SCOPE, the black circle at the center of the target looked tiny. The shooter tried to remember everything the rifle instructor had told him, held his body steady, checked his breath, eased his finger against the trigger.

He didn't have to be perfect. He just had to be decent.

The Remington barked. The bullet missed the center of the target, hitting the white space just beyond.

Again, the shooter told himself. Better this time. Better.

The shot sailed high, to the outer ring.

I can do better, thought the shooter. He took a long breath, then slipped his left hand ever so slightly forward. He imagined that the center of the target was not a black circle a hundred yards away but a man's head.

This time, the bullet hit the mark.

The shooter tried again, once more imagining that he was firing at a person. His shot sailed a bit to the left but still managed to find the black disk. So did the next.

"You're getting much better," said his instructor as he paused to reload.

"I think I've found the key," said the shooter. He grinned.

The instructor waited a moment to hear what he might think that was, but the student had no intention of explaining. He had registered for the rifle class not merely under false pretenses—unlike the other students, he had no intention of ever going deer hunting—but also using a false name and ID.

"Well, very good," said the instructor finally. "Keep at it."

"I will," said the shooter, beginning to reload.

PINE PLAINS LOOKED like a picture-perfect town, a throwback nineteenth-century village, complete with striped awnings over the main street storefronts and white picket fences on the side streets. The center of town was dominated by a freshly painted three-story bank building—Stissing National, which had so far resisted overtures to join the megabanks that dominated the region. The drugstore to its right could make the same claim, with an old-fashioned soda fountain clearly visible through the sparkling plate glass at the front of the store. And the hardware store demonstrated that it was *still* just a hardware store, not a fancy home decorating center, by displaying a full run of lawnmowers and assorted shovels and rakes on its half of the sidewalk. Neither the machines nor the tools were chained or otherwise secured, the store owner confident that no one would walk away with them.

Secret Service Special Agent Jerry Forester turned his big Ford off Main Street, heading down Meadow Avenue. He gazed past the row of wood-sided houses toward the field beyond them. It was late spring, and though the field had been cleared, it had not yet been planted, the owner timing his crop to meet the needs of a processor, who would already have contracted for the result.

Meadow Avenue ended at a set of train tracks. Forester took a right, passing the ruins of an old whistle-stop as he headed back in the direction of the state highway. The houses that lined the road were bigger than those packed into the tight streets at the town center; they had larger lawns and

longer driveways. But the newest was probably more than forty years old, built before whirlpool tubs and two-story entryways became fashionable. The sugar maples in their yards had stout trunks and were generous with their shade.

Forester lingered at an intersection, considering getting out of the car and going for a walk. But then he realized if he did, Pine Plains' idyllic character would quickly fade. He'd see the beer cans tossed onto the long lawns by bored teenagers over the weekend and notice graffiti on the sides of the Main Street buildings, including the five-fingered star that proved even rural America wasn't immune to the awesome coolness of outlaw gangs. The torn shingles on the church and the rust stains from the broken gutter would be difficult to miss. The man sitting in the window seat at Kay's Breakfast Nook would have a wild expression and the vague smell of hospital antiseptic in his clothes.

Step inside some of the houses and the last bits of the illusion would quickly melt away. Forester had no illusions about human evils and how widespread they were. Even if he hadn't grown up in a town exactly like Pine Plains, he'd spent the last twenty-three years working for the Secret Service, a job that permitted no naïveté. He knew the foibles of the powerful as well as the delusions of the powerless.

And the knowledge choked him.

Best to leave it like this, he thought. Best to leave the image intact, even as the snarling dog of cynicism, of apathy and black despair, growled at his neck. He was in a hole and he was not getting out. The drive he'd taken to cheer himself up had done the opposite. There was no fooling himself, no fooling the cloud that clung to him every moment of every day.

Forester's cell phone buzzed. He pulled it from his pocket. "Forester."

"Jerry, where are you?"

"Running a little late."

"Wait until you see the nightgown I'm wearing. How long before you get here?"

"Half hour."

"Oh, pooh. I'm going down to the bar."

“In the gown?”

“I might.”

“Call up room service. I’ll put the pedal to the metal.”

“You better.”

As Forester switched off the phone, he noticed a police cruiser growing in his rearview mirror. He glanced down at his speedometer; he was doing just over sixty. The state had a law against driving with a cell phone and required seat belts to be buckled, but it was too late to do anything about either; the bubblegum lights erupted red. He hit his blinker and pulled off the side of the road before reaching for his Service ID.