

**STEPHEN
COONTS'
DEEP
BLACK:
DARK ZONE**

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and Jim DeFelice**



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STEPHEN COONTS' DEEP BLACK: DARK ZONE

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Authors' Note

The National Security Agency, Central Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Security Council, and Marines are, of course, real. While based on an actual organization affiliated with the NSA and CIA, Desk Three and all of the people associated with it in this book are fiction. The technology depicted here either exists or is being developed.

Details of some actual security procedures and equipment have been omitted or changed in the public interest.

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Charles Dean saw her first.

The beauty of her face sliced past his jet lag, shocking his eyes and reaching whatever primal instinct it is that makes a man react immediately to beauty. The bright glint of her smile stood out against her rounded cheeks like the chiseled perfection of a Michelangelo sculpture, their milky whiteness accentuated by the red-orange curls streaming back from her head like flames. The rest of her body was as beautiful as her face, but it was the face—her eyes, her mouth, her smile—that caught his attention, riveting him so that he stared through the window of the London bus. It captured him so completely that when the smile began to change to a frown he felt the woman's sadness. As her expression changed from frown to confusion he, too, became puzzled. And then he realized what was happening: the woman on the street was being robbed.

In the next moment he saw that his partner—they were traveling covertly to the same destination, not sitting together—was rushing past him to get out of the bus. Dean got up as well, following, thinking that he had lost track of the stops and missed the one where they were supposed to get off and have breakfast. It wasn't until he reached the steps of the double-decker bus that he realized his companion, NSA Deep Black operative Tommy Karr, was running to help the girl.

The bus stopped just long enough for them to get out. Dean got to the sidewalk and started to follow Karr. The other op was a bear of a man and when walking seemed to lumber, but once sprinting he could move extremely fast. He was moving now, pulling far ahead, past the woman and closing on the thief. Dean chased them around the corner toward a narrow alleyway. Professional paranoia kicked in as Dean neared the alley; belatedly he twisted backward, checking to make sure he hadn't been followed. He slowed his pace to little more than a trot and turned into the alley, warily watching the sides to make sure he hadn't run into an ambush.

Karr and the thief were gone, but the woman stood a few yards away, hands on knees catching her breath. If anything, she looked more beautiful in her distress.

"What are you doing?" hissed a low voice at the side of Dean's head.

Dean went to the girl. Her hands were balled up in fists and her face white with anger.

"They stole my purse," she said between breaths. "I have my wallet in there. All my money. Keys."

"Are you all right?" Dean asked.

"I have my pictures and credit cards and everything."

A mild French curse tripped out of her mouth. Dean was surprised and then realized she had been speaking English with an American accent.

"What are you doing?" repeated the voice.

"Helping someone," he answered aloud.

The girl looked up at him. She was in her early twenties, younger than he'd thought.

"Just talking to myself," he told her. "Bad habit."

"They stole my bag," said the girl. "There were two of them—a short skinny one and a blond hunk."

"The hunk's not a thief," said Dean. "He's a friend of mine. He's trying to help."

"Oh." She unclenched her fists and curled her arms in front of her breasts, holding herself protectively. "Oh. Well, thanks."

The girl wore a knit top over her skirt; the top stopped just high enough to let her tanned belly peek out. It wasn't a belly at all; it was taut and tight, as if she were an athlete. She wore Nikes on her feet, black running shoes with red ripples up the middle.

"You have a mission, for cryin' out loud!" said the voice in his head. "You're not a tourist!"

Dean ignored the voice. Karr told him this would get easier to do; like much the younger man said, that prediction had proven correct.

"Which way did they go?" Dean asked the girl.

"Over that wall. Do you think he'll catch him?"

A thick hand and then a shock of golden hair appeared at the top of the wall as if in answer. Tommy Karr vaulted his six-eight frame over the wall, grinning and holding the girl's purse in his paw.

"Hey, of course I'll catch him," Karr said. "Pipsqueak like that? Give me a break." Karr stalked forward, pocket-book in hand. "Here you go, ma'am." He turned and winked at Dean. "Hey, Charlie. What are you doing in London?"

"Backing you up," said Dean.

"Thanks." Karr turned back to the girl, who was going through the purse. "All there?"

"Yes."

Dean saw the smile he'd seen from a distance up close now. Her eyes flashed and Dean realized the girl was going to kiss Karr; he felt a twinge of jealousy and even disappointment, wishing that he'd been the one to grab the thief.

"Aw, hey, it was nothing," said Karr as she kissed him on the cheek. Karr blushed a decent red—something Dean had never seen him do. "Saved you a trip to the police station. Come on, Charlie; you owe me a coffee from the last time you backed me up. Better make it breakfast," he added, starting to walk from the alley. "I just worked up an appetite."

"Let me treat you," said the girl.

"Sorry," said Dean. "We, uh, we have to talk business."

“Business before pleasure,” said Karr. He laughed—Tommy Karr *always* laughed—and waved at her. “Forget about it.”

“Well, at least tell me your name.”

“Kjartan Magnor-Karr,” said Karr. “But you can call me Tommy.”

“Tommy?”

“The name’s a long story. But it’s easier to say than Kjartan, right?”

“I’m Deidre Clancy.”

“Great. See ya around,” said Karr. He jumped back into motion, trotting out into the street to hail an approaching black cab.

“That was an extremely foolish thing to do,” hissed the voice in Dean’s head as he and Karr settled into the back of the cab. The voice belonged to Marie Telach, who was the supervisor in what was known as “the Art Room,” a high-tech situation room and information center at the headquarters of the National Security Agency in Fort Meade, Maryland. The Art Room connected field operatives such as Dean and Karr with the full range of NSA resources, including satellite data and real-time code breaking, to use the layman’s term for cryptography. Dean and Karr were part of the small cadre of agents who worked for the Desk Three covert operations group, generally known by its code-word designation “Deep Black”—assuming, of course, that it was known at all.

Deep Black had been designed to bring the agency’s technological edge to covert operations, and it certainly did that. Some of its gadgets bordered on science fiction. To take one example: while the communications system that the agents used had actually been perfected in the early 1990s, it was still at least a generation beyond the systems used by even the most advanced security teams, eschewing traditional earbuds for chip sets implanted near the ear. While there were some technical limitations with the coverage, a system of satellites kept them in instant contact throughout most of the Northern Hemisphere and a

good portion of the Southern. The system included a wireless microphone, antenna, and controls integrated with the agent's clothes, usually in his belt.

Dean, a relative newcomer to Deep Black and by far the oldest field operative, was somewhat dubious about the technology. The communications system might allow the Art Room to supply an agent with up-to-the-moment intelligence all right, but it also let the people there interfere with what was going on. Telach's job was to supervise the specialists on duty in the Art Room, including the "runner" who fed information to the team during a mission. But Telach tended to act as if she controlled the field ops as well. Dean, who had seen the results of "input" from headquarters during the final days of the Vietnam War, bristled at the idea that someone in a bunker several thousand miles away had a better idea of what to do than he did.

Karr, however, was used to Telach hounding him. He handled her as he handled nearly everything—with a joke.

"Hey, Mom," he said aloud. "What's up?"

"Don't give me one of your routines, Karr. You're lucky Mr. Rubens wasn't here. He'd've read you the riot act."

"What, he took off again? I thought he worked twenty-four/seven."

"I'm not in the mood for your smart-aleck answers today, Tommy. It's still pretty early back here. Now let's stick to the game plan from now on."

"Yeah, sure. The game plan was breakfast, right?"

Dean looked at the cabbie in the rearview mirror. If he thought his passengers were "crackers," he kept the proverbial cabbie's silence about it.

"Breakfast?" Karr asked Dean.

"Good for me."

"We have time, right? The meeting hasn't been changed?"

"It's still at two," said Telach tersely.

"Well, there you go," said Karr.

"Tommy, I realize this is a routine assignment, but please, stick to the game plan from now on. Get breakfast, then take

a quick look at the park and play tourist for a few hours. *Don't chase any more purse snatchers.*"

"Shepherd's pie would hit the spot," said Karr. "Can you get that this early?"

"I'll settle for some coffee," said Dean as the cabdriver finally glanced in the mirror to see what the crazy conversation was about.