

**STEPHEN
COONTS'
DEEP
BLACK:
PAYBACK**

**Written by Stephen Coonts
and Jim DeFelice**



St. Martin's Paperbacks

STEPHEN COONTS' DEEP BLACK: PAYBACK

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Authors' Note

The National Security Agency, Central Intelligence Agency, Space 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.

Some liberties have been taken in describing actual places and procedures to facilitate the telling of the tale. Details of some security procedures and apparatus at real places have been omitted or recast as a matter of the public interest.

1

Charles Dean glanced toward the sky as he stepped away from the building, noting the direction and speed of the clouds as they moved. It was an old sniper's trick, a habit burned into his being long ago, so ancient he did it unconsciously. And yet if he had to use the information—if he were sighting a target at five hundred yards across a hill obscured by thick vegetation—his eyes and upper body would adjust to the light breeze as automatically and easily as his feet adjusted to the uneven sidewalk.

“How's it lookin', pardner?” boomed a voice in his head.

Dean pulled a satellite phone from his pocket, fussed with it for a few seconds, then held it to his ear. The phone was just a cover—like all Deep Black field ops, he communicated through a device implanted in his skull behind his ear. A tiny microphone sewn into his clothes picked up his voice; his belt held the rest of the unit, which transmitted through a satellite system.

“Same as yesterday afternoon,” he told Kjartan “Tommy” Magnor-Karr. “Two guards outside. I just finished setting up the video bugs.”

“Booster transmitter is set.”

“Signals are strong,” said a third voice. Though the other words were as loud as Karr's, the man who said them—Jeff Rockman—was sitting in an underground bunker some five thousand miles to the north.

The video bugs were miniature video cameras about the size and shape of a button. Their signals went to the booster Karr had planted. The booster uploaded the video stream to a satellite, which then relayed it to Rockman in the Deep Black nerve center known as the Art Room.

"We have sharp visuals all around," said Rockman. "You're good to go. Lia's plane is on schedule. Estimated time of arrival at Lima airport just over two hours."

"Rockman, you sound like you're an air traffic controller," said Karr.

"Is that supposed to be an insult or a compliment?"

Dean turned and began walking down the street as Karr bantered good-naturedly with Rockman, who was their mission "runner." During a mission, the runner maintained communications and coordinated operational support for the team in the field. The runner could access a wide array of intelligence, ranging from radio intercepts to satellite imagery, in real time.

He could also be a bit of a noodge.

"You guys ought to get hopping if you're going to make the airport in time," said Rockman.

"Plenty of time," said Karr.

As Rockman began lecturing the other agent about the notoriously heavy Lima traffic, Dean stopped at a small newsstand and bought a newspaper. The headlines shouted about a car bombing in the city the night before, the work of terrorists the government had claimed were stamped out months ago. Dean considered practicing his Spanish with the vendor, but the man's somber face warned him off.

Karr was waiting in the rented car around the corner.

"What do you say to a little breakfast, Charlie?"

"At the airport, sure."

"Airport food? Aw, come on."

"We don't want to be late."

"We won't be. I'm driving."

"We also want to get there in one piece."

"Always," said Karr, squealing the tires as he lurched into traffic.

2

The crisp, late May air of the northeastern Andes stung Stephan Babin's face as he looked out across the valley. Natives would think the brilliant sky a harbinger of a grand, dry day; they would welcome the beautiful chill as a sign of good fortune. But Babin was a foreigner here, a prisoner, though not bound by bars. The mountains would never seem hospitable, and as clear as the sky might be, it would never portend anything for him but bitterness and death.

He pushed himself forward on his crutches. To most of the world beyond this tiny patch of northern Peru, Stephan Babin was a dead man, killed in a plane crash three years before. There were many days when he thought of himself as a ghost, a spirit haunting the earth.

If he wasn't a ghost, Babin was certainly less than a physical man, his body a diminished wraith of what it had been before the crash. Most days he had so little feeling in his legs he might just as well not have them. What he could feel, hurt. His back alternately felt numb and screamed out in pain. Only his shoulders, strengthened by his need to use the crutches to walk or even balance consistently, were as they had been before the accident.

Babin was also as single-minded and bitter as any spirit haunting the earth. He existed only for revenge against the people who had crippled him—who'd betrayed him and left him for dead. His plan to extract it had taken shape slowly

over the past eighteen months, but his hatred seemed to have existed forever. It was as deep as the nearby mountains were tall, as cold and vicious as the wind howling at their peaks.

“Señor Stephan, what are you doing without a coat?”

Babin turned and looked at Rosalina, the housekeeper General Atahualpa Túcume had installed here to watch after him.

“The general would not want you to catch a cold,” said the old woman gently. “He would blame me—he worries about you constantly, like a father.”

“General Túcume is not my father.”

“Señor Stephan, he has been like a father to you. That you cannot deny.”

No, that he could not deny, not at all. Túcume had saved his life and kept him alive. Babin had repaid him handsomely, and by any measure the debt would be completely requited within the next few weeks. Then, like a son, Babin would strike out on his own, fulfilling his own dream of revenge. The American CIA had shot down his plane; their countrymen would burn for it, burn in the most fearsome fire the world had ever known.

“Señor Stephan?”

“Rosalina, you are always right.” Babin worked his crutches backward. “I’ll come inside. The general is counting on me after all, is he not?”