

STEPHEN COONTS' DEEP BLACK: BIOWAR

STEPHEN COONTS
AND JIM DEFELICE



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“Gripping...Coonts’s naval background and his legal education bring considerable authority to the story, and the narrative is loaded with detailed information about terrorist networks, modern weaponry, and international intrigue...the action is slam-bang.”

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“Will be enjoyed by Coonts’s many fans...Coonts has perfected the art of the high-tech adventure story.”

—*Library Journal*

“Coonts does a remarkable job of capturing the mood of clashing cultures in Hong Kong.”

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—*USA Today*

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—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Perhaps the best of Stephen Coonts’s six novels about modern warfare.”

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“Coonts delivers some of his best gung-ho suspense writing yet.”

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“Dramatic, diverting action...Coonts delivers.”

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Fortunes of War

“*Fortunes of War* is crammed with action, suspense, and characters with more than the usual one dimension found in these books.”

—*USA Today*

“A stirring examination of courage, compassion, and profound nobility of military professionals under fire. Coonts’s best yet.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“Full of action and suspense...a strong addition to the genre.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

Flight of the Intruder

“Extraordinary! Once you start reading, you won’t want to stop!”

—Tom Clancy

“[Coonts’s] gripping, first-person narration of aerial combat is the best I’ve ever read. Once begun, this book cannot be laid aside.”

—*The Wall Street Journal*

“Kept me strapped in the cockpit of the author’s imagination for a down-and-dirty novel.”

—*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

Saucer

“Coonts knows how to write and build suspense.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“A comic, feel-good SF adventure...[delivers] optimistic messages about humanity’s ability to meet future challenges.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Tough to put down.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

**STEPHEN
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**Written by Stephen Coonts
and Jim DeFelice**



St. Martin's Paperbacks

Authors' Note

The National Security Agency, Central Intelligence Agency, Space Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Security Council, Centers for Disease Control, U.S. Special Operations Command, Air Force, 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.

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Athens, New York, was founded in the great rush of enthusiasm following the Revolutionary War, when Americans first came to understand that their destiny in the world involved more than religion and capitalism. Its inhabitants saw the experiment in freedom and democracy as a link with the great Greek and Roman republics, which had produced not merely riches or military might—though both were important—but intellectual and artistic achievements unparalleled in human history. The men and women who settled in upstate New York were as optimistic as any. If, like the majority of their countrymen, their lives tended more toward hardscrabble than polished marble, they nonetheless were aimed in the right direction.

This Dr. James Kegan firmly believed, and had told Charlie Dean often. It was why he had decided to relocate to the small town, buying and restoring a dilapidated Federal period house perched precariously on a cliff just off the main drag. He could see the Hudson River from his porch. He would sit there some nights and gaze at the glittering reflections in the distance, reminding himself of man's potential and nature's power—or so he told Charlie.

Dean tolerated his friend's starry-eyed philosophizing for two reasons. One, he'd known Kegan just about all his life and, even though they hardly saw each other more than once or twice a year, still counted him among his best friends. Two, he figured Kegan meant pretty much everything he said, whether or not Dean understood it—and most of what the microbiologist said Dean didn't understand.

Kegan and Dean had grown up together in Missouri in the late 1950s and early '60s. While in many ways the two men could not be more different, their friendship had endured the many twists and turns of their convoluted and complicated lives. Kegan—more often “Keys,” a nickname earned during their first jayvee basketball practice a million years ago—was one person Dean felt he really knew. Their many differences somehow encouraged their friendship. Dean was relatively taciturn; Kegan was always talking and making friends. Dean had, if not a skeptical view of the world, at least a somewhat hardened one. Kegan remained an optimistic do-gooder, despite the fact that his early forays into altruism had ended badly.

Two years ago, Kegan had been diagnosed with cancer. But he'd come through it okay, survived the chemo with his optimism intact. He talked about it matter-of-factly, didn't bullshit about it—he hit it straight-on, just like he played basketball. It was one of the things Dean liked about him.

Dean turned off Route 9W, driving his rented Malibu through the tiny downtown as he hunted for the crossroad that led to Kegan's. He missed it and had to turn around; as he waited for a bus to pass he saw an old phone booth and thought of calling his friend to make sure he was home. But the trip had begun as a surprise, and it seemed ridiculous to spoil it now, five minutes from his driveway. He made the U-turn and

went back, cutting down toward the river and driving slowly so he could find the sharp cut that led to the house. The Malibu dipped and groaned as he took the switchbacks on the gravel lane.

Dean's attention was attracted to a large car carrier making its way upriver to Albany past a pack of Sunfish sailboats. He jerked his attention back on the driveway just before he would have sideswiped an eighty-year-old maple. He corrected and took the next switchback, avoiding the temptation to look down the rock gorge to his left. One more turn and he reached the macadam that ran around the back of the house to the garage and barn. Dean pulled around the side of the barn, glad to see Kegan's Saab; he made sure as he parked to leave enough space for the afternoon of hoops he anticipated.

A wooden porch extended around three-fourths of the building. Dean jogged up the steps and rapped on the wooden portion of the large front door—the house did not have a bell and Kegan refused to add even a wireless one.

“Hey, Keys, it's Charlie!” he yelled before rapping again. “Surprise, Keys!”

Dean glanced at his watch. It was a little past 9.00 A.M.; Kegan was a notorious early riser. He rapped again. Kegan rarely locked his front door; there was less need to here than back home in Missouri, and there was little need to do so there. Sure enough, when Dean tried the handle, the door opened.

It was possible—just—that Kegan was upstairs bedding some nubile lab assistant. Dean hesitated on the threshold, caught between wanting to be discreet and sensing the inherent humor of just that sort of situation. In the end he settled for cracking the door open and calling in.

“Hey, anybody home?” Dean yelled. “Any verifiable biology genius scientists at home?”

Kegan didn't answer. Dean pushed the door open and took a few steps inside to the edge of the Persian rug—authentic though not an antique.

“Keys! Keys! Hey, it's Charlie! What, are you in bed?” He took a step toward the wide staircase, which began about halfway down the hallway. “Keys, get your butt out of bed! I'm going to make some coffee. Then I'm going to whip your ass in a game of b-ball. Happy birthday, by the way.”

Dean heard something move in the rooms to his left. He stepped back toward the large front parlor, his eyes glancing from the restored nineteenth-century claw-foot couch to the large brick fireplace with its early-twentieth-century spark catcher. The floor immediately before it was made of brick, arranged in an elaborate quadruple-fan pattern, and it was this symmetry that made it easy to spot the leg lying on one corner of the bricks.

“Jesus.” Dean took a step toward the leg but stopped as the noise sounded again. He spun, heart pounding; in the same motion he reached to the back of his belt for the hideaway weapon his new employer had insisted he carry.

The tiny Glock felt like a toy in his hand. Dean took a step toward the kitchen at the rear of the hallway.

“Come out slowly with your hands where I can see them,” he said.

There was no reply.

Dean went to the doorway, flattening himself against the wall, listening. Slowly, he lowered himself into a crouch. Just as he started to spring he heard the sound again,

but it was too late to stop himself; he twirled and pointed his gun into the kitchen, both hands steadying it, ready to fire.

His heart jolted as a cat jumped down from the counter island. The cat was as startled as Dean and bolted from the room.

Casper, a kitten Keys had picked up at the shelter about a month or two ago. He'd mentioned him in an E-mail.

Dean dropped to his knee, listening, waiting for what seemed like hours before convincing himself he and the cat were the only ones moving in the house. He rose and walked back to the parlor.

"Keys. Keys," he repeated. "Is everything okay? Keys?"

A pool of blood extending out from the fireplace to the rug told him it wasn't.

William Rubens rose from his desk and unfolded the gray security blanket, draping it over the work surface with the same precision that he brought to every task he undertook. The corners had to be positioned just so over the shallow baskets at the corners; the creases were lined so they cut the large desk into an exact chessboard. Rubens smoothed the surface with his fingers, running them down the sides in the same manner his tailor used to set the seams on his pants. The National Security Agency's regulations called for the blanket to be used to cover sensitive papers on a desk whenever an NSA employee left his or her office. Rubens rarely left any papers, sensitive or otherwise, on his desk, but he would sooner neglect his personal hygiene than fail to place the blanket when leaving the building. Attention to detail was the only thing that allowed the mind to make order from chaos, and in his job as the number-two man at the NSA—and the head of the agency's ultra-high-tech covert "Deep Black" force, known officially as Desk Three—delineating order from chaos was William Rubens' prime concern.

Desk covered, chair positioned, Rubens stepped to the wooden credenza at the side of the office, double-checking that the drawers were locked. Finally, he reached to his stereo—hand-built by the agency's technical division to prevent the possibility of bugging devices—and turned off the Schumann midmovement.

Rubens had nearly reached the door to his office when the secure satellite phone in his jacket began to vibrate. The sat phone was one of two he carried; the other he might not have answered, as the number could be reached by anyone in the agency and quite a number of people beyond. But this phone was used exclusively for Desk Three operations, and so with a sigh he sat down in the chair near the door and entered the code to accept the transmission.

"Rubens."

"Mr. Rubens, this is Charlie Dean."

"Charles."

Dean was an ex-Marine foisted on Rubens by the White House for a recent mission. Though considerably older than most of Rubens' operatives, he had proven so capable that Rubens had added him to Desk Three's operations team. A Vietnam veteran who'd spent the last days of that war as a sniper, Dean brought a certain maturity to the job that Rubens appreciated.

"I have a bit of a problem here," said Dean.

"I thought you were on holiday," said Rubens, who had given Dean and the rest of the team from Russia a few days off.

"I came up to New York to see a friend and, uh, I found a body in his house."

"Your friend?"

"No, he's not here. I don't know where he is."

Rubens stared at the painting on the wall across from him, noting the subtle use of the green shades.

“Where is your friend, Charles?” he asked again.

“Haven’t a clue. I was wondering whether I should call the police.”

“By all means, you should call the police.”

“If they ask what I do?”

“You’re a government employee, Mr. Dean. It need go no further than that. Who is your friend?”

“James Kegan. He’s a scientist.”

The name registered in Rubens’ brain, but he could not decide why. He knew Kegans and Kagans—Tom Kegan in at the Pentagon, Kagan at State, the historian, of course....

“Do you think he murdered this person?” Rubens asked.

“I don’t—I wouldn’t think so.”

“Are you there now?”

“I’m standing over the body.”

How inconvenient, thought Rubens.

“Alert the authorities. Keep me informed.” He glanced at his watch. He was due for his weekly haircut in forty minutes; after that he had a session with his yoga master. “Charlie, you were right to call me. For the next few hours I’ll be tied up. If you need anything, speak to Marie in the Art Room.”

“Yes, sir.”

Rubens clicked off, entering his security codes as required to disentangle the phone from the system. He rose and went to the desk, pulling the blanket back from the corner so he could pick up the secure phone that tied to the Art Room—Desk Three’s control room, where Marie Telach was on duty as supervisor.

“Marie, I’d like you to find out what you can on a James Kegan of New York. He lives in—” Rubens slid his thumb over the buttons on his phone to retrieve the GPS location that Dean had called from.

“Athens, New York,” said Telach. “We’re on it already. Charlie talked to me first.”

“Very good.”

“Listen, boss, you’re going to want to take a look at this.”

“Why would that be?”

“He’s some sort of expert in germ warfare. His name is on our file as a potential consultant.”

Rubens considered the painting once again. Green faded to gray; gray merged with black...shadow blurring to shade, shade to shadow: the perfect representation of the world Rubens and his people operated in.

“Is Mr. Dean aware of this?” Rubens asked.

“I don’t think so. He knows he’s a big-shot scientist, but when I spoke to him I hadn’t run the name.”

“I will be back in the building no later than eleven-thirty. Please have the details waiting in my queue.”

“You found him just like this?”

“Haven’t touched him. You can see where the blood is. I would have to have stepped into it.”

“How’d you know he was dead?”

“Well, I guess in theory I don’t,” Dean told the plainclothes investigator.

“All right, let’s go outside. ID people have to go over the place.”

“ID?”

“Crime-scene guys.”

The state police investigator put his hand out in the direction of the door. Dean walked out to the front of the house and followed down toward the driveway, which was now filled with several troop cars, an SUV, and an unmarked Bureau of Criminal Investigation sedan.

“You mind showing me your license?”

“I went through this with the trooper.”

“Yeah, I know.” The BCI investigator didn’t sound particularly apologetic. “You right- or left-handed?”

Dean held out his arms so the investigator could look at his sleeves himself. “You want to dust me or something?”

The investigator stared at Dean’s arms and hands. Probably he was trying to decide whether Dean was smart enough to wash and change his clothes after firing a gun, so there were no traces of gunpowder.

Or blood.

“How ’bout that license?” said the investigator, looking up.

“Your name again was—”

“Achilles Gorman. License?”

Dean took out his wallet and handed over his ID. He’d already put his pistol and its holster in the car—not hiding them, exactly, just trying to avoid unnecessary questions.

Gorman called in the license information, then copied it in a small notebook he’d taken from his pocket.

“You live in California?” the detective asked.

“I’m in the process of relocating.”

“Up here?”

“Maryland.”

They went back and forth like that for a while, the investigator gathering useless background information. Even if Dean hadn’t been working for the NSA, he would have stuck to one-word answers. He didn’t particularly like being questioned, and while he’d come to respect police officers during his days as the owner of a string of

gas stations, he resented the fact that Achilles Gorman treated him more like a suspect than a witness.

“So Mr. Keys, where does he hang out?”

“I just call him Keys. His name is Dr. Kegan.”

“Where does he hang out?”

“I don’t know. When I was here last we went into town. Some place called Maduro?”

“Like the cigar?”

Dean shrugged. “I guess.”

“It’s not there now.”

“Don’t know what to tell you.”

Casper the cat came out, mewing loudly. Gorman stooped down, scratching the animal’s head. He licked Gorman’s fingers as if they were covered with catnip.

“Dr. Kegan—he a rich guy?” asked Gorman.

“He’s got some money, but I wouldn’t say he’s rich.”

“Pretty big house. A lot of property.”

“Guess it depends on what you mean by rich.”

The BCI investigator smiled. “Let’s go over your arrival again from the top.”

“Again?”

“You know, Mr. Dean, the thing is, this is a pretty serious felony here.”

“Yeah?”

“Be better if you cooperated.”

“You don’t think I did this, do you?”

“Be better if you cooperated.”

Eventually, Charlie Dean found himself back at the troopers’ barracks, giving his statement for the third time. Gorman used two fingers to pound it into his computer. At three o’clock, as they waited for the printer to deliver a fresh draft, the investigator picked up his phone and sent one of the troopers to the deli for some sandwiches. That signaled the start of a short interval of nice-cop behavior; the investigator got a cola from the soda machine in the lobby and even offered Charlie a plastic cup to use. Charlie stuck with the can.

Gorman claimed he had a relative who worked for the GSA in Washington, and wanted to know which government agency Charlie worked for.

“I’m just a government employee and let’s leave it at that,” he said, and the nice-cop routine came to an end.

They went over the statement twice. Around four, the investigator’s boss came in, a Lieutenant Knapp. Short and so muscular that the bullet-proof vest he was wearing looked like a flat baking pan, Knapp asked Charlie exactly two questions after looking over the statement:

This true?

You think your friend did it?

He answered “yes” and “no,” respectively.

“You’re done here. Make sure Gorman has a phone number where he can reach you.”

“He does.” Dean started to leave.

“If Kegan contacts you,” said Gorman, “we’d appreciate knowing about it.”

“Sure,” said Dean.

Gorman frowned but said nothing else.

Rubens spread his forefinger and pinkie apart, nudging the key combination to kill the program. He sat back as the screen blanked, letting all that he had read settle into his brain.

The premonition of something truly awful lurked in the corners of his consciousness. He sensed that Dean—and thus Desk Three—had inadvertently stumbled upon a conspiracy with the gravest possible consequences. And yet the actual evidence would not have persuaded a logical man that anything more than a sordid murder had taken place. Rubens, a mathematician by training, prided himself on being logical. But he was also the descendant—now some generations removed—of a famous painter, an artistic genius, and as such Rubens could not deny the validity of emotional intelligence and intuition. It was important now to combine the two, to balance premonition with cold analysis.

To block out fear yet be aware of it.

Kegan had missed a scheduled contact visit with an FBI agent a day before. That was suggestive, especially since Dean's latest account made it seem the murder had likely taken place then. Autopsy information would not be available for some time, and the state police had apparently been uncooperative when a local Bureau liaison tried to get an update. But the FBI was extremely interested—worried more likely—and had already assigned an agent to find out where Kegan had gone.

Kegan, according to the information Marie Telach had retrieved on his behalf, was an expert on viruses and bacteria. While that in itself was not particularly noteworthy—many doctors might make similar claims—his area of expertise involved bacteria, and to a lesser degree viruses, that could be weaponized. He had served, briefly, as a consultant to the Pentagon some years before.

Was this connected to the murder?

Possibly. As best Dean and Telach could gather, the dead man had carried no identification. Officially he was a John Doe, an Asian—or Asian-American—in his twenties, no weapon, no apparent reason to be in the house. The murder sounded like a robbery gone bad: doctor comes upon an intruder, shoots him in the head, then panics when he realizes what he's done.

Telach had asked about the possibility of something more titillating: a homosexual affair gone bad. Dean discounted that, pointing out that Kegan had been married three times; Rubens decided that was not necessarily a disqualifier.

So more than likely, the murder had nothing to do with Kegan's profession and skills.

And yet, a connection could not be dismissed. Kegan was due to attend a conference in London on viruses in just two days, a conference that the NSA had in fact already been asked to monitor. This was merely routine; the science and

technology section often gathered information for a variety of government agencies, and in this case the Agency's involvement amounted to providing a tape recorder for a Centers of Disease Control expert who would be attending the sessions. The agency would then transcribe the information, which would in turn be disseminated to the CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency as well as the CDC.

The conference concerned penicillin-resistant bacteria, an area where Kegan had not published. It was an area of interest, however, especially for someone interested in getting government grants, so it wasn't completely out of the ordinary that he would attend.

Of more interest was a contact by a company supposedly unknown to Kegan but tracked by the NSA to a firm named UKD. UKD was a Ukrainian pharmaceutical company with links to a Polish "entrepreneur" named Radoslaw Dlugoski. Dlugoski had made a fortune selling surplus Polish arms to third world countries. UKD, meanwhile, had been communicating with the Research Institute for Viral Preparations in Moscow, which itself had connections to the Russian military's germ warfare program.

Connections, links—but no firm evidence of anything. Shades and shadows of great interest, but no precise forms.

Kegan had reported the contact, apparently because of a provision in one of his government contracts requiring him to note overseas contacts that might be of a suspicious nature. Rubens had the contact report on his computer—there was no mention in the report about why he thought it suspicious. And it was apparent from the processing that the people who had reviewed the report, including a low-level FBI official, had no idea, either. But the agent had at least been savvy enough to tell him to pursue the contact and then report back. Kegan had therefore sent a note saying he would be at the London conference and could be contacted there.

And into this mess walks Charles Dean, Kegan's friend since high school.

Coincidence?

Surely.

An unexplained murder at the home of a biology expert who had been contacted by possible terrorists—precisely the sort of situation Desk Three had been created to investigate.

Well, not precisely, but the executive order establishing the organization was suitably vague. Rubens picked up the phone and dialed the FBI.