

# Poised to Kill

## Chapter One

Life was good. I threaded my Porsche deftly through early-morning traffic on the San Diego Freeway, pitying the grim-faced drivers around me. They were dour, joyless—oblivious to life’s possibilities. But most tragic of all, they were not me, James Halloran Dwyer. I drove my convertible Boxster with the top down, soaking up the sun’s smoggy rays, occupying a zone of contentment. Not euphoria, but simply a sense that life was good.

For the next two minutes, it would stay that way.

Traffic loosened a little, and I reflected a bit on life and all that made it good. I was finally free of an unfulfilling marriage, but remained close to my twelve-year-old daughter, Kirsten, whose sunny energy justified all the unhappy years with my ex. A transplanted Chicagoan, I now lived in the warm exuberance of southern California. At the moment I lived on my boat, the *Kirsten D.*, while a large apartment on the Balboa Peninsula was being refurbished for me.

With a minute of the good life remaining, I allowed that my career situation could use a little more certainty. My position at Horrey Technologies, a large defense contractor, was a very senior one, but within a week, Horrey would be merging with a large competitor. I’d have to find a new job. The opportunities, however, looked numerous and lucrative, and life still looked good.

My cell phone rang.

I glanced at the caller I.D.; the number was blocked. I clicked the phone on.

“Hal Dwyer speaking.”

“Listen very carefully,” said a strange voice, which sounded electronically distorted.

I gave the phone an annoyed glance. “Who is this?”

“We have your daughter and are prepared to hurt her.”

I felt my entire body weaken, nearly going limp. “W-what?”

“Pull off at the next exit.”

“Now, wait—” I slammed on the brakes, nearly rear-ending the stopped car ahead of me. My heart was beating out of control. “Who the hell is this?”

“Pull off at the next exit,” said the disembodied voice.

“How do I know—”

“Shut up and pull off. You won’t get another chance.”

The voice, though distorted, carried the weight of menace and authority. I pulled off on the south side of the freeway, across from the South Coast Plaza shopping complex.

“Drive into the supermarket parking lot,” the voice commanded.

I steered the Porsche into the lot of a Ralph’s store, scanning the car-filled landscape. Who was watching me?

I tried to pull myself together, to think. I had to demand proof, that Kirsten had really been kidnapped. And what on earth could they want? It wasn’t as though I was a billionaire. Okay, a millionaire, maybe, but so were half the homeowners in California. I was no Bill Gates.

“All right,” the voice said. “Reach under the seat and pull out the envelope.” The caller hung up.

“Wait a minute,” I said, my voice desperate. But the caller was gone.

I reached under my car seat and felt for an envelope, finding it immediately. The envelope contained a single typed sheet:

Load the entire BMIS comm module—code and specs—onto disks, and bring them home tonight by seven. You’ll be told what to do next. You will be under continuous surveillance. When the code and specs are checked, your daughter will be released. If the authorities are alerted, she will not be released.

My mouth went dry. I was in charge of three large contracts for the second generation of the Pentagon’s Ballistic Missile Interception System project. It was part of the program most people knew as Star Wars. The loss of the communications software module would be catastrophic, compromising communications with and control of the satellites that were the key to tracking and intercepting incoming missiles. Communications with the interceptor missile itself were also at stake. The specifications alone contained critical, top-secret satellite locations, transmission protocols, and radio frequencies. The software code would contain the encryption algorithms that allowed secure communications and control. Armed with the comm module, an enemy might be able to develop countermeasures that would leave America open to a missile attack. The BMIS comm module was critical to my country’s defense, and now I was being told to hand it over to...to whom? A hostile foreign government? Terrorists?

My cell phone trilled again. I clicked it on with a shaking hand. The same distorted voice resumed.

“Now that you’ve read the instructions, take the sheet, crumple it up, and place it in the trash can on your left.”

Again, I looked around but didn’t spot whoever might be watching me. I opened the car door and swung my legs out, barely able to move them. I wobbled over to the trashcan and deposited the note, still holding the phone.

“Any questions?” the voice asked.

I stared at the phone in disbelief.

“Well?” the voice demanded.

My sweaty hand tightened around the phone. “I can’t do it,” I said. “There are security precautions, to prevent this kind of thing—”

“Don’t waste our time,” the voice snapped. “You can do it. You know it, we know it. Just do it. You’ll be called at seven with delivery instructions.”

“Wait. How do I know you have Kirsten?”

The voice didn’t answer. I waited, my chest heaving, sweating in the cool smog.

“Dad?” The girl’s voice came suddenly over the phone. It was Kirsten.

“Kirsten? Are you all—”

“Enough,” the distorted voice interrupted.

“Now wait a minute. This is bullshit.”

There was another pause. Then I heard an agonizing scream that turned my insides to cold, watery jello.

Another pause. “Seven o’clock,” the voice said. “Sharp. At 7:01, everything is off.”

“It’ll have to be an exchange,” I said quickly. “Simultaneous. Out in the open, unarmed.”

After a moment’s hesitation, I heard another scream that nearly drove me mad with

anguish. My God, what were they doing to her?

The voice returned. “You’ll do it our way, Dwyer. You’ll deliver the code when and where we say. We’ll release her within twenty-four hours—alive if the code and specs are legit. This is the last communication you’ll receive until seven. But you’re under surveillance.”

“Now, wait—”

I was interrupted by the words that would tie my brain in knots for countless hours in the months to come.

“This is payback, Dwyer.”

Then I heard a click. The caller had hung up again. I glanced around quickly, scanning the parking lot. Off at the other end, closest to the stores, on a slight rise, a green car with tinted windows disappeared around a corner. I couldn’t see clearly what make it was, but it had elegant lines—a Jaguar or BMW, I thought. And it might have had nothing to do with the kidnappers.

Fighting to regain my composure, I waited for the phone to ring again. It didn’t.

Seven o’clock. They weren’t giving me any time to think about it. I would have to begin almost immediately if I was actually going to steal the code.

And payback—what the hell did that mean? Payback for what? Something I’d done? Something Horrey Technologies had done?

I began to punch in the number for Beth, my ex-wife, then stopped myself. Could they be monitoring my cell phone? I looked around again but couldn’t tell who might be watching me or how. I took a deep breath, put the car into gear, and pulled out of the parking lot onto the busy road. I drove for a mile or so along the road, parallel to the freeway and underneath Route 55. Then suddenly I drove over the median and made a U-turn into heavy traffic, causing horns to honk and brakes to squeal. Then I got back onto the freeway. I turned south onto the 405, got off on MacArthur, and headed into Newport Beach, toward Corona del Mar.

Beth had kept the house. A \$3 million house, hefty child support, half my retirement plan, a Volvo station wagon, and a cool \$2 million in cash—that’s what it had cost me to end the marriage. I didn’t need the house; my new apartment would be more than adequate. But the house had been very much a part of Beth’s vision. The daughter of a prominent North Shore attorney, she had expected—hell, felt entitled to—the upper middle class suburban American Dream, with me as the dutiful, upwardly-mobile-backyard-barbecue-soccer-coaching version of the Stepford Husband.

Even now, I shook my head at the thought. What was it about women and marriage? They were convinced that right after the ceremony you’d vanish and a different guy would appear, out of a pod or something. At first I’d been attracted, as men usually are, by her looks; Beth was a willowy natural blonde who still looked nearly as striking as the day I’d met her in a Rush Street bar. Later I had also been attracted by the prospect of her loyalty and devotion, not realizing the price expected of me.

When she wanted to buy a minivan I knew it was over.

I downshifted the Porsche and veered south onto Pacific Coast Highway for a mile, then took a right toward the ocean on Marguerite, past the little playground where Kirsten and I spent many an hour, shooting hoops and hanging out. Seaview Avenue appeared, as usual for a weekday, empty. I screeched to a stop in the alley behind the two-story Newport-style house and trotted around to the front door, which opened as I approached.

Beth appeared in the doorway, haggard and frantic. She glanced up and down the street. “Christ, Hal, what on earth are you doing here?”

“Did you—”

“Get inside,” she said, motioning quickly. I slid through the doorway, and she reached past me to push the door shut.

“What are you doing?” she repeated. “They’re watching us.”

“So they called you about Kirsten?”

She brushed sweaty strands of blonde-streaked hair from her eyes. “Of course they did. She went down to the store and...never made it. Then they called and said they had her. You haven’t called the police, have you?”

“You know I haven’t.” She was well aware of my aversion to the police, the result of too many youthful scrapes with the law.

“Well, for Christ’s sake don’t,” she snapped. “Just go and do...whatever it is they asked.” She was coming unglued, losing her usual icy self-possession.

“They didn’t tell you what they wanted?” I asked.

“No. They just said you’d know what to do.”

“Did you talk to her?”

She nodded, and tears sprang from her eyes. “It was her. They said they’d...kill her.” She broke into huge, choking sobs. I thought of taking her in her arms to comfort her, but couldn’t.

“Beth, what they want—it’s, well...”

“I don’t care what they want!” she shrieked. “Just fucking do it! For once in your life, think about someone besides yourself!”

I started to lash back, but swallowed my anger. “All right,” I said. “Just sit tight. I’ll think of something.”