

A CLEAN

KILL



**STEVEN
KONKOLY**

WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PRAISE FOR STEVEN KONKOLY

Wide Awake

“[T]he pacing is brisk and the bloodshed cinematic enough that a first-timer can wolf down this entry without having knowledge of the first two. This sends the series out with a bang.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

Coming Dawn

“A deft cat-and-mouse novel that keeps the action moving and the reader guessing.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

Deep Sleep

“Techno-thriller fans will delight in military vet Konkoly’s obvious expertise when it comes to the authenticity and intensity of the numerous action sequences.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“A lively, roller-coaster thriller that moves like lightning.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Nobody’s better at spy craft, action, and intrigue than Steven Konkoly. Thrilling entertainment from the first to the last written word.”

—Robert Dugoni, *New York Times* and #1 Amazon bestselling author of *The Eighth Sister*

“Steven Konkoly has blown my mind! *Deep Sleep* is an intelligent, intense, and completely unpredictable high-concept spy thriller. I’m hooked!”

—T.R. Ragan, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Her Last Day*

“Fast paced, suspenseful, and wildly creative. A modern-day masterpiece of spy fiction.”

—Andrew Watts, *USA Today* bestselling author of the Firewall Spies series

“A pulse-pounding conspiracy tale in the finest traditions of Vince Flynn and Nelson DeMille . . . *Deep Sleep* is a must-read roller coaster of a thriller.”

—Jason Kasper, *USA Today* bestselling author of the Shadow Strike series

“Devin Gray is the hero we need in our corner. Relentless in pursuit of truth, vindication, and saving his homeland, he is the perfect protagonist for Konkoly’s newest dive into the techno-thriller world. Again Konkoly proves his mastery of the genre, drawing from real-world events to create a plausible and frightening glimpse into what’s happening underneath our feet and behind the walls of power.”

—Tom Abrahams, Emmy Award–winning journalist and author of *Sedition*

“Steven Konkoly delivers a conspiracy thriller unlike any other and proves he’s at the top of his game. With a deft hand and an eye for plot intricacies, Konkoly will take you into a web of deceit that will shake you to your core and keep you turning until the very last page. The Lost Directorate has set a new bar in the world of thrillers, and Konkoly has taken his seat at the head of the table.”

—Brian Shea, *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author of the Boston Crime series and coauthor of the Rachel Hatch series

“A master of action-adventure, Steven Konkoly has done it again, weaving a tale of high-stakes espionage that’s ripped from today’s international headlines. Plan to stay up very late reading *Deep Sleep*, as he keeps the pages turning!”

—Joseph Reid, bestselling author of the Seth Walker series

“I love a great conspiracy thriller, and Steven Konkoly has conjured one that’s utterly chilling with *Deep Sleep*. From the high-stakes setup to the explosive finale, there’s barely time to take a breath. Crack this one open and buckle in for one hell of a ride.”

—Joe Hart, *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author of the Dominion Trilogy
and *Or Else*

Previous Praise for Steven Konkoly

“Explosive action, a breakneck pace, and zippy dialogue.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Readers seeking a well-constructed action thriller need look no further.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“If you enjoy action thrillers that have both strong male and female characters, then this may be the series for you.”

—*Mystery & Suspense Magazine*

“Exciting action scenes help propel this tale of murderous greed and corruption toward a satisfying conclusion. Readers will look forward to Decker and company’s next adventure.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Steven Konkoly’s new Ryan Decker series is a triumph—an action-thriller master class in spy craft, tension, and suspense. An absolute must-read for fans of Tom Clancy, Vince Flynn, and Brad Thor.”

—Blake Crouch, *New York Times* bestselling author

A CLEAN
KILL

OTHER TITLES BY STEVEN KONKOLY

DEVIN GRAY SERIES

Deep Sleep

Coming Dawn

Wide Awake

RYAN DECKER SERIES

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The Raid

The Mountain

Skystorm

THE FRACTURED STATE SERIES

Fractured State

Rogue State

THE PERSEID COLLAPSE SERIES

The Jakarta Pandemic

The Perseid Collapse

Event Horizon

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THE ZULU VIRUS CHRONICLES

Hot Zone

Kill Box

Fire Storm

**A CLEAN
KILL**

**STEVEN
KONKOLY**

 **THOMAS & MERCER**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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*To Kosia, Matthew, and Sophia—
the heart and soul of my writing*

CONTENTS

PART I

CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 7

CHAPTER 8

CHAPTER 9

CHAPTER 10

CHAPTER 11

CHAPTER 12

CHAPTER 13

CHAPTER 14

PART II

CHAPTER 15

CHAPTER 16

CHAPTER 17

CHAPTER 18

CHAPTER 19

CHAPTER 20

CHAPTER 21

CHAPTER 22

CHAPTER 23

PART III

CHAPTER 24

CHAPTER 25

[CHAPTER 26](#)

[CHAPTER 27](#)

[CHAPTER 28](#)

[CHAPTER 29](#)

[CHAPTER 30](#)

[CHAPTER 31](#)

[CHAPTER 32](#)

[CHAPTER 33](#)

[CHAPTER 34](#)

[CHAPTER 35](#)

[CHAPTER 36](#)

[CHAPTER 37](#)

[CHAPTER 38](#)

[PART IV](#)

[CHAPTER 39](#)

[CHAPTER 40](#)

[CHAPTER 41](#)

[CHAPTER 42](#)

[CHAPTER 43](#)

[CHAPTER 44](#)

[CHAPTER 45](#)

[CHAPTER 46](#)

[CHAPTER 47](#)

[CHAPTER 48](#)

[PART V](#)

[CHAPTER 49](#)

[CHAPTER 50](#)

[CHAPTER 51](#)

[CHAPTER 52](#)

[CHAPTER 53](#)

[CHAPTER 54](#)

[CHAPTER 55](#)

[CHAPTER 56](#)

[CHAPTER 57](#)

[CHAPTER 58](#)

[CHAPTER 59](#)

[CHAPTER 60](#)

[CHAPTER 61](#)

[CHAPTER 62](#)

[CHAPTER 63](#)

[CHAPTER 64](#)

[PART VI](#)

[CHAPTER 65](#)

[CHAPTER 66](#)

[CHAPTER 67](#)

[CHAPTER 68](#)

[CHAPTER 69](#)

[CHAPTER 70](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

PART I

CHAPTER 1

Alejandro released his tight grip on the overstuffed contractor bag and crossed himself. He'd long ago rejected the church, but the sacred gesture, drilled into him as a child, involuntarily surfaced on rare occasions like these. When remarkably fortuitous circumstances conspired to protect him. To keep his life's unfinished journey intact—and the *tríada* legacy alive. He shook his head at the irony of the moment, his hand mechanically finishing the sign of the cross. Just a few minutes ago he had enthusiastically cursed the same spirit's name.

A sizable tear in one of the contractor bags had forced him to return to the Suburban to retrieve another. A cracked tibia or ulna—whatever—had stabbed through the thick material while he dragged it through the grass. The small hole had snagged an immovable root or rock and ripped a gash in the plastic. Sizable enough to empty some of the bag's contents along his route. The time he'd spent correcting the situation had delayed his labors long enough to alert him to an unforeseen danger—a set of oncoming headlights—during his last trip across this waterlogged field.

A few more seconds and he would have dropped into the shallow ravine that ran roughly parallel to the road, oblivious to the potential threat to his less-than-holy calling. A possible endgame scenario if things went substantially wrong. Alejandro ignored the headlights for now and concentrated on the task at hand. Lugging the last of the bulging contractor bags over the edge of the rift and out of sight. He didn't bother to arrange the bag next to the others. He had more pressing business to attend to.

A vehicle traveling this isolated stretch of road at one thirty in the morning—during a vicious rainstorm—suggested a potential complication. The kind of complication that probably wore a uniform, wielded a gun, and carried a radio. The radio being Alejandro's biggest concern. The uniform meant little to him. The gun even less. Like in his own country more than a

thousand miles to the south, most police officers here spent a day or two on the gun range every year. Hardly enough to give him even the remotest concern.

Alejandro put in several hours of firearms training a week on his private range. Rifles. Pistols. Submachine guns. Shotguns. A gun engagement was the least of his worries. But a police radio represented a different threat altogether. Even out here, in the middle of nowhere—during a torrential rainstorm—a call for backup would complicate matters.

If the approaching headlights turned out to be a state or local police cruiser, things could go in one of several directions. Few of them good. Alejandro wiped the thick sheen of rainwater off his face and studied the dark shape behind the headlights. An SUV, if he had to guess.

As the vehicle closed the distance to his Suburban, which he'd parked facing north, it slowed for several seconds—a powerful light suddenly lashing out to probe the Suburban's windows. Definitely a police vehicle. He instinctively tucked the bottom of the waterproof rain shell tight into his waistband behind the concealed holster on his right hip, where it wouldn't interfere with a quick draw, if that ultimately became necessary.

The police SUV passed the Suburban and stopped, the spotlight now sweeping across the grassy, waterlogged field he had just traversed for the fifth time. The trail left by the heavily burdened contractor bags had worn an obvious path through the low grass. Obvious to Alejandro, but hopefully not so easily observable by the officer scanning a rain-swept scene through water-speckled windows.

He made a quick mental calculation just in case. Roughly thirty yards lay between Alejandro and the police vehicle. Easy shooting distance, even in the rain. If the officer got out of the SUV and started to look around, he'd be forced to act. Forced to add another body to the scene. Only time would tell.

CHAPTER 2

Deputy Keller scanned the area beyond the Suburban with the spotlight. Nothing noteworthy. The heavy downpour concealed most of the landscape, but he knew it all too well after patrolling these roads for a few years. The low grass would connect to an endless field of soybean plants. Same on both sides of the road. Same throughout the entire county. Soybeans as far as the eye could see—the occasional, distant farmhouse breaking up the horizon like an oil rig on the ocean.

He directed the light back toward the black Suburban. Not that he could see much through two sets of rain-blurred windows from this distance. Or any distance for that matter. He had to admit—it was an odd vehicle to find abandoned out here. No doubt about that. But the strangeness of the situation ended there. Keller hadn't observed any exterior damage to the vehicle. The tires and windows were intact. No tools next to the vehicle. No handwritten SOS sign affixed to one of the windows or lying on the dashboard. Just an empty SUV with Minnesota plates, in the middle of nowhere Minnesota. Not exactly a big deal—especially when he was on his way home at one thirty in the morning after a double shift.

He extinguished the spotlight and considered his options. First and foremost—all he wanted to do right now was drive another ten minutes to his house in Ellendale, take a quick shower, and crawl in bed with his wife. This was his second double shift in a week. Back-to-back shifts to be precise. The Steele County Sheriff's Office had been hit with a flu bug, which someone had likely passed along during Chief Deputy Hanson's retirement party last week.

To say that Keller felt exhausted would be a grave understatement. Borderline mission-incapable might be a better description. If he called this in, he'd be stuck out here for hours. And the last thing he needed right now was to give up some desperately needed sleep to babysit a rich asshole's

abandoned SUV—which was how it would play out. Walker, the duty sergeant, would drive down from the station in Owatonna with a few other lookie-loos to assess the situation, dragging him out into the rain to search the soybean fields. Hours would pass before a tow truck arrived. The sergeant might even ask him to drive back up to the station to file paperwork. He could kiss most of his sleep goodbye.

Or. He could head back to this spot early tomorrow afternoon, on his way north to Owatonna. Before reporting for his next shift—which was another double. If the Suburban was still here, he'd call it in. It really wasn't much of a decision. Sleep trumped babysitting an eighty-thousand-dollar SUV. Keller took his foot off the brake and pulled away from the scene. A few hundred yards down the road, he started to have second thoughts.

But how would he explain why he'd diverted from Interstate 35 to a side road if the SUV hadn't moved by the time he headed back to the station? County Road 3 ran roughly parallel to the interstate, but it was located east of the interstate. He lived in Ellendale, to the west. Then again, he was unlikely to be questioned about his choice of route—unless something funky turned up in the vicinity of the Suburban. And if that happened, GPS tracking data would reveal that his patrol vehicle had stopped near the Suburban tonight and moved along. He started to slow down.

Did he miss anything obvious? It was hard enough to see in the darkness, even with the spotlight. The rain made it nearly impossible. Maybe he should have gotten out of his Interceptor and taken a quick check around the abandoned SUV or taken a better look inside the vehicle. Keller pounded the steering wheel and cursed. He was about to lose precious sleep because some jackass probably ran out of gas several hours ago, called a friend to pick them up, and neglected to leave a courtesy note on the dashboard saying they'd be back tomorrow.

“Son of a mother,” he mumbled, before stopping his vehicle.

Keller executed a three-point turn on the two-lane road and sped north toward the Suburban. He'd do a quick search of the vehicle and the area surrounding it. If the search turned up nothing suspicious, he'd head home without calling it in. And he'd take Interstate 35 to the station tomorrow, forgetting about the Suburban altogether—with nobody the wiser. Out of sight. Out of mind.

A hundred yards or so away from the abandoned vehicle, his headlights

caught something in the grass next to the Suburban. Something moving fast. Someone running.

“No shit,” he grumbled, before turning on his police strobes.

A hooded figure crossed in front of the Suburban, momentarily vanishing before reappearing to open the driver’s-side door. *Definitely up to no good!* Keller hit the siren, hoping to freeze the person in place. Nope. They shut the door—the taillights glowing red a moment later.

Keller slowed the Interceptor, not wanting to get too close, too soon. This could be anything. From a guy taking a piss on the side of the road to a prearranged drug drop. Better safe than sorry. When the Suburban took off, its taillights vanishing into the darkness, he hit the accelerator and grabbed his vehicle radio transmitter.

“Dispatch. This is Keller. I’m about two miles south of Oak Knoll Campground on County Road 3, heading north in pursuit of a black Suburban. Minnesota license plate. Didn’t catch the full number. Started with XR. Black Suburban had been parked on the shoulder of the road, facing north. When I approached from the south, a single subject appeared in the field next to the vehicle and proceeded to take off in the Suburban. Request backup.”

He left out the part about having previously approached it from the north and passing it.

“This is dispatch. Copy your last. Sending Duncan and Shuman your way. They’ll be heading down from Owatonna. I’ll coordinate an intercept based on your updates. Be careful, Rich. A fancy truck like that parked out in the middle of nowhere on a night like this sounds fishy.”

He recognized the voice as Sheryl Eggers, who must have just taken over dispatch for the night. Karen Shay had been the one to send him all over the county prior to this call.

“Copy that, Sheryl,” said Keller. “I plan on maintaining my—”

His Interceptor rumbled violently, then slowed to a crawl. He gunned the accelerator, pitching the vehicle forward—without gaining any significant momentum. The Interceptor crawled along the slick road, a high-pitched squealing sound filling the cabin. Keller took his foot off the pedal, letting the Interceptor grind to a halt, presumably on its rims. The Suburban’s taillights disappeared in the storm.

“Keller. You still there?” said Sheryl.

“Yeah. I’m still here,” he said. “But something’s wrong with my vehicle. Hold on a second.”

Keller put the Interceptor into park and hopped out, the heavy rain instantly flattening his hair and getting into his eyes. He reached back inside the cabin and retrieved his ball cap, pulling it tight over his head. Raindrops pattered against the hat’s bill and his rain jacket as he examined the driver’s-side tires with his flashlight. Not only flat but shredded. Just as Keller had suspected. He walked around the front of his vehicle and confirmed the same situation on the passenger side. Had to be a spike strip. There was no other explanation.

A short jog down the road validated his theory. An expandable, accordion-like spike strip spanned the two-lane road, originating from a luggage-size container on the eastern shoulder. A remotely activated system, like the one their department had purchased a few years ago. He grabbed his shoulder-mounted radio microphone.

“Sheryl. My vehicle has been disabled by a remotely triggered spike strip. All four tires are gone. I’m headed back to where the Suburban was parked to see if I can figure out what this yahoo was doing out here in the middle of the night.”

“Stand by.”

Stand by for what? He started walking south on the road. His radio crackled a few seconds later.

“Deputy Keller. This is Sergeant Walker. Stay with your vehicle until we can get some backup out there. The spike strip thing is highly unusual. Same with the high-end Suburban. Nothing run-of-the-mill about this.”

“Understood, Sergeant,” said Keller, relieved not to be traipsing around in the rain and slogging through the muddy fields. “I’ll wait for backup.”

“Better safe than sorry,” said Walker. “I’m scrambling some auxiliary patrol deputies from nearby towns. They should be there within ten minutes. The rest of us will be headed south from Owatonna, looking for the Suburban.”

“Sounds good,” said Keller.

“I’m not gonna sugarcoat this. You’re in for a long night, Rich,” said Walker. “I’ll find someone to cover your shift tomorrow.”

“Thank you. Either way, I’m good, Sergeant. Seriously. I know the roster is low right now,” said Keller. “Maybe one of the auxiliaries could fill