

DEAD MAN'S SWITCH

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Summary: On a remote island in Washington's Puget Sound that houses a federal prison where his father works, high school senior King sets out alone to unravel a dark conspiracy after receiving a "fail safe" email from his best friend who drowned in a boating accident two weeks earlier.

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Messages can be sent in many ways.

From a method as ancient as a carving on a tree, to lettering in plain view that just needs to be seen in a different light. To binary digits sent through cyberspace. To a video from a friend.

Here's what's different. The messages to King started with emails that his friend sent him two weeks after his friend drowned trying to escape the island.

“Trust no authorities. They will hunt you too.”

When King becomes the hunted, he is trapped on the same island, where he can trust no one. Not even his father.

CHAPTER 1

On the morning that King betrayed his father, the white of the clouds was so pure against a blue sky that it almost hurt the eyes, and the crispness of the air and sigh of a breeze among the swaying tops of the spruce gave the illusion of eternal tranquility.

But King felt no tranquility, and he could cling to no illusions. Especially about his father.

In front of King, an arrow-shaped gash on the north side of the spruce tree was the horrible proof. The gash was head high, pointing upward. Exactly as promised in the email that had sent King here. The sap had dried from the gash, trapping a few ants at the edges where gravity had elongated the slowly falling drops.

King had not wanted to find this gash because of what it might mean about the email—and about his father.

Much of the time, especially early in the day, Pacific Coast mist and fog defined the island. It seemed to rise from the waters of Puget Sound yet also descend from the tall spruce on the hills to the rocky shores until, as sentries, the spruce dissolved into a shroud that dampened but didn't completely muffle the low barking of seals gathered at the northern end, where they bobbed and rolled effortlessly in the waves that made the island such a secure prison.

William Lyon Mackenzie King always felt as if the fog were there to taunt him, pressing in as a reminder that the island was a prison that he shared with 103 of the most dangerous criminals in America.



A few hours earlier, King had woken to sunshine slicing through the parted window shades of his bedroom. Much as he hated the fog, his constant enemy, this was a morning when King wished for the fog's presence.

He needed the island mist because if a guard caught him among the trees in the island's forbidden zone, he'd be unable to spin or charm or bluff his way out of the situation with the creative dialogue that usually left adults—except his father—shaking their heads at him with cheerful resignation.

But it was more than that.

A son should not betray his father.

King had been able to sneak to this location because of a hack into the prison's infrared scanning system that prevented it from detecting his body heat. It hurt King inside to think that by sneaking to this location on the island, he was trusting a hacker rather than believing his father was innocent.

So as much as he hated the fog, King wanted it to surround and hide him because he was about to commit an act of shame. A son should not betray his father.



It wasn't too late. If he walked away now, there would be no betrayal, no disloyalty. He felt as if he were swaying at the edge of a rooftop on a high building, knowing the consequences of the next and final step.

If a son truly had faith in his father, he wouldn't need to prove that his father was innocent of a crime the world did not yet know existed. A son with faith in his father would turn around and leave the forbidden zone.

But if his father was innocent, why hadn't King been surrounded by armed guards by now?

King didn't like the answer. It could only mean the email had been accurate when it promised that the prison's computer system would shut down the infrared scanners for two hours.

Which meant something frightening about the remainder of that email message. It meant his father had already betrayed him.

CHAPTER 2

King stood on one of the slopes overlooking the cleared flatland where the worst offenders in the US prison system were locked in buildings surrounded by an electric fence. The barbed wire bounced silver sunshine at him in the middle of the first sunny morning of the week.

Tilting his view away from the shiny silver strands of lethal wire, he looked beyond at the snow-covered peaks of the Olympic Mountains, so often hidden in the island fogs. On too-rare days of sunshine like this, the peaks reminded King that only a few miles of frigid and deep channel waters separated McNeil Island from Tacoma. Men had been imprisoned on this island for more than a century, and it was the cold water that kept them prisoners. The unpredictable tidal currents of the sound were dangerous enough, but an escapee's body could not withstand the hypothermia that would set in long before he swam halfway to the mainland.

This century's inmates were too dangerous to be allowed to roam the island. They never saw the Olympic Mountains. Instead, they saw concrete blocks painted smooth, inch-thick bullet-proof glass, and massive doors that slid sideways only if the correct password was punched into an electric lock from the main control room by guards who surveyed every movement by surveillance cameras. The password was changed each day, and when a door slid open, it revealed another door because every cell and every hallway had two doors with a five-foot gap between, and only one door could be opened at a time.

As King placed his hands on the thick branch near his head, he saw the occasional flit of black and gray as chickadees fluttered from

branch to branch above him. He was nearly at maximum elevation on the island—315 feet. He heard the chickadees, the whistling of wind in the branches, and the occasional throbbing diesel engine of a fishing trawler out of sight somewhere in the channel. The inmates only heard the hush of air moving from the narrow vents in the ceiling because they were each completely isolated. If they did hear human screams, the sound came from themselves. Not screams of fear, but rage.

Except for the prison and the homes for the 40 federal prison employees and their families, McNeil Island was essentially pristine, pure, and uncontaminated. No regularly scheduled ferry service. All transportation to and from the island was strictly controlled by the prison authorities. No stores. No services. No school. Three-quarters of the island was a wildlife refuge—untamed, unbroken.

Because of this isolation, McNeil Island, with its hills and coastline and freshwater reservoirs and patches of pasture and farmhouses built with neat fussiness, was just as much a prison for King as for the 103 convicts.

Yet it was less than a ten-minute helicopter ride away from where King yearned to be. In a hospital at the side of his mother, Ella, who was in a coma. Alone. Among the millions of people of Tacoma and Seattle who worried about traffic jams and getting their Starbucks order placed correctly, mostly unaware of how close they were to these violent convicts, unaware of the infrared scanners and other security systems that guarded the forbidden zone.

King wasn't allowed to know why any of the men had been placed inside the prison. Too violent, too scary, he'd been told, and absolutely none of his business as a family member of a prison employee.

And he most certainly was not allowed to be in the forbidden zone above the complex of prison buildings.



If the instructions in the email were correct, King had only 20 more minutes of protection from the infrared scanning alarms. He glanced at his iPhone GPS for one final confirmation of his location.

The coordinates showed him at a longitude of 47° 12' 40" N and a latitude of 122° 41' 20" W. He'd been sent to this location by someone who had reached out to him from beyond the grave. With a message to find a package hidden in a tree. A tree in the island's forbidden zone.

King peered upward. If something was waiting there for him, he didn't want to find it. Because that would mean yet another part of the email was accurate. The part about his father. The same father who would not let King go to the hospital on the other side of the water to be with Ella and hold her hand and tell her stories in case she could hear something behind the eyelids that wouldn't even flutter with any signs of real life.

If something was waiting there for him, he didn't want to find it. But he had no choice. King began to climb.

CHAPTER 3

The metal and glass of the black iPhone, slim and sleek even in comparison to the generations of iPhones that followed, weighed only 3.95 ounces—112 grams. But as King stepped into the schoolroom that afternoon, the phone felt like a bulky hand grenade in his right front pocket, heavy as lead.

A quick glance showed him that everyone else in the homeschool co-op was already there. Ten kids, ranging from first grade all the way up to where King had been placed, a senior in high school. His placement wasn't because of his age, but because he'd ripped through the curriculum over the past years. King wanted out of school. Until two weeks earlier, all he'd really wanted was freedom. Now what he really wanted was for his mom to wake up and smile and come back to their home.

King never showed fear or pain. That was one of his codes. Because of the iPhone in his pocket, he was almost overwhelmed by both of those emotions, but he hid them well.

He smiled and waved all around as kids looked up and greeted him. The windows showed that fog had returned. Normally, there would be a view of the other buildings in this corner of the island. Half were empty farmhouses now. The largest prison area had been shut down, leaving only high-security buildings, so only a third of the families were left on the island.

King walked through the room. He was glad the instructor brought in from Tacoma was late for the weekly writing class. With only

unscheduled ferry service to the island, class didn't always start on time. King needed this time to talk to Mike Johnson.

King moved to his usual place beside Johnson, who was sketching out a dragon in a notepad at his own desk. Mike was tall, gangly, and working hard on a mustache. Even though Mike's hair was dark, the mustache took some imagination to visualize. The week before, Samantha, one of the seven-year-old girls in the co-op, had innocently offered Mike a damp cloth to wipe the dirt off his lip.

"Kinger," Johnson said in the groovy, cool way he liked to use as he talked. Johnson was the only one who thought it was groovy or cool. Some days—and King felt bad for it—he wondered if he and Johnson would be friends if they were not forced to be together on the island. As the only two guys their age among the prison-employee families on the island—now that Blake Watt was dead—King didn't have many choices for friends.

"MJ," King responded.

"Hey," Johnson said. "Any word on your mom?"

King could see the concern in Johnson's eyes, and he knew Johnson wasn't asking just to be polite. It made King instantly regret his semi-traitorous thought about whether he and Johnson would be friends off the island.

"Still the same," King said. "It's good news and bad news, right?"

King's mind flashed to the memory of seeing Ella in a hospital in Seattle. In an extended-care wing of a hospital. Being fed with intravenous tubes because of the unexpected stroke that put her in a coma. And with that flash of memory came the usual anger that she was alone. ALONE.

"Dude," Johnson said. "Anything I can do to help, I will. Okay?"

"Help with this." King pulled the iPhone from his pocket and sat. He slid the iPhone to Johnson. "Seen it before?"

King reached over and hit the home button so the lock screen photo showed.

Johnson's eyes widened, just as King had expected. In clear techno color, the screen showed a jack of spades.

"This was Blake's," Johnson said. "Unless somebody copied his wallpaper."

"Check out the back."

Johnson flipped it over and ran his finger across the top edge, as King had also expected. When King and Johnson had delivered the phone to Blake, Blake had freaked out at a nick in the bevel. Blake had refused to calm down when they pointed out that you couldn't expect perfection from an eBay purchase, but it hadn't mattered. They hadn't known Blake long, but by then, they did know he was a freak about details.

"Yep, Blake's," Johnson said.

Which meant it was the iPhone that King and Johnson had smuggled onto the island for Blake. The one they had lied about to the prison warden after Blake had drowned. Lied repeatedly.

Johnson also whispered the question King expected. "Where did you find it?"

In a tree, King thought but did not say. In a tree, following instructions from an email that Blake sent yesterday. Which was impossible because Blake had drowned in Puget Sound, and they'd already had his funeral. Blake had drowned trying to do what King wanted to do—escape the island. But King didn't want to die in the process.

King didn't answer Johnson's question about where he'd found the iPhone. Too complicated right now. He didn't want Johnson freaking out just before class started.

"Check this out," King said.

He reached over again and moved the slider to take the device from lock screen to home screen.

Four blank squares appeared across the center. Below was a touch-screen keypad. Above was the phrase "Enter password."

King remembered the email instructions that had been sent the day before from a friend who had drowned two weeks earlier: "MJ knows the password. Four wrong tries and all the data is gone."

"I don't want anything to do with this," Johnson said. He looked around, as if expecting the warden to step into the room and confront them. "Throw it away."

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It's what King wanted to do. And he would have done, but the email had told King that if he didn't follow instructions, the world would find out about a crime that King's father had committed.

Johnson slid the phone back to King. "We can't get caught with this. You know all those rumors about Blake being a hacker. You know what will happen to us if anyone finds out we got this for Blake."