

# SEA OF LIES

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AN ESPIONAGE THRILLER

BRADLEY WEST



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Distinguished University Chair in Military History, Columbus State University

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## CHAPTER ONE

## ROAD TO NOWHERE

*SATURDAY AFTERNOON, MARCH 8, EINME, BURMA*

Bob Nolan's head throbbed as the embassy Hyundai Sonata headed west from the Rangoon city limits. Fighting nausea, he revisited last night's scotch-fueled conversation with the DEA's Sam Hecker. Nolan had told Hecker that, as of the end of March, he and the CIA were parting ways after almost thirty-three years. Brothers in arms suffering at the hands of the politicians, careerists and incompetents in their respective agencies, Hecker and Nolan accounted for half a bottle each of the blended brown nectar now eating at Nolan's stomach lining and reminding him he was famished.

Hecker confirmed that Rangoon Chief of Station Lloyd Matthews was a manipulator of unlimited ambition. Singapore-based CIA cryptanalyst Nolan wasn't in a position to aid Matthews in his career aspirations, so Matthews treated Nolan like the handyman at his family's Martha's Vineyard compound. Nolan was happy to put a helpful boot in and told a couple Agency stories that had Hecker roaring.

Nolan nodded in and out of wakefulness. Endlessly looping beneath his conscious mind was the question, "What in the hell are you doing?" Ostensibly on a preretirement weekend vacation visiting an old college classmate now teaching at an international high school, earlier on Saturday Nolan had answered the CIA's emergency summons. A quick shower, shave and an overheard story on the news about a missing Malaysia airliner, and then a taxi to the embassy annex. There he'd received a twenty-minute briefing before being packed off to tick the lowest-priority box on Langley's "Could MH370 be here?" checklist. Basically, a waste of a Saturday.

Post-hangover fatigue and the narcoleptic effects of stop-and-go driving overwhelmed the momentary bouts of terror triggered by screeching halts, full-on horn play and evasive action. After almost two hours of slow torture, his lolling neck hurt too much to pretend to sleep any longer. He moved the passenger seat upright and looked around. His driver Kyaw handed him the GPS; they were only twelve miles from Einme, the last speck before they went off the map. The rural traffic was sparse but multimodal: tractors, bullock carts, commercial vehicles, bicycles, mopeds, motorcycles and the odd passenger car. It was a Third World video game with real blood, although surprisingly little of it actually spilt.

Each country had its own driving culture that worked for its inhabitants, but not visitors. Sri Lankans were terrified when driving on India's roads and Indians couldn't handle driving in Bangladesh. Nolan experienced the pucker factor nearly everywhere, including supposedly disciplined Singapore. Visiting Burma wasn't much different. While he hadn't given it much thought until now, Buddhist countries were particularly dangerous. The prospect of reincarnation surely added to the recklessness among drivers

in Burma and Sri Lanka. But Hindu India took first prize. The lower-caste drivers looking for a rebirth upgrade were positively incentivized to steer their vehicles off cliffs and into a better tomorrow.

Einme featured a modern gas station and a few tin-roofed restaurants and shophouses selling everything from lumber to dresses to rice cookers. The tallest building was a four-story shophouse with the top floor only half built. They drove through and headed west by southwest. The GPS unit showed they were only nine miles away from the center of the toll road that abutted Rangoon research librarian Millie Mukherjee's maybe-building under a camouflaged net. It was hard to tell very much from the low-resolution satellite photo, but Nolan grudgingly admitted that it *could* be a landing strip in the middle of nowhere with a secret building nearby.

The GPS reading didn't change much for the next forty minutes as Kyaw tried roads and lanes that might take them closer to Millie's mark on a grainy satellite photograph. No route leading from their initial northern approach came close. Without four-wheel drive, becoming mired anytime they hit low ground was a threat.

"Kyaw, drive back toward Einme five to six miles. Head south and let's approach the road from below, just here." He pressed his finger against the GPS screen. It was past three o'clock and hotter than the hinges on the gates of Hell. The sweat and generous slugs of water restored Nolan's analytical abilities. Even with a clear head, it still seemed like a wild goose chase.

That Malaysia Airlines flight 370 had disappeared wasn't in dispute. The planned nonstop flight from Malaysia's capital Kuala Lumpur to Beijing departed just after midnight on Saturday, March 8. Vietnam air traffic control lost contact at 1:15 a.m. and by sunrise there was a full-scale international search in progress. The CIA was well aware of China's territorial aspirations in Burma's northeastern Shan State. Nolan recalled from Millie's brief that the last thing the US wanted was the People's Liberation Army sending a division south of the river to protect China citizens at risk in Shan State, including any survivors from a hijacking or crash. Northern Shan was where the full-time Agency operatives and analysts were headed to check out every piece of asphalt at least mile long in a straight line. The Pentagon and CIA were in rare agreement that China's external espionage arm, the Ministry of State Security, could have orchestrated the hijacking with a landing in Shan or maybe the adjacent Kachin State. Once in Burma, the PLA might never leave, annexing resource-rich territory and inching closer to the day when Burma became a client state.

Agency short-timer Nolan had been assigned to the least-likely destination, the swampy center of an infertile patch of the massive Irrawaddy River Delta. At least he didn't have to operate in stealth mode. About the only place the US intelligence community could send a fifty-four-year-old white-collar worker to hunt a missing commercial jet would be in the swamplands of southern Burma. The Army wasn't around, and from the aerial photos, neither was much of anything else.

As the Sonata hit a pothole, the jolt rekindled Nolan's hangover and he reconsidered the situation. The Burma Army didn't like prying eyes. If they'd been in on the hijacking, whoever had paid them off had surely also given instructions to protect the landing site.

That was the challenge Matthews's men faced across Shan and Kachin States, with China supplying extra excitement. But if by chance the plane was out in the delta, then the Army would be there, too.

Kyaw and Nolan feinted and jabbed as they probed for a way around the end of the toll road to approach it from the south. When they stopped for a leak, they watched a convoy rumble out of a side lane with eight-foot-high shrubs and stunted trees lining each side. The road was barely wider than the vehicles. Fronting this group was a dark-windowed battleship-gray SUV bristling with antennae and macho adornments. Three prime movers followed, hauling brown containers with "K-Line" logos flaking off their rusty sides. The vehicles accelerated and roared out of earshot.

Nolan played a hunch. "Take that same side road."

Within a quarter mile, they were back in the salt marshes where outlines of abandoned rice paddies were evident. One mile later, they came to a heavily rutted, muddy turnoff with a guardhouse and a gate maybe eighty yards away. A ten-foot-high chain-link fence stretched on either side. Kyaw bounced the Hyundai through the mud for about fifty yards. Nolan noted the razor wire atop the fence as they approached the guardhouse. "Protected Area" signs in English and presumably Burmese squiggles were illustrated with silhouettes of attack dogs and armed men. "Ah, the international language of fear: German Shepherds and tactical rifles," Nolan said aloud.

The scrawny Kyaw said nothing as he wrestled the Sonata over the ruts. When they were within seventy feet, two men stepped out of the sentry box and casually leveled their assault rifles. Kyaw braked to a stop.

"Roll the windows down, Kyaw. Put your hands outside. Stay inside." Nolan knew the drill from his six months in Iraq in late 2006 and early 2007.

The soldiers wore brown and green camouflage uniforms without insignia. As they approached, one strode straight at them while the other walked obliquely to maintain a clear field of fire. Whatever these short guns were, they weren't AK-47s.

"Kyaw, these are serious people. Translate for me if they don't speak English."

"Y-yes, s-sir," Kyaw managed, terror adding another ten years to his lined, fiftyish face.

The first soldier halted two steps away from Nolan's door, assault rifle on a sling pointed through the open window. He had one hand on the trigger. Nolan noted the half-fingered leather shooting gloves favored by Spec Ops. Gunman One smiled broadly behind his mirrored sunglasses. With his other hand, he reached up and took a bite of a half-peeled baseball-sized fruit.

"Do you speak English? We're looking for the Yangon-Chaungtha toll road." Nolan's voice sounded calmer than he felt.

"No road here," came the reply. Taking another bite, he grimaced and spat out white pulp as he brought his left hand onto the forestock and gestured with his weapon. "Go. Now." Kyaw put the car in reverse, spun the wheels until they caught and juddered through a harried three-point turn.

Nolan pulled his hands in and swiveled to watch the motionless Gunman One. The guard wasn't smiling anymore, his weapon casually trained on them as long as they were in view. Nolan saved the waypoints on the GPS.

"Kyaw, turn left here and keep going." They drove another two miles across an undulating landscape. Long grass, dusty small trees and fetid water marked the terrain. Wading birds hunted. The odd hovel marked the otherwise featureless track. Millie was right. Rice didn't grow well in this part of the giant Irrawaddy Delta. No rice meant few people. So what was the point of having a guardhouse, professional soldiers and a razor wire-topped hurricane fence protecting a road project in a depopulated part of the delta? Something wasn't right.

Their southwest course gradually took them away from the GPS coordinates for Millie's blob. Kyaw was driving fast enough that the Hyundai was bottoming out every fifty yards or so, risking a broken axle or punctured fuel tank.

"Slow down, Kyaw. There's no one after us." They passed another narrow lane headed north. "Stop! Turn here and drive slowly. We don't want any noise." Kyaw slowed to fifteen miles an hour. Within three-quarters of a mile, the track ended at the base of a hillock. The GPS showed another mile to go before they reached the feature highlighted on the sat photo.

Nolan applied bug repellent and drained the better part of a big water bottle. Kyaw turned the car around. Nolan weighed duty versus common sense. The oath he'd sworn to uphold the Constitution. The good people he'd served with for over half his life. The frustration of not doing anything meaningful in the past eighteen months. The wish to impress Millie, that vivacious young woman from California with fluency in Burmese and a deep desire to find a way into Clandestine Services. All of that stacked up against the prospect of getting shot investigating something that was none of his business. What he needed to do was drive back to Rangoon, file a report when he was back in Singapore and let Matthews's people take a proper look next week. He'd be blowing out candles on his combination fifty-fifth birthday and retirement cake soon enough.

However, he'd been motivated to solve problems his entire life. He'd broken unbreakable codes, designed unstoppable computer worms and conquered almost every professional challenge. The phantom road, armed guards and a missing airliner begged for answers.

"What would Bob Nolan do?" he said under his breath. The Nolan his younger colleagues idolized was a man they counted on, a leader. He had conceptualized the master plan for Operation Olympic Games and personally convinced the heads of the Mossad and CIA that it was viable. The result was Stuxnet, the evil genius computer worm that wiped out eight hundred of Iran's U-235 enrichment centrifuges and set back their bomb-building program three years. Stuxnet won Nolan a citation and earned him a transfer to Singapore, where his wife so badly wanted to live. Then there was the Anti-Nolan, the Bob who nearly ended his marriage with a disastrous inter-Agency affair, followed a year later by Prentice Dupree's death in a sex-free, but doubly dangerous debacle that had nearly ended his career. So who was it behind the sunglasses and under the long-billed fishing cap, the expert with thirty-three years inside as a latter-day CIA renaissance

man—code breaker, cybersecurity expert, competent electronic surveillance field man—or the plodding hacker outsourcer of the last year?

“Sometimes you have to live up to your own press clippings,” he said in a resigned voice. Kyaw looked at him curiously. Nolan said, “I’m going to take a look. It will be a couple of hours, so just relax here. Do you have any cell reception?” Kyaw shook his head no.

He marked their location on the GPS and set off uphill through knee-high grass that hid shoe-shredding sharp rocks. The moist soil stank and much of it sported the telltale white gloss of salt. It was obvious why little grew here.

Nolan hadn’t been on even a mock field operation since SERE training in Harvey Point, North Carolina, back in 1982. He’d been a twenty-three-year-old whippersnapper back then, fresh from the tradecraft classrooms of Camp Peary, Virginia, a.k.a. the Farm. Here he did a combination of duck walks, hunched-over dashes and low crawls to avoid detection. He’d look ridiculous to anyone standing on one of the swales in the vicinity, and hoped no one was peering at him down the barrel of a rifle. His shoes, knees and hands were muddy and reeked of methane.

He took out the binoculars and looked around. Nothing moved save for a circling bird of prey. “You’d better not be a vulture,” Nolan said. The bugs were ferocious even after the generous application of DEET-based repellent. What had even more of his attention was a smattering of rats, parade of frogs and a pair of black cobras he was sharing the lowlands with.

The sun remained relentless despite it being after four o’clock. Nolan was happy for the hat, yet annoyed he’d forgotten sunblock. Like most Chinese women of status, his wife Shao Yin equated a suntan with poverty. When he came home looking like a lobster, there would be an ass-chewing. He grinned at the thought of his wife. Joanie Lam Shao Yin was quite a nagger, but she had a good heart.

He cursed the sharp-edged grasses, the vermin, the heat and his aching quads, knees and elbows. As he reached the top of the last mound, the discomfort fell away. Down the hill, two hundred yards distant, was a ten-foot razor wire cyclone fence stretching as far as the eye could see in either direction. Beyond the fence maybe another eighty yards was the tarmac. After the road, more fence: this was an expensive project.

“Damn, I should have brought a camera with a telephoto lens,” he said. He brought the binoculars up and gave the pavement a careful scan. The Yangon-Chaungtha toll road was a fraud. This wasn’t a highway; it was a runway. The six lanes were laid out side by side with no center guardrail, just a double yellow line down the middle without any road signs in view. All the vegetation for over fifty yards on either side of the make-believe road was burned away.

The entire scene was devoid of life. Up the runway another one hundred fifty yards was the object of Millie’s fascination. A single-story corrugated iron shed under camouflage netting within one hundred feet of the putative road wasn’t Highway Department standard issue.

He clicked off a few shots with his camera phone, but they might be too grainy to be of much use. The sun was setting. He reversed course, taking less time to conceal himself than on the way in, given the failing light. He wanted to get back to town.

Forty minutes later, he was back almost to his starting point. As he came down the last hillside in the high grass, he saw the midnight-blue embassy Sonata blocked by a hulking forest-green Escalade. Kyaw knelt by the front of the Hyundai, head bowed and hands over his groin. The driver rolled over and writhed on his back.

“Oh, shit,” Nolan exclaimed. He recognized the brown-green uniform and familiar stance. At this distance, the single gunman looked just like the US soldiers in Iraq who had covered him when he tapped junction boxes. Nolan raised his own arms an instant later when the second uniformed man entered his peripheral vision from the left rear, tactical weapon at his hip. God only knew how long Gunman Two had been tracking him. Nolan took a closer look. Those weapons were the same issue as the Rangers carried in Fallujah. Even the web gear looked identical.

While Nolan walked the last thirty feet toward the car, Kyaw staggered upright. Immediately Gunman One barked, “On knees. Hands on head!” An unseen third person bent over in the back of the SUV. He backed out, straightened up and closed the passenger door without turning around. He had on a dark blue shirt and a black baseball hat. Broad-shouldered, but well below Nolan’s 6’1” height. The man turned around and revealed himself to be an old Caucasian. He stepped toward his two prisoners, giving Nolan the eye as he did so.

Nolan didn’t wait for further instructions; he knelt down near Kyaw and put his hands on his head. *My cargo pants are ruined* ran through his numb mind as he stared at the tattered knees.

He looked up at his captor. Mirrored wraparounds shielded a creased, deeply tanned face offset by thin white hair. The boss growled through thick lips, “Get over there,” his hand indicating the hood of the Kia. Nolan stood up and complied, noting an American accent as he awaited further orders. The Old Man with Attitude spoke again, “OK, pal. Your driver already told us you were from the US embassy. So what the fuck are you doing out here?”

Nolan recognized that voice. That face. “Rob? Robin Teller? It’s Nolan . . . Bob *Nolan*. Bangkok, 1985. CIA.”

“I don’t know you. I have no idea who Teller is. So drop the ‘best buds’ angle or you’ll be digging your own graves in one minute.”

Nolan was pleading for their lives now. “Rob, it’s *Bob Nolan* from the Counterintel Division in Bangkok. I worked with Ned Windham, Frank Coulter and you on the Double Llama Trading clean-up in 1985. I delivered the passport you used to get out.”

Robin Teller was perhaps the single worst example of an ex-US military man Nolan had ever met. After Double Llama Trading collapsed in 1985, CEO Teller had convened a board meeting and told his fellow directors that if they talked to anyone, he’d kill their wives in front of them. Teller was a no-bullshit ex-Ranger from Vietnam with a specialization in counterinsurgency tactics. His taste in personal accoutrements tended toward ear necklaces.

“Take off your sunglasses and hat, but keep your hands on your head.” After a pause that aged Nolan five years, he said, “Well I’ll be a damned fool. Bob fucking Nolan!”

“Yes, yes, it’s me, Rob. And I retire at the end of March after nearly thirty-three years. So please, just let us go.” Neither guard acknowledged the thaw in relations; the guns stayed leveled.

“Still on a desk, using one-time pads and listening to your shortwave at night?”

“Very much so, Rob. I’m actually over in Burma on a preretirement vacation to see a friend. I’m out here doing a day trip as a favor for the chief of station—”

“*Lloyd Matthews?* That incompetent brown-noser. He couldn’t sell pussy on credit in prison. Why did he send you to a stinking marsh?”

“It seemed like an easier gig than trying to sneak into Shan State and ending up with my head on the end of a spear. Rob, we’re looking for MH370 . . . a Malaysia commercial jet that went missing around midnight last night. Some shedheads in Langley think it could be on the ground in Shan or Kachin States. I’m out here killing an afternoon at Matthews’s request.”

“Let me see your wallet.” Nolan obliged and Teller confirmed his name. Looking at Nolan again, he said, “You think you understand, but you’re stupid. Rob Teller is no more. My name is Jay Toffer. I’m a longtime resident and run security for the late Khun Sa’s estate. What you need to do is get the hell out of here and not come back. I don’t know what you thought you saw, but it was nothing more than an abandoned construction site for a misconceived toll road. We were building it on the cheap, and now that the free labor isn’t available, we stopped work. It’s over. *Finito*. Am I making myself understood?”

“Very clear, Mr. Toffer.”

“Alright. If I find you or”—he glanced at Nolan’s driver—“Mr. Piss-Pants out here again, or if anyone from the embassy ever visits this site, I’m taking it personally.” Teller inspected Nolan’s wallet. “Got any kids?”

“Yes, Rob . . . er, *Jay* . . . a daughter and a son.”

“Yep. Here they are. Good-looking children. Congratulations. Your wife’s a looker, too. If I ever see any one of Matthews’s people or you again, I will DHL you pieces of your family. Now give me your cell phones and that GPS.”

Nolan and Kyaw did as he said. Teller had pulled three photos out of Nolan’s wallet, and he now conspicuously tucked those into his shirt pocket. Done with the wallet, he tossed it onto the hood of the Hyundai and flipped the car keys to Kyaw. The keys bounced off Kyaw’s chest and fell to the ground. Nolan took this as a cue to lower his hands. One of the henchmen started the Escalade, and Teller and the other gunman climbed in. Nolan and Kyaw remained motionless until the green monster was out of sight.





## CHAPTER TWO

## LET'S MAKE A DEAL

*SATURDAY AFTERNOON, MARCH 8, IRRAWADDY DELTA, BURMA*

Kyaw labored to his feet. He had tears running down his cheeks and swayed back and forth.

“What happened before I came back?” Nolan asked.

Kyaw held out his left forearm. He had his right hand clenched around his wrist. “He stabbed my . . . my . . . arm.” Nolan quickly walked over and took a look, but when Kyaw unclenched his right hand the blood flooded out. The grass was stained where he’d been kneeling.

“Damn. This isn’t good. Can you move your fingers?” Nolan asked. Kyaw indicated “no” with an inaudible answer and a shake of his head.

Nolan pocketed his wallet, noting the dent and small slit in the hood where the knife point had penetrated after exiting Kyaw’s wrist. It had been one hell of a blow.

“We need to get you to a hospital. It’ll be dark soon. Give me the keys and show me the fastest way back to town after we dress that wound.”

Nolan was on the move, dropping Kyaw’s wallet in the driver’s back pocket and opening the trunk even as he continued. “Did you make Teller angry or try to run away?”

“No.”

“Did he say anything to you?”

“He asked my name and looked at embassy ID. He asked who you are. I told him someone from the embassy in Singapore. He said that he would cut my throat if I lied. He also took your files from the back seat. I tried to stop him. He grabbed my arm, forced it onto top of car and stabbed me with a big knife. It went all the way through my arm. Then you came back.”

Nolan experienced a second round of heart palpitations. He hadn’t bothered to open Millie’s background briefing files yet, so he didn’t know what was in them other than that grainy sat photo. That black circle around the disguised building and GPS coordinates on the back would be enough to tip Teller. Anything else would be nails in their coffins. When Teller had seen enough, he would turn that green SUV around and come back.

“Give me the keys. I need to look at your arm.” Nolan took a lug wrench from the repair kit in the trunk, stripped off the thin cloth belt from his cargo pants and fashioned a tourniquet with a partial turn of the lug wrench to tighten or loosen the belt. “Keep this as tight as you can stand it. You have to stop the bleeding.” Nolan was outwardly calm, helping Kyaw around to the passenger seat and belting him in. He started the car and drove fast.

He recalled the old stories from the Bangkok days about Teller’s background. Teller found the Ranger combat operations exciting, but there were too many rear echelon

motherfuckers second-guessing his methods. So he bid goodbye to the REMFs and in 1970 took up an offer to join the CIA's Phoenix Program.

Phoenix rooted out Vietcong cadres in rural South Vietnam, killing, incarcerating or otherwise neutralizing over eighty thousand people in its short, infamous life. The South Vietnamese and their US advisors weren't overly concerned with due process. Once they knew who the bad people were, they either captured or killed them without the benefit of a trial. The lefties and Constitution-huggers back home succeeded in shuttering Phoenix in 1972, aided by evidence that Phoenix claimed more than a few innocent lives alongside the multitudinous guilty ones.

Nolan kept the pedal punched as far as he dared while his brain whirled. There was only one main road back to Rangoon and it ran through Einme. He could circle around and try to return via a different trajectory, but there were few roads and even fewer bridges. Besides, if he took too long Kyaw might lose the use of his hand or bleed to death. Of course, if they drove straight back into an ambush, they would both lose more than a hand. If it was to be the road through Einme, they had to ditch the Hyundai.

Kyaw was leaning back, eyes shut against the pain. Nolan the agnostic said a silent prayer that Teller hadn't opened Millie's files yet.

Nolan drove as fast as he dared, cognizant of the Hyundai's low clearance and the chance that they'd either catch up to Teller or drive into a trap. In ten minutes, they were at the turnoff. Nolan took a right, away from where he figured Teller had headed. He put his foot down until they were doing fifty miles an hour; previously, thirty had felt fast. It was all relative: the fear of dying in a car accident was far less than that of facing Teller again.

Fifteen minutes later, they were still barreling around blind turns in the twilight. He didn't see a motorized soul aside from a couple of scared scooter riders. They crossed a bridge over a creek that still held water and passed a better-than-average-looking cinderblock home fronting mottled rice paddies. To the side stood a battered pickup truck.

Nolan slammed on the brakes and pulled into the soggy gravel lot that passed for a front yard. He roused Kyaw. Fumbling first in his pants pockets, he then delved into his sock and found the three mint US hundred dollar bills he always had on him for special occasions. He'd learned that lesson early on in his first tour of Asia when Frank Coulter taught him the non-Biblical Golden Rule: "He who has the gold makes the rules." *Amen* to that.

They got out of the car. Nolan made up the plan on the spot. "Kyaw, leave your tourniquet on the seat. Knock on the front door. Tell the owner that we want to rent his truck for a day. We'll pay him two hundred dollars cash and leave the Hyundai as collateral."

A middle-aged woman stooped by a lifetime of work in the sun opened the door and stared. She probably didn't get many expatriate CIA employees as callers. Kyaw spoke in Burmese. She looked incredulous. Nolan held out the bills. She turned away from the doorway and called. The house was dark and not much cooler than outside.

Nolan wanted to step into the shade, out of the setting sun and the gunsights that might be at this very moment settling between his shoulder blades.

A disheveled man in his forties wearing a tank top and a *longyi* wrapped around his waist shuffled toward them barefoot. He rubbed his eyes and smoothed his rumpled hair and gestured for Kyaw and Nolan to enter. The living room had wooden chairs around a homemade table, a floor fan, a battered sofa and two kerosene lanterns. There was a TV in the corner hooked to a VCR. Nolan deduced that they fired up the generator occasionally, and maybe ran it to screen the latest Bollywood blockbuster or turn the lights on when friends or relatives came to dinner.

Kyaw repeated the offer. The husband's tone hinted at incredulity. The two spoke for several minutes. Nolan was antsy; either the fellow wanted to make two hundred US dollars, or he didn't. Time was short, and Nolan didn't have a backup plan: they'd have to keep looking.

The wife returned with tea. Nolan drank too soon, scalding his lips and tongue. Kyaw left his untouched to better conceal his bloodied wrist.

"Ask him to start his truck so we can see if it runs."

"He hasn't agreed to your offer. He thinks that Hyundai could be stolen, and he will get in trouble."

"Tell him I'll leave my US passport as a guarantee that we'll bring the truck back."

As Kyaw translated, Nolan pulled out his passport and opened it to the photo page. The husband looked as if he'd been offered a splinter of the True Cross. A US passport was solid gold everywhere in the developing world. It had passed Nolan through many a checkpoint, although it had also nearly gotten him killed a couple of times. He hated leaving the real deal behind while he had a perfectly good forgery in his pocket identifying him as Toronto's Derrick Larson, but a Canada passport didn't have the same cachet.

Kyaw and the husband sealed the deal with a final animated exchange. "He wants to hold the keys to the Hyundai, too."

"Sure. Fine." They walked outside. "Be sure to check the gas," Nolan said.

Nolan did the pre-rental walk-around out of habit, but he wasn't in any position to ask for another car off the Hertz lot. The tires needed air. The right rear brake light cover was broken. The bed had a couple of buckets, a stepladder, a toolbox and four 50kg bags of cement. Nolan noted that the bags had yellow elephants printed on them: another quality product from the employer of the man who wanted to kill them.

Kyaw started the pickup with a throaty rumble then shut it off.

"Tell our host he should clear out the back except for the bags of cement." Kyaw did so, and the owner got busy. Nolan slid the bags back over the wheel wells. Empty pickup trucks didn't corner at speed worth a damn. The extra weight would help if they were driving for their lives.

Nolan handed the farmer his passport and those two big bills. Kyaw held his bloody left forearm behind his back as he passed Nolan the keys to the Hyundai.

Nolan watched the one-armed Kyaw clamber in on the passenger side. Good luck if you're looking for a seatbelt, Nolan thought as he got behind the wheel. "Listen carefully. I'm going to put it in gear. Only then do you tell the farmer to pull the Hyundai behind his house and hide it. Tell him not to drive it, as there are bad people looking for it. We

will send out someone from the US embassy tomorrow to return his truck, take back the car and collect my passport.”

They started forward with a lurch, Nolan rusty with the clutch. Kyaw hailed the man and spoke earnestly as Nolan jounced at a walking pace toward the road. Kyaw paused for breath. A glance out the side window told Nolan their savior was having second thoughts.

He slammed into second gear and they were on their way back the way they'd come, last glimmers of sunset over their shoulders. He looked back a hundred feet later to see the farmer standing in the middle of the road, staring at them.

Nolan handed Kyaw one of the large bottles he'd liberated from the Hyundai. "Drink. You've lost a lot of blood." Kyaw ended up spilling a quarter and drank most of the rest. Nolan finished it. Fishing around in his cargo pants, he came up with a clean handkerchief in a baggie and gave it to Kyaw to sop up the blood oozing from under the reapplied tourniquet.

"We aren't safe yet, but short of a roadblock or ambush around Einme, we'll make it back to Rangoon. I don't know where the hell I am, so don't fall asleep." Neither headlight focused on the road, the twin beams askew. There were no side mirrors, and the rearview mirror wobbled every time they pounded through a pothole.

The drive back wasn't as complicated as Nolan had feared. With the white pickup providing cover, he stuck to the bigger roads. Within forty minutes, they were on the outskirts of Einme. What had been a hick hamlet at 2 p.m. now felt like Manhattan after the Yankees had won the World Series. Even so, when the single stoplight turned red, Nolan's heart stopped for the thirty seconds it took the light to change. He kept scouting left and right for the green SUV to barrel down on them, guns blazing.

The fuel gauge was down to three-eighths, so he bought four gallons on a side street from a kid who siphoned gas from a barrel. He decided he'd rather take the chance of contaminated gas than fuel up in a modern gas station under bright lights. Then they were back on the good road. Rangoon lay eighty miles due east. There was much less traffic than on the way out, although half of the vehicles were unlit. The grim game of dodgem-for-keeps continued. Kyaw passed out. Nolan wasn't surprised given how much blood was in the cab and on his clothes.

Nolan's thoughts turned toward their adversary. The incongruous reappearance of long-dead-to-the-Agency Robin Teller was a shock. Teller had to be sixty-five years old, but he was still menacing. "What was Teller doing hiding out in Burma? And what explanation could there be for his presence at an abandoned toll road site on a Saturday afternoon with two Special Forces troops in tow?" Nolan spoke aloud to combat his fatigue.

He looked over at the driver, who had his head against the passenger window. Kyaw's brown skin was now a pasty olive. The tourniquet looked like it had finally staunched the flow. Nolan wondered if he should loosen it a little so Kyaw didn't lose his hand. Instead, he kept driving fast.

Teller went even deeper into the dark in 1973 when CIA supremo William Colby handpicked him to head Phoenix's successor, the super-secret F-6 unit. Pursuing much

the same agenda as the Phoenix Program, F-6 was headquartered in the Mekong Delta and survived to the bitter end of the Vietnam War. Teller was one of the original hard men, an action junkie who couldn't get an adrenaline fix behind the desk, so he insisted on leading reconnaissance squads and fronting the nighttime door-kicking the Phoenix/F-6 boys specialized in. Teller was one of the best at sniffing out Viet Cong collaborators in the delta. His Army of the Republic of Vietnam Rangers worshiped him. After the fall of Saigon, through force of personality, Teller convinced three South Vietnam Spooky gunship pilots to fly the surviving ARVN Rangers and their families to Thailand minutes before the NVA rolled in. Teller had never gone back to the US, staying on in Bangkok and getting into ever more CIA-inspired mischief under the aegis of Double Llama Trading.

Everyone Nolan knew back in Bangkok in late 1984 and early 1985 had given Teller a wide berth, especially if he was drinking or something went wrong in his day. Double Llama Trading employees were delighted that Teller had relocated out of Bangkok in 1978. Teller found the life of an arms dealer too dull, even one who catered to drug runners and was the principal armorer to the CIA's covert wars in Asia. Teller first took DLT's flag to Tehran to organize what proved to be a too-little, too-late rear-guard action to prop up the Pahlavi dynasty. Another narrow escape compliments of a CIA rescue squad, but not before the revolutionaries had spent a day experimenting with different wiring configurations involving car batteries, alligator clips and Teller's testicles.

Nolan flicked on the overhead light again. Kyaw looked cadaverous. Nolan spotted a red cross and "24 Hours" on a white background on a sign hanging off one of the shophouses ahead to the right. Pulling off the main road, he looked for a parking space near the well-lit entrance. At that moment two pairs of doors opened simultaneously on the vehicles parked side by side in front of the clinic. He accelerated away with tires spinning and gravel flying. This was the first clinic they'd come across: too obvious. He had to get sharper fast, or they were dead men. However, changing cars seemed to have worked, as no one had followed them, best as he could tell. It didn't matter; Nolan had to get out of there in a hurry. He accelerated to seventy-five miles an hour, almost killing them twice while passing. He calmed down several miles later and throttled back. No one seemed to be on their tail. He took a deep breath.

Teller was maniacal, vindictive and deadly. He was also a well-organized, meticulous planner and implementer, as evidenced by the rapid expansion of DLT to Beirut, Istanbul, Malta and Singapore. Everything changed in late January 1985 when DLT cofounder Daniel Kranz turned up dead in his Oriental Hotel Suite, naked, with his hands tied behind his back and a silk bathrobe belt looped around his neck and a closet door. The Bangkok coroner judged his death accidental via autoerotic asphyxiation. Ex-Director Central Intelligence William Colby's name was on paper in Kranz's wallet. There were handwritten lists of who's-who in defense ministries across Asia with numbers against them in Kranz's briefcase, alongside Bank Credit and Commerce International (known to Agency wags as "Bank of Crooks and Cocaine International") account numbers. The international press and Thai newspapers asked questions.

Teller flew to Bangkok from Singapore and ferociously micromanaged the cover-up. Senior Agency covert operators Ned Windham, Paul Hattemer and Frank Coulter—the few people who could handle Teller—arrived as well to minimize Teller’s mischief and keep matters out of the press. Nolan had been the low man on that particular latrine detail, but just from being on the scene, he knew to take Teller seriously.



## CHAPTER THREE

## HELP IS ON THE WAY

*SATURDAY NIGHT, MARCH 8, RANGOON, BURMA*

Kyaw was unconscious and didn't reply to Nolan's loud exhortations to wake up. Nolan didn't know where they were headed other than into town. He followed the traffic east looking for a hospital. They crossed the Yangon River, the western city limits. He had no clue as to where the embassy was, and doubted if Kyaw could find it even if he were conscious. Ten minutes later, he drove up to the main entrance of the halfway-decent-looking Hotel Yangon. He put the truck in neutral, then thought better of it and pulled past the main entrance. There weren't any free parking spaces. Saturday night was in full swing. He stopped and blocked three luxury cars parked in parallel. An attendant was on him before he even climbed out of the driver's seat.

"Sir, you cannot—"

"Forget that. We need a doctor. My friend is hurt. Here." He turned on the overhead light and the attendant gasped. He handed over the key and ten *kyat* thousand notes, a little more than ten dollars, equivalent to about three days' pay. "Wait here. Don't move the truck. I'll be back."

He appreciated how sore he was after the first step. What was that old Aussie expression? *Stiffer than a honeymoon prick*. He walked into the lobby, wincing at every step. The well-dressed locals politely ignored him. He found the concierge counter, hoping they'd understand English.

"My friend had an accident. He has cut his wrist very badly. He has lost a lot of blood. We need to get him to a hospital."

"Sir, I call ambulance."

"No, we need a hotel car to take him to the hospital. He is from the United Nations. I will go with him."

"Yes, sir. Would you like deluxe car Mercedes Benz for only US\$30 per hour or would you like Toyota Camry at—"

"I don't care. Just get a car and driver out front now by the white Toyota pickup truck past the entrance. I will meet you there."

"Sir, I will need credit card—"

"My friend needs a blood transfusion or he will die. I'll pay you when I come back from the hospital."

"I still need credit card or cash."

Nolan handed him a card in silent contempt.

It took the attendant, hotel driver and Nolan to pull the unconscious Kyaw out of the pickup and into the Camry's back seat. Kyaw was a sight with so much blood on his



shirtfront and pants he looked like he had been shot. Nolan told the attendant to park the truck somewhere in the back and that he would return for it later.

On the drive to the hospital, he let his mind unwind for the first time in seven hours and tried to figure out the next move. He'd entered Burma under his own name, giving the Traders Hotel as his address. If Teller was working for the Army, he would have ready access to Immigration Department records now that they were computerized. He needed to get a new room under a different name at another hotel, pronto.

If Millie had put her name on any of those reports, she was also on Teller's list. Although Agency standard practice used work names and Foreign Service staff signed off by job title, she'd given him her card. He felt physically ill and clawed for his wallet. Upon opening it, he saw *Samuel Hecker, Police Liaison, United States Drug Enforcement Administration, Burma*. Millie's card—*Millicent Mukherjee, Research Associate, Economic & Political Affairs, United States Embassy, Burma*—was nestled behind it. His stomach was still knotted, but at least he could start breathing again.

They pulled up in front of the ER entrance at the Alexandra Hospital. It dated from the colonial era and sat on an impressive piece of land. The hotel driver gave the horn a blast and orderlies came running. Nolan watched them slide a limp Kyaw onto a gurney. He played the ugly American by shouting, "United Nations! United Nations! This man is very important. Get more doctors."

A British-accented voice replied over his shoulder, "Your friend is in shock and needs a transfusion. Can you donate blood? The hospital's supply may be contaminated with hepatitis."

He turned around to find an ethnic Chinese doctor in his forties clutching a clipboard. "Yes. I'm O-negative."

"Wonderful, a universal donor. Please follow me." The doctor spoke Burmese to the ER staff and Nolan's vein was soon draining into a big bag. The needle sticking into the inside of his elbow hurt like hell. Ten minutes later, he stepped out of the curtained cubicle to find Kyaw gone.

"Where is my friend?" he asked two attendants, but the Brit doctor wasn't in view, and no one else spoke English.

Admissions was down the corridor. He commandeered the phone on the desk and someone picked up on the second ring.

"Sam? It's Bob Nolan. We met last night at Walt's . . . yes, that's right. Sorry to trouble you late on a Saturday night, but I'm in big trouble. I'm at the Alexandra Hospital with a US embassy driver who's been stabbed. I think the people who did it are after us. I don't want to talk over an open . . . Right. Got it. I'll look for Travis in thirty minutes, white Toyota SUV. Thanks."

Police—or worse—monitored ER phones worldwide. He was at hospital reception, an even more likely place for the government to record phone calls. He decided to risk it anyway.

"Millie? It's Bob Nolan. You were right about the site, but Kyaw and I were attacked. We're back in Rangoon. I'm fine, but someone last seen thirty years ago put a knife through Kyaw's wrist. We're in a hospital, but I'm leaving soon to come get you."

“Oh, my God! How’s Kyaw?”

“I don’t know. He’s in surgery. He lost a lot of blood. Where are you? And I need you to do three things for me. Make a list of the contents of those files—”

“Slow down. I’m still at work. What files? The files I gave you earlier today?”

“Someone took your files out of the car. He stabbed Kyaw when he tried to stop him.”

“I can print out another set of files for you right now.”

“Good idea, but make it two sets. Is your name or any other identifier on them?”

“No. Only *US Embassy Burma Economic Research* as a footer and *Secret* as the header,” she said.

He winced at the indiscretion, but said nothing. “OK, that’s great. I need you not to tell anyone about this call until after we meet later tonight. We might have a problem on campus. Can you stay near your cell and wait for my call?”

“Yes, of course. When do you want to meet?” she said.

“In an hour or less. We’ll call you when we’re outside.”

“The boss left a few minutes ago, so I’m free,” she said. “I was just leaving to grab dinner.”

“Dinner may have to wait. See you soon.” He hung up. Looking at his black plastic watch, he turned off the timer: 1:20. With digital switches, call traces were instantaneous; analog switches still required three minutes on the line. They should be all right even if trackers were actively monitoring the call.

Nolan found the men’s toilet and cleaned up as best he could. He felt faint. “Never give blood on an empty stomach,” he advised the mirror. He wandered into the ER where the Brit doctor was back, making his rounds.

Spotting Nolan, he came over. “Your friend is in luck. Our vascular surgeon was visiting a sick relative here when the emergency call went out. He’s scrubbing up, and will be operating any minute. We’ve transfused two liters into your friend. His vital signs are weak but stable. He’s out of shock, so it’s now safe to operate.”

Nolan thanked the doctor and stepped outside the ER to wait for Travis Ryder, head of regional security in the DEA, Hecker’s bodyguard and an ex-SEAL. Within ten minutes, a full-sized UN peacekeeping-style SUV pulled up and Ryder hopped out, biceps veins visible through his black compression undershirt.

Nolan started talking even before Ryder shook his hand. “We need to get an embassy driver named Kyaw registered here under a false name, and put a guard outside his door. We have to go by the embassy annex to pick up someone, and we need to meet Sam as soon as possible. We—”

“Whoa, Nellie,” Ryder said in an East Texas lilt. “Let’s do these one at a time.”

He opened the near passenger door, and a neatly dressed bronze-hued man exited and said, “Special Agent Gonzalez, DEA, at your service.” Relieved, Nolan repeated his request. Gonzalez said something in Burmese, and yet another man emerged from the back seat. The two men entered the ER. Kyaw was covered.

Nolan started; he’d left out something important. “Travis, another thing—”

Ryder interrupted him, "It'll be faster if we only have to do this once. Zeya, come over here." The other rear door opened and a local with a welterweight's physique double-timed it to their sides. Damn, Nolan thought. Ryder came loaded for bear.

"A gray Camry and a hotel driver are somewhere out there," Nolan said with an arm sweep. "I have a white Toyota pickup truck parked at the Hotel Yangon. The jockey has the key. Please ride back to the hotel with the Camry driver. Let them charge my credit card for two hours and retrieve my card. Then drive the pickup over to wherever we're meeting Mr. Hecker later. You'll know the truck. The front seat is covered in blood and it smells of stale piss. If someone could clean the upholstery, that would be helpful, too."

Ryder let out a low whistle. "Bob, you've been a busy boy since the beer ran out. Tell you what, why don't we talk while we drive to the embassy annex?"

Nolan eased into the back, half expecting more DEA agents. The vehicle was empty save for the driver, but the rear deck had enough weapons, mags, scopes and goggles to do a small gun show proud. Ryder rode up front and Nolan figured he'd be packing the Glock with the seventeen-round magazine that was on display last night at his friend Walt's house where he'd pounded too many whiskeys.

Nolan started with the basics, but was talking at twice his usual sedate pace. "Thanks for bailing us out. We were in a bad way. This afternoon we were one hundred fifty miles to the west, checking out an airfield. We found a new runway that's over two miles long—" Nolan interrupted himself midstream. "Did they find MH370 yet?" In the excitement, he'd forgotten it.

"Nope. As of a couple of hours ago, no trace. It's a real puzzler, that one."

"Well, I found the airfield that was showing on a sat photo an embassy researcher gave me earlier today. That's where we're headed now—to pick her up so we can find out more."

"Sounds like you've met our Millie, then," Ryder said. Nolan thought he detected a leer.

"The landing strip is surrounded by a ten-foot fence and razor wire, and guarded by Special Forces types in green camouflage uniforms. Their boss is someone I met back in 1985 in Thailand. Ex-Army Ranger and CIA in Vietnam, founded an arms trading company in Bangkok after the war, ran guns across Southeast Asia, Africa and Iran before he disappeared mid-1985 when his business partner was found hanged."

"Never to be seen again?"

"A few traces, but nothing concrete. His name's Robin Teller and he's lived in Burma since 2007. He said he provides security to Khun Sa's children. I think he's helping the Army ship drugs. Whatever he's doing, he's using that airstrip. He let Kyaw and me go before he saw the aerial photos of the runway. I'm certain he'll try to kill us to shut us up."

"Well, on that happy note, here we are," Ryder said. They were outside the embassy annex in Dubern Park where the CIA and DEA had their offices. As in the morning, the wrought iron gate was closed and there was an armed guard on duty.

Nolan pulled out Millie's card and asked Ryder to call her. Spotting the name, he handed the card back. "I already have this one." Ryder dialed and spoke briefly. "She's on her way."

While they waited, Ryder took a call. He hung up and said, "That was Hecker. We're all meeting at a safe house we set up off the books. No one outside the DEA knows where Club Avatar is. Have you told this story to Matthews or anyone else?"

"Not a soul. That's exactly what I told Millie. We could well have a leak in the embassy or even the Agency," he said.

On cue, a breathless Millie exited the embassy annex at a trot with a shoulder bag on one arm and laptop case on the other, breasts heaving. She opened up the passenger door and took inventory. "Bob! You look awful," was followed by a distinctly cooler, "Hello, Travis." The door shut and the light went out, but Nolan could see Ryder's smirk hanging in the air. He decided Ryder was a better male bonding buddy than boyfriend.

Within five minutes Nolan had no idea where they were headed, only that it featured plenty of alleys. Twice their driver stopped, shut off the engine and killed the lights, windows down, listening.

Ryder rattled Nolan's already frayed nerves when he jumped out at the first stop, dropped the rear gate and racked a magazine into a tactical rifle. Ryder slid back into the passenger seat, weapon and night-vision goggles in hand. "Just to be safe," he said.

"What are you carrying?" Nolan asked.

"It's a SCAR Standard, basically a more accurate AK. I used it in the SEALs and it's my favorite for urban work."

"Today at the airbase, the soldiers carried what looked to be the same guns the Rangers packed in Iraq when I was posted in Baghdad and Ramadi in oh-six," Nolan said.

"Yeah, that would be Ranger standard issue M-4 Carbines. They're about a decade behind the other Special Forces when it comes to guns. Did the weapons have anything on the ends of the barrels?"

"No, I'm positive they didn't." Nolan didn't share that he'd been staring at those weapons with morbid fascination, and the barrels were clean save for the front sights.

"Good. If the first bullets don't kill us, at least we'll know we're being shot at."

**For more on Burma's geography, Stuxnet, the Phoenix Program and many other topics raised in Chapters 1-3, download the fact-and-photo-packed *Insider's Guide to Sea of Lies*.**

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