

BIMAT

SIAM STORM 3



A Vietnamese Adventure

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Prologue

It had been an exhausting day and his heart pounded. Feeling hungry, he saw something in the distance.

'Food,' he thought and rushed over to a white suspended object and took a large bite. He gagged as he felt searing pain shooting through his mouth. Panic set in and he struggled to breathe as water rushed past his face before he was yanked into an unfamiliar atmosphere. Feeling helpless, afraid, and confused, he hurtled toward a large object until darkness engulfed him.

"Look matey, I've caught one," said Spock with a beaming smile. He swung up the rod and grabbed the little fish.

Stu looked at the sprat now flapping in Spock's palm and tutted. "Yes mate, it's a monster. With any luck it would cover a Ritz cracker," said Stu sounding unimpressed. "Put it back in the sea and maybe you will catch it again when it grows up to be two inches long," he chuckled.

Spock frowned, "Huh, so what have you caught then Captain Birdseye, hmm?" asked a disgruntled, but proud, Spock.

Stu smirked as he continued fishing from the rocks in Pattaya bay.

The lads had been fishing for almost three hours now, with the only result being the baby Quoy parrotfish, now housed in Spock's large mauler. He de-gorged the hook from the fish's mouth and mumbled. "Another exciting day in paradise."

Spock put the small fish into a rock pool and watched it swim away into the warm South China Sea.

'It has been a bloody exciting day; it's a hard life being a fish,' pondered the little Quoy. This thought was quickly followed by, 'Oh bollocks!' before swimming into the gaping jaws of a passing barracuda.

— Chapter One —

Stu sighed. “It’s too hot, shall we call it a day for the fishing?” he said reeling in the hook with the bait still attached. Looking disappointed he added. “Well, at least the worm had plenty of swimming practice.”

Spock sniggered. “Good idea matey, he said. “I can tell everyone about my catch, and you can tell them about the ones that got away.”

Stu groaned as they packed their fishing gear away into his Toyota SUV and Spock tapped the rim of his hat. “See matey, the problem was that you don’t have a Lucky Fishing hat.”

They both now lived on the outskirts of Pattaya with their wives, Dao and Moo, and as Stu drove, Spock asked. “What time are Pon and Kim coming?”

Stu shook his head, “I’m not sure, Pon said that he was picking Kim up from the airport at one o’clock and then going home for a few hours before coming here. So I guess they will be here around four.”

Spock looked at his watch. “Good. That gives us plenty of time to pop somewhere for a beer.”

“Yeah, shame not to,” said Stu, as they drove toward the Butterfly Bar on the *Darkside of Pattaya in search of an afternoon libation and get their todgers fondled in the short time bar.

Spock smirked. “Did I mention I caught a fish?” he said gloating.

Stu sighed and said. “Yes, several times already.”

Spock chuckled and said. “I can’t wait to tell Moo.”

“You do that,” groaned Stu accelerating and wishing the Butterfly Bar was closer so he wouldn’t have to listen to Spock bleating on about that bloody fish and rubbing it in that he had caught bugger all.

“Did I mention I caught a fish?” said Spock moments later, followed by another burst of acceleration and another long groan from Stu.

Dao and Moo felt happy. They enjoyed working at their clothing stall and raking in the cash. Although it had been difficult at first, they had now settled into a routine, making enough money to send back to their homes and take care of their parents and Dao’s son.

The girls ran their large clothing stall on the busy outdoor Threpsit market, and worked long hours in the hot Thailand sun.

That day, they were going to close early because of Pon and Kim’s visit. Spock and Stu said they would pick them up and take them home at around 3:30pm. The girls enjoyed the times that Pon and Kim stayed with them.

Dao and Moo now spoke good English, albeit with a Northern English twang, and with Kim now able to speak Thai, the girls loved hearing about her lifestyle at the Imperial Palace and the Royal Family. Kim coming was a good excuse for the girls to get rid of the lads, which suited Spock and Stu as that meant that they could go on the piss with Pon.

While the girls packed up their clothes in large plastic boxes, Moo noticed that Dao did not appear to be her usual cheery self.

Moo puckered her brow and asked. “What’s the matter? Everything okay with you and Stu.”

Dao forced a smile, nodded, and said. “Yes, everything’s fine.”

Stu and Dao rarely argued, unlike Spock and Moo who constantly bickered, but they always made up. It was a normal occurrence to hear the slapping of Spock's head and, “stupid man,” being shouted from Spock’s garden.

Moo had known Dao most of her life, so with them growing up together, she knew that Dao was lying.

“No you’re not,” said Moo frowning, “Kim’s coming and you are usually ecstatic about that.”

Dao glared at Moo and snapped, “I’m okay, and everything’s fine.”

As the girls carried on putting their stock away, Dao sighed, puckered her brow, and said. “Sorry Moo. I do have something on my mind.”

Moo, knew there was a problem and by the look of guilt on Dao’s face, knew what it was. She glared at her and asked. “When’s he coming?”

Dao, sounding aloof, said. “He arrives in Bangkok tonight and coming here tomorrow.”

Moo frowned, pursed her lips, and sounding angry, said. “You have been lucky so far, but you need to finish it now.”

Dao looked worried when Moo reminded her. “You have too much to lose, and with Pon and Kim being here, you won’t be able to go to see him. You know how observant Kim is, she will ask questions and if Stu ever found out you will lose everything, and I know you don’t want that.”

Dao nodded and sounding pensive, said, “I know, but I will end it this time. I promise.”

“Okay, well make sure you do,” said Moo, but felt unconvinced as Dao looked nervous and blinked rapidly as they carried on packing away their stock in silence.

The bar girl scene was now behind them. It had been years since they worked as bargirls and they were now married and content. Nevertheless, they both still had a history with customers, which at times caught up with Dao, although so far she had managed to make excuses and bluff her way through. Unfortunately, for the happy couple on this occasion, the timing would prove disastrous.

It had been several years since Spock, Stu, and Pon’s Cambodian adventure, and when the lads first took Dao and Moo to England.

It was fun at first because the girls were gullible, especially when told that they would see herds of wild bison meandering majestically over sandy plains. After finding out what bison were, Dao and Moo became excited.

However, when this turned out to be a few scraggy-arsed donkeys wandering up and down a cold Cleethorpes beach, with scraggier-arsed tourists wearing Kiss-Me-Quick hats’ riding on them, the girls quickly realised that this would not be the paradise they hoped. “Shit-hole,” was an expression frequently used and after a few months, as winter took hold, the girls became restless, cold, and homesick.

The cold bleak winter depressed the girls and with Stu too stingy to have central heating installed, he told them to put on extra jumpers and the word was “Brisk,” and not “Fucking freezing,” so they soon became fed up. With neither Dao nor Moo able to drive, they stayed in the cold flat most of the time watching TV, and with it only having English channels, they soon picked up the language.

Stu and Spock noticed the change in the girls and knew they were not happy, and neither were they. Things had become mundane for them all and they knew they had no life in England.

Stu decided after talking with his Mum, Pearl, to sell his business, move to Pattaya, and set up a business for the girls.

Stu had built up a successful business in Cleethorpes over the years and soon sold his shop and other investments, giving him a tidy sum of money.

It was an emotional goodbye with their respective parents and Chunky, who was to stay with Pearl. The two lovable old fossils would take care of each other.

“Take care of him, Dao, you know how useless he is,” said Pearl as she hugged her son with tears in her eyes.

“I will Pearl,” said Dao who had grown fond of Stu’s old Mum. “And we will visit several times a year, but only in the summer.” She chuckled.

“Thanks love,” said Pearl as she then hugged Dao and said to Stu. “And make sure you take good care of Dao, buggerlugs.”

“I will mum,” said Stu as they got into the taxi to pick up Spock and Moo from Spock’s Mums and then go to the train station.

Stu looked at his teary-eyed mum and felt a lump in his throat as he looked at Chunky sat on the floor beside her looking bemused. He then smirked as she looked at him, cocked her head, and then licked her arse.”

With tears in his eyes, Stu waved goodbye, as did Dao, who then put her arm around his shoulder and smiled.

It was a sullen train ride to Manchester airport, but after a few beers on the plane, the lads relaxed and looked forward to their future.

They relocated to Thailand, much to the delight of Pon and Kim, who helped them by using their high-ranking status. Pon used his influence to help build their Pattaya homes on two plots of land next to each other, given to them by Taksin.

Pon and Kim were regular visitors from Bangkok, and once their houses were finished, Moo and Spock, along with Stu and Dao married in a joint ceremony. Pearl and Spock’s Mum Hilda flew over for the joyous occasion although they both found Thailand too hot.

Dao and Moo set up a clothes shop on Threpasit market, while Spock and Stu did bugger all, which suited them. Although Spock was short of cash at times, he had wangled a small disability pension from the UK, and Stu helped him when he was skint.

Spock and Stu attempted to learn Thai language but lost interest after the first few lessons, even with the girls’ badgering. Dao and Moo eventually gave up trying, concluding that the loves of their lives were as thick as pig shit.

They all now felt contented and settled with their idyllic lives.

Pon relaxed in the plush living room in his house in the Imperial Palace grounds. He had just called Kim, who said she was in the departures lounge at Noi Bai, Hanoi International Airport awaiting her flight.

Pon smiled and looked at his watch. ‘Good, she will be home soon,’ he thought. ‘I will pick her up from Savarnabhumi Airport, bring her home, and have a few hours with Samnan before going to Pattaya.’

Pon missed Kim more than he could have imagined. Married now for over two years, they had a year-old son named Samnan who they doted on.

Apart from the odd weekend, when his duties took him to Salaburi to teach the Tinju, it had been the longest period that he and his wife had been apart. Kim was always by Pon’s side, and when he had his tail surgically removed for the first time, she would not let go of his hand throughout the long surgical procedure.

Spock and Stu went to visit him in hospital, but that was just to take the piss.

Pon had gained weight over the years, although still muscular, he had to train harder to keep trim, especially after his Pattaya excursions. He had lost no speed, power, or agility; he’d just gained a little beer podge. There came a knock on his door and Banti came in with Samnan to see Pon and find out what time Kim would be home.

Kim had been gone for almost two weeks visiting her parents in Vietnam after her mother got rushed to hospital.

They had spoken several times a day on the phone and after almost a fortnight in hospital, her mother was told that she would make a full recovery and discharged for outpatient care, so Kim could return home to Thailand.

Kim and Pon discussed the visit to Vietnam. They usually went everywhere together. However, an important Saudi dignitary had made an appointment to view the Sacred Light, and protocol dictated the Prime Master needed to be present. They decided that Kim should go alone. Kim felt sad, but she hadn't seen her parents since her and Pons wedding in Cambodia and they had not yet seen their Grandson.

"I will take the videos we took with Samnan on my phone and maybe when Mother gets better they will come here and visit," said Kim sounding hopeful.

Kim now worked in the Thai Royal Palace's foreign diplomatic office in Bangkok. Her role was the intermediary between Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam for Royal visits, which had been similar to her work in Cambodia, but required more administration.

She loved her job and spent a lot of time on the phone with the Palace in Phnom Penh speaking to her old friends. Her Majesty's Norodom Monineath Sihanouk and Princess Bhuppa Devi, had become like second mothers to Kim when she worked there as their maid-in-waiting.

Colonel Tighe had long since been forgotten, with no trace of him or Tar ever being found.

Kim had told Pon on the phone that her mother had suffered a minor heart attack although Pon knew something else troubled her because she had sounded evasive. It was at Kim's request that they would go to Pattaya as soon as she got home because she needed to get advice from Stu or Spock on a matter that troubled her, and with them being from England, they could advise her.

Pon agreed, as he had not been on a good night out since after the second unsuccessful operation to remove his tail several months ago. Neither Pon nor the surgeons could understand why the bloody thing kept growing back, but it did, much to the amusement of Stu and Spock. Norman Rumble Junior's revenge was permanent.

Pon now spoke English and he'd learned a few extracurricular words not found in any English dictionary, which, according to Spock and Stu were colloquial words used commonly in North East England. An example of which was, "stop talking bollocks," that Pon heard Stu, Spock, Dao, and Moo say frequently.

Banti and Samnan left an hour later with Pon's thoughts again on Kim's return and he had already booked the Royal limousine to meet her at the airport. The dark tinted windows gave Pon ideas of what to do on the twenty-minute journey back to the Imperial Palace, with even more notions about the two-hour drive to Pattaya. He chuckled to himself and thought, 'I had better pack the mullet.' The intercom buzzing interrupted his intimate thoughts.

"Your car is here, Prime Master," said a female voice.

"Thank you Nid, please tell the driver I will be there soon," said Pon and smirked as he went into their bedroom to search for his mullet.

It was a hot and sticky afternoon in Pattaya when Stu and Spock pulled up at Threpsit market alongside Dao and Moo's shop, and the girls climbed into the back seat.

"Hello, darling," Stu said, leaning back to kiss Dao.

Dao smiled and put her arms over Stu's shoulders and hugged his chest.

"Did you catch any fish darling?" she asked sounding interested.

"I did," interrupted Spock, who told the girls about how he wrestled with the monster for over an hour before it succumbed and how he'd used his last ounce of strength reeling it in.

Stu groaned and banged his head against the steering wheel in despair.

Moo rescued the situation from becoming too boring by slapping Spock around the head. "Don't talk bollocks, stupid man."

Spock went quiet and thought. 'I'll tell her the story again later, only next time with more Gusto.'

Stu drove out of the market and they arrived home fifteen minutes later. It had been a tiring day and they

relaxed at Stu's while waiting for the Heads... Shit and Goyt.

When Pon and Kim came, they always stayed at Stu's because Spock's house always stunk of gorgonzola cheese, with Moo's feet giving off a pungent odour due to her standing at their market stall all day.

The time ticked by, and at 4:30pm, Stu said. "I thought Pon would have phoned by now?"

Stu's mobile phone then rang; he looked at the number and smiled. "Ah, speak of the devil."

"He must have known that we were talking about him, the mystical old dog," said Spock and chuckled.

Stu, sounding cheerful, answered. "Hello, mate. Are you on your way?"

Pon, sounding anxious, said, "No Stu, Kim never arrived. Her luggage came, but when everyone cleared immigration, she wasn't there."

"Oh," said Stu and furrowed his brow. "What could have happened to her?"

Stu could hear the concern in Pons voice as he said. "I don't know, but when I called Hanoi airport, they said that Kim had checked in, but never boarded the plane. They told me that although they called her several times over the airport tannoy to board, she never went to the gate, so the plane had to leave without her."

Stu, hearing Pon that sounded upset, said. "Don't worry mate, perhaps she caught a later flight."

"No... When she called me this morning from Hanoi airport, she told me that she was in departures waiting to board her flight," said Pon with a quake in his voice. "After I spoke to the check-in desk and departures at the airport, I called Kim's father Thran. He said he couldn't understand what had happened because he drove her to the airport earlier and saw her checking in. Thran also felt concerned and went back to the airport after I told him that Kim did not board the plane. He called me thirty minutes later and said he had ordered airport security to instigate a search. They are still searching the airport but so far there has been no sign of her and they don't have security cameras in the airport. We have both been trying to call her mobile for several hours, but it has been switched off." Pon sighed. "Stu, I am worried because there were things that Kim wouldn't tell me over the phone. Something troubled her which she wanted to discuss with you and Spock, but I don't know what."

"Oh," said Stu, "I wonder what that could be about. Hang on, I'll tell Spock and the girls."

Stu told the three who could see from his expression that something was wrong and knew Pon would be worried.

Stu glanced at Spock, who now looked concerned as Stu again spoke to Pon and asked. "Are you still at Bangkok airport, mate?"

"Yes, I will stay here until I hear any news."

"Okay, wait there, we are on our way," said Stu, and nodded to Spock as he heard Pon breathing a sigh of relief.

"Thank you my friends, I will wait for you in the arrivals section, see you soon," said Pon and hung up.

Spock puckered his brow. "It may be something or nothing," he said sounding curious, "but we better go and make sure everything's okay."

Stu nodded. "Yep, and we need to go now, Shithead sounded frantic on the phone," said Stu and shrugged, "if it turns out to be nothing and Kim has already turned up or contacted him, we can stay overnight in Bangkok and travel down here with them tomorrow."

"Yes," said Dao, nodding, "you must go alone though, we have the shop to look after so we must stay here."

Moo threw Dao a furtive glance, as Spock nodded, looked at them, smiled, and said. "Right girls, pack our bags just in case; we could be going on another adventure." He smirked at Stu and said, "I better go grab my hat."

Pon paced around the arrivals gate. Although he knew it was fruitless, he could think of nothing else to do for the two hours that it would take for Spock and Stu to get there. He called Kim's mobile phone again, sighed, and then called Taksin.

***In Appendix**

— Chapter Two —

Ca leant back in the passenger seat feeling content. He noticed the speedometer read 120km/hr.

“Slow down,” he said, putting his hand on the nervous driver’s shoulder to reassure him. “We aren’t in any hurry. The hard part is over.”

The driver eased off the accelerator and the car slowed to 80km/hr.

Ca looked at the driver. “Are you okay Tuong?”

Tuong’s knuckles had turned white from gripping onto the steering wheel and with his voice trembling said, “Yes, fine.”

Ca smiled. “Just relax we will soon be there?”

He then looked at the passenger sat on the back seat, smiled, and in a soft tone, asked. “Are you okay?”

The passenger glared at him, but said nothing.

Still smiling, Ca faced forward, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes as his thoughts drifted back into memories.

Ca was born in 1970 in the small seaside village of Phan Yar, a few kilometres South West of Ky Anh on the north east coast of Vietnam. Within a small bay of clear emerald water and shallow coral reefs, there’s a white sandy beach extending to a lush jungle scattered with coconut trees and shrubs. Off shore, huge rocks jutted from the calm ocean covered in sporadic patches of lush green foliage. These small uninhabited islands were home to many varieties of tropical birds and an idyllic setting for a young boy to grow up in.

Ca’s real name was Gio-A Tho, but given the nickname, Ca, meaning fish in Vietnamese, as he was always playing in the rock pools as a child catching the small spry.

He grew up in a small, wooden shack on the village outskirts close to the ocean. His mother, Diudang Tho, worked sun drying, salting, and curing fish that his father caught, which they sold on the village market.

In 1973, his father Nguyen went with other village men to join the National Front for Liberation of South Vietnam, the Viet Cong, and sent to Cu Chi province to fight the Americans from the underground tunnels.

Young Ca did not know what an American was or why they were fighting, but he and his elder brother Phaol took up their father’s role as fishermen. This was a happy time for Ca and because he was young and small, his brother did most of the work, leaving young Ca to potter around in the rock pools.

Viet Cong soldier’s families received no communications, so Ca had almost forgotten about his father.

One day in 1975, while playing in his favourite rock pool, he heard loud bangs, fireworks, and the sound of people cheering emanating from the village.

Phaol, a muscular young teenager, sloshed his way out of the ocean and went over to Ca.

Ca furrowed his brow, looked puzzled, and asked. “What’s happening Phaol?”

Phaol stood with his hands on his hips looking concerned. “I don’t know,” he said and stood next to his young brother as an old jeep approached.

Ca looked confused as he saw Pu-ed, the head of the village, driving the jeep with his mother and a fierce-looking man with them. As the jeep got closer, he looked up at his brother who trembled, his mouth quivering. “Who’s that man sitting with mother?”

Phaol’s jaw dropped and then he yelled, “Father.” He then ran towards the oncoming jeep, with little Ca stumbling behind, trying to keep up.

Over the next few years, Vietnam changed. The Northern army took the southern capitol, Saigon in April

1975, thus ending the Vietnam War.

The Northern armies backed by the communist bloc were victorious against the South, and thanks to President Nixon's policy, the *Vietnamization, Americans scarpered and North and South Vietnam unified.

The family went back to a normal routine, and young Ca now understood a little about war, due to his father screaming in his sleep about his dead friends.

He told the brothers about the poisonous centipedes and bloodsucking leaches that roamed around the muddy, dank, musty Cu Chi tunnels and the screams of wounded men in the underground hospital section.

He wasn't the same man who Phaol remembered. This once peaceful and gentle fisherman now had a cold, vacant expression.

The family were given the land that they lived on, plus a hectare of lush fertile land 500 metres away, for the bravery that Nguyen Tho had displayed during the war.

With the new Vietnamese government having little money and not enough to pay the soldiers, they gave them land instead.

This pleased the family. They went about their usual business of fishing, but now tended their land.

Several months later, while Ca, Phaol, and their father Nguyen splashed the water to scare fish into their net, they heard a vehicle's horn sound several times.

They went to the water's edge and saw several jeeps with soldiers in uniform coming towards them. Most of the soldiers they recognised as Viet Cong soldiers from the last war and Nguyen's old comrades who lived in Phan Yar, along with several of the older village boys.

Nguyen went over to the jeeps where an officer, unknown to Nguyen, greeted him. Nguyen got into the jeep and it drove the short distance to the Tho's wooden shack and Nguyen and the officer went inside.

The two boys walked the short distance back to their home. They passed the parked jeeps outside, and, as they reached the open door of the shack, they saw their mother inside, before their father noticed them and closed the door.

"Are you coming with us, Phaol?" asked one young soldier from a Jeep.

Phaol puckered his brow and looked bemused. "Why, where are you going?"

The soldier chuckled and said. "To Cambodia, to kick the Khmer Rouge arses."

The others soldiers laughed, but Phaol did not understand and shrugged.

Several minutes later, their mother, father, and the officer emerged. The two boys walked towards their parents. Nguyen, now dressed in his old beige Viet Cong uniform, got into the front seat of a jeep and looked at his sons.

"Take care of your mother," he said, and showing no emotion, stared forward as the Jeep pulled away.

The astonished boys looked agog as the jeep drove away from their shack and their mother came and stood beside them.

Ca looked up at his mother's stern face and asked. "Where's father going?"

Diudang looked at her bemused son and told them. "Your Father has gone to help the Cambodians who have nasty people in charge called Khmer Rouge. Other Cambodians are fighting them but need help."

Phaol and Ca looked confused and Phaol asked. "Why? If Cambodians are fighting Cambodians, what does that have to do with Vietnam?"

Diudang looked at her young sons, and with tears welling up in her eyes, whispered. "Because the world's gone mad son." She wiped away her tears, went into the small outdoor kitchen area, and shouted, "dinner will be ready in ten minutes."

Several months later, a Vietnamese government official and a soldier came to the family home in an army

jeep.

The official got out and went to speak with Diudang who was drying fish at the side of their shack. He told that her husband was last seen in Neak Loueng, a large tropical-forest on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, where much of the fighting had taken place.

He explained that Nguyen and his troops were engaged in a bloody battle with the Khmer Rouge. Although they had lost control in Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge still fought viciously to regain control and bloody battles still raged on the city outskirts and in the jungles. The man told Diudang that Nguyen's troop had forced the Khmer Rouge to flee further into the jungle, but Nguyen had not reported into base. He said that many bodies could not be found due to the dense jungle vegetation and a wide, fast-flowing branch of the Mekong River, which dragged bodies under.

The expressionless faced man told Diudang that her husband, Haṣī, Nguyen Tho, was therefore now presumed dead and handed her a scrap of paper with details hand written on it with a government stamp. Diudang looked at her husband's death certificate and as her eyes filled with tears the official got back into jeep and it drove away.

The year was 1986. Ca had grown into a small but handsome young man. He still lived with his mother on the beachfront and still fished, but he was now alone, as his brother had gone to work in Ho Chi Minh City a few years earlier.

They employed two boys from the village to tend their land and crops that now flourished. They had rich soil, and although a little sandy, they were able to grow Serrano peppers, luffa beans, aubergines, and other seasonal vegetables.

Vietnam was transformed when a new reformer government came to power led by 71-year-old Nguyen Van Linh, who became the party's new general secretary.

The new government turned Vietnam from a command economy into a socialist-oriented market economy. With the authority of the state remaining unchallenged, private ownership of farms and companies engaged in commodity production, deregulation, and foreign investment were encouraged, while the state maintained control over strategic industry.

The economy of Vietnam subsequently achieved rapid growth in agricultural and industrial production, construction, and exports.

This was an exciting and liberating time for Ca and the Vietnamese people.

Ca frequently visited the discos and night scenes in Ky Anh town and regularly sang along with the local bands. He never had a steady girlfriend and did not want one.

One hot, humid afternoon, Ca sat on the wooden porch of the family's new brick home that he renovated with funds that Phaol had sent home. He watched as a red Hyundai Excel 1.5 drove towards his house.

'Who could this be?' He wondered staring at the car looking intrigued. 'We don't get many visitors here, and none driving shiny new cars,' he thought.

The car pulled up in front of the porch and the driver got out carrying a map.

The man smiled and bowed his head.

Ca returned the bow and the man showed Ca the map. "Hello, could you help me? I am looking for this plot of land which I think is around here, but I am not too sure."

Ca looked at the map and could make out several familiar tracks close by. He went with the man back to the car and laid the map on the car bonnet in the direction they needed to travel.

A middle-aged man got out of the car and stood beside them, while Ca explained the directions and pointed the way.

The first man smiled and sounding relieved said. "Thanks a lot, we have been driving around in circles for

hours. I am Go-Lhom, an architect and surveyor.”

Ca smiled and said. “I am Gio-A but everyone calls me Ca.”

The other man, who looked more official and had a superior demeanour, bowed and said. “Hello Ca, I am Thran Tangh.”

Ca returned the bow and Thran looked at his house. “That’s a nice house; I am having one built on the plot of land where you showed us.” Thran smiled. “So it looks like we will be neighbours young Ca.” They thanked Ca and drove in the direction he had indicated.

Ca went back and sat on his porch. ‘That is a huge chunk of land, so that will be a big house.’ He thought, ‘and Thran looked important in his designer suit and gold watch, I bet he is rich.’ He sniggered.

Over the next few days, bulldozers, builders, surveyors, and Go-Lhom moved into the area and constructed corrugated tin shacks for the workers and their families, turning a construction site into a small community.

After a few months, a large house took shape.

As it was close by, Ca and his mother watched with interest, as did the other villagers, who had seen nothing so grand.

Six months later, the large five-bedroom house was completed, with high external walls surrounding the property and grounds with a large metal gate at the front.

The interior had a wide central staircase leading to the five bedrooms on the first floor, with a large dining room, living room, study and kitchen on the ground floor. A small building to accommodate staff was built at the back of the main property with a swimming pool at the centre of a vast sway of landscaped gardens.

A gravelled pathway led from the entrance gate to the house’s large forecourt and garage.

New plush furnishings arrived a few days later and once set up, the small community of builders dispersed.

Pu-ed, the village headman and market owner felt annoyed when they left after doing a roaring trade from them over the past few months.

Several days after the workers left, a saloon car arrived and went through the gates. It pulled up outside the front door; where three people got out and went inside.

The villagers heard within minutes of the newcomer’s arrival and Pu-ed announced they would throw a party in their honour. He delegated himself to invite the new arrivals.

The villagers rallied around to cook meals and supplied the Saigon beer and rouo qoc liu, rice and kans grass: Vietnamese moonshine.

Twilight saw the corrugated tin sheet covered open community centre alive with music and laughter.

Villagers had set up a stage and a small diesel generator powered the lights, an old record player, and a microphone.

Several villagers played Moon Lutes, and Bing Nams, similar to a harmonica, along with Thungs, bamboo xylophones, with the villagers dancing and singing.

The new family arrived at 7pm, accompanied by Pu-ed, who got onto the small raised plywood stage at the front, grabbed the microphone, and addressed the village community.

“Hello comrades and friends,” he said and held his hand out at the newcomers. “This is Thran, his lovely wife Nga, and their daughter Hern.” He smiled at them and bowed. “Welcome to Phan Yar village.” The Tangh family bowed, smiled at the crowd, and left the stage.

The music started again and the villagers went back to their dancing, apart from Ca, who couldn’t take his eyes off Hern.

He thought she looked to be around 14 or 15 years old and was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

He and the other villagers looked surprised when Hern strode up to the record player, removed the record, and replaced it with one that she had taken out of a plastic bag containing several black vinyl records.

The villagers went silent and looked at one another as they listened to an American pop song.

Hern went on to the patch of land in the centre where everyone danced. Everyone stopped and looked at Hern now dancing. They all looked bemused for several minutes before they smiled and danced along; even though not understanding the lyrics.

Ca smiled and edged his way towards Hern. He moved closer until he danced in front of her and said, "Hello Hern, my name is Ca."

Hern looked at Ca and smiled. "Hi Ca, how are you? "

"I am fine. Well, I am more than fine now," said Ca with an impish smile. "I met your father a few months ago."

"Oh, well it's nice to meet you Ca, and I hope we can be friends while I am here," she said, and seeing the way the handsome young man gazed at her, she blushed.

"I hope we can too," said Ca, bobbing his head to the sound of the music.

As the night wore on, the pair danced and chatted until the party finished.

Ca awoke early the next day and walked the short distance into the village centre, to help clean up the mess from last night's party. The market and village centre bustled with villagers, cleaning and setting out market stalls. Ca helped with the cleaning, and while washing down a piece of muddy pathway in front of his mother's fish stall, he heard a soft voice behind him. "Good morning, Ca." Ca swung around to face Hern.

"Good morning," said Ca, noticing how cute Hern looked in the first light of day. She seemed to gleam.

Hern smiled. "How are you this morning?"

"Fine," said Ca. "You're awake early, I thought you city folk slept all day," he chuckled.

"Very funny, I came to see if I could help clean before we leave for Hanoi this afternoon."

Ca frowned, gulped, and with a stammer in his voice said. "Leave... But you've only just arrived."

Hern giggled. "Don't worry," she said, "we will only be gone for a short while. Father has to work in *Saigon next month, so my mother and I will stay here for a while." She smirked. "Why? Will you miss me?"

Ca smiled and nodded. "Sure," he said, "I need someone to dance with."

"That dirt won't clean itself Ca," interrupted Diudang who came out and scolded her son.

Ca smiled and picked up rubbish off the floor.

Hern chuckled and said. "I'll see you soon," and walked away.

The days dragged on for Ca over the next month. He couldn't take his mind off Hern. Even though the meeting was brief, he knew she was the girl he would one day marry.

Ca was setting his fishing net one day in the shallow waters of the bay when he noticed a figure walking on the sand towards him.

Hern seeing Ca looking at her, waved.

Ca smiled, anchored his net, and walked to the shoreline. While trying to appear macho, he tripped on a sharp rock, stubbed his toe, and yelped.

Looking in pain, he hobbled ashore and limped his way over to a giggling Hern.

"It hurts you know," said Ca looking indignant and embarrassed.

Hern put her hand in front of her mouth. “Sorry,” she said, still giggling.

Ca looked at her and smiled. “Never mind, welcome home.”

The next few days were like a dreamy haze for Hern and Ca. While her father worked in Saigon, Hern and her mother, Nga, would stay at their beachside residence in Phan Yar. With the family based in Hanoi, Thran had the property built for the times he went to work in Saigon, which wasn’t too far away for him to commute.

Nga kept to herself in their large home and although she had house cleaners and auxiliary staff, Nga, liked to keep herself busy tending to their large manicured gardens.

Hern and Ca became inseparable, spending balmy days on the beach, with Ca teaching her how to fish, although she spent most of the beginning of her lessons belching out seawater when she tried to go out of her depth.

Hern was well educated and attended the High School for Gifted Students, Hanoi: HNUE. Although intelligent and analytical like her father, she enjoyed the new freedom and social scene that teenagers now enjoyed, especially the western music.

She’d taught herself English along with her father because state schools never had English language on their curriculum. It was a good bonding experience for them both to learn together, and Thran used his influence in the Vietnamese government to have teaching aids shipped over from all parts of the world.

Hern and Ca listened to records in her room, with her explaining the meaning of the lyrics of her favourite song, the one she had played at the party.

Ca thought it made little sense, with no sad story and no happy ending. To him, it sounded a thumping beat of nonsense, but because Hern liked it, so did he.

Nga had noticed the friendship developing, but trusted them because they were Vietnamese, so knew there would be no hanky panky because that wasn’t allowed until marriage.

Ten days later, Thran returned from Saigon, and the following day the family left for Hanoi.

Ca and Hern again said a tearful farewell to each other the night before and the following morning Ca came to their house, stood at the gate, and watched them leave.

He saw Hern in the back seat as the car drove past him and Thran and Nga smiled at him from the front seat while Hern smiled and waved at him from the back.

Ca sighed and felt a lump in his throat as Hern carried on waving out of the back window until the car disappeared from view.

Hern’s father, Thran Tangh, was the deputy minister of public security and an influential communist party member, recently elected to join the national assembly of four-hundred and ninety-three delegates.

Thran and his brother, Lee, had been Trung Tá, Lieutenant Colonels during the American-South Vietnamese and Cambodian conflicts.

However, after the Khmer Rouge were ousted from power, his brother remained in Cambodia as a liaison officer, and helped with the reconstruction of the war-torn, ravished land and impoverished, helpless Cambodian people.

The Tangh family became regular visitors to their beachside retreat over the next few years. Ca and Hern had grown close. Hern taught Ca to read and write Vietnamese and speak English.

Hern wanted Ca to move to Hanoi to work, so they could spend more time together, but Ca refused. He didn’t want to leave his mother, which exasperated Hern. She knew he could better himself and find a well-paying job, but he felt happy being a fisherman. The only other thing he wanted in life was a family with Hern.

They had fallen in love, with them assuming that one day they would marry.

Hern, now nineteen-years-old, worked in Hanoi with her father in the security department as his personal

assistant, and although it was a well-paying job, she loathed it and felt she had wasted her education. The only thing she looked forward to was being with Ca.

Thran was a kind but strict father and usually let Hern have her own way and, although he never showed emotion, Hern knew he loved her. Besides, she had her uncle Lee and his new wife to supply the pampering on their visits over from Cambodia.

However, these visits became less frequent, with the Cambodian Royal Family due to return from their years of exile, her new aunt was placed in charge of the reintegration of the Royals as the Cambodian government liaison.

Ca desperately wanted to marry Hern but she kept asking him to wait. She knew her father wouldn't approve yet. Even though Thran and Ca got on well, her father had made it clear that Hern would marry someone of the same high status and wealth.

One day, Ca and Hern sat on the beach watching the twilight as they did most evenings when she visited. Ca took Hern's hand, gazed into her brown eyes, and said. "We have been together for many years. I love you and want to stay with you forever, so I can wake up next to you every day for the rest of my life. I will ask your father for his permission to marry you. I am sure he likes me."

Hern frowned, looked at Ca, and nodded. "Yes, my Father likes you a lot. But I have already told you about the kind of man who he wants me to marry. Wait a few more years. I am sure he will mellow when I refuse to marry any suitor that comes along." She kissed Ca's cheek, "I love you so much, but wait...We are happy aren't we?"

Ca looked at Hern who smiled but her eyes looked sad. He sighed and said, "Yes, we are happy. Okay, I'll wait a while longer."

He smiled, and they hugged. However, Ca had already decided that he had waited long enough and would not wait any longer. 'The worst they can say is wait,' he thought. 'They are like my second parents and I always give them the largest and freshest fish daily when they visit, so I am sure they'll approve. Besides, I am a landowner. They leave tomorrow so I will ask tonight. Hern will be overjoyed when her parents say yes.' He smirked as Hern released her hug and sat back. She stroked his cheek with the back of her hand and said. "I love you and I want to stay with you, but I must go home soon."

Ca nodded, and they watched as the sun went down over the horizon like a bright red and orange curtain, followed by a fiery mauve and then dark royal blue as the night set in.

With the moon's glow bathing the small beach, and carrying small torches, they walked hand in hand towards the Tangh's home.

Thran smiled as he watched the couple from the window strolling up the driveway to the house. Thran knew Ca and Hern were close, but he assumed they were like brother and sister. He trusted Ca like the son they never had.

Hern and Ca went into the house and up to her room to listen to records, which they usually did until Ca went home around 8:30. However, tonight would be different. Ca got up to leave at 8pm.

"I will walk you to the door," said Hern smiling.

Ca smiled and said. "No, that's okay, you are up early, and I know you like your sleep." He chuckled and left the room.

Hern furrowed her brow. 'Hmm, that's strange, he usually likes me to see him to the door and say a long goodbye.'

Thran stood at the living room window, admiring his new S.U.V. parked in the forecourt when Ca came into the living room.

Thran looked at him and smiled. "What is it Ca? You look like you have got the weight of the world on your shoulders."

Ca, although rehearsing what he was going to say many times over in his head, now didn't know what to

say as his mouth felt dry and his palms sweated. He took a deep breath and with his voice quaking said, “Thran; Hern and I are very much in love and I would like yours and Nga’s permission to marry her.”

Thran looked surprised and frowned at Ca.

Ca looked worried when Thran then looked angry and sounding abrasive asked. “Where is Hern now?”

“She’s in her room playing records. She thought I was going home,” said Ca as he saw Thran’s face changing from a mild, happy looking man into a raging bull as his nostrils flared. Thran stormed out of the room, went to the foot of the stairs, and hollered.

“Hern! Hern, come down here, Now!”

Hern came out of her room and looked down at her father and Ca, who stood behind him looking worried.

“What’s the matter?” asked Hern looking confused and scared.

“Come down here,” bellowed Thran, which woke Nga, who also went downstairs.

They assembled in the living room and Thran glared at Hern and Ca. He then flew into a rage and fired question after question at the trembling couple, about how long the affair had been going on and how many times they’d had sex, etc. He ranted and raved at the confused, frightened, couple. Hern had never seen her father so angry before, seeing a different face of this Jekyll and Hyde, and she did not like it. She looked at Ca, who cowered, hung his head and looked at the floor.

Hern felt furious with Ca, ‘why didn’t he listen when I told him to wait,’ she thought.

The yelling, screaming, and denials went on for twenty minutes, and then Thran wagged his finger at Hern, and shouted. “You know the rules young lady. You will not marry beneath you. Fisher boy here is sole shit. You will not see each other again. Do you understand?”

Hern looked into her father’s eyes as he glared at her. She nodded, sobbed, and with a quiver in her voice said. “Yes Father, I understand.”

He then glowered at Ca and with his hands on his hip leaned forward and through grated teeth said. “As for you Ca; if I see you here again, the repercussions will be hard and permanent. Do you understand?”

Ca looked into Thran’s angry eyes. He knew Thran was rich and powerful, and he did not seem like the same man who he had always regarded as his second father; that feeling disappeared thirty minutes ago.

Ca nodded and stared back at Thran. “Yes, I understand, but I still, and always will, love Hern,” said Ca sounding defiant.

Thran glared at him, and breathing heavy through flared nostrils said. “Get out of my house.” He pointed to the door.

Ca left the house full of fear and confusion; he had never expected that reaction.

He walked down the driveway with his hands on his cheeks looking fraught and thinking, ‘What have I done?’

The next morning Ca walked to the Tangh’s house and hid behind a tree. Twenty minutes later the S.U.V. came out and drove past his hidden position. Hern sat in the rear seat as the vehicle sped away. She never looked back.

Thran only wanted the best for his daughter, somebody rich with high status to make her life easy. A poor fisherman with an uneducated upbringing would certainly not be an ideal candidate. Now his thoughts turned to damage limitation. Although Hern and Ca both denied having sex, it would be hard to find a good husband if the bride wasn’t a virgin, especially in Vietnam. He felt betrayed by Ca, whom he would never forgive. But for now, he would forget and concentrate on creating the best future for Hern.

Over the next few years, the Tangh’s visits became less frequent. Hern hardly ever came, and when she did, she stayed in the house or within the grounds. Unbeknownst to Thran and Nga, she would occasionally sneak out to meet Ca, but their meetings were brief and planned like a military operation.

During one of their secret trysts on the beach, Hern looked sullen as she told Ca what her father planned. She told him that her father had ordered her to go work in Cambodia. She said that her uncle Lee had procured her a position in the Royal Palace as a maid to Her Majesty, Norodom Monineath Sihanouk.

Ca felt his world falling apart when Hern said that her father would change her name before she went to Cambodia to make it not sound so Vietnamese. So any prospective husbands would not be able to trace her indiscretions.

Vietnamese, Cambodian and Thai people can change their name by simple deed pole, which is commonplace among the rich younger South East Asians

Although she was rebellious and ostracised her father, Hern could not disobey him.

Hern, knowing their time together was short as she had to get home before Nga and Thran realised she had snuck out, and speaking rapidly to lighten the sombre moment, said. “My new surname will be *Doung. Father named me out of respect of the country’s war hero, General Doung Van Mihn, (or ‘Big Mihn’ as he was better known)

She held Ca’s hands and smiled. “Father let me choose my first name. So to remind me of you, I chose the name of the singer of our special song, Kids in America.”

Ca smiled and seeing tears welling up in Hern’s eyes kissed her and held her close. Ca could feel her heart beating, as they stood entwined in a lover’s embrace for several minutes.

“When do you leave?” asked Ca, his voice sounding hoarse.

Hern gazed into his eyes and said. “We leave here early morning, and I fly to Cambodia the following evening from Hanoi.”

Ca felt like he had been hit with a sledgehammer and stared at Hern, and not knowing what to say or do, he just chuckled nervously.

“Maybe it won’t be so bad. I will write to you all the time, and you can write to me, and when they put a phone line in the village, we can call each other,” said Hern smiling.

Ca nodded and smiled. “I love Hern Tangh,” he said. “But now I also love Kim Doung.”

“And I will always love Gio-a Tho,” said Hern, her eyes filling with tears as she stroked Ca’s tear soaked face.

Ca didn’t want this moment to end, but as Hern sniffed back her tears, she said, “I have to go now.” She released her embrace and smiled.

Ca watched her walking away into the darkness with her flashlight. They both knew this could be the last time they would see each other. Hern never looked back.

Over the next few weeks, Ca received several letters from her saying how much she enjoyed her job and how the royals had been good to her, but she missed him so much. However, the letters became more formal as time went on. Ca wrote back several times, but was unsure whether she received his mail as she never mentioned them in her letters, and after several months, her letters stopped.

Over the next few years, Phan Tar village grew into a prosperous community with many of the new wealthy Vietnamese buying cheap plots of land and having properties built.

There seemed to be continuous development, modernisation, and construction work going on in and around the village.

Ca sold the family’s hectare of land to a developer for a tidy profit, using some of the money to renovate and extend the family home. He bought several small long tail boats and set up a fishing tour company for the new tourist invasion.

Thran and Nga no longer came, which suited Ca as he now loathed Thran who he felt had ruined his and

Hern's life. He dreamt of revenge, became a nasty, vindictive man, who could not get Hern out of his thoughts.

It had been many years since Hern went to Cambodia and Ca had heard nothing from her, although thought about her often.

One afternoon, Ca was in the village, drunk as usual in one of the dingy karaoke bars. He sang Di Prolap Chim, Blood on the Hands, a sad Vietnamese love song and one of his favourites. He wobbled and then squinted at a woman stood in the doorway smiling.

Ca gasped when he focused and exclaimed. "Hern!"

Hern waved, went over, kissed his cheek, and put her arms around him.

She replaced the microphone on its stand, led him off the stage, and walked him out of the dark karaoke bar.

They stood outside and as Ca squinted in the sunlight, Hern took his hands and looking serious but sad said, "Ca, I have not heard from you for so long, and I need to speak with you."

Ca's heart raced and he couldn't think straight as he tried to fathom out whether he was dreaming. He stared at her, and apart from dressing finer and speaking more eloquently, it was still his Hern.

Hern smiled at him. "We need to go somewhere private and talk."

They got onto Ca's moped, drove to his house, and went into his bedroom.

They sat on Ca's bed. Hern complimented him on how nice his house now looked.

She then held his hand and told him about her time in Phnom Penh and her new life.

Ca asked why she had stopped writing and had not answered his letters.

Hern looked surprised and said she hadn't received any letters from him, but said she knew that her father would tell her uncle to block any mail coming from him.

"I knew you would have tried, so I never gave up hope. Even though we have been apart for many years, you have always been in my thoughts. I've always been loyal and had no interest in other men," said Hern and then looked pensive. "This is the first time I have been home since I left all those years ago." Ca's heart raced as he smiled.

He then saw Hern biting her bottom lip and looking upset as she gulped and sounding sombre said, "Ca, my love, I am engaged to be married."

Ca gasped and felt like his heart had been ripped from his chest. They had spent what seemed like a lifetime apart, though the bond between them remained strong, and although he had always clung to the hope that they would still be together one day.

The revelation hit him like a truck as Hern told him how her fiancé and her parents arranged the marriage that she'd had no say in.

"Do you love him?" asked Ca with a rasp in his voice and tears in his eyes.

Hern frowned and looked angry. "No, and I never will. He is a horrible old Cambodian man, but rich and powerful. He and my parents are staying at our beach house today and discussing my large dowry and arranging the date. My parents like him and although father is rich, he thinks with this man I will be set for life as they are concerned because I should be married at my age. Father also knows this man would not find out anything about my past and love for you."

Hern looked forlorn. "Father has ordered this, and I cannot, or dare not, refuse. This man is powerful and dangerous in Cambodia and can harm Uncle Lee, so I am also afraid for him and his family."

She then smiled and said. "We are only here for one day and leave in the morning. I am supposed to be shopping, but I wanted to see you. I still, and always will, only love you."

Ca, still feeling tipsy and now morose, put his head in his hands and wept.

Hern stoked his head, stood up, and whispered. “I have something important to give you, something only you could take.”

Ca, feeling confused, looked at her as she smiled at him and then took off her clothes.

It had been almost a year since Ca was intimate with Hern and his life had changed. For the first few weeks after Hern left, Ca moped around in and out of bars, getting into fights, and ending up in drunken stupors. After a month, with support from his mother and brother Phaol, he accepted the loss of Hern and married a young girl from the village.

Ca pulled himself together and realising he and Hern would never be together, concentrated on his business.

With the vast sums of money that the Vietnamese Nouveau Riche brought to the coastal towns and villages to build and develop beach resorts, Ca’s business became extremely lucrative with the influx of tourists that followed. The once quiet bay where he lived now bustled with tourists, and jet skis whizzed around the bay churning up the still emerald waters.

Ca now owned six large wooden boats and ran a busy tour and fishing business with his old friend and now his brother-in-law, Tuong, who was also a *Vovinam master/instructor. Ca, although content, always felt an emptiness.

His mother came home one day from the now large village centre and showed him a copy of the Thanh Nien International Newspaper. Although his mother couldn’t read or write, she’d recognised some faces on a photograph on the front page.

Ca read the headline about the marriage of the daughter of a high ranking Vietnamese government official. He looked at the photograph of the wedding in Cambodia with the Cambodian and Thai Royals and the smiling bride and groom, Pon and Kim. He glared at the man standing alongside them smiling. This man, Hern’s father, Thran Tangh, Ca still hated with a vengeance and blamed him for wrecking his happiness.

He then stared at Pon in the photo. ‘Huh, Hern lied when she said he was an old man,’ thought Ca, who threw the newspaper in the bin.

That had happened several years earlier.

Ca, now into his late thirties had two young daughters and several lucrative businesses, including properties in and around the now expanded and modernised Phan Yar village, but life for Ca became mundane.

That was until a few months ago, when the strangers arrived.

— Chapter Three —

Stu pulled into the car park of Suvarnabhumi airport in Bangkok. He and Spock stepped out of the Hilux, much to his relief. He had endured two hours of Spock's wittering about the bloody sprat he had caught earlier, along with recipes he could have used to cook it. However, to top off the already shitty day Stu was having, when they arrived at the airport, Spock put on his daft hat, given to him after their Cambodian Adventure. "Lucky Adventure hat, matey. You shouldn't leave home without one," he said and sniggered as they walked along the walkway and into the arrivals section of the airport.

'All we need now is the mad monk to be wearing his stupid mullet and that would round the day off,' thought Stu as the automatic doors slid open. He groaned when he saw Pon standing at the entrance wearing his mullet.

"Thank you for coming," said Pon sounding anxious.

Spock and Stu saw the worry on Pon's face as Spock asked. "Have you heard any news from Kim?"

Pon sighed, shook his head, and looked concerned. "No, I have heard nothing and neither had her Father the last time we spoke. He told me had ordered road blocks put in place in case Kim had left the airport."

Spock and Stu looked dumfounded as Pon told them. "Taksin came to help and set up a team to liaise with Vietnam and investigate. He is now coordinating search efforts with Kim's father."

Pon took them through the airport into the cordoned off V.I.P lounge, where a control centre had been set up. A myriad of laptop computers and uniformed officials chatted away on mobile phones, both in Thai and Vietnamese. Pon went over to Taksin.

Taksin wai-ed Spock and Stu..

"Have you heard anything yet Khun Taksin?" asked Pon sounding hopeful.

Taksin nodded and said. "We may have something Pon. Kim's Father called me not long ago. He told me that a staff member at the Hanoi airport came forward and told him they had remembered seeing a woman fitting Kim's description leaving the departure lounge and meeting someone outside that morning.

Pon furrowed his brow and looked surprised. "That must have been after she called me, but why would she leave the airport, and who did she meet?"

Taksin shook his head and said. "That's what Thran is now trying to find out." He sighed, "but with them having no CCTV at Hanoi Airport, that may prove difficult. The staff member didn't get a good look at the man, so only gave a vague description. Although it had been a long time before the staff member came forward, Thran still felt confident of finding her. He realised she must have left the airport after doing a thorough search outside with no trace. "

Pon puckered his brow. "I don't understand. Who would Kim know that was important enough for her to leave the airport and miss her flight?"

Taksin sighed, shrugged, and looked at his long-time friend. "I haven't a clue Pon; hopefully Thran will find the answer to that question."

Pon looked wistful as he racked his brains.

Taksin interrupted his thoughts. "There isn't much you can do here Pon except worry, so why don't you take care of Stu and Spock. If there are any developments, I will call you at the Palace."

Pon sighed and nodded. "You're right Khun Taksin; I will be more use at the Imperial Palace. I will see if I can find anything at home that could give us some clue about Kim's disappearance and let you know. Please call me if you receive any more news."

Stu drove them to the Imperial Palace and as they left the airport Pon said, "Thank you for coming to help me my brothers. Kim was insistent that she spoke to you both the last time we talked, so maybe together we can shed light on this mystery."

“I hope so matey, this all sounds strange,” said Spock rubbing his chin and looking at Pon’s worried expression.

A few hours later, after Spock and Stu settled into their rooms in Pon’s living quarters and Pon had searched through Kim’s belongings, the three sat in Pon’s living room discussing events. Pon told them that he had found nothing to give him any clues why she had disappeared and, as they sat and pondered, the phone rang.

Pon looked at the number and sounding frantic answered. “Hello Thran, has there been any news?”

A conversation then took place in English with Pon unable to speak Vietnamese, and Kim’s father spoke no Thai.

Pon gasped, his jaw dropped, and he looked horrified as Thran said something. He looked stunned and with a quake in his voice said. “Kim has been kidnapped.”

Spock and Stu jolted back. “What?” asked Stu wide-eyed.

Pon’s head pounded and he couldn’t think straight as Thran then said something that puzzled him. He raised his eyebrows and said. “Wait a moment please Thran,” He pressed the speakerphone button so Spock and Stu could hear the conversation. “Could you repeat the last part so my English friends can listen?”

“Certainly,” said Thran, his voice trembling. “I received a phone call from a man saying that Kim had been abducted and although safe for now, the man insisted that I call off any search in Vietnam or she would be harmed.”

Thran then repeated the part of the conversation that Pon wanted Stu and Spock to hear and said. “Although the voice was synthesized, it sounded like an Englishman.” Thran paused before telling them. “It’s suspicious because I recently had dealings with an Englishman who came to my house before my wife Nga got sick.”

Pon furrowed his brow and stammered. “What does he want?”

“He didn’t say, only that he would contact me again tomorrow unless he saw any police searching or suspected that they were investigating. In that case, I would have to accept the consequences.” Thran then sounded frustrated as he said. “I called off the search because I didn’t know where he was and couldn’t risk him seeing my forces.”

“That was a wise decision Thran,” said Pon. “Did you manage to trace the call?”

“No, it was made from a state of the art scrambled satellite phone, which we have never come across before. My security team are checking with the US military to see if it is something that they developed. I will also have the Vietnamese government undercover security forces investigate.”

“Is that wise?” asked Pon, sounding concerned.

“Don’t worry Pon; they are the best and very discreet. They will inform me of every step before they take it.” Thran then sounded enraged. “She is my only daughter. They will pay for this with their lives.”

Pon looked concerned and reminded him. “She is also my wife and Samnan’s mother.”

There was a pause before Thran said softly, “I know Pon, sorry Son. I am a little edgy and angry. Good night, I will call you when they contact me again. Please give my grandson a hug.”

Thran hung up and looked at his phone. He understood Pons concerns but there were two men he trusted implicitly; one was his brother Lee and the other was his and Lees old army colleague, Brigadier Nhat, and the three had saved each other’s life many times. Thran knew his friend was a skilled tactician, an excellent Battalion Commander, and discreet. He knew this would probably be his last chance to ask for help so he made the phone calls.

Pon, Spock, and Stu sat looking at one another. “I wonder who this Englishman is?” said Pon and shrugged. He looked at the bemused faces of Spock and Stu. “You two are the only English people we know, my brothers.”

Stu rubbed the side of his face. “Perhaps that’s why Kim needed to speak with us.”

Pon and Spock nodded and Pon sighed. With many thoughts and emotions running through his head he felt a menace in the air, which he couldn’t understand. But for now, all they could do was wait. The situation felt grim, leaving Pon feeling helpless.

Spock, seeing the anguish on Pon’s face, leaned over to him, put his large arm around his shoulder, and said, “I caught a whopper of a fish today, matey.”

Dao and Moo chatted after the lads departed, wondering what could have happened to Kim. She was like a sister to them, so they felt concerned.

Stu had called Dao earlier and told her that they had arrived at the airport and that he would call them later when he had more news.

The girls had heard nothing for a few hours and watched TV.

Moo and her smelly feet stayed in Dao’s spare room in case they received any news.

As they watched the end of a Thai soap opera, Dao’s mobile phone rang. She looked at the caller’s number and then looked nervously at Moo, who glared back at her before she answered the call.

“Oh, err, Hello, John.”

Dao looked guilty, as she covered the phone with her hand and mumbled, hoping Moo couldn’t hear her conversation.

Moo couldn’t, except for the end part when she heard her say. “No problem. I will see you tomorrow. Call me when you get here.”

Dao hung up and looked sheepish as Moo glared at her.

“Come on,” said Dao, trying to justify her action. “We are Thai girls, and we did it when we were working girls. I love Stu, so I will finish with John this time, I promise.”

Moo scowled at Dao and firmly reminded her. “We are now wives, and if Stu ever found out that you’d betrayed him, you would suffer. You have been lucky so far, but if you spoil things for Spock and me, our friendship will be over. Do you understand, Dao?”

Dao nodded and although feeling chastised, she spent the next few minutes persuading Moo that it was over and she would tell John when she saw him the following day. Moo knew she was lying.

After Spock and Stu’s first visit to Thailand many years earlier, Dao and Moo returned to Pattaya after seeing the lads off at Bangkok International Airport, and went back to work in the Happy World Bar.

Over the next few weeks, Moo went with a few foreign men for short time sex to support her family. Dao stayed in the bar with the other girls learning English and waiting for Stu. However, the Mamasan, the bar owner Charlie’s wife, told Dao that Stu would not come back. She said they rarely did, and insisted that Dao went with other foreigner men to make money to support the bar and her family.

“Besides,” she told her, “Stu wasn’t sending you any money, so he couldn’t have cared that much.”

Although Mamasan tried to convince her otherwise, Dao felt certain that Stu would return. However, to keep Mamasan and Charlie happy, she acted more outgoing and stayed close to Moo to learn the tricks.

She’d had men spend the evening chatting to her and buying her drinks, but when they offered to pay her bar fine, she always said that she had, ‘Men,’ a period. Mamasan and Charlie didn’t mind as the men bought her lots of drinks and came back over the next few nights to see her and buy more drinks. However, they soon got fed up waiting for her and found new ladies, so there was never any problem.

Stu had called her several times from England and said that he would get back there as soon as possible. Dao felt happy when he called, as she could hear from the tone of his voice how much he missed her, and

although at times she felt lonely, she couldn't wait to be with him again.

Several weeks later, two foreign men came into the bar. One was a quiet unassuming, middle-aged man, the other, a brash gobshite, who went straight over to Dao and Moo who were sitting behind the bar.

Moo shrieked. "Hello, sexy men. What would you like to drink?"

The brash man smiled and looking smug said. "You're nice. If I buy you a Bacardi Breezer, will you ride me like Sea Biscuit?"

He then burst out roaring with laughter at his own wit, knowing that the Thai girls would not understand.

Dao went to the fridge, took out two Pai Yen cold towels, and went to the other side of the bar. Moo took the men two beers and two Bacardi Breezers for her and Dao.

Moo wiped a cold towel over the brash gits face and neck and he introduced himself as Taff from Wales, and he said his shy friend was called John, also from Wales. Taff said that he had been to Pattaya many times, but it was John's first time and told the girls they were staying for a week.

John looked shy and blushed when Dao wiped the cold towel over his sunburnt shoulders. "Ahh, that feels good," said John who smiled at her. "You are very pretty, what's your name?"

Taff and John stayed in the bar for a few hours talking to the girls and then Taff went to speak to Charlie and handed him 400 Thai Baht. Dao and Moo looked puzzled when they saw Charlie smiling as he handed the money to his wife.

"Right," said Taff coming back over to the three. "Get your bags girls, I've paid your bar fines." Moo chuckled and went to get her hooker bag, with essentials; a change of clothes, condoms, toothpaste etc.

Taff looked at Dao and said. "And don't give me any bullshit about having 'Men.' I know that old scam."

Dao felt uneasy and looked at Mamasan who scowled at her and nodded. She sighed and wondered what to do. John looked at her and smiled. Seeing Dao trembling and looking nervous, he leant forward and whispered in her ear. "It's okay, we don't have to do anything if you don't want to."

Dao felt tense around John at first as she did not want to be with him. It was only because of the pressure exerted by Moo and Mamasan reminding her that this was her job, and for the first two nights, they only slept together.

She relaxed after a few days of fun with the Welsh men. She now enjoyed being with John, who was a patient man and helped her with her English language. The men paid a thousand Baht a day to the girls, plus the 200 Baht bar fine. They drank in the Happy World Bar every night, so everyone was pleased. Dao never felt the same excitement or affection for John as she did with Stu, but she needed the money.

Taff and John went home a week later. Dao and Moo returned to the bar to work. John told Dao that he would stay in contact. Taff told Moo that he wouldn't be seeing her again because she was too wild, which suited Moo as she liked the non-committal short timers and liked Spock.

However, the thunderbolt had struck John who was besotted with Dao.

Stu and Spock returned to Pattaya several weeks after the Welsh lads had gone home and rekindled their romances with the girls over the next fortnight.

Over the next few years, Stu and Spock made frequent visits to Pattaya, as did John, although usually at different times.

If Stu and John came out at the same time, Dao would stay with Stu, but sneak out to see John, lying to him about her baby being sick and having to go home to her village.

She occasionally told the same story to Stu if John booked an excursion away from Pattaya.

John kept to his word and called Dao frequently. He sent her 20,000 Baht a month along with gifts from England and told her several times he wanted to marry her, but she always made excuses why she could not marry him yet.

This arrangement suited Dao for a while until things got serious with Stu and she stopped all contact with John.

Dao didn't tell John she was marrying Stu. She knew how he felt about her and didn't want to hurt him. Besides, Stu had been her first long-time foreign boyfriend and the only man she loved.

Now happily married, Dao had forgotten about John. That was until a few months ago

Dao and Moo were setting up their shop on Threpsit market when Dao heard a familiar voice behind her.

"Hello Dao."

She turned around and saw John smiling at her.

Dao, feeling embarrassed, blushed, smiled, and said, "Oh, err, hello John. How are you?"

John gazed at her and replied. "I'm fine, somebody in Pattaya told me you worked here, so I had to come and find out if it was true." He then smiled. "It's been a long time; how have you been?"

Moo looked at Dao as she stammered and told John how sorry she felt about losing contact and having to change her phone number. She told him she was happy and doing well with her business, but never mentioned that she was married, and although John noticed her wedding ring, he didn't mention it.

John told her how he had spent the last few years trying to trace her and said he'd thought about her all the time. He told her that he still loved her and felt happy now he had seen her again.

Moo had known about John for many years, but could say nothing to Spock, as this was the Thai bar girl edict. Besides, it was at her and Mamasan's insistence that Dao went with John in the first place.

Dao and John chatted for several minutes, and then John asked. "Can I see you later?"

Dao saw the hopeful look in John's eyes, so she agreed to meet him. She knew that Stu and Spock would be out until late, and she and Moo usually closed the shop around 10:00 pm and then went home, so she agreed to meet John at 8:00 pm.

Moo felt angry, because not only did it mean her packing the shop stock away alone, but she would have to make excuses if Dao didn't get home before Spock and Stu.

John left the market with a spring in his step and Moo looked at Dao and said. "Why didn't you tell him you are married?"

Dao shook her head, sighed, and said. "I was surprised to see him. I thought he would have found a new lady and had forgotten about me by now. But I will tell him tonight."

"Well, you had better tell him," said Moo, puckering her brow.

"Yes, I will," said Dao frowning.

That evening, Dao met John in The Green Onion, a small restaurant on Second Road. She knew it would be a safe meeting place. It was where she and John had eaten together many times before, and a place Stu never went.

Dao told John about now being married to Stu. She thought he would be angry with her as he had sent her a lot of money over the years.

Instead, he looked forlorn and told her that he knew because he had seen her wedding ring, but he didn't care. He told her that he still loved her and wanted to be with her and take care of her no matter what.

Dao felt guilty and tears welled up in her eyes.

Dao wasn't westernised as quickly as Moo and she was gullible. To have two or more boyfriends was normal. Mamasan had told her that until a commitment was made by the Ferang, foreigner, she should have as many men as possible sending her money. Dao knew Mamasan was right after speaking with other long time bar girls who'd had many men sending money, with several being engaged two or three times.

Moo only went short times for business, and once she'd committed to Spock, that stopped.

Dao however, had only been with two; she loved one and was fond of the other.

Dao became confused. Although Stu was now her husband, and she loved him, she was flattered that John still wanted her.

They finished eating, and John, not wanting to lose her again, and not wanting the night to end asked. "Will you come to my room so we can talk more?"

Dao felt sorry for John when he'd told her he slept alone every time he came to Pattaya. He assured her that he would never take another girl now he had found her again.

Dao looked into his sad pleading eyes and nodded. "Okay John, but only for an hour, I have to go home." They left the restaurant and went to John's hotel room.

Over the next few months, unbeknownst to Stu, Dao had liaisons with John when he came to Pattaya on a two-week holiday. She did not know how to say no to John, and realising that she had broken his heart before, felt guilty.

Dao spent the odd day and occasionally a few hours at night with John, which John felt happy about, knowing Dao would never leave Stu as she constantly spoke about him. This wasn't a problem in Dao's mind because it was only sex and she pitied John. She felt madly in love with Stu, her husband.

Moo, knowing about the affair tried to talk Dao into ending it with John many times. She told her that Westerners didn't accept infidelity as easy as Thais and Dao told her every time John came to Thailand that she would end it, but she didn't.

Pon and Stu stayed awake all night talking. Pon felt worried and restless, and Stu couldn't sleep through Spock's snoring in an armchair.

The telephone rang at 6:30 am, which woke Spock.

Pon put the call on speakerphone so they could all hear.

"Good morning," said Thran, sounding frantic. "I just received another call from the kidnapper. Again, the voice was synthesised but it was the same man. The conversation was brief, with instructions for you, Pon."

Pon looked bewildered as Thran told them.

"On Kim's flight there should be two unclaimed pieces of luggage; Kim's, and one other. A green holdall with North Territory decals belonging to Mr Lang Duc. He said that you would find further instructions in there." Thran sighed. "That was all he said."

"Okay, thanks Thran," said Pon, "I will tell Taksin and call you when we find the bag and check the contents. Hopefully, we can then figure out a plan."

"I hope so, son," said Thran and hung up.

Pon called Taksin who contacted his team at the airport and told them to retrieve the luggage and try to find the whereabouts of a Vietnamese man called Mr Lang Duc.

Pon, Stu, and Spock arrived at the airport an hour later and were met by Taksin, who hustled them through to the operations centre in the VIP lounge. An empty holdall with old clothes piled up next to it and a large envelope addressed to Prime Master, Pon Meesilli, lay on a desk.

Taksin picked up the envelope, handed it to Pon, and told them. "That was on top of that pile of clothes in the bag."

"What about Lang Duc?" asked Pon.

Taksin picked up the flight manifest laid on the table, showed it to Pon and said. "Lang Duc was booked on Kim's flight. He checked in at Hanoi airport, but never boarded."

Pon looked at the manifest. He remembered the woman at Hanoi airport telling him about another person

not boarding but had paid little attention because he was worried about Kim.

Taksin furrowed his brow, looked at Pon, and said. “This has been carefully planned Pon. I called Thran and told him and he said he will check on their database, but he assumed that Mr Lang Duc would be a phoney name and he’d used a forged passport when he checked in.”

Pon’s hands trembled as he ripped open the sealed envelope, took out a sheet of A4 typed paper, and read it. He looked bemused and then took out the rest of the contents, which were several aged photographs, newspaper clippings and a DVD disc.

Pon then read the letter aloud and held up the DVD. “If you want to see Kim Meesilli / Hern Tangh alive, follow the instructions on the DVD. What we want, along with the three people involved, are marked on the information.”

Pon and Taksin had seen the clippings and one photocopied picture before, they had been used for an investigation that they had closed many years ago. When they saw the other picture they looked at Stu and Spock, and Pon showed them.

Spock and Stu looked at the newspaper clippings, and although they couldn’t understand the Thai writing, they saw the picture of Pon stood outside the Temple of the Sacred light, with his head circled with red marker pen.

They then looked at the other photocopied image of an old photograph and gasped. “That’s us years ago at the Siam Sawasdee Hotel,” said Spock as he saw the picture of them and Pon leaving the hotel, with all their heads circled in red marker pen.

Spock looked closer and spluttered, “but how? Who could have taken that? it must have been ages ago because we haven’t stayed at the Siam Sawasdee for years, and look, I am wearing my old Adventure Hat ”

The four looked baffled at one another and then Pon handed Stu an enlarged photograph, and said, “They want this in exchange for Kim.”

Stu and Spock looked at the picture and then frowned.

They looked up at Pon and Taksin who now spoke to one another in Thai.

Taksin then ordered a DVD player brought in and Stu whispered to Spock. “That fucking box will be the death of us.”

Spock smiled, raised his eyebrows up and down, and said. “Another adventure matey; maybe we’ll catch some fish.”

Stu groaned as Taksin’s staff brought in a DVD player and TV and set them up.

Pon placed the disc into the slot and pressed play. There was silence in the room as the disc loaded, and then a digitally distorted face appeared on the screen.

— Chapter Four —

The oncology consultant's prognosis for the dying Sheik Mohammed Del Alaz was dire, giving him only months to live.

Mohammed lay in a bed at the centre of a large domed room inside his palatial home in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. His bed, surrounded by life-saving machines, monitors, and medical equipment, looked out of place in a room surrounded by ancient treasures. It appeared as if someone had plopped a hospital ward in the middle of the Louvre Museum.

He was now a gaunt frail figure as cancer ravished his once handsome features and toned body. He had the best care and facilities that his wealth could buy. His bodyguards and medical staff were never more than a few minutes away from his large well-equipped bedside.

From his deathbed, he could view all the treasures and holy relics from different cultures that he had amassed over the years.

The collection, worth billions of dollars, and previously housed in a large underground vault, were now where he could always view them: displayed in his final accommodation and soon to be his mausoleum. 'These treasures would appease Allah and the prophet Mohammed,' he thought, looking around at the religious icons.

However, one relic had eluded him and cost the life of his closest advisor and friend, Abdul Bhunto.

That was many years ago, but he had never forgotten about what he'd witnessed from the webcam and the newspaper clippings regarding Abdul's demise, which still haunted him.

He had kept up to date with the news media of the event, but due to his other business commitments, followed by his illness with its slow and painful spread, he had neither the time nor energy to pursue his justice or exact his revenge until now, and accepting his fate, he could focus on his last defiant act.

Mohammed, although hazy from the narcotic pain relieving drugs looked around his treasure room and at the glass case that he'd had built to house the relic he'd never obtained. In the case was a gold gilded framed photograph of Abdul.

He stared at the photo and with his voice weak, said. "Soon my old friend, I will see you soon. You died bravely on the quest with infidels and I will join you at Allah's right hand." He wiped tears from his eyes, croaked "Allah is great," and prayed before his pain intensified. He pressed a button at his side that injected morphine into him and he fell into a narcotic induced sleep.

Several minutes later, Mohammed felt awake. He gazed at an ectoplasm figure taking shape at the foot of his bed. He looked wide-eyed as Abdul appeared looking pale and ghostly with cupped hands as if something appeared to be missing. The apparition looked at him and he saw desperation and sadness in Abdul's eyes before he faded.

Mohammed awoke with a start and covered in sweat, let out a piercing scream. Doctor and bodyguards rushed over to his bedside and tried to calm him down, and after the Doctors gave him a sedative, he fell into a dreamless sleep.

Mohammed awoke pain free several hours later and as he sat up in bed. He set up a laptop computer on his over-bed table, he summoned Mophi, his bodyguard and head of security.

Mophi was a large, muscular Arabian with an expressionless face, giving him a menacing demeanour. Previously in the Iranian Special Forces, he was now a well-paid bodyguard and mercenary for Mohammed and a ruthless bastard.

Mohammed, typing instructions into a laptop computer when Mophi entered, summoned him over to his bed.

Mophi bowed and stood at the side of Mohammed's bedside as he showed him images on the screen.

“I want this,” he said and pointed at an image, “and I want the men responsible for the death of Abdul, my loyal and trusted friend.”

Mophi looked, smirked, and nodded.

“I will find out more information,” said Mohammed and frowned. “Meanwhile, get the Ayatollah here. Sons of Islam have been offended and slain. We need to get a fatwa ruling against these infidels.” Mophi nodded as Mohammed put another image on the screen and smirked.

Mohammed pointed at the screen and said, “then bring him to me.”

Dawn broke over the arid plains of Las Vegas. Gates clanging, heavy doors banging, and the chatter of prisoners and guards, signalled another day at Clerk Detention Centre as the inmates’ lined up for breakfast.

A tall, slim man stood alone. He looked weary as he waited in line for food.

A stocky, shaven-headed tattooed American man standing behind him shoved him and smirked. “Oops, sorry Professor,” he said with a growl.

The man turned, glanced at the bully, sighed, and then faced forward as the server dolloped scrambled eggs onto his plate.

The tattooed man shoved him again and said. “Do you intend to eat that?”

“Yes, I do,” said the man with an articulate English accent and walked away.

“You’re getting brave Professor,” said the American lout who followed the Englishman to a bench table and sat beside him.

The other prisoners eating at the table smirked as the bully glared at the Brit, frowned, and growled at him.

The Englishman sighed, picked up his plate, and scraped the contents onto the lout’s, who smiled. “That’s better,” he said and started eating both breakfasts.

The Englishman got up and sauntered back to his cell. ‘I hate this place,’ he thought, ‘but it’s better than the alternative I suppose.’

John Crawford, A.K.A Professor Julian Grimes, and known in Las Vegas as the Duke Philip of Southerby, had served almost a year of his seven-year jail sentence for multiple gambling frauds, which he’d committed around Vegas.

Grimes had returned to Vegas years earlier to set up another convoluted con against the man whom he had conned out of a fortune, Sheik Mohammed Del Alaz.

When Grimes arrived in Vegas, he spent a few months settling in and integrating into the high rolling scene at the casinos, also acquiring a cocaine habit that made him sloppy and uncontrollable.

Funded by Mohammed, he lived way beyond his means and kept the Sheik continually paying for his fictional quest to discover the whereabouts of the missing Gnostic gospels of Judas Iscariot. He had told the Sheik he knew the parchments contained conversations between Judas and the Messiah, reputed to contain mind-blowing revelations about Judas being requested by Jesus to betray him to the Romans, thus completing his final act for god.

After several years of living the high-life, the Sheik, after his failed attempt to get the Holy relic of Buddha, felt angry and warned Grimes that he wanted results, threatening to cut off his funds and giving him a deadline to produce proof.

Grimes, fearing that he was about to be rumbled, flew to England to meet with an old acquaintance; a Cambridge Professor, Daniel Farquharson, who specialised in translating ancient languages. Even though Grimes previously duped the Professor, they formulated a plan to fool the stupid Sheik. Grimes then travelled to Beni Masah in Egypt, the site of the discovery of some of the original gospels and other scrolls found from the same period written on papyrus.

After befriending a local Egyptian official with a few bribes, he'd obtained old sheets of Coptic papyrus containing only small pieces of script considered being of no historic value.

Grimes then returned to England, took the papyrus to Daniel, and flew back to Vegas.

It took Daniel weeks of painstaking effort with microscopic scraping, shaving, and a laser to erase the ancient texts.

Daniel then mixed the ink he'd scraped off with squid ink and used an ageing process that he had pioneered.

It took several weeks for the new ink formula to integrate and stabilise, and then Daniel wrote new text in Aramaic onto the blank sheets of Coptic papyrus.

While Grimes played roulette in the Riviera hotel's casino, his mobile phone rang.

"Hello Julian," said Daniel, sounding excited.

Grimes smiled. "Hi Dan, have you finished?"

Daniel chuckled. "Yes, at last it's ready. When are you coming to collect the parchments and when do I get paid?"

"Great!" Grimes exclaimed, "I will be on the first available flight to London and I will pay you once I have seen the results, old bean."

"Okay, I'll see you soon," said Daniel sounding relieved and hung up.

Grimes lit a cigar, picked up his martini, and put his arms around an escort girl hovering nearby. "Pick a number young lady, and put \$10,000 on it. I'm on a roll."

The following day, Grimes flew to Cairo and met his contact, Fayed. There was another man with him, a tall Egyptian, who introduced himself as Mr Tariq, the editor for the Sawi Al-Azhar, the weekly independent newspaper.

The three went to the Grand Hyatt hotel, and after an hour, the editor and Fayed departed.

Grimes left ten minutes later, took a taxi to the Cairo International Airport, and caught a British Airways flight to Heathrow.

He arrived in London during the early hours of the morning and after hiring a car, drove to Daniel Farquharson's house in Cambridge.

"Good morning Daniel." said Grimes with a beaming smile when the Professor answered the door.

Daniel smiled, invited him in, and led him into the living room, where a thin leather-bound bundle of papyrus lay on the table. Grimes took the pile of papyrus, and whilst Daniel made a pot of tea, he unfolded the small roll and inspected a sheet of Daniel's handy-work.

The aged writing looked perfect and even though Grimes couldn't understand the text, he felt certain that Farquharson would have written something poignant.

Daniel brought in the tea tray and poured the tea into bone china cups,

"What have you written Daniel?" asked Grimes

"Oh, as you instructed, conversations between Judas and Jesus, with one in particular about the Messiah asking Judas to grass him up, which would cause a stink in Rome if it ever got out," said Daniel and chuckled.

After an hour chatting, Grimes stood up, thanked Daniel, and handed him \$200.

Daniel looked at the money and then glared at Grimes and said, "Huh! Same as the last time. That doesn't look to be £2000 you promised me, and this took weeks of hard work."

"No, its \$200," said Grimes, who stared at Daniel and sounding angry said. "That's all I got from my

buyer. Now take it or leave it.”

Daniel frowned and said, “What can I do with dollars? Don’t you at least have sterling?”

Grimes just glared as he held out the money and Daniel sighed as he reluctantly took it.

Grimes grabbed the leather bound bundle and left. He got into the car, smiling at the stupidity and weakness of Farquharson, who was watching from the window as Grimes pulled away.

Daniel smirked and said aloud. “Shame me once, shame on you. Shame me twice, then shame on me.”

He refreshed the teapot and fiddled with the mobile phone that he had taken earlier from Grimes’s jacket pocket, which he’d hung in the hallway. He turned on the phone and went through Grimes’s contacts.

Grimes flew to Cairo a few days later and again met with Tariq and Fayed. Tariq handed him a copy of a newspaper, and Grimes handed them both a wad of cash. He then boarded a flight to King Khalid International Airport, Saudi Arabia, and went to Mohammed’s palatial residence.

Mohammed apologised for rushing his search, but it had been many months since his search began and had so far cost the Sheik a small fortune. However, unbeknownst to him, Grimes had gambled away or snorted most of it.

Before Grimes handed over the papyrus, he told the Sheik about his difficult search, recovery, and how he’d obtained the lost gospels under dangerous circumstances and how he now feared for his life.

Grimes then took the leather-bound scrolls from his briefcase and handed them to him.

The Sheik unravelled the scroll and stared at the scripture on a sheet of papyrus and Grimes told him. “The information on those pages will rock the Christian religion to its core.”

Sheik Mohammed, looking delighted, said, “Excellent work Julian... well done.”

Grimes then gave the Sheik the newspaper that Tariq had given to him, written in Arabic. The front page had a photograph taken inside a small cave with empty catacombs and a few small pieces of ancient papyrus scattered around the floor.

“Here Sheik Mohammed,” said Grimes, and looking puzzled shrugged. “I don’t know what it says because it is written in Arabic, but I know it has something to do with my discovery.” He then smirked when the Sheik looked at the newspaper.

The Sheik smiled as he read the article.

‘A cave discovered two days ago on the outskirts of the village of Minya Beni in the district of Mazar, contained several empty catacombs. Evidence suggested from remaining fragments of papyrus that these may have been the long rumoured parchments from the Gnostic gospels and scriptures of Judas Iscariot. The cave was almost empty and the Egyptian police believe this to be a recent plunder and are following several leads.

The Sheik looked thrilled and handed Grimes a suitcase containing a million dollars in cash. He leant back into his chair and said to Grimes, “Why don’t you take a well-earned break Julian until the heat dies down. You can call me when you have another acquisition.”

Grimes smiled, thanked the Sheik, took the money, and flew back to Vegas.

Several days later, Grimes was again losing at the roulette tables when a concierge from the Riviera Casino came up to him.

“Sorry to disturb you, Your Grace, but there is a phone call for you in reception. We transferred it to booth number 1 and the caller is on hold.”

Grimes furrowed his brow and looking worried said. “Nobody knows I am here.”

The concierge shrugged and Grimes went over to the reception desk and into a phone booth 1. He picked up the receiver and with his voice trembling, said, “Hello?”

“Hello, Julian. Or perhaps I should call you Duke Phillip of Southerby,” said a familiar voice on the other end of the phone.

Grimes, surprised, stammered, “Oh err, Hello, Mohammed. What can I do for you?” He felt confused as to how the Sheik had found out where he was.

Mohammed, sounding aloof, said. “If you look outside your booth, you will see a large Arabian gentleman.”

Grimes kept the telephone receiver to his ear as he looked outside the booth and saw a giant Arab leaning against a marble pillar glaring at him.

“That is my bodyguard, Mophi. He has been following you for a few days now,” said Mohammed.

“Why?” said Grimes with a quiver in his voice, “I don’t understand. You have the papyrus and the newspaper.”

“Ah, yes, the fake newspaper,” said Mohammed. “The one written by the late Mr Tariq.”

Grimes gulped now terrified. “What do you mean by the Late Mr Tariq?”

“Nasty accident, Mr Tariq drowned in his pool,” said Mohammed and paused before telling him. “As for the papyrus written by Judas Iscariot; shall I tell you what it said?”

Grimes, now trembling, listened as the Sheik continued. “After receiving a tip off, my translators deciphered the following: baked beans in tomato sauce, cheese, bread etc. Need I go on?” said the Sheik sounding angry. “Oh!” he added, remembering something else, “Along with the shopping list, there was also an item that my research team couldn’t understand. A friend of yours from England, Daniel Farquharson who had called to tell me about the documents being fake, kindly pointed out that it was the instructions for using your mobile phone.”

Panicking, Grimes hung up and rushed over to Mophi.

The intimidating Arab glared at Grimes as he tried to sound calm, smiled and said, “Hello Mophi. Mohammed and I have sorted out our differences and he would like to speak with you now.” He pointed at the booth.

Mophi grunted and went into the booth, picked up the phone, and spoke to the bewildered Mohammed, who knew Mophi had fallen for Grimes’s ploy.

“Find him and deal with him,” said Mohammed sounding enraged and hung up the phone.

Mophi looked outside the booth but Grimes had scarpered onto the casino floor.

Mophi went onto the gamblers floor, but Grimes was nowhere to be seen.

He continued searching for him until he got a tap on his shoulder from two in-house security guards.

Mophi glared at them as they told ordered him to go with them to their office within the inner section of the casino.

The two burly security guards of similar size to Mophi led him into a warehouse and told him to sit down on a plastic stool.

Mophi stood and glared at the guards as they stared at him. With their hands on their batons as they told him that a high roller customer had seen him picking people’s pockets.

Mophi said nothing as the guards looked at one another and one slipped his baton from its holder while the other looked at Mophi and asked. “Do you speak English?”

Mophi glared at the pair, smiled, and struck the guard who had his baton out hard in the throat, and before the other guard could react to the surprise attack, Mophi hit him hard on the jaw, knocking him unconscious.

He then went behind the choking man and sharply twisted his head, snapping his neck. He repeated the process with the unconscious guard and then calmly walked out through the casino and into the hot Vegas

air. He then rang the Sheik for further instructions.

Grimes spent the next few years terrified and sneaking around Vegas. His money soon ran out, and he amassed a fortune in debt. He didn't care, he knew that he was a dead man walking. He figured that the Sheik would assume that he had bolted far from Vegas and search elsewhere, so he stayed in Vegas.

However, the Sheik never cared about the money, which meant nothing to him. He respected Grimes for being able to fool him for all those years and quite liked this toffee-nosed Englishman. He had only sent Mophi to scare him and then return to Saudi, which was accomplished at the cost of only two lives.

Grimes eventually turned himself in to the police, admitting to conning nearly every casino in Vegas out of millions of dollars by selling non-existent plots of real estate and fake castles while posing as the English Duke.

Because of his previous spending and elaborate cons, every casino gave him large credit facilities. Grimes wanted to be caught, knowing that the safest place for him would be prison.

He confessed to everything, even for crimes that he didn't commit. Arrested under his real name, John Crawford, and sentenced to seven years in Clerk County Detention Centre, Grimes felt relieved.

Because of his arrogance and posh English accent, the other inmates targeted him. The guards hated the fact that he had wasted and gambled away more money in two minutes than they could earn in a lifetime, so they turned a blind eye when he got bullied.

Grimes's only ally was a friendly Arab named Akhim who had recently moved into the next cell. Akhim said he had been transferred from another prison to serve the short time remaining of his sentence.

Akhim told Grimes that he had come to Vegas on holiday from his home in Egypt and befriended some Egyptians living in Vegas. They had duped him into being a mule for supplying cocaine. The police had arrested him when he was delivering what he thought were Bibles to a local priest, but it turned out that each bible was hollowed out and stuffed with cocaine. Although he never mentioned how long he had been in prison, Grimes never asked, presuming it had been many years.

Grimes and Akhim spent many hours in conversation through his cell bars passing codes for a chinwag. He found Akhim to be intelligent and articulate especially with his knowledge on forged artwork, which Grimes found fascinating. The only time they lost contact for a few days was when a new cellmate arrived in Grimes's cell. The man from a local biker gang intimidated Grimes and hated Arabs, so their conversations ceased.

However, they continued to correspond a few days later after prison guards found the lout dead in the shower block, his throat slit with a shank. Rival gang members were suspected of the murder and Grimes never had another cell mate.

Grimes had just given away his food again and was sitting in his cell, staring into space. He missed Akhim who had been released several days earlier, and as he thought about their chats, a prison guard came to his cell door.

"Crawford," he barked. "Pack your belongings and come with me. You're being released."

Grimes looked taken aback and stammered. "I don't understand. I am not due to be considered for parole for at least another three years."

"I don't know," said the guard sounding impatient. "Now do as you are told and pack your gear."

Feeling confused, Grimes packed his meagre prison belongings and trudged to the release section where he was given his personal effects. Although his clothes now smelled musty, it felt good to get out of prison fatigues and into a mouldy suit.

A deputy sheriff came over and, along with the prison guards, escorted him out. A large gate opened and the deputy and Grimes walked outside.

Grimes panicked, something felt untoward, and as the deputy walked him over to a squad car, he said, "I

demand to know why I am being released early.”

The deputy put his hand on his head and pushed him into the rear of the car. “You certainly have friends in high places, now shut up,” he said as he slammed the door shut, got into the front seat, and drove away from the prison.

“Where are you taking me?” asked Grimes sounding nervous as the car drove along the desert highway towards Las Vegas city centre.

The deputy didn’t speak as he pulled the squad car into the car lot of the South district police station and took Grimes inside.

An embassy official stood in the waiting area at the police station and introduced himself as the UK attaché to the US in Las Vegas. He thanked the deputy and told Grimes to sit.

Grimes thought the middle-aged man looked friendly as he smiled and said. “Would you like a cup of tea Mr Crawford? I just need to finish your paperwork here and we can be on our way.”

Grimes smiled and felt pleased to hear an English voice after all the years he had spent cooped up with Americans and other foreign nationals. “Thank you,” he said. “Yes, I would love a cup of tea.” Grimes then looked puzzled. “But why have I been released early and what happens now?”

The attaché smiled and said. “You will be deported to the UK once we have all the paperwork, and I will be escorting you to the airport.”

“But why have I been released early,” said Grimes furrowing his brow.

“I’ll get you that cup of tea,” said the attaché avoiding the answer. “You can drink that while I collect the paperwork and then we can go.”

Twenty minutes later, Grimes and the attaché left the police station and got into a saloon car, which sped off towards McCarran airport.

Four kilometres before they reached the airport, the car pulled into a diner car park, and the attaché said to Grimes. “We still have a few hours before the flight Mr Crawford, so do you fancy a last taste of US cuisine at its finest?” he chuckled.

“Okay,” said Grimes, sounding relieved and feeling happy to be going back to England, he smiled and thought. “Marvellous, I can set up some scams and then deal with that snake Dan Farquharson.”

They sat in a booth and Grimes ordered a burger as did the attaché, who then excused himself and went to the washroom.

Their burgers arrived a few minutes later and Grimes looked at his stacked burger, smiled and took a bite. He savoured the flavour of the beef, fried onion and grease covered bacon and salad. He chewed the succulent greasy burger as the attaché returned and sat back down and looked over behind Grimes.

Grimes stopped eating, realising someone stood behind him.

“Slight change of plan, Mr Julian Grimes,” said the attaché and smirked.

Grimes puckered his brow and spitting out bits of burger said, “My name is John Crawford, so why are you now calling me Julian Grimes?”

The attaché grinned. “Because that is the name my employer knows you by,” he said and pointed to the figure stood behind him.

Grimes spun around and looked up at the intimidating face of Mophi glaring down at him.

“Shall we go?” said the man posing as the attaché.

Mophi grabbed Grimes shirt and lifted him off his seat. Like a condemned man walking to his execution, they walked outside.

Grimes was taken outside to the back of the diner where Mophi shoved him into the back of a waiting limousine.

Sheik Mohammed Del Alaz lay in his hospital room museum, gazing at his treasures. The room, under a large golden dome was built on the top of his Mecca wing, a large building that faced S.S.W towards Mecca, 700 kilometres away. The centre of the dome was in exact alignment with the centre of Mecca.

Glass vaults housed 130 tempered glass cases, with all but one containing a religious icon or precious treasure. With each housing temperature regulated and vacuum sealed to avoid decomposition.

The treasure rows filled the back of the room with tempered glass tinted windows around the dome. It looked like a large public Aquaria with various size glass containers housing precious religious treasures. The ceiling of the dome was adorned with paintings, murals, and collages created by the best modern-day artists.

Central in the vast room was Mohammed's hospital bed with its array of life-preserving and monitoring apparatus, along with a plush study area with sofas, desks, and a computer. Another small piece of equipment that looked out of place hung on a plain painted wall

Both internally and externally, the dome not only looked like a work of art, but also held a sinister secret that Mohammed had included.

This would ensure that unlike the Egyptian pharaohs who left their treasures to be plundered, the same would not happen to his.

Reinforced Carbon-carbon, RCC tiles and a layer of laminated Graphite resin, which could withstand temperatures exceeding 1260°C, lay underneath the golden dome's ceiling and was reinforced with steel and concrete, which was plastered and painted.

Mohammed's treasure room and hospital ward was a bunker. However, it was not designed to protect from any outside attack; this protected the outside from events that would occur within.

Two small, silver canisters, engraved to match the decor, hung on the wall. These sinister containers were full of Tritium and deuterium gas, which, although harmless on their own, when mixed they became a detonator for the fusion-boosted fission bomb, which Mohammed had installed into a small space under the floor beneath his hospital bed; a Russian layer cake he had bought from Saddam Hussein at the height of his power.

The bomb's kiloton yield would destroy the room and turn the treasures into plasma, encasing the room, making everything unsalvageable and radioactive for years. Mohammed's legacy to the mortal world would be... nothing.

A Doctor came into the room, checked the monitors, and said. "Everything looks fine Sheik Mohammed. Do you need anything else sir?"

Mohammed nodded and pointed to his wheelchair that the Doctor then wheeled over. Mohammed got into the chair and the Doctor pushed him to the large windows around the dome where Mohammed looked out over the city and waited.

Grimes had spent the 12-hour flight on Mohammed's private jet being glared at by Mophi. He tried to figure ways out of this dangerous situation, but coming up with nothing, he looked a beaten and worried man when the plane landed at King Kaled International Airport. Grimes felt the hot desert heat on his face before Mophi shoved him into a waiting Jet Ranger helicopter.

The dome glistened with gold leaf and golden Islamic crescents. It was a remarkable sight from the sky, as the occupants of the Jet Ranger helicopter saw before it banked and landed on the helicopter pad of the Mecca wing.

Three occupants got out, went into the large building, and up a plush elevator. They walked through a series of corridors, through a thick electronic sliding vulcanised rubber door, and into the domed room.

Mohammed, saw the helicopter arriving and ordered the Doctor to push him to a large armchair and then

leave the room. Mohammed sat and waited behind a wooden desk, typing instructions into a computer as the three walked in and Mophi bowed.

“Come sit down gentlemen,” said Mohammed. Grimes looked shocked at the gaunt Sheik as he beckoned them over to a sofa.

He pushed a button under his desk, and a few seconds later an Arab entered with a briefcase. He handed it to the bogus attaché, who smiled and left the room.

Mohammed then turned his attention to the remaining two.

He smirked when he saw Grimes looking terrified, staring at the coffee table.

“Did everything go according to plan?” he asked Mophi.

Mophi grinned and glanced at Grimes. “Yes sir. Everything went according to plan.”

He then stared into the terrified eyes of Julian Grimes, who appeared gaunt, feeble, and afraid.

“Hello again Julian, you’ve been a very naughty man.”

Grimes looked up at the pale; cancer riddled Arab, trembled, and said. “I am sorry about what happened Sheik Mohammed, but my mother was dying and I needed the money to pay her hospital bills.”

Sheik Mohammed chuckled, coughed, caught his breath, and smirked. “Oh dear Julian, I am sorry to hear that.” He opened a folder on his desk and smirked. “That wouldn’t happen to be your mother, Mary Crawford, who died eighteen years ago in an NHS hospital would it?”

Grimes sighed, and glanced at Mophi grinning. He then looked at Mohammed. “Okay Sheik, if you’re going to get Mophi to kill me, let’s just get it over with.”

Mohammed laughed, coughed, and said. “Kill you Julian. If I wanted you dead, I would have done that a long time ago.” He smiled and nodded at Mophi.

“No,” said Mohammed, “I need your help, and because of your talents and meticulous sense of planning, it should be an easy task for you.”

Grimes looked shocked and gasped as Mohammed tapped on a keypad and images flashed up onto a computer screen, which he turned around and showed a gobsmacked Grimes.

He then told him about his ghostly encounter with Abdul and said. “I believe Allah sent me a sign telling me to retrieve this object and then avenge his loyal servant and my friend before I join him.”

The Sheik looked weak and with his hands shaking he held up an envelope. With his voice now sounding feeble, he said. “Study the information in there and then bring me a foolproof plan.”

Grimes took the envelope from Mohammed who slumped back into the chair, closed his eyes for several seconds, and then jolted awake and said. “Mophi will show you to your quarters. There is a computer in there with other information you will need. Mophi will bring you here tomorrow and we can talk more. Just remember Julian, this time you will carry out all my orders and to make sure you do, Mophi will be monitoring you at all times.”

Grimes nervously looked at the large menacing Arab glaring at him and with a tremble in his voice, nodded, and said. “Yes Sheik Mohammed. I will work on this straight away.”

“You have all the resources you require at your disposal along with the \$3 million I will give you on completion, so spare no expense, just get it done Julian, and soon,” said the Sheik who forced a smile. “Oh, I also have another surprise for you.”

Mohammed pressed the button under his desk again and another Arab man walked into the room carrying a small pewter box.

He smiled at Grimes who gasped as the man said. “Hello Julian.”

Grimes looked startled as he faced the Arab convict who he had befriended in jail and exclaimed. “Akhim!”

“So you can see Julian, not only did I not have you killed, but I had you protected at all times. Although I will have you killed if you fail me again,” said the Sheik, giving Grimes a stark warning.

Mohammed, who looked worn as he again slumped back in the chair looking in pain, furrowed his brow, winced, and said, “Now go.”

Mophi picked up the light fragile Mohammed, who groaned as he carried him to his bed and Doctors came scurrying to his aid.

Akhim gave Grimes the pewter box and while medics attended to Mohammed, the three left the domed room. Mophi showed Grimes to his living quarters while Akhim went to his room further along the corridor.

Mophi sneered while showing Grimes how to work the computer and then he left the room and shut the door.

Grimes sat behind a large desk in his one bedroom living quarters, which brought back memories of the plush hotel suites he used to stay in Vegas.

He smiled and took out the contents from the thick envelope that Mohammed had given him, glancing at the photographs, newspaper clippings, and information, gathered throughout the years.

Grimes read the documents and shuffled the papers into order as he looked at other information on the computer. He smiled and felt relieved after spending hours going through everything. Rubbing his weary eyes, he yawned and stretched. ‘I need to come up with a foolproof plan to guarantee I get the box as soon as possible,’ he thought, ‘but I need to rest first.’

Yawning again, he looked at the pewter box given to him by Akhim that he had put on the corner of the table. ‘Hmm, what’s in there I wonder?’ He picked up the paperback novel sized box and lifted the lid. He stared at the fine white powder inside and looked puzzled. He dabbed a small amount on his moist index finger and smiled when he tasted the bitter narcotic.

Feeling ecstatic, Grimes removed a plastic card, a three-inch thin straw, a small coke spoon, and a mirror from the inside the box lid, he spooned out a large portion of cocaine powder, forming two straight lines on the mirror. He leant over, snorted the powder into one nostril through the straw, jolted back, and smiled as the cocaine gave a familiar sting to his nasal septum. He did the same with his other nostril and then sniffed the narcotic further up. He leant back into the chair, thought about the strange events, chuckled and said aloud, “Yesterday I was in prison fearing for my life, and today I am in a billionaire’s quarters snorting great cocaine, with servants running around after my every whim. Just because the dying Sheik had a bad trip on Morphine and thought he saw his dead friend. Now he wanted to give me \$3 million to get a small box and have a few people killed, which I will leave to that big dope, Mophi. This should not be too difficult.”

Grimes giggled as the cocaine made him feel euphoric. He stared at the papers on the desk, smiled and thought. ‘Akhim must have been brought into help, our chats in prison always centred around planning and scheming and his knowledge as a forger was unparalleled. He must be an expert if he is employed by the Sheik and he must have arranged the killing of the biker in my cell.’

Grimes laughed, pondered, and said aloud. “Good old Akhim.” He took a deep breath and grinned like a Cheshire cat, “and welcome back, Professor Julian Grimes.”

Lying back in the chair as the cocaine took firm hold and now feeling rejuvenated, he pondered some more.

— Chapter Five —

The room fell silent as the digitally distorted face on the TV screen gave out information.

Military, National security, Police, Pon, Taksin, Spock and Stu, listened and looked bewildered as the synthesised voice sounding like a Dalek, announced. “We have in our possession Mrs Kim Meesilli, previously known as Hern Tangh. The wife of your guardian of the Holy Relic and daughter of Minister Tangh of Vietnam. For the time being she’s safe and will remain unharmed so long as you follow these instructions.”

The same enlarged picture Pon already had of the jewelled box appeared on the screen as the voice continued.

“This is what we want in exchange of our hostage.”

Pon’s skin crawled when they mentioned the word, hostage.

“We want this relic.” The voice continued as the picture on the screen changed. “And these three men brought to justice.”

The newspaper clipping and photographs from the envelope came on the screen and the voice said. “These men will be punished for the brutal, cold-blooded murder of Mr Abdul Bhunto, along with the subsequent murder of the Thai, Dam, and murder and unknown disposal of the bodies of Mr Andrew Towhey and Miguel Santos.”

Spock and Stu looked at one another and shrugged as the screen then showed a photograph of a smiling Abdul, along with separate photos of a smiling Towhey, and Miguel, and then one showed Dam going into a temple. The photographs stayed on the screen for several minutes until the voice said. “This item must be handed over to its rightful owner.”

The voice then instructed where and when the exchange would take place and the repercussions should they see any Vietnamese police or Military anywhere near that vicinity.

This carried on for another 30 minutes, and finished with a chilling warning. “You have offended a son of Islam and any infidel’s life we take in achieving our goal is irrelevant to us. However, we will be honourable if our demands are fully carried out. We will contact you in two days for your decision.”

The screen then showed scenes taken from the webcam many years earlier showing Abdul with Miguel and Dam doing business, with the relic in the background.

The scene then cut to shouting, screaming and blurred moving images as the action took place behind the laptop camera. A scalped Abdul then slumped back in a chair, with blood splattering on the camera. Gunshots were heard and then somebody’s hand grabbed the relic from the desk.

After the screen went blank for a moment, still images of Towhey, his two employees, and Abdul flashed on the screen with Arabic music and chants of, “Allah is great” playing in the background.

It then faded, leaving an uneasy silence in the room.

Two confused Englishmen looked over at Pon, who said. “I will explain later my friends, but their information is incorrect. They must have assumed that it was us three who had come into the room and stolen the Holy Relic all those years ago.”

Pon puckered his brow, sighed and said. “But I am baffled as to why now, and how they found out about Kim?”

Spock frowned and thought. ‘Who are these people and what secret has Pon been keeping for all these years?’ He wasn’t angry, after all, he and Stu had also been keeping a little secret from them all.

Stu cursed under his breath. “That fucking box.”

Spock shrugged and said. “I wonder who those people were. That Thai monk looked like a younger

version of Shithead. Maybe that was his dead brother who he told us about ages ago.”

Stu nodded. “Perhaps, but he said that he would explain about them later, but I am puzzled why we are involved. We never knew any of them, and the picture of that scalped Ab dab looked grisly.”

Spock nodded, puckered his brow, and rubbed his chin. “Well, whatever the reason we are involved suits me. I don’t think either of us wanted Shithead going it alone to rescue Kim.”

“Too bloody right,” said Stu looking angry and then worried. “With the Dalek mentioning the sons of Islam, it looks like we could be dealing with terrorists.” He frowned, “but why would Muzzie terrorists want a Buddhist relic?”

Spock sniggered. “Maybe they want an infidel’s false choppers.”

While the people in the room looked confused and then chatted amongst themselves, Pon went and stood over by the frosted glass wall of the VIP lounge. Feeling confused and desperate as he thought about his quandary and the ramifications. ‘Do I hand over the most treasured symbol of my country and put my best friends lives in jeopardy to save the single most important thing in my, and our son’s life, with him having to grow up without a father. Or should I refuse their demands and let fate decide the outcome?’ Pon sighed. ‘There must be an alternative. Even though the recording had been specific with the instructions, I am sure that with Taksin’s help we can come up with a plan.’ Pon rubbed his eyes. ‘The recording gave us two days to decide, which isn’t long to formulate a workable plan.’

Pon sighed, knowing that they needed to gain more time to plan a rescue. He had already realised by listening to the recording that if they played to their rules, both he, Spock, and Stu would be murdered, knowing that was the, ‘brought to justice,’ that the recording intimated. Pon’s thoughts turned to Kim, and what she must be going through. He knew she wouldn’t want him to sacrifice his, Spock, and Stu’s life for hers, but how could he look Samnan in the face later in life and tell him that his mother was murdered, but he could have prevented it?

Taksin came over and interrupted Pons troubled thoughts. “What are your instructions, Prime Master?”

Pon turned to face Taksin and said, “I don’t know my friend, there appears no way to contact them, but we need more time to plan. I think all we can do is pray and ask Buddha for help and guidance.”

Buddha must have been listening as Pon’s mobile rang. The room went silent as Pon spoke to Kim’s father.

The conversation lasted for fifteen minutes, and over the last few minutes of their conversation, Pon had a wry smile on his face. He finished speaking with Thran and addressed everyone, who stood agog awaiting the news.

“My wife is safe and unharmed. The kidnappers let Thran speak to her via their Sat phone,” said Pon.

Everyone in the room breathed a sigh of relief as Pon, looking sullen, said. “Thran told me that they were sending one of their men to his home to ensure compliance. The kidnappers told him that systems were in place for monitoring the situation, so any deviation from the instructions would result in Kim’s death. He said that the kidnapper’s agent would arrive at his house later that day, so he advised me that any further investigations needs to be carried out here in Thailand. He told me that he will send any relevant information already gleaned in Vietnam by email when his security staff compile it.”

Pon looked over at the people sitting at the computers who nodded.

“Thran also found out that the Sat phone they used to communicate with was secret hardware developed by the U.S., which they claimed was untraceable,” said Pon and smiled “However, the Chinese have the technology to trace it and moved a few spy satellites into low earth orbit for us. Although they don’t yet have any results, they felt it was only a matter of time and would contact us when they have.”

Pon looked at the group, and Taksin then interjected. “I think we are dealing with a tenacious, dangerous, and motivated group, who appear to be well funded with the latest high-tech equipment. So everyone be on your guard.”

Pon nodded. “Thran was trying to find the Englishman who first contacted him, but he could find no

trace of him in Vietnam. Thran said he'd contacted Interpol and the UK's New Scotland Yard with the name the man had given him, but they found nothing. The Metropolitan Police told Thran that no such peer of the Realm had ever existed."

Pon again looked at the army Captain and said. "Thran will send us all the details he has on this man."

Taksin looked over at the Thailand Intelligence Chief and said. "Maybe it's a long shot, but check with the FBI."

After a stunned silence, everyone mumbled and then went to work on specific tasks.

Stu and Spock, not grasping the severity of the situation, but realising they would be going to Vietnam, thought about how to plan their beer stops along the way.

Taksin looked worried. "Whatever the reason is behind this Pon, I imagine they have been planning it a long time. We need more time and more information before we can work out a plan."

Pon nodded and knew that any workable plan would come from Taksin's analytical mind.

Taksin thought for a moment, and suddenly had a *House moment.

"I may be able to buy us more time. If I'm successful, we just need to plan how to get you, Spock, and Stu to the arranged point at their appointed deadline. That way if things go wrong you can be at the location and carry out their instructions. The kidnappers will be none the wiser."

Pon thought and said, "We don't yet have any information of the whereabouts of Kim, only where we have to meet their agent."

"I agree," said Taksin, "but I hope we will soon have that information. Until we do, we can only work with the information we have."

Pon, looking concerned, said. "This would be an easy decision if they only wanted me, but this sounds like a dangerous situation. I don't want to put Spock and Stu into harm's way; they are innocent and oblivious to what happened before."

Taksin looked at his worried friend. He'd also realised that if they were to make the exchange, Pon, Stu, and Spock will be killed. But if they did nothing, Kim will be murdered.

"You may have an alternative Pon, we can attempt a rescue." Taksin paused and said, "You have done it twice before Prime Master." He smiled and nodded over to Spock and Stu, "and with those two."

Pon and Taksin looked at Spock and Stu trying to chat up two women customs officers in the corner of the room who had just brought them in two bottles of Singha beer.

"Do you really think they would let you go alone," said Taksin and grinned.

The sight of his two English friends being their normal selves gave Pon a feeling of well-being. He couldn't think of anybody better to have by his side and no one he would protect more.

Pon smiled. "Let's formulate a plan Khun Taksin," he said.

Taksin saw a glimmer in Pon's eyes that he hadn't seen for a long time, the look of the Tinju warrior.

Late afternoon, Taksin, Pon, Stu, and Spock sat in the back of the limo and headed to the Imperial Palace. Pon and Taksin looked at maps and information about Vietnam, taken from the computers in the operations centre at the airport. They spoke Thai as they tried to coordinate a plan that Taksin had come up with. They both looked concerned as the plan hinged on many variables.

Spock and Stu sat on the seat opposite, and as Spock looked through a tour guide of Vietnam, he glanced over at Stu.

"What's up buggerlugs? You seem quiet," he asked, noticing Stu looking sullen.

Stu shrugged and said. "I've been trying to call Dao all day, but her phone has been off. She only turns off her phone when she goes to see her son because she told me there's no signal in her village. But she never

said that she was going.”

Spock, seeing his mate looking confused and unhappy, phoned Moo.

“Hello Goyt-head,”

Stu heard Moo mumbling before Spock asked, “Where’s Dao?”

Stu heard Moo mumbling again.

“Why don’t you know?” asked Spock

The conversation went on for five minutes and after telling Moo to call him when Dao turned up, Spock hung up, looked at Stu, and shrugged.

“Moo said that Dao went out earlier, but she didn’t know where,” said Spock and seeing Stu looking worried, he smiled and added, “she probably has a problem with her phone matey.”

“That’s strange, why Moo doesn’t know where she is, they are usually joined at the hip,” said Stu looking at Spock.

“Ach, I wouldn’t worry matey. It’s probably nothing. Moo will call me when she comes back,” said Spock, but by the way Moo had sounded, he knew that she was hiding something.

Stu sighed. “Yeah, you’re right,” he said and picked up a book from a pile. They both studied the Vietnamese pub guide.

Pon and Taksin unfolded and looked at a large road map of Vietnam.

“How long was it before Thran set up his initial road blocks?” asked Taksin.

“It would have been roughly three hours after I called him to tell him that Kim didn’t board the flight, so about 3:30 pm,” said Pon.

“So, let’s assume that the kidnapers had around three hours to make a getaway. We can Assume they could have done around 150-200 kilometres in that time,” said Taksin as he circled a section on the map to denote the area. He thought for a moment how intelligent and organised their adversaries had been so far.

Looking further down the map and then back to his markings, he saw an area that piqued his interest and showed Pon.

Taksin then pointed to an area outside Hai Phon town at a small airstrip and said. “They would have known that Thran would have set up road blocks immediately and want to be as inconspicuous and untraceable as possible. With the money and resources at their disposal, they could have easily made it to this airfield less than 100 kilometres from Hanoi Airport.”

Pon looked and nodded. “That makes sense. They knew Thran would not have considered this.”

Taksin nodded, dialled a number, and gave instructions to one of his staff to obtain any information about the airstrip. He and Pon sat back and waited.

Stu, noticing Taksin and Pon no longer studying the maps, asked. “Who were those people on the DVD, and what was the Dalek banging on about us killing them?”

Pon looked at his curious friends. “I don’t understand most of this but I will tell you what I know.” He leant forward “When we first met, I told you I was searching for the Holy Relic.”

“Huh,” said Spock puckering his brow, “and what a bloody nuisance that’s been.”

Pon smiled and told them about what had happened in Salaburi years earlier and his quest to retrieve the Holy Relic. He told them how he killed Towhey, Miguel, and his brother Dam and said that it was Dam who had killed the Arab

Spock and Stu looked gobsmacked and found some of it unbelievable having known Pon for many years. They knew about him being a monk and a Royal escort, but not an assassin. Even though he’d threatened them with a sword when they first met, they’d never assumed he would have actually used it.

Although shocked, this revelation put the pair at ease. They realised that this could be dangerous and cost them time at the Vietnamese bars, but now knowing Pon was well 'ard, they felt safer.

After an awkward silence in the car, Pon's smartphone rang. He looked at Thran's number on the screen and was about to answer when Taksin stopped him. "Let me answer it."

Pon handed Taksin the phone who pressed the button to put the call on the speaker and then pressed the green button and said. "Hello."

"Are you Prime Master, Pon Meesilli?" said an unfamiliar voice with a Middle Eastern accent.

The four looked surprised expecting to hear the Englishman.

"Yes I am," said Taksin. "And who are you?"

The man ignored the question and told Taksin that he must follow instructions.

"Yes," said Taksin. "I am at the Imperial Palace waiting for an audience with the King to get permission to take the relic."

The caller then hung up after giving Taksin several more warnings and insults.

Taksin grinned and said, "Good, he believed me, so he now thinks that I am you, Pon. We have our window of opportunity, but not for long. I now need to buy us more time."

Spock leant over to Stu and whispered, "It doesn't sound like we will have much time for bar-crawling matey."

They arrived at the Imperial Palace five minutes later and went into the large Conference suite now set up as the main Control Centre and alive with activity. Maps of Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam were now pinned on the walls with satellite photos and information on people, places, and equipment, strewn about.

A man approached Taksin and handed him several copies of transcripts between a man at air traffic control in Hanoi, and a supervisor at the small airstrip.

The room went silent as Taksin relayed new information to the gathered team.

With everyone speaking Thai, Stu and Spock left the Conference Centre, deciding to hunt out beer stocks when Taksin went over to the enlarged map of Vietnam and said. "A Bell 206L helicopter took off from this small airstrip at Hai Phon at 15:27. The aircraft registered a flight plan from there to Tan Son Nhat International Airport, Ho Chi Mihn city. The flight log registered two persons on board, but the air traffic controller at the airstrip reported seeing at least five people boarding. The ATC radar picked up the helicopter making an unscheduled landing here." He pointed to the map, and marked the area with a felt pen. "The aircraft stayed here for twenty minutes before taking off again, and landed at the Ho Chi Minh airport at 18:05pm."

Taksin looked at the details again. "Only two people, the pilot and co-pilot, logged in at flight control Ground authorities at Ho Chi Minh investigated the helicopter, which they found out had never been registered and according to the phoney paperwork they had received, it had been undergoing trials.

The pilots also had false papers and quickly disappeared. The police are searching the helicopter, to see if any evidence can be found that the abductors and Kim were on board."

Taksin paused and then said. "We will concentrate our search in this area," Taksin pointed to the area around where the helicopter made its unscheduled stop, which Taksin then circled.

The audience mumbled and an army officer pointed out. "That's within dense jungle."

Taksin nodded. "I'm aware of that Colonel," he said, "and the nearest town is miles away and heavily policed, so here would be a perfect place to hide." He tapped his finger within the area. "If we're correct, we have a 75 square mile area to search."

A man came then over to Taksin and handed him a copy of a satellite image of the area, taken six months earlier.

Taksin studied that against the up-to-date image and looking bemused said. “The jungle appears to have either grown overnight, or someone put camouflage over the tree canopy. I think we have the correct location.” Taksin rubbed his forehead with frustration and thought. ‘This is too vast an area to cover in the little time we have. Without more time, it will be impossible to attempt any rescue and difficult to mobilise the Vietnamese military without the kidnappers finding out. I cannot send in the Thai army, too indiscreet.’ Taksin sighed, looked at Pon, and then had an idea.

Taksin ordered silence in the room. He took Pon’s phone and said. “It’s a long shot, but here goes nothing.”

He dialled Thran’s number and placed the phone on speakerphone.

The Middle Eastern man answered. “Have you kept to your schedule?”

“No,” said Taksin and sounded perplexed, “the King refused my request.”

The phone went silent for several seconds and the man sounding menacing and cold said. “You’re wife will be dead within the hour,”

“No, wait!” beseeched Taksin. “I can get the relic for you, but I need to steal it. You know I am in the best position to do this, but I will need more time to set things up.”

Again silence for a few seconds and then the man asked. “How much time?”

Taksin grinned, but sounding desperate, said, “I will need at least another five days. I need to plan the robbery, escape Thailand, and get to Vietnam. It will take a lot of favours and involve a few close friends, so I will need at least another five days, eight days in total.” Taksin sighed, “if I do this I can never return to Thailand, and I will be a wanted fugitive.”

They heard the man sniggering, and the phone went silent for a few moments before he said. “Wait!” and hung up.

Taksin speculated that the man would be contacting his bosses and there was silent anticipation in his office for the next twenty minutes until the phone rang.

Taksin answered and with a quake in his voice said. “Hello.”

“You have five days in total. Be in Hanoi as directed at the same time and same place. I will be contacting you every day. And remember, we are monitoring you,” the man then hung up.

A sigh of relief echoed around the room. Now they had five days to plan and complete a mission, which although they all felt wasn’t a lot of time, at least they could try. Taksin could keep in contact with the kidnapper at Thran’s house and with him now being monitored, it would leave Pon free to attempt their plan.

“This is the break we need,” said Taksin and looked at Pon, “now my friend, we can instigate our rescue plan. Call Brigadier Lee.”

Needing the help of another friend and family member, Pon called Brigadier Lee Tangh, Kim’s uncle in Cambodia.

Lee had already been told of Kim’s abduction and wanted to help.

Taksin and his aides continued to plan while Pon spoke with Lee over the phone.

The Thailand Security Chief came into the office with a file and showed it to Taksin, who read it, frowned, and asked. “See if this Duke of Southerby, Professor Julian Grimes, John Crawford, or whatever name he was now using had ever been to Thailand? Oh, and thank the FBI.”

The Security Chief nodded and left the room.

“Can I have everyone’s attention,” said Taksin, and holding up an enlarged photograph of a prisoner mug shot from Dulles Prison told them. “This is the Englishman who we are looking for. Although the FBI don’t know his whereabouts since he was broken out of prison several months ago.”

Several minutes later, a woman came into the control centre and handed Taksin a sheet of paper. Taksin looked and smiled. He got everyone's attention again and relayed the news.

"This is from The China National Space Administration, CNSA. They picked up another trace from the American sat phone used by the kidnappers and triangulated its location close to where the helicopter had landed."

He stuck the satellite image with a red dot on the map of the jungle on the wall and said. "It's here, so now we have confirmed their location, and we must assume that's where they are holding Kim."

Taksin then looked at the image, then the map, and shook his head. "There is nothing there; no buildings or anything to suggest a hideout."

Taksin sighed and looked confused as he and the others scrutinised the information and looked puzzled.

A Thai army Colonel looked at the map and said, "Khun Taksin, it will still take days to cover that jungle terrain and there is nothing there, perhaps the Chinese got it wrong."

Taksin then went over to a large laminated Vietnamese tourist guide map on the wall and looked. He rubbed his chin and said. "Hmm, maybe not."

It had been a long day and after Stu and Spock chilled out in the canteen enjoying some cold beer and snacks, they filled carrier bags with cans of Singha beer for the journey ahead.

Now late, the pair were snoozing on armchairs in Pons living room when Pon came in and told them that they would be leaving soon.

He told them that the first part of the plan would be launched from Lee's estate in Cambodia, where five of his elite commandos trained in jungle warfare waited to assist them.

Stu, Pon, and Spock went to Taksin's office, where Taksin waited for a delivery.

Stu tried to call Dao again and looked concerned, while Spock picked his nose and watched a large military Bell 412 helicopter landing on the floodlit Imperial Palace's helicopter pad close by.

A woman came into the office accompanied by two armed guards who stood either side of her. She wai-ed Pon and Taksin and then handed Pon a small parcel.

She wai-ed again before leaving the room. Pon put the parcel in his old cloth bag, along with the other items he needed and looking concerned, said. "The last resort."

Ten minutes later, one depressed looking Englishman, one stupid looking large Englishman clutching onto a daft hat, and one Thai Elvis impersonator holding onto his mullet, ducked under the rotor blades and boarded the helicopter.

The chopper then took off heading south into Cambodia towards Sihanoukville for their rendezvous with Lee.

Pon sat in the front behind the pilot and co-pilot, while Spock and Stu sat with an aircrewman in the rear of the large fuselage with the side door open. The lads were having fun in the back of the helicopter and, because it flew low the entire way, they saw the lights of towns and cities. The lads thought it looked like different coloured land-stars, glittering beneath the night sky. They saw people going about their lives like ant colonies. It was fun and amazing for Spock and Stu to witness. As they got closer to their destination, the aircrewman let them sit in the open section at the side and put safety harnesses on them.

The helicopter flew a circuit, and then made a final approach towards Lee's estate. Spock and Stu sat in the doorway having a whale of a time with the aircrewman. They dangled their legs over the side while singing about a drunken English sailor. They splashed their cans of beer around and felt as if they were on top of the world.

The pilot gave the aircrewman an order through his head set, and assuming the two foreigners spoke Thai, said. "Thu pi yang thi rea peid, hold on while we make a sharp turn."

Spock looked at Stu as the aircrewman stood behind them and held onto the side of the helicopter. "What

did he say?" He asked.

Stu shrugged and said. "Buggered if I... whaa."

The aircraft banked sharply to the right, jolting the two lads who grasped for handholds.

"Phew, that was close," said Stu after the aircrewman grabbed him and pulled him further back into the helicopter as it levelled off.

Spock held onto the side door, peered down over the fuselage at the ground below, and sounding indignant said. "I dropped my bloody beer." Then looking concerned, added. "There are houses down there, so I hope it didn't hit anyone."

Several minutes later, the helicopter landed on Lee's large well-lit lawn and the passengers disembarked.

They ducked under the idling rotors and went over to Lee, who stood with five stony-faced soldiers from the Airborne 911 Cambodian commando unit.

Nick had been having an amazing few years. He now spent most of his time in Sihanoukville and only went to England when he had a few weeks of guaranteed work to make some dosh, where he still stayed with his sister, Lorraine.

Now living cheaply in Cambodia with his wife, Shanti, whom he'd married a year earlier, they lived in a Cambodian wooden one bedroom house close to Hun Sen Beach where he had lived an idyllic and calamity free life.

Nick, besotted with his lovely wife, occasionally worked in restaurants and bars around town to subsidise his income until a temporary job came up.

Shanti still worked at the Snake house, but was now the resort manager and accountant, gaining a degree in hotel management and accountancy at University several years earlier.

Although well paid for working long hours at the resort, sometimes she would not arrive home until late at night.

Nick smiled as he sat on his roof terrace and looked out to sea as moonlight bathed the bay and he watched the lights of the small fishing boats in the distance. 'Life is great,' he thought, and as the warm sea breeze caressed him, he smiled and sighed, reflecting on his happy existence. He took a slurp from his bottle of Angkor and looked at his watch.

This was Nick's favourite spot, especially at night. He'd spend hours sitting, thinking, and drinking beer, until Shanti arrived home from work.

For some unexplained reason, that night seemed different. A cold chill went through him as he saw a bright light on the horizon, which appeared to be coming closer at speed. He then heard the sound of rotors and felt a sense of foreboding. He puckered his brow and juddered. 'That's weird,' he thought, 'we don't get many helicopters flying over here, and I've never seen one at night before.'

Nick watched as the helicopter came closer and banked before descending. 'That's low,' he thought looking at the underbelly of the large helicopter as it roared above him and then a look of horror came across his face.

Nick screamed in terror before a half-empty can of Singha beer struck him on his head, knocking him unconscious.

The party went inside Lee's large study, where plans and computers showing the Vietnamese terrain around their target lay on a large table.

Pon, Lee and the commandos stood around the table while Lee told him of their plan and gave him other information.

Spock and Stu squeezed their way in and looked but Lee was speaking Cambodian and they couldn't understand any of the maps or information. Having no clue as to what was going on, they gazed around Lees study.

Lee, noticing the two lads looking bored and confused, spoke to Pon, who nodded.

While Lee called a number on his mobile, Pon said to Spock and Stu. "We are planning our way to the destination and what will happen when we get there, so it's not important for you to be here for this. I will fill you in on the details later."

He pointed through a window and said. "Lee put his driver and SUV at your disposal."

Spock and Stu saw the headlights of the SUV approaching and smiled at one another.

"Why don't you go out and take a look around Sihanoukville? It has been a long time since we were last here," said Pon who went back to studying the maps.

"Oh, and don't be back late, we..."

Pon looked up, but spoke to thin air as the lads had already legged it out of the study and running towards the oncoming vehicle.

"Have early starts." Pon finished his sentence and smirked.

Lee chuckled and said, "Spock moves fast for a big lad."

Laughter flushed through the room, which broke the tension and gave them all a glimmer of hope.

— Chapter Six —

The year was 1979 and the jungle reeked of death, with a Cordite haze filling the air like a deathly fog.

After several bloody battles on the outskirts of the jungle resulted in heavy Khmer Rouge losses, the Cambodian and Vietnamese liberation forces forced the Khmer Rouge to flee deeper into the rain forest, scattering them in disarray. Nguyen and his troop of twenty soldiers were ordered into the jungle to capture or kill any stragglers. The Vietnamese soldiers knew what to do as they were proficient in this type of warfare. Armed with Chinese mk56 rifles and wearing slippers made of rubber tyres, ideal for this harsh and sometimes flooded terrain. A short way from their base camp they entered the jungle and grouped in a small clearing. Nguyen ordered his men to split up and gave them different directions where to search. “We will meet back here in three hours,” he said and his soldiers looked at their watches, taken as spoils of war from recent conflicts.

The troop split up and made their way through the foliage. However, this time, unlike the Americans, they knew they were fighting an enemy equally adept at jungle combat.

Nguyen cut his way through the dense vegetation heading toward the Mekong River, stepping over decapitated corpses, some Vietnamese, but mainly Khmer Rouge.

The stench was foul, but having experienced this before many times, he had become immune to the smell. His and his troop’s objective was to go into the rain forest, kill or capture fleeing Khmer Rouge stragglers, round up any prisoners, and bring them to their base camp set up on the jungle outskirts.

Making his way through thick, stinging foliage, Nguyen headed toward the sound of the fast flowing water of the river. Edging his way towards the riverbank, he came out of the jungle and surveyed the area. He ducked down while he checked for any sign of an ambush, but all he saw was rotting, leech covered corpses wedged between roots of mangrove trees along the river edge with patches of blood in the water, swirling around like red whirlpools. Checking his compass bearings and seeing no sign of life, he turned to go back into the jungle. He then gasped as a Khmer Rouge soldier stared at him with his rifle pointing.

Nguyen stopped in his tracks and glared at the young soldier. “Damn!” he mumbled. “Why didn’t I hear him?”

Nguyen froze as he waited to feel a bullet tear into his flesh. ‘Why hasn’t he fired? I am an easy target’ he thought and quickly raised his rifle and aimed at the black pyjama Khmer Rouge soldier’s head. He then looked at the face of his foe quivering with fear. Nguyen estimated the soldier to be about 13 years-old. He looked like a street urchin, with his face covered in tear-streaked mud. This boy reminded him of his sons, Phaol and his little scamp, Ca. He knew the Khmer Rouge children were brainwashed and unfeeling, but this boy looked terrified.

Nguyen saw the boy struggling to take aim, hands trembling and his face distorted, he fought clumsily with the large, heavy bolt-action M1 carbine.

Nguyen, now with the boys head in his crosshairs, looked at the youth, who now had his eyes closed awaited death. Nguyen saw this pitiful site, sighed, and lowered his rifle.

“Put your weapon down,” he shouted in Vietnamese.

The boy, not understanding, panicked, scrunched his eyelids tight shut, and fired at Nguyen. The bullet whistled past Nguyen’s ear and went into the jungle.

Nguyen fired, as did the panicking boy. The bullet glanced off the top of Nguyen’s head, but Nguyen’s 7.62 calibre round ripped into the boy’s chest. The boy wheezed as the round exploded from his back before falling face first onto the jungle floor.

Nguyen’s world then went fuzzy and black as he fought consciousness. His legs gave way, and he tumbled uncontrollably down the muddy embankment. He tried to grab onto something to stop his fall, but this proved futile as he splashed into the dirty brown, blood-drenched, fast flowing, Mekong River.

Semi-conscious and caught in the powerful current which kept dragging him under, Nguyen grabbed hold of a mangrove root and took a lung full of air while he clung on to the vine. Pulling himself through a mass of floating foliage and debris to the edge of the bank, he wedged himself between some exposed tree roots and caught his breath. Lying with the hot afternoon sun beating down on his face, he lost consciousness.

Nguyen awoke with a start some time later. Disorientated and confused, he regained his faculties. "Where am I?" he wondered as he grabbed the tree roots and hoisted himself up to see his surroundings.

'I need to head downstream and get help,' he thought, let go of the roots, pushed himself away from them, and floated on his back washed along by the current.

This was not a well-planned strategy, and he drifted on his back, being smacked against rocks in the shallows, and pulled under in the brown rivers depths.

Exhausted, he tried to guide his body into the shallows again and hang on to something. He grabbed onto the branches of a fallen tree, but some of the branches spiked him in the side, causing more puncture wounds, and lacerating his already beaten flesh.

He knew he was losing blood from his wounds and felt that he was going to die.

Holding onto a thick branch, he swung around in the shallow water. He felt a root beneath a fallen tree with his foot, so wedged both feet under the root. He let go of the branch, pivoted around, and managed to beach himself onto a shallow sandy bank. He snapped his ankle with this manoeuvre and he screamed in pain before his world went dark.

Nguyen drifted in and out of consciousness, he felt like a camera taking snapshots as he looked up at two shaven headed, emaciated women smiling down at him and then blackness.

The next time Nguyen awoke he felt a sharp pain under his armpits where a vine had been tied. He looked up at a treetop canopy and then his head and shoulders were lifted. He then felt excruciating pain in his ankle while being dragged along the ground... then darkness.

When he regained conscious again, a strong stench of decaying flesh filled his nostrils and, when he opened his eyes, a woman was mopping his brow. The woman's gaunt, ashen face, looked like a skull covered in skin and although she had despair written in her eyes; Nguyen thought she appeared to be a kind and caring woman. The woman lifted his head and gave him a drink of foul smelling Mekong River water, which he drank. The woman smiled and said. "Don't worry you are safe, my name is Darah... what's yours?"

Nguyen only understood a little Cambodian, but knowing what the woman said about her name being Darah, he croaked and tried to speak before again losing consciousness.

Nguyen's nursemaid, Darah, had once been a happy, beautiful, intelligent woman, but that was a lifetime ago.

She and her husband had been lawyers in Phnom Penh before the Khmer Rouge took the city.

Once Pol Pot took power in Cambodia, Darah and her husband were rounded up along with other 'New people,' as educated people were called by the Khmer Rouge. They sent them to communes outside Phnom Penh to be processed and transferred to work camps.

Like all educated people in Cambodia, they were despised by the Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime, who worked them to death in rice fields and quarries.

Two years after arriving at a labour camp, Darah fell pregnant, which made her life easier. The Khmer Rouge knew they would have another child to take from its parents and brainwash, so the hard labour for Darah stopped. She and her husband were moved to an easier work camp closer to Phnom Penh.

Eight months later, the Vietnamese invaded to liberate Cambodia.

The Khmer Rouge, fearing defeat, now needed to hide their atrocities from the outside world. Darah and

her husband were scheduled to be transferred to Choeung Ek death camp, better known as the killing fields.

Heavily pregnant, Darah, along with other New People, traipsed several miles over dried up rice paddies before being crammed into a small river boat and taken down the Mekong river, to one of the small transit camps set up to process the wretched individuals.

They arrived at a transit camp within thick jungle and only accessible from the small riverbanks. The emaciated group were herded off the small vessel and taken to a patch of jungle cleared of trees and vegetation. The boat then left to pick up the next batch.

A young Khmer Rouge Commander barked out Pol Pot's doctrine, and with no food and only dirty river water available, he told them that they would leave early the following morning for Choeung Ek. There were 30 soulless Cambodians in the camp, kept prisoner under small palm leaf-roofed open shelters. Darah had felt sharp twinges on the boat ride and during the evening, as her pain intensified, she went into labour. With no light and the sleeping Khmer Rouge knowing there was nowhere for them to escape, the other women helped Darah.

Darah bit down on a branch as a woman cooled her down with the brown dirty water from the Mekong.

She gave birth to a son and as one woman held her hand over the infant's mouth to stop it screaming, another chewed through the umbilical cord.

The woman gave the struggling infant to Darah who clutched it to her chest where the infant tried in vain to suckle on her shrivelled empty breasts.

The sound of gunfire and shouting, brought a new day to an abrupt beginning, with everyone ushered outside into a small clearing. Darah wrapped her infant in a piece of cloth from her shabby skirt and hung it over her shoulder like a sling. She felt afraid knowing the Khmer Rouge would notice.

The Khmer Rouge shouted and screamed as they pushed the terrified New People into two rows, with men on one side, women the other. Darah looked at her husband and then at the ground in front of her as the Khmer Rouge barked out orders for them to kneel on the ground and dig.

Weak, they scraped away small pieces of dry soil with their bare hands and could hear the gunfire in the distance getting closer.

The Khmer Rouge scurried around them and told them to stop digging. They ordered them to put their hands behind their backs and look at the ground.

The frightened New People complied and The Khmer Rouge walked behind the men and women. After one bound their wrists another bludgeoned the back of their heads with a hoe.

There were no sounds heard from the victims during this systematic murder. They had already suffered years of torture under the Pol Pot regime, so death would be a welcome relief.

A young girl came over to Darah and snatched her newborn from the small scruffy cloth holster. She glared at Darah and walked to a nearby tree where she swung the baby hard against the trunk. A dull thud signalled the end of the baby's short life as the girl dumped the corpse at the base of the bloodstained tree.

She looked back at Darah and grinned.

Darah looked across at her husband knelt opposite. He smiled at her and she saw his wrists tied. Happy memories of them together washed through Darah and she hoped they would spend an eternity of peace together.

A Khmer Rouge boy pushed her husband's head down and then a loud thud sent his lifeless bloody body lurching forward.

Darah felt her arms pulled tighter behind her back as a boy bound her wrists.

A loud explosion then shook the ground as a mortar shell hit the top of a nearby tree, sending shards of metal, wood, flame and smoke, cascading above their heads.

The Khmer Rouge panicked as they shouted and screamed at one another, firing their rifles wildly into the jungle.

“Let’s get out of here,” screamed the teenage Commander, and they ran into the jungle in the opposite direction of the gun fire.

Ten minutes later the jungle clearing became quiet. They could still hear artillery in the distance but that now sounded a long way off. Apart from the smoke and smell of scorched timber, it became peaceful and serene for the survivors of the genocide.

They remained in the same position, with their ears still ringing from the sound of the explosions.

Darah, expecting the Khmer Rouge to return and finish the job, smirked and thought. ‘At least these bastards will get their comeuppance.’

She had heard the Khmer Rouge soldiers talking about the evil Vietnamese coming to conquer their country. They all sneered and bragged at the time and said they were prepared to die for Pol Pot, but these evil children had run away. Darah felt hatred towards them, even though she was Cambodian.

Minutes passed in silence and, no longer hearing any gunfire, the man kneeling next to Darah’s dead husband broke the silence.

“They’ve gone,” he said as he looked up.

Looking around and seeing no sign of the Khmer Rouge, they stood, and looked at their dead. A woman untied Darah’s bonds and for the next few hours they all milled around looking for a sense of guidance and direction.

The survivors dragged their dead into the nearby jungle, but because they were too weak to dig, they covered the bodies with lime from large brown sacks, which the Khmer Rouge stored and used to turn humans into fertiliser.

They then went to the small shelters that the Khmer Rouge had used and rested.

Over the next few days of aimlessly wondering around, they realised that the Khmer Rouge slaughterers would not return. They drank the dirty water from the Mekong River awaiting death.

One emaciated middle-aged man then spoke to the remaining fifteen survivors and sounding frail said. “We don’t know where we are or how to get away from here. Our only hope is stay alive until someone finds us.”

“What? So they can kill us,” said a woman and sighed. “We may as well just stay here and die.”

Darah, although weak, felt enraged after seeing her husband and infant murdered.

“We aren’t going to die,” she said sounding defiant. “We have water and we can catch fish and find food in the jungle.”

The other survivors looked at the rage and determination on Darah’s gaunt face and mumbled.

For the next few weeks the survivors lived on fruit and vegetables they found in the jungle. They occasionally snared lizards and rodents which they ate raw as they were unable to make fire. Undernourished and weak, every day became painful, but they were all determined to survive as a community.

Months went by, and one day as Darah and her friend went to collect water from the Mekong and check their fish traps, they saw the unconscious Nguyen washed up onto the shallow riverbed.

She and the other woman slid down the embankment and dragged him to their small camp.

Nguyen drifted in and out of consciousness over the next few days, but with no medical aid, Darah knew he would be lucky to survive as she mopped his fevered brow.

After four days, Nguyen’s fever broke and he felt pain in his ankle as he opened his eyes and saw Darah smiling down at him. “How are you feeling?”

Nguyen winced in pain as he looked at her and tried to sit.

Darah smiled and helped him.

“My name is Nguyen,” he said and looked around the clearing where the people in the camp gathered and looked at him. Nguyen looked bewildered as he looked at the ghostly gaunt figures glaring at him through soulless eyes and asked. “Where am I?”

Darah understood a little Vietnamese from her days as a lawyer and said. “We don’t know where we are.”

Over the next few days, Nguyen regained his strength.

Darah bound his ankle so he could hobble around with a thick branch as a walking stick.

Over the next few weeks, Nguyen used his expertise in jungle survival to hunt and scavenge, and taught them the natural resources of their jungle surrounds. He taught them how to make fire, efficient fish traps, and snares. He told them what jungle fruits, fungi and leaves were edible and showed them how to make bows and arrows to catch larger prey.

Nguyen’s head wound took a long time to heal, and although he could remember his name and that he was a Vietnamese soldier, his past life remained a mystery, but he felt that he had a family somewhere.

The small community began to thrive with them all now having a sense of purpose and hope, thanks to Nguyen. Darah and the others taught him the Khmer language that he soon picked up because apart from Darah, that’s all the others spoke.

Several months passed and Nguyen made a slow, painful recovery and now walked unaided, but with a limp.

At first, corpses regularly drifted down their small tributary of the Mekong, which the people from the camp dragged ashore. They took anything useful, clothing, weapons, small tools, etc., and then pushed the naked body back to carry on with its journey.

They made basic tools from what they had scavenged from the Mekong’s flotsam and built basic wooden huts using lumber and large leaved foliage from the jungle.

With the rainy season now upon them, they made large clay pots to catch fresh water, with the heavy rains refreshing and cleansing the jungle and the small community. Nguyen taught them how to make sandals from the blown out tyres washed down. These sandals were ideal for the wet jungle conditions.

The stench from the previously buried corpses of the people murdered by the Khmer Rouge dissipated, leaving a pleasant floral aroma drifting through the camp which lifted their spirits as they felt their loved one’s presence.

When corpses and useful debris stopped drifting by on the river, they all realised that either the battle had moved on or the war was over.

Because the Khmer Rouge never kept these transit camps on record, no one knew of the camp’s existence, so the small community realised they would be safe.

Eighteen years had now passed, and the camp had grown into a small, self-sufficient community.

Even though at first the conditions in which they survived had been harsh, they had adapted and thrived by using the jungle’s resources for food, clothing, utensils, and weapons to hunt.

There were now thirty-eight inhabitants. Several had died over the years and some of the men and women had paired off and had children. The camp was now a small Cambodian village with small stilted shacks with a larger banana leaf covered open communal hut at the centre.

Their small tributary of the Mekong River had no boat traffic due it not being on trade routes or maps, which was why the Khmer Rouge had used it for a transit death camp. Having no communication with the outside world and unaware that the conflict that had driven them to this lifestyle had been over for seventeen years, none of them felt safe leaving the village.

Nguyen and Darah had a son two years after they first met. Nguyen still could not recall his past life, but when Darah gave birth to their son, for some strange reason, Nguyen insisted they call him Ca, although he couldn't figure out why he wanted to call his son fish, and because fish in Cambodian is Threy, nobody else knew what the name meant.

They still feared the return of the Khmer Rouge and developed their own language to communicate, a Cambodian, Vietnamese hybrid.

They kept the weapons and ammunitions that had washed up years earlier in working condition and remained on constant vigil.

Thanks to Nguyen, they were now all proficient hunters with bamboo blowpipes with cobra venom covered darts, an accurate and lethal weapon at close range. They made booby traps, from punji and bamboo stake pits, to the lethal Malay whip log. Two large logs suspended from two opposite facing trees that smashed together when the trap on the ground was tripped, crushing whoever or whatever was there, messy but effective. The community were now formidable hunters, with the children taught from an early age. They felt safe and secure thinking nothing or nobody could come into their world uninvited. That was until the strangers arrived.

END OF SAMPLE

Novels by Robert A Webster

Fiction

Siam Storm- A Thailand Adventure:

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Protector – Siam Storm 4-The Final Adventure

The adventure continues in, Protector, the fourth book of the Siam Storm Series.

When descendants of Siddhartha Gautama arrive at the Royal Palace in Bangkok, it is Prime Master Pon's duty to discover who is responsible for the murder of the other descendants, along with their age-old protectors.

After capturing an assassin, Pon assembles a team of combatant monks to track down the leader of a rising savage group of terrorists. The fun begins when Spock and Stu join the team, and as usual, they find trouble. Even with Spock and Stu underfoot, the team uncovers evidence of a plot with worldwide implications.

Protector follows the hazardous journey through unfamiliar terrain as the team races the clock to stop further killings of their brethren, only to discover that things are not always as they seem.

Spice – Culinary Adventure

Ben Bakewell is a master baker with a unique gift that made him the grand master of his culinary craft. More commonly known as 'Cake' he meets up with Ravuth, a Cambodian man residing in England, who has spent the majority of his life trying to trace his long lost family.

Jed Culver is a disgraced D.E.A agent whose bitterness for his old employer and lust for revenge lead him along a deadly path, as he also pursues the plant, although for a far more sinister gain.

This thrilling, but yet sometimes hilarious quest, takes you from the glitz and glamour of the fashionable London restaurant scene, to the wild, untamed tropical forests surrounding the Cardamom mountains region of Southeast Asia, as the participants race to discover the whereabouts of a remarkable plant and locate a misplaced family.

Fossils

Enjoy the hilarious antics of an elderly four piece band as they embark on a whirlwind tour of several

countries in Southeast Asia, unaware of their amazing worldwide success. Steve Baker (Strat) Elvin Stanley (Chippers) Charles Clark (Nobby) and Wayne Logan (Sticks) more famously known as ‘Fossils,’ are four musicians from varying background who are inadvertently united and form a band with a unique and exciting sound that filled an auditory hiatus that has been lacking for decades in the modern day music industry. Pursued and hounded by ruthless record producers, this unassuming rock band discover a new, exciting and carefree way of life, which they enjoy to the fullest, or at least what remains of it. Viagra, snuff, and Rock’n’roll.

P.A.T.H – Return Of The Reich

A team of three psychics use their unique talents to provide a link between the mortal world and the celestial. Commissioned by lost souls; they find lost treasures for the troubled spirits, which they give to the mortal beneficiaries. One particular case finds the team caught up in a plot that had been conceived during world war two, which is instigated in the present day. The team has to solve a mystery that threatens to split the delicate fabric joining the two worlds.

NEXT - PATH 2 Covenant Of The Gods

With the fate of humankind resting on their shoulders, the PATH team, along with the mortal Keepers and Guides around the world, are sent on various quests. Each individual test will push them all to their limits as time slowly ticks down towards Armageddon and their destiny.

Ratchet and Stench - Dog Gone Mystery

When Cruft’s Best of Breeds Champion mysteriously disappears; the finger of suspicion points at the owner of a rival kennel.

Somerset police find the missing Scottish terrier’s dermal tracker, but cannot find further evidence of a crime. Having no proof, they are unable to do anything and drop any investigations.

The other dogs call in Ratchet and Stench, and even though they uncover clues that suggest a brutal murder, the animal sleuths aren’t convinced.

NON Fiction

Diabetes Type 2 – Help Safely Lower Your Blood Sugar With The Tree Of Life

Written by Diabetics; for Diabetics.

Diabetes is now a prevalent condition that affects millions of people. Many of you will have, or most of you will know, someone who has it.

This book has been written by a collaboration of medically trained diabetics – not by Medical Practitioners, PhD professors or salespeople. – They are people who until recently struggled to control diabetes with diet, exercise and high levels of glycemetic drugs alone. After learning about products made from the Moringa tree, they were able to dramatically lower their blood glucose levels within weeks and continue to do so. They did their research thoroughly and found the pods and leaves of this unique tree dramatically lowered their blood glucose levels quickly, and that continues to be the case. They now want to share their knowledge and extensive research in a simple to understand way, so you too can also benefit from their experience.

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