

# **Ghostwalker**

**By Jake Kaminski**

*To Felicija,  
You first gave me the love of books*

**Ghostwalker: One who walks but cannot be seen or heard.**  
*Hmong Legend*

# Part One

2014

## Chapter One

### *Bay of Bengal-Indian Ocean*

The storm buffeted the Liberian freighter, roiling black waters tossing it like a child's toy. The Captain braced himself as the floor of the ship's bridge tilted steeply beneath his feet. A glance forward revealed the bow rising impossibly as if the ship would break in half; folding in on itself like a piece of dry kindling wood. Everyone on the bridge held their breath collectively as the nose continued skyward, only to be rewarded by the ship's sudden plunge into a steep trough. The men grasped nearby handholds tightly, their bodies almost weightless as the massive ship dove sharply into the angry sea.

The seasoned captain glanced to his right. In the darkness, his first mate's jet-black face reflected clearly in the green lights of the control panels. The African met the Captain's gaze, his eyes wide, betraying the young man's unease. The older officer nodded and smiled, even winking like some old-time pirate. The man smiled back uneasily. Just then the deck lurched unexpectedly, dropping down from the crest of another huge swell. From behind him he heard a panicked cry as his navigator stumbled forward across the room, his flailing hands searching desperately for something to break his fall. His head struck the forward bulkhead with a loud thud. Blood burst from the man's forehead as he fell backward to finally rest on his elbows; his dazed eyes looking stupidly around the darkened bridge.

The Captain grimaced as he saw the blood appear from the navigator's now broken nose. He tightened his grip on the wheel and concentrated on keeping the ship pointed into the wind. He shouted the two sailors assigned to the bridge. "See to his injuries and try to get him to the back of the room. We can't risk trying to get him below right now." He continued to keep his eyes fixed ahead as a giant wave swept over the foredeck and slammed forcefully into the thick glass of the bridge. He called shouted into his comms, struggling to be heard over the din. "Give me full power! We need to keep this bitch headed into the storm."

As the additional power surged beneath his feet, the Captain could feel the helm coming around. *'Now, if these fucking engines can just hold out, we'll be fine.'* He called out to his first mate, who was standing perfectly still, eyes fixed ahead. "How are we doing Mr. Francis? Are we having fun yet?"

The young man, wedged securely between two handholds, looked back at the Captain with a bright, toothy grin. "Yes sir. I believe we are having very much fun.!", his African accent cutting through the tension and putting the other men at ease. Even the dazed navigator was smiling up from his place on the floor.

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Three decks below the bridge, Ali al-Hassad sat with his back wedged against the bulkhead of the top bunk, his left hand fiercely gripping the heavy metal brace above his head. His right hand worked furiously at the beads of his *misbahah* prayer beads. His face was locked in a permanent scowl as he silently mouthed *Subhan Allah*, “Glory be to God” thirty-three times. Two of his men were in the bunks below him. He refused to look at them. The Syrian fighter was ashamed at their weakness. They cowered in fear, huddled in their bunks, whimpering pathetically each time the ship struck another wave. They had been vomiting for the last three hours and the cramped quarters reeked with sweat, fear and last night’s half-digested supper. The disgusting air had become so foul he was breathing through his mouth just to avoid becoming sick himself.

The ship shuddered as it hit a huge wave, causing the man to tighten his grip on his beads and pause from his prayers. As the wave released the vessel and it surged forward again, the Syrian took a breath, surprised he had been holding it. He closed his eyes, returning to his prayers. Surely, Allah was testing them. Unexpectedly, the ship’s motion paused--a lull. He looked over the bunk across the room, where his “number two” lay calmly staring at the ceiling. The man, sensing he was being watched, returned his gaze. Their eyes locked in fierce determination. The man spoke quietly in Arabic. “All will be well, my Sheik.”

A full five minutes passed without the ship trying to throw al-Hassad from his bunk. He used the time to reflect on the purpose of this voyage. It had already been three weeks since they had left their safe house back in the Syrian desert. Each step of the journey had been through trusted channels. Most of the time their modes of transport had been primitive and uncomfortable. He smiled wryly to himself. It was as it should be. Comfort was of no importance, only secrecy. After all, their suffering was for Allah; an offering gladly offered up.

The “Sheik” and his fighters were on a journey to kill the infidel crusaders—the Americans. The thought of it stirred his blood and caused his black eyes to glint in the dim light. He and his *jihadi* fighters would show the Americans that they were not safe anywhere. Allah would always find them...and he was Allah’s instrument of death. Suddenly, the calm was broken when another wave slammed into the ship. The Syrian fighter’s head bounced sideways, striking the side of his head against the cold steel hull. Flakes of grey paint, mixed with rust, ground painfully into the side of his face. Pulling back, he dabbed cautiously at his temple, checking for damage. He gingerly brushed small grains of debris from his face and beard, checking his fingers for blood. Nothing. He released a long breath, sat back and cursed the non-believers who had built the ship.

## Chapter 2

### *Chiang Mai, Thailand-Three Weeks Later*

Robert Forrester sat calmly under a colorful umbrella at a sidewalk café in downtown Chaing Mai. A career diplomat, he was serving at the US Embassy-Bangkok as the Deputy Chief of Mission. He had just completed the first two years of his assignment in Thailand. If all went well, he would get his own Ambassadorship early next year. Things were going well. Helen and the girls were happy. His oldest daughter, a sixteen-year-old going on thirty, was excelling at the American school and had become fluent in French. A natural. His youngest, Maggie, just turned ten. She was also flourishing. Her math scores were off the charts and she had soaked up the Thai language quicker than her own.

The diplomat sipped slowly from a cup of iced Thai tea. It was a local brew, made from black Ceylon tea leaves and then mixed with condensed milk and sugar. He found it refreshing and easy on a stomach that was becoming increasingly sensitive with each passing year. His dark Saville Row suit stood in sharp contrast to his bright, open-collared white linen shirt.

On the sidewalk close to the café's tables, a Buddhist monk sat cross-legged, back arrow straight, eyes closed in meditation. A stream of humanity flowed like water around the robed figure, the people as oblivious to him as he was them. The morning air was moist but comfortable. Robert knew that it was only temporary. The moderate temperatures would soon give way to a tropical sauna bath. The city's air was already thickening with pollution from the diesel buses, ancient cars and motorbikes battling for position on the narrow, crowded streets. He watched as an ancient Thai woman deftly maneuvered her scooter through traffic while balancing three crates of chickens tied to a wire rack behind her.

Robert shook his head in wonder and continued to take in the world around him. The first thing that struck him was the noise. It was a permanent fixture, as much a part of the city as the clouds in the sky. The unique, high-pitched, sing-song tones of the Thai language competed fiercely with the mosquito-like whine of the moto-taxis, creating a symphony of sound found only in the Orient. Exotic aromas drifted on the breeze from open-air food stands. Pungent joss sticks burned in the stalls of street vendors, and tendrils of black vehicle exhaust rose like living things from the streets. He smiled in satisfaction. He loved it. This was something that his colleagues sitting at a sterile desk in Washington would never understand. This beautiful, flawed, exotic world was the reason he had joined the State Department so many years ago.

Sensing movement to his rear, he lowered his cup and turned. A small, brown hand touched lightly on his shoulder. A slender young Thai woman dressed in a tight black skirt and pale-blue blouse lowered herself demurely into the seat next to him. Robert smiled and spoke. "Achara, I was beginning to worry that you were having trouble getting here."

The young woman brushed back her long, lustrous black hair and smiled. "No, everything is fine. I stayed at the house of my parents last night and then took the bus here early this morning."

Forester motioned for the waiter to bring another tea for his assistant. Achara smiled modestly as she opened her appointment book. He smiled at her composure. She had just gotten off a stuffy, one-hour bus ride; no doubt sharing the journey with a myriad of peasant farmers, chickens and goats. Yet here she was, looking like she could be seated at the finest café in Paris. Robert had to admit to himself that most of the women in Thailand conducted themselves with a grace seldom seen in the West. He chuckled to himself. *'How would I describe the complexities of this place to the folks back home?'*

The diplomat broke from his reverie, noting that Achara was now texting someone on her Blackberry. She paused for a moment, clearly receiving a reply to her message.

He looked over at her, eyebrows arched questioningly. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes, of course." She glanced to the street and then to her watch. "The Minister's assistant just texted me that they are running a little late. Something about a traffic jam near their offices. I think they should be here very soon." She gently set her phone onto the tabletop and lifted the porcelain cup of tea to her lips.

Robert nodded. "I would have thought they'd be early. After all, the Minister of Interior called this meeting looking to gain economic assistance for the region. From the looks of this place as we drove in, it could certainly use *something*." He thought to himself. *'Now I just need to hear what he is willing to give in return.'*

The diplomat sat back and sighed. "It was quite a trip from Bangkok. Breathtaking country, but the roads were horrible. As you know, I'm not crazy about those long rides in the armored SUVs. You can't open the windows and the bumps and turns just get me car-sick. But, since the Minister and his staff are all supposed to be here, the Ambassador felt that I should handle this personally. Run up the flag...more or less." He returned to his tea, gazing at the street expectantly over his raised cup.

Achara nodded her head in understanding. She paused a few seconds, once again scanning the street for a sign of the Minister and his cadre of bodyguards. "Do you want me to call his assistant again?"

Forrester responded quietly. "No, it's okay. We're still early." He smiled reassuringly. "By the way, where is our driver?"

"He is just across the street." She pointed with her chin to the white Suburban parked across the street to their right.

He turned his head to the right and found the white Chevrolet Suburban, a glaring example of American opulence, totally out of place on the narrow roadways of Thailand. The driver was seated behind the wheel, the engine running. Seated next to him was an Embassy Security Officer. Forrester knew that both men were armed and on alert, their primary responsibility to protect himself and his translator from any and all threats. His gaze lingered, watching as the locals walked past the SUV, stealing glances into the interior while keeping a wary distance. *'I*

*wonder what these people must think of us, cruising through their country like visitors from another planet.'*

Robert expanded his focus to take in the surrounding skyline. The exotic rooftops of the nearby Buddhist temples stood out against an azure sky. This was a beautiful country with a rich history. The Thai culture and religion stretched back thousands of years. Its people were enjoying the benefits of a rich civilization when Europeans were still living in the Dark Ages, unbathed and illiterate. He glanced briefly at his assistant. She was a wonder. Brilliant really. She kept his schedule and ran his life so efficiently that he often wondered how she had time for a personal life of her own. Her name, Achara, meant *angel* in her own language. *'Her parents certainly had great foresight when naming this sweet young woman.'*

Sensing his gaze, Achara smiled quietly. She had come to care for Robert deeply. He was a decent man, dedicated to his job and his family. Kind and respectful of her from the first day they met, he was genuinely interested in her life and her extended family. He often asked about them and did what he could to help her younger brothers and sisters to find employment. She would miss him terribly when he went to his next posting.

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The lone rider stood astride the Korean-made motor-scooter; his helmet fixed with the visor in the up position. The chaos of the street traffic rendered him invisible to all but the keenest eye. He ignored the close proximity of the multitude of passing vehicles with single-minded intensity. His attention was fixed solely on the open-air café across the street.

Ali al-Hassad stared intently at the American seated at the table. From his perch on the tiny motorbike he could see the entire café and the American SUV parked across the street, its engine running. His pulse quickened as he considered the fate of the man comfortably sipping his tea. His black eyes flashed with contempt for this soft, pale-white infidel. His gaze then traveled to the young woman seated to the American's right; his lips curling reflexively into a vicious sneer. The sight of a woman uncovered in public, catering to an American, was incomprehensible. Killing her would be a pleasure. For Ali al-Hassad all of this was personal. Hatred was always personal. To his controllers back in Syria, this was a political statement... a religious statement as well. This spoiled American's death would be a part of ISIS's asymmetrical global strategy to sow fear and confusion among the non-believers. For al-Hassad, the politics would be secondary. In minutes he would spit on the diplomat's corpse. The woman's death would be of no consequence.

Coordinating this strike had been easy. The American government was not on a "war footing" in Southeast Asia. Nobody expected the reach of ISIS to extend to a remote café a world away from the Middle East. Al-Hassad and three of his most trusted fighters had traveled to Thailand in the hold of the rusty Liberian freighter, somehow surviving a three-day storm in the heart of the Indian Ocean. Upon arrival, fully recovered from their trials at sea, they had mingled with the ship's crew as they had disembarked on shore leave; Burmese port authorities paying little attention to the comings and goings of ordinary sailors. From the port, elements of a powerful

drug cartel in the pay of ISIS had quietly smuggled the four men across the border and into Thailand.

Once in country, it was just a matter of selecting the appropriate target. After only a week, a gift from Allah... A devout Muslim worker on the staff of the Minister of Interior had provided advance notice of the Embassy's meeting in Chaing Mai. Al-Hassad enlisted some local believers and paid a king's ransom to the local drug triad for the use of some of their soldiers and jungle guides. Al-Hassad then quickly arranged for this strike, knowing delays always resulted in leaks. The operation would be swift and violent. The exfiltration of his Syrian team would be through the jungle highlands and into the mountains of Myanmar, or Burma... or whatever the non-believers were calling it now. One day it would all be a part of the worldwide Caliphate. *'It will be as Allah wishes it'*

Al-Hassad was a top-level leader of ISIS in Syria. He was sought by Western intelligence services worldwide. So far, he had eluded all of their computers, facial recognition technology and complex search algorithms. He accomplished this by living off the grid, purposefully remaining low-tech. A devout student of the great Muslim leader Saladin, Al-Hassad modeled his life after the man who had defeated the Crusader armies of the Middle Ages. He worked every day to keep his life simple and pure. The Syrian never used computers, rarely traveled by commercial airlines and routinely slipped across international borders utilizing remote stretches of unguarded frontiers.

He removed his helmet and set it on the curb next to the scooter, replacing it with a battered baseball cap he had purchased from a man on the street that morning. He casually picked up the "burner" phone and called his number two. "They are seated outside near the sidewalk. Their driver is parked across the street in the white American vehicle. The bodyguard is in the vehicle as well. We will proceed as planned."

Yusef al-Nouri calmly listened to his leader through his earpiece and responded. "Yes, my sheikh."

Yusef didn't end the call but kept it open, looking over and nodding to the Thai mercenary seated on the bench just ten feet away. They both picked up their backpacks and headed north on the crowded sidewalk. The white Suburban loomed ahead. As they passed a recessed doorway, two men emerged from the shadows, both carrying AK-47 assault rifles pressed downward against their legs. Two additional gunmen stayed on the sidewalk with their backs pressed tightly against a building, their weapons invisible to the casual observer. Yusef and his partner ignored them and continued to walk nonchalantly into the street, pausing directly behind the American SUV, appearing to wait to cross the street. Yusef noticed that the driver was now watching him in his side-view mirror. The man looked more curious than worried.

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Staring into his side-view mirror, Lek Jaa watched from the driver's seat of the Suburban as two men walked into the street just feet from the SUV's rear bumper. One of the men was a local, but the second looked different. A Westerner? He couldn't be sure. Maybe something else...He

kept watching them in his mirror and spoke to the American security officer seated next to him. “We have two men coming up on our six. Not sure what they are doing...”

Rick Hanson tightened the grip on his machine pistol, held cradled in his arms in the ready position. His eyes shifted immediately to the rear-view mirror, trying to unobtrusively see what Lek was talking about. “Talk to me brother...I can’t see shit from here.”

“They seem to be waiting to cross the street...One of them looks different...I don’t know...”

Hanson shifted in his seat. “Fuck...” He turned to his left, his weapon wheeling toward the possible threat.

Lek spoke quickly. “It’s okay, they’re crossing the street.”

Both men exhaled the tension from their bodies. They observed the two suspicious men for several minutes, watching them stop at a shop fifty meters down the street from the café. All was good.

Suddenly a blinding white flash, at first barely registering with the occupants of the armored Suburban, was followed by a powerful, directed blast that rose through the floorboards of the SUV, vaporizing the two security men instantly.

Forrester started to look up as the sound of the blast erupted across the street, only to be met by the overwhelming effects of a second blast, this time much closer. An unseen shock wave swept the café, scattering people and tables like pieces of paper. As Forrester’s body smashed against a nearby wall, he was struck in the left shoulder by a piece of the flying iron railing that had separated the café from the street. He felt his shoulder snap loudly, pain coursing through his upper body like giant hands were trying to rip him in half. He struggled to make sense of what was happening but his world was fading to dark, cries of the injured ringing in his ears as he slipped into the void.

Moments later, Robert slowly began to regain consciousness, the world returning through what seemed a wall of cotton. His ears were ringing and all other sounds were a muffled mix of crunching glass and distant screams. The lingering smell of explosives hung in the air, something he had learned during his time in Iraq. The diplomat forced himself to open his eyes and assess the situation. He tried to move, but couldn’t make his arms or legs work. He was only able to move his head but even that caused him extreme pain. As his eyes began to focus, he saw the lifeless form of Achara, a large piece of metal shrapnel impaled in her throat. Her silky black hair lay soaking in a thickening pool of dark red blood. He tried to suppress a reflexive whimper, horrified that he was now a part of one of those tragedies seen on cable news almost every week. Suddenly, he sensed movement to his left. Someone was moving across the wreckage of the café. He closed his eyes, praying fervently to a God who he had been ignoring for as long as he could remember. The footsteps stopped. He opened his eyes to the faint smell of gun oil. Above the din that was still thundering in his ears, he heard the words “*Allahu akbar*”, God is Great, spoken calmly. He never heard the shots from the AK-47 that would shred his body and further mutilate his already dead assistant.

Al-Hassad spat on the body at his feet, cursing in Arabic. He then scanned the remainder of the café. Nothing moved. Remnants of the other patrons lay scattered all around him. On the sidewalk nearby, the Buddhist priest lay crumpled in a pile of robes. He felt nothing but triumph. Although most of these people were not Americans, they were still infidels, non-believers. Their Oriental religions were just as much an affront to Allah as those of the Crusaders and their brothers, the Jews. He turned back to the street, stepped carefully over the body of the monk and calmly walked to a waiting Volkswagen bus. He was already on his way back to Syria.

## Chapter 3

### *Two Days Later-Northwest Thailand Highlands*

The two men moved silently and efficiently. They emerged from the thick stand of bamboo and stood on the narrow path, looking northwest along the thin ribbon that served as a passageway through the jungle. They had materialized from nothing; the undergrowth taking human form. Even in the open they were nearly invisible. Both had smeared mud over all exposed flesh to protect themselves from the merciless hordes of mosquitoes and even more importantly, to mask any scent of civilization. They looked and smelled like the jungle...they were the jungle. All sounds of their passing were muted by the cacophony of the surrounding triple canopy and the soft, moist earth that absorbed the pressure of their boots. Screeches from tropical birds competed with the incessant hum of insects, while troops of monkeys chattered their displeasure at the strange intruders into their domain.

The men had received a call ten hours earlier via sat phone informing them of the attack in Chaing Mai and the belief that the terrorists were fleeing to the border through the highland jungle. They had been ordered directly by the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command to pick up their trail and stop them...by whatever means necessary. The only rules of engagement were that there were no rules. Their orders had been clear on that point.

The taller of the two men was an American. A special operator from Delta Forces, he was assigned to the US Embassy in Bangkok as a military attaché. In truth, he was an agent from the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Pentagon's version of the CIA commonly known as the DIA. His name was Ethan Crowe, a highly decorated soldier with almost twenty years of experience in some of the worst places on Earth. He and his partner had been in the region tracking down leads on smuggling routes through the highland jungles of Thailand. The powerful Triad known as the Mong Tai Army was moving billions of dollars in drugs, money and weapons through Thailand and into Burma. Crowe was there to disrupt the routes and to try to locate the elusive General Khun Sa, the powerful drug lord who presided over all criminal activity in northern Thailand.

Ethan began his career as a scout for an Army Ranger company in Bosnia in the nineties. He was a Lakota Sioux, evidenced by his high cheekbones, black hair and deeply tan skin. The Army had quickly put Ethan's tracking skills to use, assigning him to a group of Native American scouts tasked with locating genocidal Serbian militias during the Balkan wars. The tour was a bloody one. Crowe's actions in Bosnia brought him to the attention of an American colonel who convinced him to re-enlist and transfer to Army intelligence. It was the beginning of a long and violent career, Crowe fighting shadow wars far from the headlines and even farther from his home in the Dakotas.

Now, nearing the end of his military career, Ethan was still the battle-hardened soldier, lean and muscular. His hair, black and coarse, was worn long and over his collar; a look only permitted to special forces operators. His dark face was ruggedly handsome, marred only by a scar that ran along his left jaw-line; a gift from a Serbian soldier many years ago.

The shorter of the two men was known only as Ntaj. He was a native of Thailand, but not an ordinary Thai. Ntaj was a Hmong tribesman. He had been on the payroll of the Americans for at least ten years. His father had scouted for the Americans during the Vietnam conflict, fighting side by side with a squad of Force-Recon Marines deep into VC-held territory. Ntaj had learned his skills from years spent at his father's side. His knowledge of the jungles and northern mountains bordered on mythical.

Under the auspices of the American Embassy the Hmong tracker had worked to support the DEA and other U.S. intelligence agencies with vested interests in the region. The man was a physical wonder. His body was one solid muscle. Nothing bulky or imposing at first glance, but a total package of taut power stretched across a slender frame. His sinewy upper torso was covered in tattoos, an elaborate dragon on the inside of his left arm and a Chinese tiger on the inside of his right. His long black hair was pulled tightly back from his face and gathered in a thick leather band, from which a black braid fell to the center of his back.

Crowe and Ntaj had first met upon Ethan's arrival three years earlier. They had been inseparable since that time; seeming to communicate without words. Together they Embassyformed an imposing force, striking fear into the brutal soldiers of the Mong Tai Army whenever they encountered them.

Crowe watched his partner as the man moved cautiously along the jungle floor, all of the man's senses on high alert. Ethan marveled at the Hmong, the closest example of a pure warrior he had ever met. He let his thoughts drift momentarily, his time with Ntaj playing in his mind.

*'The two men had been introduced by the outgoing military attaché at the Embassy. They had both been briefed about the other's history, but they would have recognized a kinship without the introductions. They were hard men; both coming from tribal societies that cherished honor and courage.'*

*Ntaj had become a trusted friend, surprising Crowe because they rarely spoke. Ntaj was a man of few words. When he did speak, it was to pass on knowledge or skills learned during his life in the jungles. In battle or conflict, the Hmong faced every situation as if it had been predestined. Crowe was certain the man knew no fear. He had never met a man...or woman, who was more in harmony with the world around them.*

*Ntaj had spent a large part of his younger life in a Shaolin Buddhist temple in the remote highlands of Thailand. It was there that he was taught the philosophies of the ancient beliefs of the Shaolin...the disdain for materialism and the precious nature of life. It was also where he had learned the science of fighting. During the past few years Ntaj had become a strong influence on Crowe, teaching him how to fight even better than before and mentoring him in the art of meditation. Under the Hmong's tutelage, Ethan had come to truly know his body and mind. The Buddhists believed that every human had an inner strength, known as "chi", which through proper training, could be unlocked. Ntaj had taught Ethan how to use that power; not only to fight, but to control his body under the most stressful of situations.*

*During a mission into the mountains of Cambodia, Ethan had once asked Ntaj if he was some sort of priest and if he prayed to the same God as the whites. Ntaj had just shook his head silently, staring into space while deliberating how to answer.*

*“Ethan.” Ntaj began in his thick accent. “I am not priest...not like the Christian priests. Nothing like that.” He paused again to select his words carefully. “I think you are good man. You are not white man. Maybe that is good. I think your people are like my people. We have our ways. They are very old ways. We have our own ancestors in the next world. They wait for us.” He watched Ethan closely, wondering if he understood his words. “We will never understand the white man’s God.” He smiled and chuckled quietly, pausing for a moment to consider his next words. “Sometimes I think their God must be lonely. The Christians say we all must go to their churches to visit their God...I think maybe their God is lonely because he lives in churches and not in world.”*

*Ethan smiled at his friend’s take on the white religion. He wondered what the Jesuits at the mission school on the reservation would think of Ntaj’s observations.*

*Ntaj continued. “And these Muslims, they are different puzzle. They say that they have to kill all those who do not believe in this God called Allah. I think the Muslim God must be very angry. Why would this Allah want to kill his people?” He fell silent for a long time, clearly thinking about what he had just said. He finally sighed and continued. “It is very confusing. For me it is enough to live in harmony with the world around us...try to do good.” He motioned to the mountains around him to make his point. “I think all of this is better than a church.” This pronouncement was all he had to say on the subject.*

*Ethan just nodded silently in agreement, thinking of his own people and their belief system. The whites had swept it away with the ‘Jesus Road’. Maybe their God was more powerful...or angry...or maybe he was just an excuse for the whites to take what they wanted.’*

Crowe’s thoughts snapped back to the present. Ntaj was walking slowly along the path twenty feet ahead of him, his eyes scanning the ground intently. Crowe carefully kept pace with the Hmong warrior, eyes turned outward, routinely checking their ‘six’ and ever watchful of ambush. Suddenly Ntaj stopped and crouched close to the ground, studying a clear sign in the damp earth of the jungle floor. Crowe joined him as they knelt over the footprint, their expert eyes noting that the track was fresh.

Ntaj’s head turned slowly to the left. He had noticed something. A disturbance in the undergrowth...The Hmong took three crouching steps off the pathway and stopped. He scooped a small sample of the moist earth into his hand, raising it to his nose, smelling it... all the while scanning his surroundings.

Crowe moved slowly sideways to get close to his partner. He silently raised his eyebrows questioningly, “What?”

Ntaj stuck out his index finger and moved it back and forth, imitating a man relieving himself. Then he held up two fingers... “Two hours ahead.”

Crowe scanned the pathway and held up eight digits, confirming that the eight men they were tracking were still together. Crowe motioned silently with a tilt of his head, pointing to the dense undergrowth to their left. Ntaj nodded in agreement and both men stepped deep into the vegetation and dropped quietly to the ground. There was time to rest...take some nourishment. They would need it for the fight to come.

## Chapter 4

### *US Embassy-Bangkok*

Ambassador Graham entered “the bubble” with a grim expression, his clothes rumpled and two day’s growth on his haggard face. The room got its nickname because it was the only place in the Embassy that could not be penetrated with electronic eavesdropping devices. He looked around the table at his senior staff. Most were mid-career civil servants, a few with experience in “hardship” posts. As he took his seat, he looked over at the young man who was now manning the Deputy Chief of Mission post. Jim was bright and quick, but this attack was going to put the kid to the test. He let his gaze travel around the conference table; the faces told the story. Each was processing this in their own way. From the looks he was getting, their reactions ranged from somewhere between angry and scared shitless. Truthfully, he didn’t blame them. Losing Bob Forrester had shaken him to the core. He put his steno book down on the table in front of him and slowly looked at each of his people in turn. After a prolonged silence, he finally addressed his team.

“First of all, how are you all holding up?”

Everyone quickly murmured assurances that all was fine; responding too quickly, he knew.

“What about your people? Are they doing okay with this? He quickly held his hand up to delay their response. “Just wait a minute before you answer. It’s okay if there are problems. There should be problems. This attack didn’t happen in a vacuum. Our people were loved by many in this Post and they will be missed. A certain amount of uncertainty is to be expected.” He tried to engage their eyes, doing his best to convey his sincerity. What he saw looking back was fear; haunted eyes wishing they were back home.

The consular officer was the first to respond. “Mr. Ambassador, we’re experiencing quite a bit of stress in my section...fear too. Everyone is wondering if this is just the beginning of something bigger... I’ve had several of my local employees call in sick every day since the attack. I think they’re afraid to be seen coming in the gate.”

Several other section heads added that the reaction was the same throughout the embassy. The Ambassador nodded sadly, letting out a slow sigh before speaking.

“Try to be patient with your people. I know we still have a job and Washington still expects reporting as usual, but if you can’t meet a deadline, just let my assistant know and we will intervene for you. I won’t have some bureaucrat back home fucking with us over some unimportant reporting schedule.”

The entire team just looked at their boss. He never used coarse language, ever. It was somehow reassuring that he was using it *now*.

Ambassador Graham quickly shifted gears-all business now. Looking to the far end of the table, he looked at the Embassy Military Attaché and demanded, “Colonel, status report please.”

Quickly sitting upright, as close to attention as possible while seated, Colonel Nelson began his briefing. “Sir, it has now been forty-eight hours since the incident. Indo-Pacific Command has moved Seal Team One to Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. They can be here in a matter of hours and will have no problem with a halo drop...*if* we can generate actionable intel. To that end, all of our intelligence agencies are cooperating and are deep into this thing. One thing everyone seems to agree upon, this was an ISIS operation through and through.

The Ambassador interrupted, skeptically. “No locals?”

The Colonel responded carefully. “Sir, there was some local support, but it looks like this op was ordered up in Syria. We also believe that the four primary operatives were Syrian, assisted by local sympathizers here on the ground. One of our contacts is adamant that the head of the team who carried out this attack was Ali al-Hassad.” He took a minute to pass a series of photos around the table. “Al-Assad is a major player. He’s a member of the top leadership of ISIS in Syria at the moment. He was responsible for the bombing of a tour bus in London two years ago...it killed forty-five tourists, mostly Brits down from Scotland on holiday. It was a nightmare...at least fifteen of the passengers were children. Needless to say, our British counterparts have already offered the services of an elite squad of SAS troops to assist.

The Ambassador nodded quietly and motioned for the Colonel to continue.

“This al-Assad is still a bit of a mystery to all of us in that he remains totally off the grid for long periods of time. If this *is* him, it’s a very rare appearance... He must have thought he would be safe so far from his home turf.” He hesitated a beat and then continued. “It’s also probable that he hired some local bad guys, gunmen from one of the drug triads. We think that these same locals will be getting them out of the country and across the Burmese border using one of their smuggling routes. There’s no way that the Syrians can find their way through those remote jungles and mountains without a guide...a really *good* guide.”

Ambassador Graham nodded thoughtfully. “What are we doing on the ground here? Are the Thais with us on this?”

“We’re working all of our sources in the region. CIA, DIA and NSA are running full speed and tapping all of their sources. As for full disclosure to the locals, we thought it best to keep this a close hold. The Thais are not happy that this has happened on their soil. They have pledged one hundred percent support. They have their military on alert, but we’ve been cautious about sharing too much intel. Not yet anyway. Frankly, we’re not sure who’s who at this point. They’re making all the right noises, but I don’t want to tip our hand and have it cost us in the end.”

The Colonel looked expectantly at the Ambassador, who just gestured for him to continue.

“As for the Embassy itself, we are on maximum alert. All dependents have been brought into the compound and will remain here until the threat is over. Our Marines are on a full combat footing. They will remain on post until we get a handle on this thing. Our people will be protected. We are well provisioned and our perimeter is tight as a drum.” The military man

looked around the table expectantly. “Are there any problems with accommodations and supplies so far?” He was met with strained smiles and positive responses all around.

The Colonel then resumed his briefing. “We believe we have a team on their trail as we speak. We’re ninety percent sure that the Syrians are heading for the Burma border. We also think that they have a group of Burmese tribesmen who are escorting them through the jungle.”

Ambassador Graham responded with a questioning look. “Burmese?”

“Yes sir. These guys work for the triads. Probably the Mong Tai Army. They help move opium out of Thailand through the jungles and into Burma.”

The Ambassador’s eyes flashed uncharacteristically in anger as he processed the information. The he demanded in a low tone, almost a growl. “Who’s on their trail and how did we accomplish that?”

The Colonel looked directly at the Ambassador when he replied. “Agent Crowe sir... We have Crowe and the Hmong tracker closing on them now.”

The Ambassador raised his eyebrows at the news. “How did that happen?”

“Pure luck, sir. If anything about this can be construed as luck... Crowe was up in the highlands helping the DEA on a drug op when the attack happened. He had his sat-phone and we were able to coordinate his insertion. His tracker was able to put us onto the most logical route to the border and it looks like they are closing the gap.” The Colonel paused momentarily to let the information sink in, then continued. “Unfortunately, we have temporarily lost contact with them, but we’re hoping it’s just topographic interference; there’s all sorts of rock formations out there.”

“What will they do when they catch up to them?” The Ambassador’s eyebrows raised questioningly.

“Well, hopefully they can reach us on the sat phone when they get close and confirm they have indeed found the Syrians. They can then provide us with their coordinates and we can insert the Seals.” He paused, “If not, then it will be on Crowe and his man to resolve the problem.”

“Rules of engagement?” The Ambassador demanded in a stern tone.

“They have a green light to engage sir. The Pentagon has authorized a lethal response. I’m told that this comes directly from the White House. These men are considered enemy combatants. We have been cleared to engage on either side of the border. I don’t believe the Syrians will be given any quarter...” The Colonel looked at the Ambassador expectantly, not sure how he would react to this news.

“Let’s just hope we can get a Seal Team into the mix. That’s a lot to expect of Crowe and his man to handle on their own.”

The Colonel nodded his head in agreement. “I agree sir, but if it’s got to be anyone, they would be my choice...”