

Mekong Dawn

by Bill Swiggs,

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❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧

Table of Contents

Prologue



Chapter 1 ... thru ... Chapter 33

Epilogue



Acknowledgements

❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧

Prologue

Phnom Penh, Cambodia. 1976.

Chey Chanthou hooked the fingers of her one good hand through the wire ceiling of the cage to prevent collapsing into the stinking mess at her feet as the truck bounced through the darkness. By the filtered glow of the headlights she could just make out the face of her son. The boy supported her tortured body with one arm while struggling bravely with the other to protect her from the crush of prisoners thrown across the cage as the truck swayed and bucked along a potholed road. She lifted her free arm to place it around his shoulders but the pain defeated her. A gasp of agony hissed from her mouth that she tried to disguise with a cough—a futile, motherly gesture, for their captors had forced the twelve-year-old to watch every moment of her torture and rape.

‘All right, Mother?’ The dread in his voice tore at her.

‘Yes, my boy. I am fine.’

She sensed his gaze in the darkness as he examined her, then the arm gripped her tighter, the strength of a man.

‘Where do you think they are taking us?’ His voice sounded faint in the darkness, barely audible over the groan of the engine.

Chanthou shook her head. ‘I don’t know.’

‘They might be taking us home.’

‘I don’t know where they’re taking us.’

The truck’s front wheels dropped into a rut and Chanthou and her son slammed against the steel cage under a press of tumbling bodies. Her vision exploded into painful stars and she fought to breathe until the men, women and children in the cage regained their feet.

The weight came off her at last and Chanthou’s son helped her out of the filth. A tiny breeze blew past her face and she followed it back to its source, discovering a small tear in the canvas. She sucked greedily at the air until the agony receded into that dull pain that had been with her for weeks now. Placing her eye to the tear, she glimpsed the outside world—a world she had been kept from for two months, since the night the men with scarves came for them. As best she could tell, the truck was making its way through the narrow streets of Phnom Penh. The buildings lining the road were in darkness and the footpaths empty. Not a single vehicle passed by.

The Khmer Rouge had driven everyone into hiding.

A sense of dread held her in its icy grip and she could see no chance for the future. Lowering her head, she placed her lips close to the boy’s ear. ‘I want you to make me a promise.’

‘Yes, Mother?’

‘If a chance comes I want you to run as fast as you can. Don’t wait for me. Don’t look back. Run as hard as you can and stay in the shadows. Hide from the men with scarves. When you can, make your way to Kampong Cham. Your uncle will hide you and keep you safe. Do you remember where his house is?’

‘Yes, Mother.’

‘Promise me you will do this. Run when I say and keep running until you are safe. Promise me you won’t come back for me.’

The boy, always so dutiful and quick to respond, hesitated. She kissed his forehead. ‘Promise me.’

‘I promise, Mother.’

The truck slowed and turned off the road. The tyres sloshed through water, the cage bucking as they travelled along a rough track. The tear revealed nothing but darkness. They could be anywhere. Some of the other prisoners whispered to each other, wondering at their final destination, but the voices fell away as a new sound grew in the distance.

‘What’s that noise, Mother?’

Chanthou cocked her head and listened. A tinny screech could be heard over the engine noise, like fingernails being dragged down a blackboard. The noise faded as the truck manoeuvred along the track, then returned louder than before. Now Chanthou recognised the sound. Somewhere in the distance music played so loud it had distorted into a painful roar. She squeezed her son’s shoulder and wondered what fresh hell awaited them.

With a jolt the truck stopped. The canvas covering was lifted, revealing men wearing the red-chequered scarves of the Khmer Rouge. They unlocked the cage and had to scream to be heard over the music.

‘Out! Everybody out!’

One by one the prisoners climbed to the ground. Chanthou followed her son to the rear of the truck. The boy dropped lithely to the ground and turned to help her, but she hesitated, unsure if her abused limbs could handle the fall.

A guard, a bull of a man with a bald head, grabbed her cotton shift, the only piece of clothing she wore, and pulled her from the truck. Chanthou sprawled in the mud. Her son helped her to her feet and she squinted against the painful glare of lights.

They were in a grove of trees. Bare electric bulbs and floodlights hung from the branches, throwing harsh light in every direction. A few trees had large trumpet-like speakers fixed into them, the kind normally found at sports stadiums, all blaring out the horrible, too-loud music. Beyond the trees she could see an old yellow excavator, fresh dirt clinging to the bucket.

The guard grabbed a handful of hair and twisted her head back to examine her face.

‘She was beautiful once, this one.’ His voice carried no pity, no hint of human kindness, as if he commented on a piece of beef in the market. In his other hand he held a pick handle, a stained and marked length of mahogany that had split near the narrow end and been repaired with red electrical tape.

‘Maybe, once.’ Another guard gestured at Chanthou’s exposed, blood-caked crotch. ‘Those bastards at S21 have ruined her.’

'Pity. I would have liked a little time with her behind the hut.' The big guard let go of her hair and Chanthou stepped back into the group of prisoners. Her son clutched at her hand and she linked her fingers through his.

'Move!' the guard bellowed and pointed through the grove of trees with the pick handle.

Like cattle, the prisoners filed through the trees, flanked on all sides by Khmer Rouge, who carried no guns but were armed with a strange mixture of farming tools and lengths of wood. The music diminished as they stumbled farther into the grove and Chanthou realised the speakers must face out into the surrounding countryside.

A few floodlights illuminated an opening beyond the trees where the excavator had been at work. There were piles of earth and long lines of raised ground like the levees between rice paddies. At each side the ground dropped away into shadow. A stench permeated the air, a high smell, sticky and cloying. It hung as thick as oil and Chanthou gagged at the first whiff. The Khmer Rouge herded them out onto a narrow levee and she could see down into the shadowed ground beyond. The sight that greeted her made her gasp and stumble. She gripped her son's hand with a strength thought long beaten out of her, squeezing so hard the boy cried out in pain.

The pits at either side were filled with bodies—hundreds of human bodies. The corpses of men, women and children lay in grotesque positions, a tangle of limbs and torsos, three and four deep in places. Some had been dead for a long time, the decay well advanced. Others looked as if they were merely sleeping. Then she saw the terrible wounds that left her with no doubt as to the purpose of the cruel tools in the hands of the guards.

Near the head of the line a man screamed and tried to break away. The nearest guard thrust a pitchfork savagely at the man's back. The prisoner let fly an ear-splitting wail that rivalled the music. The guard pulled the pitchfork free and the man teetered on the edge of the levee, blood spreading across his back. Another guard stepped up and swung a shovel into his head, sending him crashing into the pit.

Holding her son's hand, Chanthou tried to pull back with the rest of the prisoners. The guards were ready. They closed in, swinging their killing tools with wild abandon. Rough hands pulled her to her knees. Beside her the boy wailed in terror. She could see the other prisoners being subdued and brought to their knees also.

'Be brave, my boy. Remember your promise.'

The guards could do nothing to quiet the prisoners. The condemned had seen the fate awaiting them and howled for mercy. The Khmer Rouge were immune to their pleading.

'Tepan! Bring me the first one. My little angel has tasted no blood yet tonight.' The big guard patted the pick handle affectionately.

At the front of the line, Tepan pulled a man to his feet. He begged for his life as he was shoved to the edge of the levee. The guard ignored the sobbing pleas, widened his stance, like a baseball player at the plate, and swung the pick handle hard into the back of the prisoner's head.

Chanthou heard the skull crack. The man toppled forward onto the other bodies. A wail went up from the watching prisoners, but any that moved were quickly beaten into submission.

The big guard gestured by holding his hand palm-upward and crooking his fingers. A woman was brought forward by Tepan this time. She sobbed uncontrollably but, resigned to her fate, walked willingly to her death. The guards recognised the lack of fight, the total loss of will and let her move freely to the killing place.

Holding her son, Chanthou watched as the guard brought the pick handle into a back swing then closed her eyes. There was nothing she could do to block out the sickening thunk of wood striking bone.

There were seventeen people ahead of Chanthou. She watched them murdered one by one, their bodies added to the pit. Those that resisted were held by Tepan, but others, those who could see no way out or had lost the will to resist, were allowed to show their bravery and step up to the place of execution unrestrained.

The Khmer Rouge worked quickly and without mercy. Soon Chanthou and her son were the next prisoners on the levee. Tepan came over and offered her a macabre choice.

'You first, or the boy?'

Chanthou had to pry her son's fingers from her. She kissed his cheek.

'Remember your promise,' she whispered then stood and stepped boldly to the edge of the levee. The Khmer Rouge let her move without hindrance, seeing another brave soul ready for the inevitable. Behind her, the boy made no sound, and she knew her words had been heard.

'Ah! The once pretty one.' The big guard waited with the pick handle resting over his shoulder, the end smeared with blood and hair. 'I will make it quick for you, my beauty.'

Chanthou nodded once, just a quick incline of her head as she stood facing out over the pit. Below her, the legs of the last executed prisoner still twitched in a spasm of death. At the edge of her vision she could see the guard, Tepan, standing behind her son. The other guards were ten or more paces back down the levee, standing behind those prisoners they considered prone to flight.

She sensed rather than heard the pick handle lift from the executioner's shoulder. Her blood pounded in her ears, each beat of her heart timing the moment. She drew a deep breath and held it.

He said he would make it quick.

Thoughts jumbled in her head, confusing her sense of time, and she needed her timing to be perfect.

If I'm too late, then I'm dead—and so is my boy.

Chanthou turned and lunged.

The executioner was at the full extent of his back-swing, at the moment of imbalance with his arms twisted away to the side. She only had one weapon to fight with and brought her hands up, reaching for his eyes. The executioner tried to turn away and was quick enough to save his eyes, but her nails dug deep into his cheek, dragging away flesh.

'You little whore.' He roared like a water buffalo, dropped the pick handle and reached up to his damaged cheek, the other hand flailing to get a grip on Chanthou.

'Tepan! Help me!'

She saw Tepan leave her son and come at her and she lashed out at him, ignoring the pain in her injured arm. Her movements were slow but she managed to catch him by the scarf. With her other hand she grabbed the executioner's shirt as tight as she could. Both men were held fast, hampered by her weight.

'Run! Run, my boy!'

Her son leapt to his feet in one fluid movement and sprinted along the levee, his legs pumping fast.

Tepan punched and chopped at Chanthou's arm. She felt the blows but the pain was nothing, dulled by her fear for her child. The boy reached them and for one panicked moment she thought he might try to come to her aid.

'Run! Run!'

The executioner let go of his bleeding cheek and reached for the boy as he dashed past, but his fingers closed on empty air.

The men punched and kicked at her in a rapid frenzy. A fist connected with the side of her head and her vision exploded into painful lights. Another punch landed in the small of her back, driving the air from her lungs. She gasped and tried to hang on, her strength draining fast. Her hands slipped from the guards' clothing and she fell onto the levee in a panting, sobbing heap.

'You bitch!' The big guard's face was covered in blood from his torn cheek, but it did little to hide his rage. 'Sit her up, Tepan. We'll knock her head off, and then you can go catch that brat of hers.'

They dragged Chanthou to a sitting position and she turned to look down the levee. As the pick handle started its lethal arc she saw her son reach the shadows at the far end and disappear into the darkness beyond.

Chapter 1

Western Australia. January 2013.

Scott Morris watched the way Dr Sally Womack's eyes barely met his and knew instantly that the news would not be good. Nancy had sensed it, too. Her grip tightened on Scott's hand and he had to pry her fingers away so they could sit in the chairs on the nearside of the expansive desk without having their arms linked across a metre of open space.

Dr Womack walked around the desk, lowered herself into the high-backed office chair and studied the open file on the blotter. Scott could hear Nancy's ragged breathing. He glanced across and the look of fear on her face nearly tore his heart in two. He stood and pushed his chair against Nancy's then sat and put his arm around her, noticing that the doctor did not look up during the whole exercise.

This is definitely going to be bad news.

Nancy had her gaze fixed on the Jacaranda tree in magnificent bloom outside the window. Scott studied the plastic models of human anatomy on a side table and wondered which one the doctor would use to explain the reason behind their shattered lives.

'It's not good news, I'm afraid.' Dr Womack lifted her head and peered at them over the top of her horn-rimmed spectacles.

'I didn't think so,' Nancy said, her voice a hoarse croak. She shifted in her seat and Scott knew she was fighting hard to hold back the tears. A battle his wife would win. For now. Tonight, at home, she would cry her heart out. 'It was the ovarian cysts I had as a child, wasn't it?'

The doctor shook her head. 'There is absolutely nothing wrong with you, Nancy. You are as capable of having children as any woman in her early thirties.'

'Then what...?' Nancy's head turned towards him. Her green eyes were awash with tears, but the look of fear had been replaced by something else. Scott felt the slide in his guts as he recognised it.

Pity.

He looked at Dr Womack and saw the same emotion on her face. 'Me? The reason we can't have kids has something to do with me?'

The doctor nodded. 'Your sperm count is extremely low, Scott. I can say, with a high degree of certainty, that you will never father a child. Not without some sort of medical assistance.'

Scott felt as if the walls were closing in on him. For eight years, from the day they were married, they had been trying to have a child. Nancy had always thought it her fault, that she was paying the price for a childhood illness. And Scott had gone along with it. After all, Nancy was the nurse. She knew about these things. Never, in his worst nightmare, did he ever think it would be his fault. He was thirty-six, a dashing helicopter pilot and ex-army officer. He jogged fifteen kilometres a week and spent four or five hours in the gym. He was tall and fit, but apparently couldn't produce enough sperm to put together a swim team.

This doesn't happen to guys like me!

Nancy leant forward. 'So what happens now?' Gone from her voice was the emotional desperation, replaced by a cold, clinical inquisitiveness. Her thumb rubbed the back of Scott's hand.

'There are plenty of options,' Dr Womack said. 'It's not the end of the line. Far from it. But, you may want to take a little time to digest this new information. When you're ready, we can work out the next step together.' She smiled and stood. Scott followed her and Nancy to the door, his mind a jumble of racing thoughts.

Out in the street, they walked hand in hand to the car. Nancy pressed the button on her car keys to unlock her little Mazda, a far easier vehicle to park on the city streets than Scott's four-wheel-drive. Before she could climb in behind the wheel, Scott took her in his arms and held her tight against him. 'I'm so sorry, Nance. I know how much you want to have kids.'

She looked up at him, at the mournful expression. 'I don't blame you, Scotty.'

Nancy kissed him lightly and he felt her fingers in his short, dark hair.

'Let's talk about this at home,' she whispered.

* * * * *

Scott watched as Nancy stepped out of the bathroom wearing a pale-pink satin nightdress and pulling a brush through her long, raven hair. He lay sprawled on the bed, the remote for the little television in one hand and the other swirling two fingers of scotch around a glass. He rarely drank, but tonight the numbing warmth of the scotch spreading through his belly came as a welcome relief. The swirling stopped as he watched her cross to the bed.

My God, she's beautiful!

The thought crossed his mind at least once a day. Nancy had the kind of figure that would be at home on the fashion catwalk or on a television soap opera. Every time he looked at her he couldn't help but wonder at his luck. His wife was a beautiful, intelligent woman, and she thought the world of him, a devotion that ran both ways. Scott had given up his army career so Nancy could take a job in a hospital here on the west coast, a job she very much wanted. It hadn't been much of a sacrifice. Scott had practically fallen into a job of his own flying rescue helicopters. Maybe it wasn't quite as exciting as flying for the Army, but still pretty challenging none the less. As he watched her sit on the bed and tuck her long legs up beneath her, he realised there wasn't anything he wouldn't do for this woman. A pang of remorse and guilt stirred in the pit of his stomach as he realised the one thing that Nancy wanted was the one thing he couldn't give her.

'You're thinking about today, aren't you?

Scott placed the glass on the bedside table and turned towards her. 'Uh-huh.'

'Scotty, we're not the only couple to ever find themselves in this position. There are several fields of medicine devoted to infertility. We just have to decide which one is best for us.'

'I know, Nance. I know we will get what we want. It's just, you know, a bit of a shock.'

She nodded and took the remote from his hand, turned the television off, tossed it onto the dresser and snuggled in beside him. 'You're right. We will get what we want, but everything is a bit of a blur at the moment. While I was in the shower my mind kept running through things like IVF, sperm donors or even adoption.'

'Adoption?' He threw his head back.

'It's an option, Scotty.'

'Yeah, I guess it is. I'd just never really thought about it before.'

'Well, don't think about it tonight. Let's give it some time before we go rushing in to anything. Do our homework.'

'Yeah, I suppose you're right.'

She kissed him on the forehead. 'Why don't you go and have a shower? I'll be waiting here for you. While it's just us, we might as well make the most of it.' She tried to sound positive, but Scott thought he heard a hint of despair lurking somewhere in her voice.

After showering, he towelled himself dry and tossed the towel into the laundry hamper. As he turned for the door he caught his face in the vanity mirror and was shocked by the hang-dog look that stared back at him. There were lines in the corners of his steel-blue eyes, and the worried frown added ten years to his tanned face. Enough women over the years had told him he was handsome, but Scott

couldn't see it anymore. He had a tinge of premature grey at the temples, too. Nancy had told him it added a distinguished look, but her opinion was biased. In Nancy's eyes he could do no wrong and always looked as fit and athletic as he did the day they met.

Then he heard her quiet sobs through the bathroom door and wondered if his wife still felt that way about him now.

Western Australia. February 2013.

From an altitude of three thousand feet the hills appeared benign and inconsequential. A few jagged fangs of limestone climbed out of bush-choked gullies and a band of darker vegetation showed where a watercourse snaked down the lower slopes and into the valley.

Scott changed his grip on the controls as he eyed the cliffs and gullies and prayed the sea breeze would be late today. The terrain would cause the wind to eddy in unpredictable ways and he would need to hover the helicopter as still as possible for the rescue ahead.

The intercom gave a brief hiss, cutting into his thoughts.

'Looks like the walk trail cuts up the second gully from the right, Scotty.' Dave Carpenter, the copilot, had several maps folded on his lap, his index finger marking the place on one as he scanned the outside world to orientate their position. 'Briefing puts the injured hiker about one third from the top.'

It would have to be there. That's the tightest part of the gully.

'Why do they always hurt themselves in places like this?' Scott voiced his thoughts out loud.

'No point in taking a scenic walk if you don't have any scenery.' Scott recognised the voice of Paul Barker, the rescue crewman in the back of the Bell 412.

'What's wrong with a nice walk along a big wide beach? That's scenic. And a hell of a lot easier to get a chopper into.'

'And the wildlife on beaches is far easier on the eye.' A new voice, Arthur Stent, the crewman. A few chuckles echoed through the intercom.

The four men had worked together for over three years and performed many rescues in that time. They were as much at ease with each other in the air as they were on the ground.

Scott keyed the intercom, bringing their minds back to task. 'Okay, guys. Met puts the wind as south-easterly, five to ten knots. We'll be in the lee of the ridge so I don't anticipate too many problems unless the sea breeze kicks in early today. If anybody spots us drifting towards the cliff sing out loud and clear. If we need to bug out in a hurry, I plan to take us over the southern shoulder of the gully. That's the lower one by the look of it and will get us into open sky as soon as possible. Arthur? While Paul's on the winch keep spotting our position. I should have some good outside references, but the extra input will be welcome. As far as we know, this guy's just broken his leg. There's no rush, so keep it safe, people.' They were all experienced and most of what Scott had just said he knew his crew would do automatically anyway. But he always briefed them on his intentions and what they needed to do. Hell, it was just good practice.

Executing a shallow left turn, Scott guided the helicopter on approach into the gully. As they drifted lower, the downwash from the rotors whipped the higher branches into a hurricane-like frenzy. He hoped the emergency services people at the scene had moved the casualty to a relatively clear area to reduce the risk of being hit by debris.

'Door's coming open.' The muffled noise inside the helicopter changed to a windy roar as Arthur slid the large side door aft on its rails. Though he couldn't see him, Scott knew the crewman would be leaning out, preparing to guide him over the pickup point. 'I can see the emergency service guys. One hundred metres forward and ten right.'

Scott eased back on the cyclic, slowing their forward airspeed, angling slightly to the right at the same time.

'Fifty forward now. Five right. They've got the casualty in a clearing,' Arthur told them, crossing an item off Scott's list of things to worry about. 'Thirty forward now. Dead ahead.'

Slowly, Scott flew the helicopter into position over the people on the ground. He couldn't see them himself and relied totally on Arthur's instructions. As soon as the crewman had them overhead, he picked out two landmarks on the ridge to help him hold the chopper in place.

Arthur kept up a running commentary for the two pilots. 'Paul is hooked up and in the door. Paul is outboard the door—and he's away.' Scott corrected for the roll created by Paul's weight coming to bear on the winch arm. The nose swung to the right and he applied left pedal to bring the chopper back into line.

'Come two left, Boss. One left... Hold her there.'

Scott's hands and feet moved deftly on the controls. He noted with a little annoyance that their nose was swinging to the right once more and he applied more pressure to the pedal with his left foot.

'Paul's on the ground. He's unhooked. Winch is coming back up.'

The helicopter whirred and clattered in the hover. Scott's gaze flicked between the two reference points he had picked out, landmarks to help hold them in position.

'Winch is back up. Stretcher hooked up. Stretcher is outboard. Stretcher is away.'

Damn! We're yawing right again. He applied the necessary force for the correction. Then it occurred to him that the left pedal must almost be at its limit of travel.

'Arthur? I'm running out of left pedal. We need to abort the rescue. Right now!'

'The stretcher is halfway down. Forty metres to travel,' Arthur's voice responded in Scott's headset.

Scott picked up a sudden, alarming change in the aircraft. The whirring clatter was still there, but now there was something else, another noise emerging from behind it, a deep and ominous rumble. Even as the noise registered in his mind, lights began to illuminate on the caution and warning panel. At the same time a warning horn went off, filling the cockpit with a warbling wail, demanding attention. Scott felt the controls give a shudder and the helicopter lurched to the right, spinning on its axis. He pushed down hard with his left foot, but the pedal was at its limit.

As Scott fought with the controls he had visions of the winch cable snagging a tree, adding to their problems. ‘Sever the cable, Arthur. Now!’ He heard the distinctive ‘pop’ as Arthur hit the severance switch on the winch control and an explosive charge fired a small guillotine through the cable.

‘Cable’s clear.’

The helicopter had yawed ninety degrees to the right. Scott could see the lower shoulder of the gully ahead of him and applied forward stick in an effort to reach open sky. The helicopter responded, struggling into forward flight, but the right turn continued, faster than before.

‘You got her, Scotty? You got her?’ Dave’s voice, edged with panic.

The turn increased. Scott caught a glimpse of orange overalls through the trees as the mad pirouette continued. Then they were facing back towards the cliff and he took out the forward input from the stick. The nose swung around again—open sky and orange overalls—faster this time. The grinding and crunching got louder.

‘We’ve lost the tail rotor. I can’t hold her.’ Again the nose went around, another full circle. Scott saw the trees clawing for them, and he knew they were going to hit.

‘Everyone brace, brace, brace!’

The tail hit the trees, stopping the sickening spin so abruptly that Scott’s helmeted head struck the side window with enough force to star his vision. He felt the fuselage begin to fall. Debris hurtled past the windscreen as the rotors beat themselves to pieces against branches. The aircraft shuddered in its death throes, the engines screaming with the resistance of the rotors gone. Through the windscreen Scott saw a blur of leaves and branches as they plummeted towards the ground. His hands were still on the controls, trying to fly a machine that did not have enough parts left for the task. The nose tilted downwards, giving him a glimpse of the ground as they hurtled towards it. Before they hit, one last thought ran through his conscious mind.

Please, God. Don’t let there be a fire.

Chapter 2

Cambodia. October 2013.

The truck groaned along in low gear, dimmed headlights illuminating drops of drizzling rain slanting onto the two-rut track that climbed out of the village. Only a handful of lights showed from the ramshackle collection of bamboo and corrugated iron buildings in the valley. Kampong Hnang was not on Cambodia’s untrustworthy power grid and the distant rattle of the few generators still running at this late hour was drowned out by the noise of the approaching truck. The vehicle turned towards the abandoned warehouse, its headlights momentarily bathing rusted walls and a small group of waiting men.

Malko watched the nearing vehicle with cautious interest. He wore a light nylon jacket against the rain, his hands in the pockets. His right hand gripped a

Browning 9 mm automatic pistol. Four other men stood with him in the darkness, armed with old AK47s, assembled from a collection of rusting and dilapidated parts. The best of a bad bunch. If things went well tonight, that would change.

'They are early.' Ky stood at Malko's right hand, shorter and younger and bristling with muscle.

'They want their money.'

'They will be disappointed.' Ky's voice sounded eager for action, for blood.

Malko didn't need to turn his head to know his lieutenant's face had broken into a wicked grin. 'Severely disappointed.'

The truck climbed onto the broad gravel apron beside the abandoned warehouse, swung in a wide circle to face back down the track then stopped. It was a standard two tonne vehicle, a Mitsubishi with a canvas canopy covering the load bed. The front passenger door creaked open and a man dropped to the ground. Malko noted that he was Asian like himself, probably Chinese if the name was anything to go by, but he knew it wasn't. In this business names were as interchangeable as items of clothing.

The man slapped the side of the truck twice and the rear flap lifted. Five armed men poured out and formed a tight perimeter around the vehicle. They all carried AK74s that they swung menacingly at Malko's men. There was a sudden rattle of safety catches from both sides.

Malko held up a hand. 'Steady!' He took a step forward, establishing himself as the leader. 'Mr Wong, I presume?'

The short man looked up at Malko, taking in the bald head and scarred right cheek at a single glance. His gaze lingered where Malko's right arm disappeared into the pocket of his jacket and he smiled. 'You must be Colonel Malko?' He stepped closer and inclined his head in a slight bow.

'I am.' Malko bowed, accepting the opportunity to decline the Western tradition of shaking hands. 'You have the merchandise?'

Wong's smile broadened. 'I do indeed, Colonel. Everything you asked for and a little more.' He waved at two of his men and they turned to the truck, undogged the tailgate and lowered it to reveal a row of drab-green packing crates. Wong pointed at one of the crates and the men pulled it off the back of the truck, lowering it to the ground with some difficulty. The contents were obviously heavy.

Malko stepped closer as Wong unclipped the lid of the case. He noted with interest the Chinese script on the side. Wong swung the lid open and swept his arm over the contents like a TV gameshow hostess with the night's prizes. Ten brand new AK74s, Chinese versions of the ubiquitous AK47, lay inside the crate, each secured in its own bracket and stripped of its working parts which sat below the weapons, wrapped in wax paper.

Malko smiled, the scar on his right cheek distorting it into a wicked sneer. 'How many?'

Wong gestured at the truck. 'Another case like this one. A case of fragmentation grenades and fifty thousand rounds of ammunition. Enough to start a small war.'

'I might just do that.'

Malko bent and picked one of the assault rifles out of the box then removed the working parts from their wrapping. His fingers moved quickly, familiarly, and

within moments the weapon was assembled. He worked the action several times, reassured by the tight feel of the rifle's components.

'It is new?'

'Never been fired. These weapons came from an armoury of the PLA, the Chinese Peoples' Liberation Army. They were ah... liberated themselves some years ago. I kept them together rather than sell them off one by one. You just never know when someone may need a bulk supply.'

The rain stopped and the humidity closed in on the group of men crowded around the back of the truck. Malko placed the AK74 back in the case. 'Let me see the rest of it.'

Wong clapped his hands and sent his men to work. Within minutes the entire contents of the truck lay spread out on the ground. Under Malko's direction, random cases were opened and single weapons selected for closer scrutiny.

Malko lifted a pipe-like object out of a crate and rested it on his shoulder.

'RPG7.' Wong moved to his side.

Malko's fingers drifted familiarly over the weapon. He raised the sight and aimed at one of the lights showing in the village. 'How many rounds?'

'Five only. They are a popular weapon and hard to keep in stock.'

'Five will be plenty. You have done well, Wong. I don't think there is any need to haggle over the price.' He returned the weapon to its crate and wandered between the cases, stopping beside the crate of grenades. He selected one and held it up to the feeble light like a choice piece of fruit.

'Standard five second fuse.' Wong remained in the role of salesman. 'They have a kill-zone of seven metres but the blast range extends to four times that distance. It is very—'

Malko pulled the pin from the grenade.

'Please be careful, Colonel. All these grenades are fused and live.'

Malko ignored the caution. 'You have done well, Wong,' He waved the grenade about carelessly. Wong and his men couldn't take their eyes off it. They were all within seven metres and took an involuntary step backwards, opening the distance between themselves and this madman.

'My lieutenant has your payment,' Malko said casually.

Wong's wide-eyed stare flicked to where Ky stood. He and his men, engrossed by the proximity of the live grenade, had failed to notice Malko's men lined up some eight metres away. They all held AK47s, old models, battered and rusted from years of hard use and abuse, but still lethal at that limited range. Too late Wong and his men realised their deadly mistake. They had opened up the distance between themselves and Malko, offering the perfect killing ground. The AK47s chattered in unison, muzzle flashes lighting up the darkness. Caught in the deadly fusillade, Wong and his men fell to the ground like wheat before the harvester.

As quickly as it started, the shooting stopped. Echoes faded into the distance as Malko stepped into the carnage, surprised to discover Wong still alive. The Chinaman had several bullet holes ripped through his torso and he seemed to look up at Malko with a questioning gaze.

Malko pulled the Browning from his pocket. 'I have no money to give you, Wong. But you have given me the means to generate my much-needed funds. Thankyou.' With that he shot Wong in the head.

Chapter 3

Cambodia. Present day.

The aircraft's tyres hit the runway at Siem Reap with a thud and Scott Morris gripped the arms of the chair, his knuckles turning white with effort. He closed his eyes tightly, but then reminded himself that he was being irrational. He was on the ground and the flying behind him. He opened his eyes to a blur of palm trees and thatched roofs, already slowing as the engines screamed in reverse thrust and the brakes came on.

Nancy leaned across him and peered through the window. 'It looks rather tropical.' On both legs of the flight out from Australia she had strategically positioned herself between Scott and the aisle, a gesture intended to calm him, but one that had only succeeded in making him feel like a trapped animal.

'It looks bloody hot and humid.'

'It's romantic. Ten wonderful nights on the Mekong River,' she countered.

He forced a smile. 'You sound just like the brochure.'

The aircraft taxied to a stop on the apron. Moments later the doors swung open and warm, tropical air flooded into the cabin. They followed the rest of the passengers down the steps and onto the sun-baked tarmac, hurrying for the shade of the terminal building.

Standing at the baggage carousel, they watched the endless line of suitcases and satchels parade past.

'Here's one of ours.' Nancy nudged Scott in the ribs. 'And another.'

Scott pulled the suitcases from the conveyor belt and stood them on the floor beside him.

'One to go.' Nancy craned her head to examine the streamer curtain from which the luggage appeared.

Ten minutes later the conveyor belt was empty. Their bag hadn't appeared.

'I bet they lost it in Singapore.'

Scott rubbed his sweaty palms on his thighs. 'I don't care where they lost it. We need that bag. You know what was in it, don't you?'

Nancy reached for his hand and tried to deliver one of her calming squeezes. He saw it coming and snatched his hand away.

'I'm sure the bag will turn up, Scotty. If not, we'll find a chemist or drug store or whatever they're called here. They're bound to have some in stock.' She couldn't meet his angry look and cast her eyes about the baggage hall. 'Look, there's the lost luggage desk. Let's do the paperwork and worry about the bag later.'

With the lost baggage form completed and customs and immigration formalities behind them, they wandered into the arrivals hall to be greeted by a local holding up a sheet of paper with their names printed on it.

'Mr and Mrs Morris?'

'That's us.'

‘Welcome to Cambodia. Please, follow me.’ He led them outside and they waited at the curb until a car pulled up. Scott helped load their luggage into the boot then slid thankfully into the cool beside Nancy.

The airport was about twenty minutes from Siem Reap. Normally Scott would have been fascinated by the mixture of dilapidated and modern buildings lining the streets, but his thoughts kept drifting back to the missing bag. He wiped the palms of his hands on the legs of his trousers and tried not to think about it. Nancy would fix it. She always did.

Their hotel had been built in French colonial times, a whitewashed three-storey structure with terracotta tiles. The louvered shutters on the windows had been recently lacquered and the gardens were an immaculate blaze of colour.

Nancy's head turned left and right, trying to take it all in as they walked up to the reception desk in the open-air foyer. ‘Isn’t this just beautiful?’

‘Yeah, it’s great!’ Scott sneered, and instantly felt bad. This was her holiday, too. Nancy deserved better after the hard months behind them. He softened his tone. ‘Really, I like it.’

With room key in hand and the struggling bellhop following behind, they made their way up to their room on the second floor. Scott tipped the boy five dollars U.S from a wad in his pocket.

Nancy kicked her shoes off and sprawled on the bed. ‘What do you want to do first?’

‘A shower first. Then a bit of exploring. What do you reckon?’

Nancy nodded. ‘Sounds like a plan.’

‘Who wants first shower?’ he asked.

A cheeky grin slid onto her face. ‘Well, it’s big enough for two.’

She rushed into the bathroom and Scott heard water running. He stared at the two suitcases on the wooden bench and bemoaned the missing bag. He swallowed and ran his sweating palms down the leg of his pants, not realising the material was already stained. Nancy’s voice roused him.

‘Scotty! You coming in or not?’

Chapter 4

The streets of Phnom Penh buzzed with traffic as Ky motored his scooter past the Royal Palace. The King’s residence stood in stark contrast to the buildings around it; gilded frescos and glaring white roofs amongst rusted tin and cracked concrete. To his left, many flagpoles stood along the riverbank, flying the flags of those nations Cambodia considered friends. Ky glared contemptuously at the flags as he navigated the scooter between a bus loaded with tourists and an old truck overcrowded with labourers. He turned into a side street, winding his way through back-alleys to an old building protected by high walls and steel gates.

Parking his scooter at the kerb, he walked to the gates and knocked sharply beside a small covered window. The hatch slid aside and a set of eyes studied him, widening in surprise as they recognised him. Heavy bolts slipped and the left gate

opened partially, allowing him to step into the courtyard. The gatekeeper lowered his AK74 as Ky passed. It was one of the new ones, all gleaming black metal and shiny varnish on the woodwork. Two other men lounged in the shade of the wall, their weapons close at hand.

Crossing the courtyard, he entered the ramshackle two-storey building and climbed a set of concrete steps to a room off the first-floor landing.

Malko sat in a wicker chair by the window. Another man Ky didn't recognise sat opposite the colonel. The room was full of tobacco smoke. Malko placed his Vietnamese cigarette in an ashtray and smiled at Ky.

'You have the information?'

'Yes, Colonel.'

The older man's face broke into a grin, the scar contorting his features into a grotesque grimace. He gestured Ky into the chair beside him.

'Tell me.'

Ky sat. The breeze coming through the open window felt cool on his skin. Out beyond the roofs he could see the Mekong River, a muddy expanse of brown water, the far bank just a vague silhouette through tropical haze.

'I received an email from my contact in the company's booking office a little over an hour ago. The times are confirmed. The vessel is at anchor in the north of Tonle Sap, reprovisioning and awaiting the arrival of her passengers. She is due to sail in two days.' Ky said.

'Excellent!' The colonel picked up his cigarette and drew on it hard, holding the smoke in his lungs. 'And the other arrangements?'

'All is in place.'

The colonel nodded. 'You have done well, Ky. Soon we will have the funds to finance our cause. We have started down the path that will return Cambodia to greatness.'

Ky allowed himself the barest hint of a smile. He cast his eyes about the sparsely furnished room—at the faded and peeling paint, the threadbare carpet and the makeshift table on which sat the plans for revolution. There were men in government, the corrupt and ill-managed government, who would crush them if given the chance and prosecute them as traitors. For the past five years they had been forced to hide away in dingy little backrooms like this, plotting in secret, moving deep underground when the authorities came searching. No longer!

Ky looked earnestly at the colonel. 'A vessel of that size will be hard to conceal. We have the camouflage netting, but that won't stop any locals from coming for a closer look if they happen by.'

Malko blew a cloud of tobacco smoke towards the ceiling. 'This is Van.' He waved his cigarette at the other man. 'He was a barge captain on the river for many years. The concealment of the vessel is his responsibility.'

Ky looked at the man sitting in the chair opposite Malko. Van had a thin face and bloodshot eyes. His hands rested on the arms of the chair, the skin on their backs parched and dried like old rawhide from years of exposure to the sun in the wheelhouses of riverboats. 'You know where a boat of such size can be hidden?'

Van nodded and Malko picked up a notebook and pencil from a side table.

'Show him.' He tossed the pad and pencil onto Van's lap.

Van opened the pad and Ky positioned his chair so that he could see. Van started by drawing a long peanut shape from top left to bottom right. 'This is Tonle Sap.' He tapped the shape with the tip of the pencil then drew an oval to the right of the peanut. 'This is Boeng Tonle Chhma. It is fed by the Mekong and linked to the larger lake by hundreds of narrow waterways, none of them big enough to take anything larger than a fishing boat.'

'The target is much larger than a fishing boat,' Ky said.

Van gave a knowing smile and tapped the pencil to the south of the smaller lake. 'Boeng Tonle Chhma is mostly surrounded by swamps. There are a few mountains rising out of the water. One such mountain is here.' He tapped the pencil on the paper at a point due east of the smaller lake. 'The Mountain of the Sun. Fourteen years ago a telecommunications company placed an antenna array on the summit of the mountain. To get the equipment there, a channel was dredged from Tonle Sap to a landing at the base of the mountain. I was one of the barge captains contracted to bring this equipment in. Once everything was in place the site at the landing was abandoned and the channel forgotten and allowed to silt up.'

Ky studied the rough sketch. 'But if the channel has silted up, how will you get the vessel down it?'

'I have reconnoitred the channel over the past two weeks. The river is in flood cycle and the water will be rising for the next eight weeks. There are no places shallower than two and a half metres. The target of this operation draws one point eight metres. I expect no problems.'

Ky glanced at Malko, but the colonel's face showed no emotion. *There had better not be any problems.*

'We will move out to the staging area tomorrow.' Malko leant over and snatched up the notepad, tearing out the page with Van's sketch. He drew hard on his cigarette and used the glowing tip to set the paper alight, turning it in his fingers so that nothing of the sketch was left. Not satisfied with that, he crumbled the charred remains to a fine powder. 'Leave no trace.'

Ky nodded. It was only by being careful that they had managed to elude the authorities for so long.

Chapter 5

The Cambodia – Laos border.

Jenkins drew hard on his cigarette and held the bitter smoke in his lungs as he watched the distant jungle where the track disappeared into shadow. His eyes flicked to every movement, to every sound, but there was nothing but the track and the jungle and the noises of the creatures it contained. In his right hand he carried a laptop bag, an item that had not been out of his grasp for three days. He felt hot and sweaty and knew it would be at least another day before he reached civilisation and a meal and a shower.

A vehicle approached, whining along in low gear as it climbed the foothills of the mountain range that separate Laos from Cambodia. Stepping deeper into the jungle, he waited and watched. A short-wheel-based Landcruiser emerged out of the evening gloom and came steadily towards him.

His promised driver or a police patrol sent to hunt him down?

The Landcruiser reached a position on the track almost opposite and slowed to a stop. There was only one man in the vehicle, an Asian with a weathered face and close-cropped hair. The driver's head pivoted back and forth as he searched the surrounding jungle.

Jenkins remained hidden, watching for a trap. He threw the cigarette to the ground and stepped on it. The horn on the Landcruiser suddenly blared, frightening a flock of birds out of the jungle and sending them screeching into the sky. Jenkins jumped, his heart racing. He hurried forward as another blast sounded and yanked open the passenger door. The driver had his face turned away, but he snapped his head around and gave a startled look as Jenkins yelled at him.

'Stop that, you idiot!'

The driver lifted his hand from the horn and his face broke into a grin. 'Mr Jenkins?'

'Who else would be waiting for you on a deserted stretch of jungle track?'

The grin remained on the man's face, who was obviously unaffected by Jenkins' blustering tone. Jenkins reminded himself that he was alone and that the man could be armed and rob him of his possessions. He tightened his grip on the laptop bag and forced himself to calm down.

'You have the documents?'

The driver leant towards Jenkins, opened the glove compartment and removed a small bundle held together by an elastic band. He tossed the bundle to Jenkins and sat up, still grinning.

Jenkins removed the elastic band and thumbed through the documents. The first was a South African passport in the name of Simon Western. He opened it to the photo page and studied his own likeness staring back at him. The forger had done an excellent job. The passport was worth every cent of the five thousand US dollars he'd paid for it. There were entry and exit stamps for various countries, including the ever important visa for Cambodia and an entry stamp dated two days ago.

'Wonderful.' Jenkins closed the passport and examined the other items, two Visa credit cards issued to Simon Western and a South African driver's licence in the same name.

'Simon Western.' He said the name aloud and wondered if there really was a Simon Western somewhere. The name sounded good—rolled off the tongue. When he finally made it out of Asia he might keep that name. He definitely couldn't go back to Liam Jenkins. There would be too many people looking for that name. No, he decided, Liam Jenkins will vanish off the face of the earth. But Simon Western will have a wonderful life from this day forward.

He reached into his pocket, removed a wad of U.S bills and handed them to the driver. The man pocketed the cash without so much as a second glance and gestured at the passenger seat.

‘Get in. I take you to Siem Reap.’

Jenkins slid onto the seat and pulled the door closed. The driver let out the clutch and the Landcruiser trundled forward.

The track picked its way through rocky jungle outcrops, twisting and turning as it climbed ever higher. At sunset they emerged on a ridge top and Jenkins had an unobstructed view back in the direction from which they had come. A few lights had winked on far below in the smoky distance. The sky remained clouded over with that perpetual south-east Asian haze. Jenkins had been in Laos for two years and couldn't recall ever seeing the stars during that time. Having been raised in the wide open spaces of South Africa, he missed the night sky. Now he was glad of its absence, glad of the added darkness that would assist his illegal border crossing.

The vehicle rounded a large boulder and Jenkins was given a view of the far side of the ridge. It was the same as the vista behind them; endless jungle and a few rice paddies with a sprinkling of evening lights.

The driver pointed through the windscreen. ‘Cambodia.’

For two hours they negotiated the far side of the ridge, descending towards the lowlands. Jenkins wasn't so fond of the darkness when he realised his driver intended running without headlights. He used one hand to grip the bar on the dashboard and the other to hold the laptop bag tight against his side as the Landcruiser bucked and rolled over unseen obstacles. The driver must have travelled this mountain road, little more than a goat track, many times, for he always seemed to know when the worst sections were approaching and was ready with a sharp dab on the brakes and quick shift to a lower gear.

Finally, the track levelled out and became wider. The driver pulled over and got out.

‘I change plates.’

Jenkins opened his door and slid from the seat. He smoked a cigarette as he watched the driver quickly remove the Laos number plates with a screwdriver and replace them with Cambodian ones. Then the driver went to the back of the vehicle, opened the rear door and removed two bottles of water, tossing one to Jenkins. Before he could close the door, Jenkins glimpsed several boxes concealed under a canvas tarp. It seemed he wasn't the only item the driver was smuggling across the border tonight.

Back in the vehicle Jenkins was delighted to see the driver turn on the headlights as they continued down the gravel road. An hour later they reached a sealed road running from left to right. The driver swung to the right and picked up speed.

He grinned at Jenkins. ‘Soon Siem Reap.’

Chapter 6

The motor sputtered and coughed then died into silence. The open boat continued on, carried by momentum, but slowing fast. Nguyen Soo-Li turned from

her seat in the bow to look back at her father who was frowning at the engine. He let go of the tiller and worked his way carefully towards the old car motor pressed into service to power the nine-metre wooden boat. She heard him mutter under his breath as he reached for a small plastic box of tools.

Soo-Li was only able to see her father because they did not yet have a full load of firewood stacked amidships. When they returned from this foraging trip to the forests of the Mountain of the Sun the pile would be higher than her short eleven-year-old frame could reach and the boat at the very limits of balance and safety. In a fortnight they would sell the firewood in the floating village and Soo-Li would have a new dress.

She turned her face toward the mountain, just visible through the broken canopy of trees. The forested slopes rose three hundred metres above the wetlands. Near the peak a few buttresses of dark rock were exposed to the sun. A solitary cloud hung above the summit, as if afraid to journey out over the myriad of waterways. She could see several antenna towers on the mountain, glinting in the sunshine, but had no idea what they were for. No-one lived there, no-one stayed with the antennas to maintain them.

‘That Minh has sold me petrol infested with water.’

‘I told you, Father. He left the bung out of the drum when it rained. We should have bought petrol from Mr Tan.’

‘Tan has tight purse strings. He wants his money up front. My credit is good at Minh’s.’

‘Soon we will have a full load of wood, Father, and you will be able to buy good petrol.’

‘And you will have a new dress as promised, my princess.’ He smiled at her across the top of the engine and Soo-Li couldn’t help but giggle with delight.

Her father tinkered with the engine for another ten minutes then tried to start it. The old four cylinder car motor whined over and gave a cough. It fired and ran for three seconds then stopped. Her father hit the starter again. This time he managed to keep it running by applying generous amounts of throttle. The motor ran roughly for a minute before settling into a normal idle. He lowered the propeller shaft into the water and the boat moved forward.

‘We’re on our way, Princess.’ He steered the boat towards the channel that led to Boeng Tonle Chhma and the Mountain of the Sun.

Soo-Li settled into the bows, the breeze blowing her dark hair behind her and her thoughts drifting to the dress she would pick out at the markets when they returned.

* * * * *

Scott lifted his face to the breeze as the water taxi made its way along a jungle-shrouded waterway. The humidity at the waterfront had hit him like a wall as he stepped off the air-conditioned coach and the cool against his skin was welcome. Beside him, Nancy held a camera and snapped away at the scenery gliding by. She seemed immune to the heat, a smile on her lips. She was smiling more often lately. The thought made Scott feel a little ashamed at his reaction over the lost bag. A hotel employee had brought the wayward bag to their room soon after

dinner on the first night in Siem Reap. Scott was so happy he had tipped the man twenty dollars.

The boat rounded a headland and the waterway opened up. It was as if they were entering the open sea, but he realised this must be Tonle Sap, the largest lake in south-east Asia. The channel behind them was calm, but here the water rolled with a small swell and the bow of the water taxi sent out bursts of spray that caused Nancy to return the camera to its bag.

The MEKONG DAWN lay at anchor about a kilometre away. She resembled a Mississippi paddle steamer without the wheel. Two decks of cabins, ringed by walkways, rose above a dark-blue hull. Above the cabins an awning-covered sundeck ran the full length of the boat. The blunt stern hung towards them, an exhaust giving off a powerful throb from a large diesel engine.

The water taxi manoeuvred alongside a gangway where crewmen were waiting to secure the lines. On the teak deck a jovial-faced man in a white uniform greeted everyone individually and directed them forward to the saloon.

Nancy lowered herself into one of the cane lounge chairs and accepted an umbrella-adorned cocktail from a smiling waitress. 'I could get used to this very quickly.'

Scott removed the umbrella from his glass and sipped tentatively at the green liquid. 'Not bad at all'

A matronly looking woman in her late fifties sat on the lounge chair opposite. She leant over the low table. 'Fellow Aussies I hear by the accent, or lack of it.'

'I'm Nancy Morris. This is my husband Scott.'

'Collette Deakin.' The woman's smile was open and friendly. Her shoulder-length auburn hair reminded Scott of his fifth grade teacher. 'This big bear here is my hubby Fred.'

Scott leant across the table and shook the offered hand – and felt his fingers crushed. Fred Deakin had forsaken the shorts and T-shirt worn by most of the other passengers, opting for a pair of white cotton trousers with blue rubber-soled boating shoes and blue polo shirt. With a mane of thinning, silver hair combed back over his scalp and a square-jawed, matinee idol face, he looked like a retired movie star.

'Pleased to meet you, Scott.'

'Likewise, Fred.'

A dark-haired man sat alone on the other lounge at their table, clutching a laptop bag to his side. 'Sorry, mate. A bit rude of us to leave you out of things.' Scott offered his hand.

The man jerked upright. He looked at Scott's hand uncertainly and shifted the bag to his other hand before he shook.

'Simon Western.'

Scott recognised the lilt of South Africa and was about to politely question his origins, but a small bell rang, bringing everyone to silence. An Asian man, dressed in an immaculate white officer's uniform, placed the bell on the bar and turned to address the passengers.

'I am Tamko, your purser for our ten day voyage to Mytho in Vietnam.' His broad smile lit up the room. 'Soon you will be shown to your cabins. But first, I must bring to your attention the safety aspects of the MEKONG DAWN.'

Tamko rattled through the safety briefing in a well-rehearsed monologue. When he finished, stewards were waiting by the door to escort the passengers to their cabins.

Fred turned back over his shoulder. 'We'll catch up for a drink later.' He and Collette were hustled towards the companionway.

'You bet.' Scott turned to invite the other man, Simon Western, to join them. The South African was gone. Scott caught a glimpse of his back as he hurried up the companionway, urging his assigned steward onwards.

* * * * *

Jenkins followed the steward along the walkway to his cabin. A humid breeze stirred the surface of the lake into a mild chop. Large clumps of water hyacinth drifted past. Somewhere up near the bow he could hear the anchor chain clanking as it was winched in. The deck beneath his feet trembled to a different beat and he realised the MEKONG DAWN was about to get underway. The girl opened the cabin door and ushered him inside. An airconditioner hummed away in the corner and the cool air was a welcome relief from the humidity of the lake. He watched with feigned interest as she pointed out the limited features of the cabin and bathroom. There was no television. Damn. He had hoped to spend most of the voyage in his cabin, out of the way. The steward was pointing out something in the small wardrobe.

A safe! That helps. With the bag locked in the safe he would be able to leave the cabin sometimes. But never for too long. He couldn't risk it.

Chapter 7

Major Sinh Ang of the Cambodian National Police (Security Division) scowled at the documents waiting on his desk. There always seemed to be a mountain of forms and briefs sitting in his in-tray and, no matter how hard he worked, the mountain never shrank. A police officer for nineteen years, he was well aware that more crimes were solved by doing the hard yards on the street than by completing forms. But the paperwork needed to be done in order for his department to function. Most of the trivial stuff could be left to his secretary sitting at her desk in the outer office, but there were always matters of importance that the woman couldn't deal with and passed through for his attention.

He lit a cigarette and reluctantly opened the top file, a requisition for several computers for Kampong Cham, a department under his supervision. The machines would be of great benefit to the small team, enabling rapid correlation of information, getting people out of the office and onto the streets where they could do the most good. The senior man there sent through a requisition every month, and every month Ang was forced to deny the request on the grounds of lack of funds. Like most police forces the world over, the Cambodian Police ran on a budget barely large enough to get the job done. The trouble was, Ang knew, that corruption ran rife through the government and heads of departments. A lot of the

funding, some of it from foreign aid, was filtered off before it got down to the people who needed it most.

Four years ago he had been lucky enough to be selected for special training under an assistance program run by Australia. Ang had spent eight months in Canberra and Sydney, being trained by the Australian Federal Police, a time he counted as one of the most fulfilling in his life. He had learned elements of police work he never even dreamed existed and had seen machines and equipment that made it a lot easier for the officer on the street to do his duty. But the experience had been a double-edged sword. He had been given a glimpse of what might be if Cambodia could get past the culture of corruption and petty infighting, a situation he knew would be near impossible to rectify.

Halfway through his apologetic refusal of the requisition, a loud knock sounded from the door.

‘Come.’

The door opened swiftly. Captain Klim, Ang’s immediate subordinate and assistant, stood at the threshold, not bothering to enter before divulging his news.

‘One of our informers has a recent sighting of Malko.’

Ang dropped the file onto his desk. ‘How long ago?’

‘Yesterday, sir.’

‘Yesterday?’ The displeasure in Ang’s voice made Klim squirm. ‘Why am I only hearing this today? Twenty-four hours is too long when dealing with Malko.’

‘Sorry, sir. The informer only came in a few minutes ago. I came straight to you after I finished debriefing him.’

‘What have you got for me?’

‘He was seen leaving a location in the old quarter of Phnom Penh early yesterday morning.’

‘Leaving! Always he is seen leaving. Never are we told where he is at any given time.’

‘Soon his luck must run out.’ Klim tried to sound positive.

‘You have an address?’

Klim waved a piece of paper. ‘Right here, sir.’

Ang stood and pushed the pile of paperwork away then reached for the webbing belt and his pistol.

‘Assemble the strike team. We will brief in fifteen minutes.’

* * * * *

The truck moved slowly through the streets. This late in the afternoon traffic was heavy as everyone headed home, but Ang was glad. The unmarked truck was just one more vehicle making its way through the old quarter, hardly worth the effort of a second glance.

The driver, a member of Ang’s team of hand-picked men, had his assault rifle resting across his lap. The men in the back of the truck with Klim would all have their weapons out of sight. None of them wore a police uniform. They were all dressed in the soiled clothing of labourers. Only at the last instant would the men put on vests identifying themselves as police officers.

Ang had a street map of the vicinity laid out on his lap. As they made their way through the back streets he followed their route with his finger, his face tilted down, but as they neared their objective he looked up.

The building was a squat, two-storey structure screened off from the street by a courtyard. The courtyard itself was secured by a pair of large iron-sheeted gates. As he'd been instructed, the driver eased the truck past. This was to be their only reconnaissance, Ang's only chance at altering the briefed plan. He turned to the driver and laughed as if at a joke the man had made but his eyes roamed the steel gates and the brick wall. The place appeared deserted. Beyond the tangle of rusty barbed wire running along the top of the wall the building's windows were closed. Some had drapes, others were shadowed. All were impossible to see into.

'Go around the block.' Ang turned to the open window behind him that linked the cab with the rear of the truck. 'It is well secured. The gates are reinforced, but I think the brick wall is old and weak. When we come around again, we will disembark. We will use the truck to smash an opening for us.' The driver's face broke into a wicked grin. He reached up to his shoulder, pulled the seatbelt down and clicked it into the buckle.

Ang waited patiently as they completed a circuit of the block. Fifty metres from the target building he ordered the driver to stop. Almost instantly the traffic behind them started sounding their horns and angry voices drifted down from blocked vehicles.

'Let's go!' Ang swung out of the cab. He put on his police vest as he ran to the rear of the truck. Klim and nine men poured out the back, pulled on their own vests and chambered rounds in their weapons. Behind them the honking and yelling died away. A few motorists tried to reverse up or perform rapid U turns. Those on scooters used the footpaths to flee.

Ang took his pistol from its holster and chambered a round. The men had split into two bricks, teams led by Ang and Klim. He waited until they were lined up and ready then slapped the side of the truck three times.

The truck's gears grated and the driver revved the engine. With a lurch it started forward, rapidly picking up speed. It bucked as it mounted the curb and the brick wall exploded inwards under the impact of the reinforced steel bumper. Pieces of masonry and render fell onto the bonnet of the truck. The gears grated again as the driver found reverse gear and backed out of the opening.

* * * * *

Malko leapt to his feet at the the sound of crumbling masonry. The noise had come from behind the building, from the side facing the street. Yelling drifted up the stairwell and through the open door. He was the only leader in the building. Ky and Van were at the waterfront, preparing the boat for departure to the staging area.

Malko reached the door. One of his men stood on the landing. He could just see the top of his head.

'What is going on?'

The man looked up. 'A truck, Colonel. It crashed through the wall.'

Malko looked in the direction of the courtyard, but all he could see was the inside of the stairwell wall. More shouting drifted up from below, echoing in the confined space. Only one word was intelligible, cutting through the gabble.

Police!

'Evacuate as briefed,' he yelled. 'Two men hold at the lower door for as long as you can. Fall back to the landing and then the first floor. You know what to do.'

The man nodded and sprinted down the stairs. Malko turned back into the room and started pulling maps and diagrams from the walls and off the makeshift table. He stuffed them into a rucksack and surveyed the room quickly. Only a few pieces of paper and pens remained. Nothing was left that would give the police any clue as to the coming operation. He shrugged the rucksack on, picked up his pistol and slid the magazine out.

Full.

Slamming the magazine back into the pistol, he turned for the window and opened it as wide as it would go. More yelling came from below, but the escape route was ready.

* * * * *

Ang led his team down the left side of the truck, pistol raised. The truck had made an opening in the wall about three metres wide. Barbed wire hung from either side and he ducked under it then leapt the debris lying in the courtyard. He was aware of Klim and his team on the right, fanning out as they covered that quarter, so he turned left, swinging his pistol. There were packing crates along the inside wall and an old scooter.

A door opened in the bottom of the building and the dark rectangle was momentarily illuminated by the muzzle flash of a weapon. A bullet whispered past Ang's head and struck the wall behind him. He squeezed off two rounds at the doorway. Beside him, one of his men did the same. Dust and chips of masonry filled the opening and something slumped to the ground beyond the shadows.

Ang moved, his legs pumping fast as he covered the ground to the doorway. He pressed his back to the wall at the side and stole a brief glimpse around the jamb. A body lay on the bare concrete floor, an assault rifle in the dead man's grip. A door led off the stairwell, padlocked closed. He could hear the sounds of feet retreating up the stairs. He pointed upwards and the man beside him rushed past. He took position at the bottom step, his weapon facing up towards the landing. Ang swung around the jamb and joined him. He could still hear feet running somewhere above him.

Two men? Three men? He wasn't sure.

Ang braced himself, ready to run up the steps to the landing under the cover of his partner. Before he could take a step an egg-like object bounced off the wall at the back of the landing and rolled down the steps towards him.

'Grenade!'

Even as he yelled he dived sideways for the door. His team were filling the bottom of the stairwell, eager to join the fight. They heard the shout and ran for the courtyard. Ang slammed into the last man. The man behind him crashed into his back as the grenade went off. The explosion was terrible in the confined space

of the stairwell. Someone screamed, and Ang was suddenly back in the sunlight, laying amongst a tangle of limbs.

He climbed to his feet and tried to shake his head clear. His ears rang from the concussive blast. The man behind him had been hit bad, his police vest torn open by shrapnel and blood running down the back of his pants. Two men grabbed his arms and dragged him towards the truck.

Ang shook his head again and tried to think.

They are retreating upwards?

He looked up at the building, at the two windows on this side. It was built against the walls of the neighbouring buildings and towered over them. Suddenly he saw the mistake in his plan.

They are escaping upwards?

'Klim? Get your team around to the street. They are going to escape across the rooftops.'

Klim waved an acknowledgement and led his team back through the opening, turning right to get around the front of the neighbouring building.

Ang pointed to the man beside him. 'With me!' And they headed back into the stairwell, guns up.

The first-floor landing was empty. Two doors opened off it. Both closed. Ang pointed at the left hand one and tried the handle. It turned readily and he opened the door wide enough to toss in a flash-bang grenade. The crump of the detonation rattled plaster off the walls and Ang swung the door wide. The room was full of dust blown into the air by the grenade. Through the gloom he could see a bed and nothing else.

They turned their attention to the other door. Another flash-bang brought down more plaster. As the door swung open, a few pieces of paper fluttered about in the aftermath of the blast. This room was empty, too. Then, beyond the window, a shape, a running man, moved across the rooftops.

Ang sprinted to the window and took aim. Before he could fire, the man disappeared from sight behind a roof. He looked down. The window was about two metres above the roof of the adjoining building. There was a street just visible beyond the rusted guttering where someone was waving to him.

Klim!

'That way!' Ang pointed in the direction of the retreating man and Klim led his team down an alley that ran roughly in the right direction.

Swinging his legs over the window sill, Ang dropped onto the roof. The corrugated iron was old and rusty and heavily dented by the men who had just used it to escape. He took off across the rooftops. Behind him he heard his new partner drop onto the roof. At least he had backup.

The rooftops followed the twists and turns of the narrow street. They were all of varying heights and Ang had to climb onto the higher roofs, jump onto the lower ones. He reached the corner and rounded the roof where he had last seen the retreating man. More rooftops spread out ahead of him, a mixture of tin and tiles, running in a different direction now. There were chimneys and T.V antennas everywhere. Those yards he could see down into had clothes hanging on lines. The sound of barking dogs filled the air.

Movement beside a chimney.

Ang lifted his gun, but the man ahead of him was faster. Bullets chewed into the tiled roof all about him. He dived sideways and took cover behind a higher roof. The shooting stopped and he lifted his head.

The man was running, holding his rifle in one hand. He leapt a narrow alley and crossed onto a roof so steep he had to use his free hand to hold on to the ridge capping to prevent sliding off.

Ang sprinted towards the gap at the alley. There was no way the man could shoot at him now, he needed to concentrate on staying on the roof. Ang lifted his gun and took aim.

Beyond the fleeing man he could see other men, eighty metres away. They were out on a veranda awning, dropping to the ground one by one. He recognised Malko's bulky frame and hoped Klim had found his way through the maze of alleys and could head him off.

'Stop!'

The man on the roof glanced back and then increased speed. He lost his footing and his feet flew out from beneath him. Only his grip on the ridge capping prevented him from sliding off the roof. He scrambled to get up.

'Stop!' Ang could see his shout had no effect so he settled his sights on the man's back and squeezed off a double-tap. The pistol jumped in his hands and the fleeing gunman jerked upright, stiffening for a moment, one hand still on the ridge capping, then he crumpled onto the roof and slid down to the gutter where his body came to rest. The assault rifle slipped from his hands and clattered onto the ground below.

Ang was up and running while his gunshots still echoed among the buildings. He leapt the narrow alley and rushed to where he had seen the men drop to the ground. Below him was a courtyard. There was a pair of vehicle gates which stood open. The road beyond was choked with traffic, hundreds of cars, trucks and buses.

Malko was gone.

* * * * *

'Fetch the bolt cutters from the truck and search that locked room.'

The policeman turned and headed for the stairs and Ang walked back into the room that was once Malko's hideout, still sweating heavily after his mad dash across the rooftops. Out in the courtyard his team cached those weapons they had seized. Four men were collecting the two dead bodies for transfer to the morgue. Ang snatched up one of the pieces of paper littering the room and found it was a map of the northern half of Cambodia. There was nothing marked on it. An old door lay across two wooden boxes, forming a table. He studied the other papers scattered about. They were all blank. As usual, Malko had left nothing behind that might give any clue as to his intentions or location.

Klim came into the room, an assault rifle in his hand. 'Nothing much in the locked room, sir. Looks like it's been cleaned out. I thought you might like to see this, though. It's near-new.' He worked the bolt on the AK74 and ejected a round that he caught in the palm of his hand.

Ang held out his hand and Klim gave him the round. The brass casing gleamed with newness, the lead of the round-nosed bullet was smooth and shiny.

'This is not an old round left over from the civil war.' Ang turned the bullet over in his fingers. 'This has come from a new batch of ammunition, Chinese maybe, or obtained from Russia on the black market. This is not good. He has new bullets, new weapons. What else does Malko have?'

'Is there anything of value in this room?' Klim eyed the scattered papers.

'Nothing that I can see.' Ang picked up a large notebook, the type a student might use at a lecture. He walked to the window at the end of the room and flicked through the pages as he held them to the light. 'See. Nothing. All blank.'

Klim grabbed his arm. 'Go back to the first page, sir.'

Ang closed the notebook to the first page. The ring binding contained a furry edge of paper where the top pages had been torn out. 'See. It is blank.' He stabbed his finger angrily onto the sheet.

'Hold it up to the light like you did before, sir.'

Raising a quizzical eyebrow at his subordinate, Ang held the page up to the window. Instantly an image came into view, a design impressed onto the page from the page above it. Twisting the paper in the light he was able to make out a long peanut-like shape with several lines twisting away from it.

'What do you suppose it is, sir?'

'I don't know, Klim. But if Malko has anything to do with it, it can't be good.'

Chapter 8

Soo-Li squatted in blood-warm water and used handfuls of river sand to scrub a cooking pot. As she worked, she watched the light from the campfire play among the canopy of trees and flicker out across the water where it faded into the distant darkness. Her father had built a shelter, a tarpaulin stretched over a bamboo ridgepole and she could see him sitting on his bedroll, the firelight illuminating his face as he smoked his last cigarette of the day and watched her work.

Turning the pot to the light, Soo-Li judged her chore finished and climbed the riverbank. The fire had attracted a myriad of insects out of the swamps and they flitted about the flames in a whirling frenzy. Soon her father would kick dirt over the embers so that their sleep might be uninterrupted by the creatures.

Nguyen Hunh flicked the cigarette butt into the darkness. 'You have finished, Princess?'

'Yes, Father.'

'I will leave the fire burn for a little longer so that you may read one of your books.'

Soo-li smiled at him. 'Thankyou, Father.' She had brought several books with her, all in English, a language she was rapidly learning, for that was the language of the tourists—and tourists meant money. She went to her plastic backpack and removed one of the books, a reader her father had obtained from the market in Kampong Chhnang. She liked this book about a girl named Jane and a dog named Spot.

Hunh laid back on his bedroll. 'Read it aloud, Princess.'

Soo-Li positioned herself so that the fire illuminated the page of her book and began to read, her voice melodic and clear. She glanced at her father over the top of the page and saw him smiling up into the darkness. She knew he understood not a word of English, only that his child, the only survivor of his family, was a very smart girl indeed.

Soo-Li read that book and another like it before placing them back in her backpack, pulling the zipper closed to keep out the moisture. 'Don't get up, Father. I will see to the fire.' She climbed to her feet and kicked dirt over the burning sticks before going to her bedroll.

She lay on her back, looking up at the dark square of canvas over her head. Beside her, her father's breathing was slow and even and she knew he was still awake.

'Father?'

'Yes, Princess?'

'Will we always live in Cambodia? Do you think that one day we will go back to Vietnam?'

Her father was quiet for a moment and Soo-Li knew he was choosing his words carefully. 'This is our home now, Princess. Your grandfather brought me here when I was a boy so that our family might escape the troubles after the war. Many Vietnamese fled up the Mekong into Cambodia to escape persecution. You have never been to Vietnam. Why do you want to go there?'

'Is it true that I am really a princess, Father?'

'You are descended from the Nguyen lords who once ruled Vietnam. You are as much a princess as the daughters of the King of Cambodia.'

Soo-Li fought down the laugh rising in her throat. She realised her father was serious. 'Then why do we not live in a big palace like the one in Phnom Penh? Why do we live in a hut that floats on the river?'

In the darkness she heard her father sit up. 'History is not always kind to those in a position of privilege or power. Sometimes those in power are forced aside and a new dynasty takes its place. This is the way it has been for centuries. The way it will always be. Even the King of Cambodia was forced to flee during the terrible reign of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. He was very lucky to get his country back, to be able to come home.'

'But, Father—'

'Go to sleep, Princess. Save your questions for another time.'

* * * * *

Several strings of coloured lights illuminated the sundeck, giving a party-like atmosphere. Nancy tapped her foot in time with the low music playing through a sound system and sipped at her cocktail, a concoction of rum and coconut juice that brought a warm glow to her belly.

'So what do you do for a living?'

She lowered her glass and turned to Collette sitting in a cane chair opposite. 'I'm a theatre nurse in Perth. What about you?'

Collette wore a pair of cargo shorts and a low-cut blouse that exposed her ample cleavage. She spun her drink by the stem of the glass, watching the umbrella swirl about in the little whirlpool this created. 'Fred and I run a boat chandlery at a

marina on Port Phillip Bay. He works with the boats and I handle the books, and the stock, and the customers, and the complaints.'

'Complaints?' Fred sat upright, his face a look of mock horror. 'No one complains about the work of Fred Deakin.'

Collette patted his knee. 'Settle down big fella. Most of the complaints stem from late delivery from our suppliers. Your reputation is intact.'

'Thank God for that.' Fred swiped the back of a hand across his brow and leant back.

'Do you have kids?' Nancy asked absently.

Collette nodded. 'Two. Ben is in the Navy. Marine engineer. Sarah is married to a bank manager in Bendigo. She's going to give us our first grandchild just after Christmas.'

'How wonderful.' Nancy studied the couple as they sat side by side, their free hands touching each other with genuine affection. She wondered if this might be Scott and her in twenty years or so. Very much in love and happy with their lives. 'Does the business keep you busy?'

'It pays the bills.' Fred had a cigar in his hand that gave off a finger of blue smoke.

Nancy's gaze flicked from the gold watch on Fred's wrist to the expensive rings on Collette's fingers. *Looks like it does more than pay the bills.* 'So what brings you to Cambodia? Why a riverboat and not some big cruise liner?'

Fred gave a little laugh and Collette rubbed his knee. 'Fred has been working small boats all his life. He doesn't like the big cruise ships.'

'Floating department stores.' Fred flicked ash from his cigar. 'Give me something where you can feel the throb of the engines through the deck and feel a little spray on your face.'

'What are we talking about?' Scott appeared at the table with a tray of fresh drinks from the bar.

Nancy shuffled sideways on the seat so he could sit beside her. 'Fred and Collette run a boat chandlery in Melbourne.'

'Oh! I bet that keeps you busy?' He squeezed in beside Nancy and took her hand.

'Busy enough.' Fred examined the tip of his cigar. 'We know about Nancy, but what do you do for a crust?'

Nancy felt her husband's hand tense, squeezing so hard she winced at the pain. The silence dragged on and she could see Fred and Collette waiting for an answer. 'Scott's a pilot.' She placed her drink on the table and rubbed the back of his hand.

Collette put her empty glass on the table and picked up the fresh one. 'Which airline?'

Nancy opened her mouth to respond, but Scott found his voice before she could speak.

'No airline. I flew rescue helicopters for the government.'

Collette sipped her drink and adopted a satisfied look at the taste. 'Sounds exciting.'

'Flew? You don't do that anymore?' Fred examined Scott over the table.

Scott fell into silence and Nancy felt compelled to answer for her husband. 'Scott was in a bad accident eight months ago. He hasn't flown since. This trip is part of the recovery process, I guess.' She looked across the table and stared into Collette's eyes, her thoughts pleading. *Please change the subject! Please change the subject!*

Collette's eyes narrowed in understanding and her head gave a slight nod. 'I read on the daily program that tonight the captain will anchor at the south end of the lake and wait for daylight before entering the river.'

Fred took his wife's cue. 'I was talking to one of the officers earlier. Apparently the passage is too risky to negotiate at night.'

Scott reached for his drink. Nancy noticed the slight tremble in his hand as he gripped the glass and drained half the contents at a gulp. When they went back to their cabin she would have him take one of his tablets.

Thank God that bloody bag turned up.

Chapter 9

Soo-Li woke in the early hours of the morning. Blinking sleep from her eyes she sat up and gazed about. Darkness enveloped the camp. She couldn't even make out the water, only twenty paces away. Beside her, her father slept on, and she wondered if a dream had woken her. Then her ears picked out the low rumble of boat engines, somewhere far out on the water, but coming closer, the sound steadily growing.

Soo-Li knew well the sounds of the riverboats. The locals used old car engines to power their craft. Most had no mufflers on the exhausts and howled noisily.

This sound was different.

These were not old recycled car engines. These engines throbbed with a promise of power yet to be unleashed. No peasant could afford engines such as these.

A powerful light pierced the darkness and reflected off onyx-black water, playing left and right, getting stronger as the boat neared, the motor barely above idle.

Soo-Li jumped as something touched her shoulder.

'Lay down, Princess,' he father said. 'Pretend to be asleep. Whoever they are, they may not appreciate us knowing they have passed.'

Laying back on her mat, Soo-Li half-closed her eyes but kept her head turned towards the water. The boat came into view, illuminated by the glare of its own searchlight, angling to pass by some twenty metres from the shore. She watched the searchlight's beam stretch towards their camp. It traversed the bank a short distance then fastened onto her father's boat moored between two trees. Voices drifted out of the distance, but she was unable to pick out any words above the deep rumbling engines. Then the beam of light lifted from the boat and climbed the riverbank towards the camp, searching.

Wherever the powerful light touched, night became day. Insects flitted about in the beam as it crossed above the shelter, swinging back and forth. Soo-Li thought it might miss them altogether. The boat was almost level with them now. Soon it

would be past, gone into the darkness. Then the light came back down the bank and found them.

Soo-Li shut her eyes tight against the painful glare. The searchlight operator held them in the beam and the voices came again, louder than before. The voice that answered them was clear.

‘Leave them. They can do us no harm.’

The light moved away from the camp and swung back to illuminate the boat’s path. Soo-Li waited until it had moved out beyond the trees before she sat up. The powerful boat was a silhouette in the light and she could make out the shape of the helmsman standing at a console in the middle of the hull. The boat turned towards deeper water, for a moment travelling side-on to the camp and Soo-Li saw the searchlight operator perched in the bow, the shapes of many men—and the outline of rifles hanging from shoulders.

‘Were they soldiers, Father?’ She did not take her eyes off the boat.

‘I don’t know. But at first light we will move deeper into the swamps. I don’t want them to come back and find us here.’

Soo-Li watched the searchlight fade into the distance until only the throb of the engines could be heard. Then the boat must have reached open water out on Tonle Sap for the beat increased as the power came on. She laid back and closed her eyes, glad the men in the boat were moving rapidly away.

Chapter 10

Scott fought desperately with the useless controls, his feet pumping at the tail rotor pedals. Through the jagged edges of shattered Perspex he watched the ground rushing towards him and filled his lungs to scream. The helicopter rocked wildly, shaking him back and forth. Then, strangely, through the horror of it all, a voice called his name and he opened his eyes.

Nancy stood over him, shaking his shoulders. She had turned on the light over her bunk and he could see the frightened look in her eyes.

‘Are you all right? You were having another nightmare.’

The sheet stuck to his sweat-soaked body. He peeled it away. Nancy let go of his shoulders, picked up a bottle of water and passed it to him. With a trembling hand, he drank thirstily.

She climbed on the bunk beside him and cradled his head in her arms. ‘It’s been a while since the last one.’

Scott nodded and stared at the wood-panelled ceiling, not daring to close his eyes in case his mind conjured up those terrible images.

‘Five nights, that’s all.’ His voice was a hoarse croak.

‘Near the beginning it was every night, Scotty. The therapy and counselling are working. You just have to give it time.’ Her voice carried a soothing tone, much as a mother would use for a child. Scott’s mind was torn by two distinct and opposite thoughts. He relished her calming tones, even needed them to get through the tough moments since the crash, but they also served as a reminder that his wife

would never be a mother. No child of theirs would ever hear that motherly voice or feel the comfort of her arms. As always, he switched his thoughts to something different.

‘What’s the time?’

Nancy twisted away and lifted her watch from the table between their twin bunks. She tilted it back and forth to catch the feeble light from the lamp.

‘Five thirty. Why don’t we shower and then head up onto the sundeck? This is the MEKONG DAWN. We should see at least one dawn while we’re aboard.’

Scott sat up. ‘You go first.’

Nancy climbed from the bunk and headed for the tiny bathroom adjoining their cabin. He waited until he heard running water then went to the low table on which their luggage was stacked and opened one of the smaller cases, the one that had been temporarily lost. Rummaging through the contents, his fumbling fingers found the pill box, pried open the lid and popped three small, white tablets into the palm of his hand. As he closed the box the words on the label caught his eye.

Take one tablet once per day with food.

Scott tossed all three tablets into his mouth and followed them with a gulp of water.

Shit! One tablet a day? Who are they trying to kid?

* * * * *

Scott and Nancy climbed the narrow stairway onto the sundeck and found it deserted. They crossed the teak deck, passed the lines of deckchairs and cane outdoor settings and headed to the bow of the ship.

Scott peered down at the inky-black water. By the bow light he could see the anchor chain disappearing into the depths, stretched tight against the mighty current of the Mekong River pushing through into Tonle Sap.

Nancy edged to his side and guessed his thoughts. ‘One of the guides told me the current flows into the lake for six months of the year and out for the other six.’

‘A hell of a lot of water is on the move.’ Scott shook his head. ‘No wonder our captain doesn’t want to attempt a run into the river until daylight.’ He lifted his gaze and searched for some sign of the shoreline, but it remained hidden by the darkness and the mist. He gave up and turned towards the U-shaped bar that also served as a refreshment and coffee stand. ‘I wonder what time they open up. I could do with a nice cuppa.’

Nancy lifted her watch to catch the light. Her world worked on time and she was never without it. ‘I think they said at 6.00 am. Should only be a few minutes now.’

Voices came from the stairway and they turned to see several passengers emerge onto the deck, followed by a steward carrying a steaming pump-pot and a tray of coffee cups. He placed his load on the bar and smiled at the small knot of passengers.

‘Who wants coffee?’

Scott was the first in line. He collected cups for himself and Nancy and walked back to where she waited at the rail. Fred and Collette Deakin were standing with her.

‘Morning!’ Fred eyed the steaming cups in Scott’s hands then looked to the short queue at the bar. ‘I’ll get one of those myself in a few moments.’

Collette fiddled with a large digital camera that hung from her neck by a strap. 'I want a few shots of the sunrise.' She spoke without looking up. 'Do you think the mist will lift? I'd like to get the dawn sky reflecting off the water.'

Scott looked at the paling eastern sky and spoke without thinking. 'It's about twenty six degrees. The mist will burn off pretty quickly once the sun rims the horizon.'

Fred leant on the rail beside him. 'I guess you pilots have to know these things.'

'I did some flying in New Guinea for a while. Tropical meteorology poses its own set of problems for helicopters.' Scott stopped and reminded himself that part of his life was now behind him. He couldn't ever see himself climbing in behind the controls of a helicopter again.

Collette lifted her eye away from the camera's viewfinder. 'It must have been exciting?'

'Uh-huh!' Scott turned away to the rail and wished he'd kept his mouth shut about the bloody mist. His gaze roved the opaque curtain. It looked impenetrable, a white wall that held their vessel captive. But the light was strengthening now. Above and beyond the layer of mist he could just make out the treetops of the jungle-covered shoreline, a vague silhouette in the murky distance. Then, for just a brief moment, the mist parted minutely, like a nosey neighbour parting the curtains a fraction to see what was happening in the street. For a split second Scott could see into the depths of the mist. A boat sat about a kilometre away. An open boat, crowded with men. He opened his mouth to say something, but the curtain of mist closed and he was left staring at the white wall once again.

Probably just a group of locals on their way to work. He lifted the coffee cup to his lips and forgot about it.

* * * * *

The MEKONG DAWN appeared as a faint shape against the horizon, silhouetted by the lightening eastern sky. Morning mist, a metre high, blanketed the waters of Tonle Sap and the distant vessel seemed to float on a cloud as Malko examined it through a pair of powerful binoculars. The port anchor light stood out as a tiny red star, perfectly still on the placid waters. Other lights showed on external companionways and several cabins had lights on also. Malko would have liked to have taken the ship at night, but once they moved there would be no stopping, and he needed enough light for his river pilot to navigate by. Once they left Tonle Sap the waterways would be treacherous, not the kind of place one would normally take a large vessel, let alone in darkness.

Standing in the bow of the RHIB, the Rigid Hulled Inflatable Boat, Malko trained the binoculars left and right. The MEKONG DAWN was the only vessel anchored at the southern end of Tonle Sap. Large tourist boats often moored here during the night. That the MEKONG DAWN was alone simplified the next phase of his plan.

'Start the engines.' Malko gave the order to the helmsman without lowering the binoculars. 'Idle only. Just enough revs to give us headway.'

Behind him the large twin outboards rumbled into life. The helmsman engaged forward gear with a crunch and the boat moved forward. Malko knew the boarding companionway was on the starboard side. He intended taking them around behind

the MEKONG DAWN and approaching from the far side. Once they reached the vessel his men knew what to do.

He guided the boat in a wide arc, keeping at least a kilometre from their target. Every few moments he lifted the binoculars to examine the ship or survey the waters around them. His greatest fear was that another vessel would show up, steaming down the lake as it hurried to be the first to make a run into the river. Swinging the binoculars back to the MEKONG DAWN, he studied the exhaust ports just above the waterline at the rear of the vessel, reassured by the cloud of sooty smoke mixing with the thinning mist.

'The noise of their diesel generator will mask our approach.'

Ky crouched beside him in the bow. Malko looked down at the younger man and saw him give a slight nod as his hand drifted to the hilt of the knife he wore in a sheath on his belt.

The light grew as they circled the larger vessel. Malko could make out shapes on the companionways that he now recognised as outdoor settings. Several shadows moved on the upper sundeck—early risers, drinking coffee and watching the sunrise. There were six or seven of them lined up against the far rail.

* * * * *

An early riser, Jenkins had showered and dressed before first light. Then he opened the cabin safe to check that the small laptop was still there. As he swung the steel door open he could see the machine sitting in the bottom and he placed a hand on it, much as a doting father would to an infant child. Satisfied, he locked the safe then stepped out onto the companionway.

Darkness still clung to the lake. A few stars were visible through the overhead haze but no moon showed. He thought about going up to the sundeck but other passengers were already on the move, heading up to watch the sunrise. Jenkins hated company and he strolled aft, passing neat little cabin doors with their brass numbers and the small tables and wicker chairs for the occupants to sit and watch the scenery glide past. Near the rear of the vessel the cabins gave way to other shipboard facilities. There was a laundry recess with several racks of folded sheets and towels. Some shirts and crew uniforms hung along one wall. Beside the laundry was a heavy door marked ENGINE ROOM. The door had a small window set in it at eye level and a large stainless steel lever. Jenkins passed the door and continued aft. At the rear of the vessel the deck opened out into a small fantail. The crew used this area to sit and relax or have a cigarette, but as Jenkins rounded the corner he was delighted to find the area deserted. He went to the stern rail, pulled a packet of cigarettes from his pocket and lit one, drawing heavily as he leant on the rail and studied the black water.

He hated that the vessel was anchored. He hadn't expected that. Last evening he had questioned the barman in the saloon and discovered that the ship anchored every night.

'Too many rice barges and fishermen using the waterways to allow for safe night navigation.'

Jenkins wanted to be on his way. He had a new life waiting for him out there. All he needed to do was get out of Asia. He wasn't doing that while the ship was at anchor. Talk about your proverbial slow boat to China. Well, he wasn't going to

China. He wasn't going anywhere at the moment. Maybe he should have flown out. But he dismissed that thought as soon as it entered his head. Airport security was far too tight, even in south-east Asia. Officials at airports had the passport and the face on that passport standing right in front of them. Jenkins' intense research had revealed that tourist boat passengers on the Mekong were rarely viewed by border officials. The purser gave the passports over in bulk, usually while the officials enjoyed some of the ship's culinary specialties, and the passports were stamped and handed back without any of the passengers being present. That suited Jenkins' needs just fine. He had no idea if the company had found their property missing, but it wouldn't be long now and his face would be rolling off every fax machine and popping up on every police computer terminal for a thousand miles. Soon, every policeman in Asia would be looking for him.

It was with that thought that Jenkins spotted a small boat circling out behind the MEKONG DAWN. A local fisherman getting an early start on his nets? The driver of the boat circled the MEKONG DAWN at the very limit of visibility. A fisherman wouldn't circle so wide, but make a beeline straight for his fishing grounds.

Squeezing the burning tip out of his cigarette, Jenkins quickly dropped the stub into a nearby ashtray and stepped back into the shadows close to the bulkhead. The smaller boat still circled wide, moving around the Mekong Dawn to the starboard side, the side with the boarding steps.

Maybe they'll move on. Maybe they're just going wide so as not to disturb the sleeping passengers.

The boat's arc reached a point in line with the boarding steps and then turned directly for the MEKONG DAWN.

Staying in the shadows, Jenkins watched the boat approach and saw it was crowded with men. And he saw something else, too.

These men carried guns.

With their weapons held at the ready, the men crouched behind the gunwale, set to storm aboard the MEKONG DAWN the moment they reached the boarding steps.

They have to be coming for me. Somehow, they found out where I am and they're coming for me.

Jenkins ran as fast as he could down the port side of the ship. He reached his cabin door and fumbled in his pocket for the key. His fingers trembled as he slipped the key into the lock and opened the door. He went straight to the safe and punched in the code.

CODE ERROR

The little green display screen taunted his mistake and he was forced to wait while the lock mechanism re-set itself for a second try. The error message disappeared and he took two deep breaths and tried the code again. The mechanism gave a little beep and he heard the lock whir open. He yanked the door open and snatched up the laptop, still in its vinyl case. Leaving the safe door open he looked about the cabin.

What else? What else do I need to take with me?

There were a few clothes on the unused second bunk and his toiletries in the bathroom.

Passport? The purser has it. No time. Just get out. You've got the laptop. Just get out of your cabin and find somewhere to hide.

Jenkins tucked the laptop bag under his arm and stepped back onto the companionway.

Which way?

Forward there was the breezeway that crossed from port to starboard near the dining saloon doors. The breezeway was also where the boarding steps were. That was where armed police would soon be swarming aboard. He turned aft, running along the companionway until he reached the laundry alcove. He glanced inside, considered it as a hiding place, and immediately dismissed it.

Too small. It would only take moments to search.

Where then? Think, Liam, think!

He continued aft and reached the heavy door marked ENGINE ROOM. Grasping the handle, Jenkins heaved upwards. The handle rotated ninety degrees and the door swung open. Immediately, the noise of a large diesel engine assaulted his ears with a painful throb. He stepped through the door and dogged it closed again. By the glow of an overhead bulb he could see a set of narrow stairs leading down. A small, open doorway at the bottom glowed with bright light. He hurried down to the next deck and stopped in the doorway. Beyond lay the engine room, illuminated by a bank of bright overhead lights. An engineer, wearing overalls and a pair of ear protectors stood at a workbench with his back to the door, oblivious to Jenkins' arrival in his domain.

Two large diesel engines occupied most of the space in the room, reaching from floor to ceiling. They were painted dark-green, the paint still shiny and new. A smaller engine, the only one running, rumbled away near the rear of the compartment. Jenkins guessed this engine powered the Mekong Dawn's electrical circuits. Beside this engine was another hatch leading farther into the bowels of the ship. He hurried between the large engines and past the engineer who didn't look up from his technical manual. The hatch had a metal lever similar to the one on the main deck. Jenkins opened it easily and stepped inside, closing it behind him. Like the other door, this one was also soundproofed. The moment the door closed the noise dropped to a bearable level.

* * * * *

'Safeties off!' Malko heard the faint clicks as his men switched their rifles from 'safe' to 'fire.'

'Remember to deal with the radios quickly, Ky. If they get a message out then we may run out of time before we can get the vessel concealed.'

'It shall be done, Colonel.'

* * * * *

Scott placed his coffee cup on the bar and turned back to where Nancy stood with the Deakins. As he turned he noticed the same boat he had seen before. It was closer now, coming straight at the MEKONG DAWN. There were ten men or more crowded into it. Two powerful outboards purred as they pushed the boat along, leaving a creamy wake.

One of the men lifted something. Scott's heart skipped a beat as he recognised an assault rifle, the curve of its magazine unmistakable. Then he realised all the men carried similar weapons. A knot of fear tightened in his stomach.

'Do the police or military sometimes board tourist boats?'

The steward was busy placing empty coffee cups onto a tray. He looked up from his task. 'That would be most unusual, sir.'

'Then who do you suppose these chaps are?' Scott pointed at the boat, now only a few metres short of the boarding steps.

The steward had to lean over the top of the bar to peer down at the water. For a moment his face remained expressionless. Then a look of puzzlement, followed by one of fear as he saw the rifles the men carried.

* * * * *

Malko turned to the helmsman and ensured the man was watching him and him alone. The man's face was set in a grim mask of concentration. Satisfied, Malko turned back to the MEKONG DAWN's bulk now looming over them. At twenty metres he gave the cut-out signal by flicking his flat hand behind his back. Instantly the engines died into silence, the only sound the bubbling of water against the bow as the boat glided up to the boarding steps.

Malko grabbed the bottom stanchion of the hand rail and Ky swept past him in the same moment. Two men followed him. They rushed up the boarding steps onto the main deck where they turned for the wheelhouse. Then the other men ran up the steps and broke into pairs as they moved swiftly to their assigned tasks.

* * * * *

'Are there pirates on the lake?' Scott asked.

'I... I don't know, sir. I'm from Burma. This is my first journey in Cambodia.'

Scott had to lean over the rail to see the boat full of armed men. 'Maybe you should run and tell someone,' he told the steward.

A large man with a shaved head stood in the bow of the boat. He grabbed a stanchion of the boarding steps and instantly the men behind him swept past, swarming aboard the Mekong Dawn two decks below Scott's feet. The bald man looked up and saw Scott peering down at him. He had a scar on his right cheek, running from temple to jaw. Scott jerked back behind the rail, a stab of fear in his guts caused by the malevolent look in the other man's dark eyes.

The steward still stared down at the boat.

'Run! Run and tell the captain!'

At Scott's urgent words the steward lifted the little trapdoor that closed off the bar area and ran for the companionway to the lower decks. He dropped from sight down the stairs and Scott heard yelling. Somewhere, a woman screamed.

* * * * *

Ky's soft-soled jungle boots made little noise on the teak deck as he sprinted for the wheelhouse. He needed to get there before their presence was known to the crew and before an emergency call could be sent. He reached the sliding door that closed off the wheelhouse from the companionway and slid to a halt. Unable to

stop in time, the man behind him almost knocked him off his feet. Ky thumped against the pane of glass set into the top half of the door.

Beyond the glass a lone figure in a white uniform with three gold bars on the epaulettes leant over a control console, adjusting one of the levers. As Ky's face hit the glass the figure looked up. The captain's gaze fell to the AK74 in Ky's hands and his eyes flew wide. He reached for a microphone on a spiral cord that hung from an overhead console.

Ky smashed the window with the barrel of his rifle and the captain's hand poised, inches from the microphone.

'What are you doing on my vessel?' The captain spoke Vietnamese. His hand resumed moving towards the mike.

Ky yelled, '*Khong!* No!'

The hand continued and he squeezed the trigger. The weapon rattled briefly and the captain's body shuddered as a burst of automatic fire slammed into him at close range, tearing through him and spattering blood over the control console. The lifeless form slumped to the deck. Ky flung the door wide and stepped through a cloud of his own cordite smoke and into the wheelhouse.

There were several radios of various types lined up in the overhead console. Ky lifted his weapon and fired again, raking the radios with bullets. Pieces of wood and metal and electronic components flew in all directions. He released the trigger and one of the radios popped and fizzed and emitted a few sparks before settling into smoky silence.

Through the front windscreen he could see several men on the workspace in the bow of the MEKONG DAWN. They had been attending to the large anchor chain, about to raise the anchor so that the MEKONG DAWN could get under way. Now they all stood staring at the wheelhouse. Ky smashed open one of the large windows and covered the men with his weapon.

'Continue with your task. Raise the anchor. We are getting underway.' He turned to the man beside him. 'Keep them covered. I will get the Colonel and our pilot.'

He stepped back onto the companionway and made his way aft to the boarding steps. Each cabin door he passed was wide open. Some had their frames splintered where his men had kicked them in. The cabins were empty. He heard more doors splintering on the far side of the vessel as the team assigned to that side continued with their task. Every few moments a woman's scream filled the air.

They would have control of the vessel very shortly.

He found Malko and Van in the breezeway, directing little groups of frightened passengers into the dining saloon where they were covered by four armed men.

'It is done, Colonel. The boat is ours.'

Malko placed a hand on the young man's shoulder. 'The radios?'

'Destroyed. The captain is dead.'

'No matter. We have our own river master.' He turned to Van. 'You have the vessel. Get us underway and into the channel as soon as possible.'

Van swept past Ky and Malko as he made his way to the wheelhouse. Malko watched him go then turned back to Ky. 'Come. There are a few passengers on the sundeck. Let us go and deal with them.'

* * * * *

'What the hell's going on?' Fred looked concerned at the sound of shooting.

'Armed men just boarded our boat,' Scott told him.

'What?' Nancy clutched at Scott's arm. Collette threw a hand to her mouth.

'About twelve of them. Maybe more. The steward is running to tell the captain.'

'My God!' Fred moved towards the rail but Scott stopped him with a hand on his arm.

'I wouldn't. There are men in a boat at the boarding steps armed with assault rifles.'

Fred nodded. More shouting and screaming came from the lower decks. Every few moments a loud crash shuddered the deck and Scott guessed the boarders were kicking open locked cabin doors.

Fred looked at the frightened faces of Collette and Nancy. 'We need to do something.'

'Whatever we do, we need to do it quick. They'll be up here any moment now.' Scott said, glancing at the companionway. It remained empty – for the moment. Think, Scotty, think. There has to be something you can do. He looked at the life rafts lined up along the sundeck, three on each side. The life rafts were contained in white fibreglass capsules about the size of a forty-four gallon drum. When needed, the capsule could be opened and the life raft inflated.

Fred noticed the direction of Scott's eyes. 'Take too long to inflate, Scott. They have a high-pressure nitrogen charge, but would still take a minute or so. Besides, the charge makes the devil's own noise. Those men will be on us before we have it even half-ready to go. They aren't powered or anything, just a couple of little plastic paddles to move them about. We'd be sitting ducks on the open water.'

'What then?' Scott grabbed a fistful of his own hair as he sought an answer.

Escape or hide? Escape *and* hide?

The shoreline was about a kilometre away. Only faint streamers of mist still clung to the water. The jungle had lost its black and white pre-dawn tones, taking on the familiar emerald hue. Scott knew both he and Nancy could swim it easily. But they would still be exposed on the water. Easy targets for men with rifles.

* * * * *

Jenkins stood in some sort of machinery space. Though not as brightly lit as the engine room, this compartment had several caged bulbs fixed overhead. There were lots of pipes running around the walls and ceiling and several large tanks with units attached that looked like pumps.

Must be the water treatment and storage compartment.

A narrow, grated walkway ran back between the tanks. Below the grates dirty, oil-slicked water sloshed gently in the bilges. Jenkins moved along the walkway to the forward end of the compartment. There were more pumps and pipes winding in every direction. He had hoped that another hatch might lead deeper into the ship, but the front bulkhead was a dead end. If he was going to hide aboard the MEKONG DAWN, this was the place. He had no time to backtrack and find somewhere else.

Glancing around the tight confines of the compartment, there were many little nooks behind pipes and pieces of machinery. Then his gaze settled at his feet. The

lights in the compartment reflected off bilge water in a rainbow-like sheen. He dropped to his knees and lifted one of the half-metre sections of grating out of the walkway. Then he took the laptop bag and pushed it through the opening and underwater as far it would go, until he felt it hit against the bottom of the hull. Dirty, oily water sloshed about his biceps, wetting his shirtsleeves. He held the laptop bag underwater until the escaping bubbles stopped and took his hand away. The bag didn't float to the surface so he quickly replaced the grate and stood up.

A red metal toolbox sat on the floor just inside the door. Jenkins opened it, rummaging around until he found a long screwdriver. He moved to the forward end of the compartment and stopped under the last wire-caged light bulb then used the screwdriver to poke through the wire and smash the bulb. The end of the compartment plunged into darkness.

Then he backed into a space between the pipes and waited.

* * * * *

'Scotty, I've got my phone.'

'What?' Scott looked at his wife.

'I've got my phone.'

'Of course!' As an on-call theatre nurse, part of an organ transplant team, Nancy always tried to remain contactable. If she wasn't carrying a pager, she had her mobile phone tucked away somewhere. Sometimes Scott was annoyed by the phone going off at the most inopportune times, in the most inconvenient places, summoning Nancy away. Then he reminded himself that she was going to help save a life and forgave her the 2.00 am calls and the interrupted restaurant meals.

Nancy thrust a hand into the pocket of her cotton slacks, pulled out the compact flip-phone and handed it to Scott. 'It's set for international roam.'

He snatched the phone and folded it open. The little screen glowed into life and showed half battery power.

Good girl!

Then his spirits plummeted as he realised the reception icon showed no bars. The phone wasn't receiving a signal from a tower. He ran from under the awning, climbed onto one of the life raft capsules and held the phone as high as he could. The reception icon remained blank. Scott pivoted on the balls of his feet and held the phone higher, lower, searching out a sweet spot where he might get a glimmer of reception. He was about to give up and try climbing onto the bar when a small line illuminated next to the little antenna icon. Scott pulled the phone towards him and began to dial a number. The phone was pre-programmed with several numbers they might need while travelling, but he dialled the travel insurance emergency number he had memorised before leaving Australia. It wasn't the best number to call when armed men were storming aboard their boat, but the number would be monitored twenty-four hours a day and he knew it would be answered. Once he got the call out, the person at the other end could decide who best to pass the message on to.

The reception bar disappeared as Scott dialled. He swore under his breath. Then the bar reappeared and he continued dialling. Raised voices came from the companionway. Angry voices. The barrel of a rifle appeared at the top of the stairs.

Scott jumped from the life raft capsule, folding the phone shut as he landed. The rifle barrel reached the top of the stairs and he could see the top of a dark head about to emerge behind it. Realising whoever was boarding the MEKONG DAWN might not take too kindly to foreigners with mobile phones, he quickly searched for a place to hide the device. The first thought that leapt into his head was to toss the phone over the side, but that would deprive them of the only means they had to get a message out. He quickly thrust the idea aside and looked desperately about. Twelve potted palms lined each side of the sundeck. The pots were about a metre high with three metre palms growing out of them. A layer of bark mulch covered the soil in the pots.

Quickly, Scott thrust his hand into the nearest pot and buried the phone beneath a layer of mulch. He glanced at the companionway. The gunman was almost at the top of the stairs, another man close behind him. Scott smoothed the mulch as best he could and slipped his arm around Nancy.

The first man was powerfully built. Short-cropped dark hair topped a face that might be considered handsome, but the good-looking features were heavily overshadowed by the look of hatred in the man's eyes. He reached the top of the stairs and quickly stepped aside to allow the man behind him onto the sundeck.

Scott recognised the large man from the boat at the boarding steps. He had a shaved head and towered over his companion, easily the largest Asian man Scott had ever seen. He wasn't fat. There was nothing in his size or in the cat-like way he moved to suggest anything but lean, deadly efficiency. He reached the top of the stairs and poised. His eyes took in the deck and the ten frightened tourists at the far rail with one sweep. The smile that slipped onto his face contorted into a lopsided grimace by a ragged scar on his cheek and exposed a set of tobacco-stained teeth.

'Search them. Make sure they carry no phones or other means of outside communication.' The man spoke English and Scott realised the words were for the benefit of the tourists as much as for the gunmen.

The man stepped closer to the scared little throng and spoke again, quietly and calmly. 'If you have any phones on you I urge you to surrender them to my men. No one will be harmed if you follow instructions.'

A man in his late fifties and with a thick crop of silver hair came forward from among the passengers. 'What do you want with us? My wife and I are British subjects. You have no right to detain us like this.'

Scarface looked the man up and down. 'I want several things from you. The most pressing of which is to follow directions without question.' He gestured to the short man beside him who ran forward and shoved the Englishman back into the group.

Four more armed men ran up the stairs and pushed the tourists into a line. Scott and Nancy stood beside Fred and Collette. Once they were lined up, two of the men went down the line, frisking each of the passengers. As his pockets were patted down and his clothing searched, Scott felt glad he had hidden the phone in the pot. But he doubted he would ever get a chance to use it.

Three passengers had phones on them that they readily handed to the searchers. When the search was complete the phones were thrown over the side.

Scarface watched the phones until they hit the water. 'Now, if you would all be kind enough to make your way down to the dining saloon, we will tell you what is to be done with you.'

The armed men shoved the passengers towards the stairs. Scott followed Nancy across the deck and onto the companionway. 'Try not to make eye contact with them,' he whispered, desperately trying to remember everything he had ever read or heard about terrorists and hostage situations. 'Just do whatever they say, Nance.' Ahead of him, Nancy's head gave a slight nod.

* * * * *

Jenkins heard the main diesels kick into life. The engines ran up for a minute or two. Then the motion of the vessel changed.

The MEKONG DAWN was underway.

He felt a little elation at this knowledge. Whoever had come aboard, they were now allowing the ship to continue on its journey. Perhaps they had examined the passports or the passenger manifest and, not finding Liam Jenkins listed, had disembarked?

He brought his watch close to his face and used his other hand to find the button that illuminated the dial.

7:08 am.

He decided to give it half an hour then retrieve the laptop and make his way back to his cabin.

Nothing to worry about.

* * * * *

On the main deck the dining saloon was full of passengers under armed guard. The room contained ten tables, each with a place setting for six people. This was where the passengers ate their meals and, apart from the saloon bar up forward, was the only room capable of holding all the passengers at once. As he and Nancy filed into the room, followed closely by Fred and Collette, Scott noticed that the passengers had been gathered about the central tables, leaving a clear space at each end of the room in which stood men holding assault rifles. The cruise was only three-quarters filled and the forty passengers fitted easily into the middle space. Some women were crying, sobbing fitfully. Here and there a husband tried to comfort a distraught wife or stared in fear at the armed men. Most of the passengers were dressed, but several had only had time to snatch up a cruise company dressing gown and shrug it on before being herded from their cabins.

Nancy slipped into a chair at a vacant table and Scott sat beside her. Fred and Collette took the seats opposite and two more passengers, the Englishman and his wife, filled the remaining seats as the rest of the passengers from the sundeck were ushered to another table.

Scarface stepped into the saloon through the double glass doors that opened onto the breezeway. He stopped about two paces into the room and rested his hands on his hips. He didn't carry a rifle, but Scott noted the pistol holstered on the man's belt.

The low murmur of voices in the dining saloon drifted into silence. Scarface waited patiently until the only sound in the room was a few soft sobs and the hiss of frightened breathing.

'I am Colonel Malko.' Scarface looked about the room, his eyes picking out several passengers at random. His gaze settled on Scott and he found himself squirming under that hateful stare. Despite the mellowed tones of Malko's voice, Scott could sense the capacity for horrible violence not too far behind those eyes. 'I am an officer of the Cambodian Liberation Army.'

Several voices came as one from the assembled passengers.

'What do you want with us, Colonel?'

'We have no money. You can have all of our traveller's cheques.'

'We demand that you set us free. We have no part in Cambodian internal politics.'

Malko held up his hand and the voices fell into silence. 'You don't seem to understand your predicament. I did not take this vessel to rob you.' He unclipped the holster and drew the pistol, a medium-sized automatic. 'You will not be making any demands of me. You are all hostages of the CLA and will remain so until a ransom is received for every single one of you. You will all help finance the cause that will free Cambodia from the shackles of oppression and return her to greatness.'

Beside Malko the short, well-built man slapped the butt of his rifle. Scott recognised the wicked gleam of the zealot, the political fanatic who would do anything, commit any atrocity in the name of his so-called cause.

Malko turned to the crewmembers gathered beside the passengers. 'Who is the purser?'

A man pushed his way to the front of the anxious crewmembers. Scott recognised Tamko, the man who had welcomed them all aboard yesterday and given the safety briefing. Tamko lowered his eyes to the deck as he addressed Malko.

'I am the purser. My name is Tamko.'

'You have the passengers' passports locked in your safe?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You have a copy of the passenger manifest?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Lieutenant Ky will accompany you while you fetch them for me.' Malko gestured at the well-built man beside him.

The man called Ky stepped forward, grasped Tamko by the shirtsleeve and pulled him towards the door. Malko turned back to the passengers.

'I am afraid you will all need to remain in the dining saloon. We will keep the generator running and the airconditioner turned on for your comfort. No one will be permitted to leave this room. Anyone caught trying to escape will be shot. Do you all understand?' A murmur of assent went up from the assembled passengers and Malko nodded. 'My men will do whatever is necessary to prevent you from leaving our little gathering. Your being alive is important to our needs, but that will not prevent anyone who tries to be a hero from being killed. You will remain here in this room for the duration of negotiations. Behave, and you will be released unharmed when those negotiations are concluded.'

Tamko returned to the dining saloon, hurried along by the scowling Ky. He carried a clipboard and two stacks of thin, small booklets held together by elastic bands that Scott recognised as passports. All passengers aboard the MEKONG DAWN had surrendered their passports to the purser when they boarded so that customs and immigration formalities could be streamlined when the ship crossed the border into Vietnam. He handed the passports and clipboard to Malko and moved to stand with the other crewmembers.

Malko tossed the passports to one of his men and examined the clipboard. Scott could see his lips moving slightly and realised he was counting the names on the manifest. Then Malko looked up and counted the heads sitting at the tables. When he had finished he looked perplexed for a moment and did the count again. This time, when he finished, he turned to Ky and spoke a stream of rapid Khmer. Ky slapped the shoulder of the man beside him and they both hurried from the room.

Nancy whispered, 'Looks as if someone is missing.'

* * * * *

Ky sent men to search different parts of the ship, working methodically from bow to stern, from sundeck to the lower spaces. He carried a copy of the passenger manifest in his hand. The Colonel had ticked off all the passengers against their cabin numbers. Only one remained unaccounted for.

Simon Western. Cabin 113.

He reached cabin 113 and found the door open. The airconditioner hummed away and there were discarded clothes on one of the twin bunks. The cabin had definitely been occupied. Using the muzzle of his AK74, he pushed open the door to the small bathroom. The shower curtain was partly closed and he thrust it aside, his finger on the trigger.

Empty.

Going back into the cabin, he stood for a moment, studying the contents of the room. The open door and scattered clothing suggested that Simon Western had left in a hurry. But where? Soon after boarding the ship, Ky had placed men on the sundeck to watch the surrounding water, partly to keep a lookout for approaching vessels, but also to spot anyone who might try and swim for the shore.

He turned for the door and saw the open safe in the small closet. One glance told him the safe was empty. Whatever had been inside was now gone, along with the occupant of the cabin, Simon Western.

What was so important or valuable that Western took the time to remove it from the safe?

Ky stepped back onto the companionway and continued aft, signalling the man behind him to follow. They reached the laundry alcove and spent a few moments searching, pulling linen off the shelves and opening cupboards, but finding nothing.

Continuing aft, Ky stopped at the engine room door. He placed his face up to the small glass window and saw steps leading below decks.

'Who searched here?'

The man with him gave a shrug.

Ky un-dogged the door and swung it open. The noise of diesel engines increased to a howling roar. Van, the river pilot, had the MEKONG DAWN underway and

both main propulsion engines were running. Ky ignored the noise and went down the steps.

The engine room was manned by the MEKONG DAWN's engineer, carrying out his duties under armed guard. Both men wore hearing protectors against the horrible din. Ky went to the guard, lifted one cup of the hearing protectors away from his ear and shouted to be heard.

'One of the passengers is missing. Are there any compartments leading away from this one?'

The guard nodded and pointed to a door set in the forward bulkhead.

Ky raised his rifle and moved to the door. He signalled his companion to un-dog the lock. The man lifted the metal bar and swung the door open. Ky aimed his rifle into the gloomy interior. A walkway stretched into the distance. Pipes and tanks filled all the remaining space. The far end of the walkway disappeared into blackness.

Ky turned back to the engine room and looked at the racks of tools above the workbench. He found what he was looking for and picked up a battery-powered torch from its holder. He turned the torch on, tested its beam, then moved back to the open door.

* * * * *

The noise of the diesels filled the compartment as the door at the far end opened.

Jenkins pushed himself back into the gap between the pipes as a shadow extended down the walkway. He still held the screwdriver, though he knew it would not make a good weapon, not against someone armed with a gun. He held the screwdriver in front of his chest and watched as the shadow advanced. It reached the forward bulkhead and started to climb upwards. Then the shadow disappeared, replaced by a bright circle of light. The circle played left and right and Jenkins realised that whoever was coming down the walkway carried a torch.

He looked down at the screwdriver, but couldn't see it in the darkness. If he was found armed, even with a screwdriver, they might shoot before he could drop it. He pushed the screwdriver behind one of the pipes just as the searcher passed the last tank.

The torch beam played against the far side of the compartment, illuminating pipes and machinery. Jenkins could see the silhouette of the man holding the torch. He could also see the deadly outline of the rifle that followed the beam wherever it went and felt sick in the pit of his stomach.

The beam scanned the far side of the compartment then came back towards him, sliding over the bulkhead and pipes like a wraith until it found him cowering in the corner. Jenkins squinted and held up his hands to protect his eyes from the light. Rough hands seized him and shoved him back towards the engine room.

Prodded along by the barrel of the rifle, he stepped into the brightly-lit engine room. There were two more armed men in here along with the engineer he had passed earlier. All were surprised to see him pushed through the door and into the room. The man behind him tapped him on the shoulder and Jenkins turned to see him properly for the first time. He was short but well-muscled. The look of anger

on his face told Jenkins that his captor was not too pleased about him hiding in the compartment.

The gunman pointed to the stairway leading up and prodded the rifle barrel into his back. He reached the top of the stairs and stepped out onto the companionway. The sun had burnt off the mist and full daylight assailed his eyes so that he stood blinking in the bright sunshine. The door was dogged shut behind him and the roar of the diesels faded, leaving his ears ringing after the painful onslaught. The air smelled clean and fresh after the dank confines of the bilges. As his eyes adjusted he could see that the MEKONG DAWN was crawling along the edge of the jungle at about three or four knots and he wondered if they had entered the river. Someone seized him from behind and shoved him up against the bulkhead so hard that his head struck the wood panelling.

'I say! Don't be so bloody rough. I'll report your manhandling to your superior officer.'

'You have caused me some concern, Simon Western.' The gunman's face was only inches away. One of the armed men from the engine room stood beside him, his gun aimed at the middle of Jenkins' chest.

Simon Western? The name on the fake passport.

'What were you doing down in the engine room?'

'I was hiding. I thought you were pirates or something.'

'What did you take from the safe in your cabin?'

'Nothing.' Jenkins felt the gun against his ribs. He thought fast, trying to remember how he had left the cabin. 'I never used the safe. It was open the whole time I've been aboard. The only thing of value is my passport—and the purser has that.'

The man nodded slowly. He stood back and examined Jenkins from head to foot. Then he came forward and patted him down. 'Do you have a mobile telephone?'

Jenkins felt the man's hand work methodically over his clothing, patting his pockets and any loose folds. 'No, I don't have one. I don't carry it with me when I'm travelling. It's good to get away from everything once in a while.' He looked down at the man, at the surplus store fatigues he wore. No badges or patches of any kind. No rank insignia. 'You're not the police, are you?'

The man finished his search and stood back. 'We are the Cambodian Liberation Army. You are our prisoner.' He pointed forward along the companionway and Jenkins turned in that direction. They herded him all the way forward into the breezeway and on into the dining saloon.

'My God!' Jenkins exclaimed as he surveyed the room. All the passengers and crew were gathered around the central tables. Armed men guarded the exit. He was shoved brutally from behind and sprawled onto the deck.

The muscled little man stood over him and grinned.

'No more trouble out of you, Simon Western. Okay?'

Chapter 11

Ang walked along narrow streets that were rapidly filling with people beginning their day. It was a five minute walk from his apartment on the north bank to the ferry jetty. He could have driven or taken his scooter, but he hated the bustling traffic that would more than double his journey time. The ferry was a more practical option and the terminal on the city side of the river was very close to the police building.

As he descended towards the riverbank several stalls were open for business, the proprietors' voices competing with each other over the din of traffic as they solicited clientele from passing commuters and a few tourists. Ang thankfully left the yelling behind and strode along the jetty to the floating terminal. A striped canvas awning shaded a few wooden bench seats and he found an empty space where he could look across the river at the city as he waited.

As always, Malko was never far from his mind, and he thought about the failed raid and the smattering of intelligence they had gleaned from the building in the old quarter.

There wasn't much to go on.

Malko had new weapons and ammunition, a worrying proposition. Ang knew Malko had styled himself as a revolutionary, the saviour of Cambodia. He also knew—from bitter experience—that Malko was nothing more than a common thug and murderer. Information from the few informants who dared to come forward had Malko assembling a team of ten or more men, all hardened criminals or ex-soldiers—men with a strong belief in the political propaganda Malko spruiked—men prepared to commit unspeakable violence at Malko's direction.

As he sat, he pondered the meaning behind the outline of the peanut shape impressed into the page of the notepad. Malko or someone else who had been in that room had drawn that shape onto the preceding page, leaving the imprint on the page underneath. Why had they drawn it? What was it and what did it mean to Malko and his plans? If someone had taken the time to draw it, then it was important.

He still wondered about the peanut shape and associated lines and circles as he boarded the narrow ferry to cross the half-kilometre stretch of water to the city. Was it a crude design for a bomb? He certainly wouldn't put it past Malko. Klim had made a sketch of the page and had spent the last day trying to match it up with maps of Phnom Penh's streets or those of other towns and villages – without success.

The ferry reached the city terminal and the helmsman expertly manoeuvred them alongside the jetty. Crewmen stood ready with lines to make the vessel fast. A barely perceptible bump signalled the ferry had docked and lines were thrown over bollards. Ang followed the other passengers up the short gangway onto the terminal where cyclo riders yelled for fares beyond the gates.

The sun emerged from behind a cloud and bathed the scene in harsh tropical light. Ang reached into his shirt pocket, removed a pair of sunglasses and placed them on his face. He looked up and was confronted by a sign advertising the fast ferry to Siem Reap. The sign had a map painted on it showing the route of the ferry, a hydrofoil that made a daily run to the northern city and back again. Part of

the map displayed Tonle Sap as a peanut shape running from north-west to south-east.

Ang stopped and stared at the shape and wished he had asked Klim to make him a copy of the notebook page as well.

Could it be?

A wire-framed stand sat beside the fast ferry counter, filled with brochures. Ang went over and flipped through the documentation until he found one that showed a map similar to the one on the sign. He pocketed it and hurried for the police building.

Klim was at his desk in an outer office.

'Do you have that copy of the notebook page you made yesterday?' Ang didn't break stride as he passed. He didn't wait for an answer. 'Bring it to my office.'

Within moments Klim was sitting opposite Ang with a copy of the imprint. Ang took the brochure from his pocket and opened it on his desk with the map uppermost. He stabbed at it with his finger.

'What do you think?'

Klim leant over the brochure and placed his hand-drawn copy of the notebook page beside it, orienting it so that both peanut shapes line up. The copy from the notebook was crude and childlike compared to the map on the brochure, the scale all distorted. And if the line emerging from the bottom was the river, then it had none of the curves or bends of the map.

'It could be, sir. It's very close, but even if Malko has drawn Tonle Sap for some reason, that's thousands of square kilometres of swamps and jungle and open water.'

'I know. Get me a proper map of this area. And some aerial photographs. Bring that notebook. Let's have a closer look. There may be something we missed.'

* * * * *

From the table in the dining saloon Scott watched the jungle slide by on the lakeshore. Except it wasn't really the shore, he noted. Water extended back beyond the foliage and disappeared into shadow and distance. Some kind of swamp or something. Whatever it was, it was huge.

The MEKONG DAWN's captors manoeuvred the vessel along the waterlogged tree-line at little more than two knots. It seemed to Scott that they were searching for something amongst the trees.

Four armed guards, two standing at either end of the saloon, had their rifles unslung and held loosely at the ready. The one named Malko had disappeared not long after the passenger head count. His lieutenant, the little ball of muscle named Ky, had left soon after depositing the missing passenger on the floor. Scott looked over at the man sitting at the next table and remembered him from when they first boarded the Mekong Dawn. Western, or something like that. He'd had that laptop with him and spoke with a South African accent.

I'd hate to be in that man's shoes, he thought. He really pissed them off hiding out like that. If they start offing passengers I reckon he'll be first on the list.

The thought that killing might be involved hit Scott like a rock in the face. He squeezed Nancy's hand and felt her reassuring squeeze back. He shifted his thoughts to the phone hidden under mulch in a pot on the sundeck.

It might as well be on the moon for all the good it is right now.

Fred sat resting his chin on one hand, his head low so as not to draw attention, but Scott noticed the way his eyes darted back and forth, looking at distant landmarks, looking at the shadows. Fred was trying to keep track of their position.

‘Where do you reckon they’re taking us?’

Fred looked at Scott. ‘We’re running north-west along the northern edge of Tonle Sap. Last night I had a good look at that chart the cruise company have pinned up in the breezeway. There’s nothing on this side of the lake but swamp and tight little waterways.’

‘Maybe they’re going to hide us in there somewhere while they wait for the ransom.’ Nancy’s whisper was barely audible.

Fred nodded. ‘Wouldn’t surprise me in the least. You could hide a whole flotilla in there. A boat this size won’t be much of a problem. As long as they’ve got someone that knows the waterways.’

Scott glanced at the guards standing in the breezeway. They wore a simple uniform of dark-blue fatigues. The weapons looked new and the men held them like professional soldiers, not like an untrained criminal might. ‘These guys seem to know what they’re about. Looks as if they’ve got all the bases covered.’

* * * * *

Todd McLean sat at another table in the dining saloon. He had three mates with him, fellow members of his local rugby team from Cobar, New South Wales. The four friends were on an end-of-season celebratory holiday. The Hawks had won the local premierships 34 to 27, defeating long-term rivals from Hay, and Todd and his mates had planned on getting drunk every night of their two week vacation. They had been on the sundeck till after midnight, drinking at the bar. They were all hung over and would still be asleep in their cabins if not for men with machineguns bursting in and herding them to the dining saloon.

‘I don’t like this. I heard shooting. They’ve already gunned down some poor bugger, probably more than one,’ he said to the others.

Paul Wilkins sat opposite Todd. He lifted his head to reveal a pair of bloodshot eyes. ‘I think they’re Khmer Rouge.’

‘Don’t be daft, Wilky.’ Paul Karlsson shook his head ‘The Khmer Rouge have been out of business for years.’

‘Maybe at first glance. But one of the guides I was talking to last night said there are still Khmer Rouge cells out there, waiting for a chance to strike. It wouldn’t surprise me if these blokes were from one of those cells.’

Todd shook his head. ‘That big bald bloke with the scar said they were Cambodian Liberation Army or something.’

Wilky glanced at the two nearest guards. ‘Either way, I think they’re a bad bunch. It won’t be long before they start shooting passengers to show they mean business. They have to, otherwise the authorities won’t take ‘em seriously.’

‘What are you saying?’ Paul looked up from the table top. ‘Do you reckon we need to do something? Try and take ‘em out?’ A bead of perspiration trickled out of his ginger hairline.

Wilky shook his head. ‘Not all of ‘em. Just the blokes between us and the water. Look how close we are to the shore. I don’t know about you blokes, but I reckon if

I made it to the side I could dive over and swim underwater until I was in the trees. They'd never find me once I got in there.'

Todd looked at the trees sliding past the picture windows. They were tantalisingly close. He could throw a stone into them from here. 'Wilky's right. It's better than sitting here and waiting for one of those goons to put his gun to your head and...' He shook his head, unable to finish.

'But what about the guns? They're sure to shoot at us, even underwater. They'll just spray the area with bullets.' Paul was so concerned he had forgotten to whisper. Todd kicked forward and landed a blow on his shin. He wasn't wearing shoes, hadn't been given time to put any on after the gunmen burst into his cabin, but the kick had its desired effect. Paul shut up.

Barry Morgan sat beside Todd, his frame towering over his three friends. 'I read somewhere that bullets only travel a metre underwater before they lose their momentum. If we swam deep enough we'd be safe until we were in the trees.'

'I don't know.' Paul shook his head. 'Wouldn't it be better to wait until the ransom is paid?'

Todd looked him in the eyes. 'They won't pay a ransom, Paul, you know that. Just about every country there is has a policy of not negotiating with terrorists. No one is going to pay any ransom. Not for us.'

'But they aren't terrorists. They're freedom fighters or something.'

Morgs reached over and squeezed Paul's arm. 'I don't think the authorities will make that distinction, mate. We need to act and we need to do it now if we are going to survive this.' He looked at each of his friends in turn. 'Agreed?'

Todd held Morgs' gaze for a few seconds and then nodded. 'Agreed. But when?'

'No time like the present.'

Wilkie placed a restraining hand on Morgs' arm. 'Let's think this through, mate.'

Todd had known the other three boys since kindergarten. Morgs had always been the impulsive one, often leading them into trouble. He glanced at the guards in the breezeway, at the automatic weapons in their hands and the way their eyes flicked about as they studied the passengers. This was no time to throw caution to the wind. 'Wilkie's right, mate. These blokes are all fired up. Maybe we should let them settle down a bit before we try something?'

Morgs nodded, seeing the sense in their reasoning. 'We need some sort of distraction—a diversion. Otherwise it's suicide.'

* * * * *

The Shenka class fast attack boat sliced through the waters of Tonle Sap at a respectable twenty-eight knots. Of Russian design, the Shenka was armed with two 55 mm deck guns, one forward of the bridge and one on the fantail. She also sported two torpedo launchers on either side of the aft deck, though these were empty of their munitions due to budget constraints gripping the Royal Cambodian Navy.

Chakara Bourey sat in the skipper's seat on the open bridge and relished the cool breeze playing on his face. Around him, his crew were in high spirits after two days of shore leave in Siem Reap where they were able to burn off a little energy in the waterfront bars and brothels. They had weighed anchor at 04.00 and Chakara had them running south on radar through the darkness and the mist. They would

make the passage into the river a little before 11.00, in broad daylight, and tonight they would anchor in their home port of Phnom Penh.

‘Radar contact, Skipper. Bearing 280 relative. Nine kilometres.’

Chakara looked at the radar operator then lifted a pair of large binoculars to his face. The image in the lenses swam momentarily then clarified as he worked the focus. In a few seconds he had the target vessel in sight.

‘Cargo barge. She’s crossing from our port to starboard. Helmsman? Come port to 150 true. Maintain present speed.’

‘Port to 150. Maintain present speed. Aye, sir.’

The deck beneath Chakara tilted slightly as the helmsman made the necessary adjustment. He lifted the binoculars again and swept ninety degrees either side of the Shenka’s path. This new course would take them close to the northern shore of the lake and his concern now was for small fishing craft that would not show up on radar. A rice barge, empty and high in the water, sat off their starboard beam. A few dark dots that could be either small boats or masses of water hyacinth speckled the distance. None of them were in the Shenka’s path. However, Chakara was a cautious captain.

‘Mr Chea? Two men with binoculars in the wings. Let’s not ruin some fisherman’s day.’

Satisfied he had done all he could to mitigate the possibility of a collision, Chakara settled back into the chair. He half-closed his eyes, but watched the cargo barge until it was well off their starboard quarter.

‘Radar contact, Skipper. Four kilometres at 330 relative.’

‘Four kilometres?’

‘Sorry, Skipper. She’s close in to the lakeshore. It took me a little while to distinguish her from the clutter.’

‘I have her, Boss.’ The port lookout pointed out across the water at the distant tree line. ‘Tourist boat by the look of her.’

Chakara focused the vessel in the field of his binoculars. It was a tourist boat, heading north along the lake shore at maybe two knots. Lieutenant Chea came up beside him.

‘Maybe they lost someone overboard?’

‘Yes. Some fat Westerner with too much booze in his belly, probably.’ He played the binoculars along the length of the vessel from stern to bow. The decks and walkways appeared empty. Several figures stood in the wheelhouse, just silhouettes against the sky and water. He found the name painted on the bow in black letters.

MEKONG DAWN.

‘We’d better go and see if she needs a hand with whatever it is she’s doing. Radio, see if you can raise her. Helm, course to intercept, if you please.’

* * * * *

Malko watched the patrol boat turn towards them and slammed his fist into the control console.

‘This is bad. Where is this accursed channel of yours, Van?’

‘Still two kilometres away. The captain anchored farther down the lake than I...’

‘No time for excuses. Get us there and get us hidden as soon as possible.’

‘What about the patrol boat?’

‘You leave that to me.’

Malko stepped out of the starboard door of the wheelhouse. The purser’s office was one cabin aft. Malko’s men were using it as a store for their equipment. He saw Ky near the breezeway and waved him forward.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘There’s a Navy patrol boat bearing down on us.’

Ky’s eyes flew wide. ‘What are we going to do?’

‘Take care of it.’ He pointed at one of the olive-painted crates on the floor of the purser’s office. ‘Set that up for me. Bring it forward when you are ready. But hurry. And keep low. We don’t want anyone on the patrol boat to see it.’

Malko hurried back to the wheelhouse. Van had a portable radio tuned to the maritime frequency, and it was squawking.

‘...is Cambodian Warship. State the nature of your operations.’

Van pointed a thumb at the radio. ‘That’s the second time they’ve called.’

‘Have you responded?’

‘No. But—’

‘Don’t. We want them to come as close as possible.’

‘We do?’

Ky stepped into the wheelhouse, the RPG7 held low in his left hand.

Malko took the weapon and moved towards the forward deck, stooping low below the level of the gunwale.

* * * * *

‘Would you look at that?’ Fred pointed through one of the picture windows.

Scott turned and saw it instantly. A large vessel approached the MEKONG DAWN, her bow throwing out foaming waves as she cut through the water. The hull was painted off-white like a lot of other vessels on the lake, but the gun mounted on the forward deck made her purpose unmistakable.

‘Cambodian Navy!’

‘That would be my guess.’ Fred squinted against the morning glare. ‘Fast attack boat. Looks as if she means to intercept us. I think these boys are in for a rough time.’

Scott looked at the guards in the breezeway door. They were fidgeting and changing their grips on their weapons. They couldn’t help but look at the warship rushing towards them.

He allowed a smile to creep onto his face. ‘This might all be over shortly.’

* * * * *

‘Mr Chea, a crew to the forward gun. Full battle rig. That boat is full of tourists. Let’s show them the Royal Cambodian Navy at its best.’

‘Aye, Skipper.’

Men rushed to take up their positions. Chakara watched them go and felt a little excitement as the cover came off the 55 mm gun. ‘Radio? Any luck with raising the MEKONG DAWN?’

‘Negative, Skipper. She’s not responding.’

'Captain's probably misdialled the frequency. Or listening to a conversation on another channel.' Chakara felt something gnawing in the pit of his stomach. A boat that size would have more than one radio. And the captain must have seen the patrol boat approaching. What the hell is he playing at?

'Helm. Reduce speed to twelve knots. Bring us onto her from astern then match course and speed.'

'Aye, Skipper.'

* * * * *

'They're manning the gun! They intend to shoot us!' Ky yelled.

Malko had one hand on the RPG7 and one hand on Ky's shoulder. He could see the patrol boat through the port hawser hole. 'No. If they were going to open fire on us, they could have done that from four kilometres away. They're just flying the flag while they see what we are up to. Showing off to the tourists.'

The patrol boat angled towards the aft of the MEKONG DAWN, but as he watched, it began a turn to come onto a parallel heading.

Malko flicked up the sight on the RPG7. 'They are making it too easy.'

The patrol boat came level with the MEKONG DAWN's stern. The bow wave diminished as the power came off and she settled lower into the water.

'Be ready with the reloads, Ky. The bridge first. Then the gun. Then one into the hull at the waterline. Ready?'

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Ky give a curt nod then turned his attention back to the patrol boat. The RPG7 had a clear plastic sight with range increments etched into the surface. In order to fire the weapon, the firer must judge the range to target and place the correct increment on the target. Through the hawser hole, Malko judged the distance to the patrol boat's bridge as eighty metres. He stood up and lifted the weapon to his right shoulder, feeling Ky's hand on his left shoulder, out to the side and away from the back-blast.

The patrol boat filled the sights. He could see men at the forward gun, the barrel still pointing harmlessly dead ahead. Heads moved on the open bridge and arms waved as he was spotted in the bows of the MEKONG DAWN, but too late. He settled the eighty metre increment on the bridge just below the windscreen and squeezed the trigger.

The rocket propelled grenade streaked away. It covered the eighty metres in a fraction of a second, a thin trail of blue smoke marking its passage over the water. The warhead, designed to take out tanks, struck the patrol boat's bridge below the windscreen and exploded. The lightly constructed bridge was destroyed in an instant. Pieces of glass and metal rained down onto the lake and fell onto the MEKONG DAWN like hailstones.

Malko dropped below the gunwale. The foredeck was filled with acrid smoke from the back-blast.

'Reload!'

Ky slipped another RPG into the launcher and patted Malko's shoulder.

Malko stood and placed the weapon on his shoulder. The patrol boat's bridge was a smoking wreck of twisted metal. The engines still throbbed loudly, pushing the warship forward, but with no one at the controls. The forward gun was almost level with his position as he fired again.

The RPG screamed away and hit the gun near the mount. The explosion tore the weapon from the deck. The men manning it cartwheeled through the air.

‘Reload!’

Malko kept his feet as Ky slipped another warhead into the launcher. Across the silver waters of the lake smoke poured from the patrol boat and climbed into the hazy sky.

Half the length of the patrol boat was past the MEKONG DAWN when Malko fired again, aiming low for the hull at the waterline. The warhead struck below one of the torpedo launchers. Malko heard the detonation and then was almost knocked off his feet as a second explosion lifted the stern of the patrol boat clear of the water. A wave of superheated air washed over the MEKONG DAWN. Malko and Ky dropped below the gunwale.

‘I think you hit the fuel tanks.’ Ky had a huge grin on his face.

Malko placed his face to the hawser hole. The patrol boat was motionless in the water. A burning ring of fire expanded around the wreckage. The boat was sinking fast.

Not fast enough for Malko’s liking.

‘Van!’

A head appeared in the shattered windows of the wheelhouse.

‘A little more speed. Get us away from the smoke.’

* * * * *

The two nearest guards, the ones between Todd and the breezeway, were both looking at the burning patrol boat.

‘Here’s our chance.’ Morgs announced his intent as he was already in motion. A big man, he lifted the edge of the table as he came up on his feet and charged towards the two guards like a bulldozer.

The guards saw him coming. Both held their weapons with the barrels resting in the crooks of their elbows. They were standing less than a metre apart and had no time to evade the hurtling table or bring their guns up. Screaming like a banshee, Morgs and the table crashed into them, carrying them to the deck and pinning them there.

Some of the passengers screamed as Todd grabbed a bewildered Paul’s sleeve and pulled him towards the doors.

‘C’mon!’

Wilky was already moving, launching himself through the air. He landed on the table beside Morgs. Todd heard splintering wood as he pulled Paul into the breezeway. A shout came from behind somewhere, a language he didn’t understand. A shot crashed out, deafening in the confined space of the dining saloon. The passengers screamed louder. Todd glanced back to see some of them diving to the floor, husbands dragging wives down out of the line of fire.

‘Run, Paul! Run! Over the side and into the water.’

Morgs and Wilky rolled off the table and the two kicking, yelling guards beneath it. One of the gunmen at the far end of the saloon fired. The bullet stripped away wood from the doorway a foot from Todd’s head. Keeping low, Morgs and Wilky dove through the doorway and into the breezeway, almost knocking Todd off his feet. He grasped the wall to steady himself.

‘C’mon!’ He could hear more shouts from somewhere up forward as other gunmen ran towards the sound of firing. ‘We have to get into the water.’

A splash sounded from behind him as Paul dived over the side. Morgs and Wilky scrambled towards the rail as Todd pivoted on the balls of his feet and ran. The trees were close, maybe thirty metres away. He launched himself over the rail as more shouts came from behind, closer this time. The wind whistled in his ears as he plummeted towards the brown water, arms reaching forward and down. He had no idea how deep the water was here, certainly deep enough for the Mekong Dawn, maybe three or four metres. The instant before he hit the water he heard the ripping sound of machinegun fire, then the blood-warm water closed around him, the noise replaced by *pfffft, pfffft* sounds as bullets hit the water. Beyond that came the rhythmic pulse of the Mekong Dawn’s engines.

Todd angled deep, propelled onwards by his own momentum. He opened his eyes but couldn’t see anything through the muddy water.

Must keep my bearings. Keep my back to the ship. The engine noise helped. He placed it behind him and pulled away from it as hard as he could.

Pffft pfffft.

More bullets struck the water somewhere above him then moved away to his left, their progress signalled by the diminishing sound. *Pffft pfffft.* Then the bullets stopped and he swam on through the murk. His lungs burned for air but he knew he had at least another fifteen seconds left in him, another ten before he would need to surface and take a breath.

Take a breath.

The thought brought a wave of panic. The gunmen would be at the ship’s rail, waiting with their weapons. Quickly, Todd formed a plan in his mind. They would be expecting the escapees to make directly for the trees—exactly what they were doing. He needed to throw them off somehow, make it harder for them to pick where he would surface. Once he got a new breath of air he would have to go deep again.

The dull burn in his lungs increased to a fiery ache as he turned to his right, angling aft of the MEKONG DAWN, praying the change of direction would be enough. Had to be enough.

His head tingled and he knew the time was now. He pulled for the surface, exhaling as he went. As his nose and mouth broke through into air his lungs were empty and he drew in one deep breath. The water hadn’t even cleared from his eyes before he was back below the surface.

Pffft pfffft. At least one of the gunmen on the Mekong Dawn had seen him surface. Bullets whizzed down all around. He angled deeper and turned for the trees. There had been no time to see where he was, no chance to take his bearings. Todd struck out hard in what he hoped was the right direction.

Have to make the trees this time. Have to! Have to!

Pffft pfffft—thwack!

Something slammed into his left calf muscle with a force that felt like a kick from a horse. The leg began to spasm, useless, a dead weight dragging behind him, slowing him. Todd struggled onwards, using his arms and hands to claw at the water, dragging himself forward, kicking frantically with his one good leg. The burn in his lungs was back, hadn’t really left him. He was out of breath again.

Have to make the...

The water around him went darker. For one panicked second he thought he had lost his bearings completely and swum back under the MEKONG DAWN. Then his hand touched something—something hard and slimy. A tree root stretched across his path beneath the water. He'd made the trees. He was in the shadow of the leaf canopy.

Todd grasped the root with both hands and pulled himself under it. More roots brushed against him. They seemed to branch out from the tree like the framework of an umbrella. Still unseeing, he followed the root upwards with his hand until it broke through the surface. Then his head was through and he clung to the root, panting heavily as he drew in air that was tepid and moist and stunk of rotting vegetation, but was the sweetest air Todd had ever breathed.

He dragged himself closer to the bole of the tree, deeper into the tangle of roots. A swarm of insects, disturbed by his sudden emergence in their realm, buzzed about his head in an angry cloud. Todd didn't care about the insects, didn't care about the muddy water or what creatures it might contain. They were minor to the gunmen and the fact he had made it into the trees. He was safe—for now.

As his eyes cleared, Todd was able to take stock of his position. The tree he had swum into was a little farther back into the swamp. To his right the MEKONG DAWN sat about two hundred metres away. The vessel was holding position as the gunmen searched for the escapees. He could see movement along the near rail, weapons aimed towards the tree-line and the sight of them made him slink deeper into the shadow of the roots. There was no sign of Paul, Morgs or Wilky.

Todd released one hand from the root and reached down his left side, feeling along his lower leg towards the pain, fearful of the wound he would find there. Carefully he probed the tender flesh, surprised to find the skin unbroken. The water must have taken away the bullet's speed, slowing it enough to prevent it from penetrating. But even the gentle touch of his fingers set off another wave of muscular spasms.

He heard voices from the direction of the MEKONG DAWN, raised, angry voices. He was too far away to make out any words and wouldn't understand the language even if he could. Then another noise drowned out the voices, a high-pitched roar. A smaller boat appeared from beyond the Mekong Dawn, propelled by powerful outboard engines. It turned behind the stern of the larger vessel and raced towards the trees. Todd counted five armed men crouched in the boat.

* * * * *

Bullets churned the surface about him as Paul came up for air. He struggled on in a panicked, overarm thrashing, too breathless to try and swim underwater any farther. Bullets zinged past to his left and right, raising little muddy brown geysers. By some miracle he reached the trees unhurt. He crowded as close as he could to the nearest tree and turned to see if the others were behind him.

A head surfaced about ten metres out from the shadows of the overhead branches, then another came up about three metres to the right of the first.

Morgs and Wilky.

The gunmen on the MEKONG DAWN now had targets to aim at and the shooting started again. Paul watched in horror as geysers erupted about his

friends. Morgs and Wilky pulled hard for the trees, foaming the water with their frantic efforts. A line of geysers raced past them, paused, came back, searching.

‘Swim Morgs, you’re nearly here. Wilky, for Christ’s sake, swim.’

The line of geysers found Wilky. He threw his arms into the air as bullets tore into him. He seemed to shudder with the impact and Paul heard the scream of terror. Then the geysers moved on towards Morgs’ thrashing form. Paul heard the bullets meaty strike as they plunged into his friend’s body.

The shooting stopped and Morgs and Wilky floated face-down in the water twenty metres away, bobbing about like discarded refuse.

Paul turned from the horror and pushed himself away from the tree, swimming deeper into the swamp. Tears streamed down his pale face as he dog paddled towards the darkest patch of shadow he could see. He heard the noise of outboard engines behind him and broke into an overarm stroke, kicking as hard as he could.

* * * * *

Ky crouched in the bow of the RHIB and directed the helmsman with waves of his arm. The boat skipped across the water, the engines screaming. Ahead he could see two bodies cut down by gunfire from the MEKONG DAWN and he directed the helmsman towards them. When they were close he gave the cut-out signal and the bow dropped into the water as the boat settled and its speed bled off.

‘Get them out of the water.’

The men with him dragged the bullet-riddled bodies from the water as Ky searched the trees with a pair of binoculars. He easily picked out one frantically swimming figure as it struggled to get away from the boat.

That one will be easy to catch.

He shifted his search to the right, sure one of the escaping men had swum aft of the vessel for a short distance. He would be in the trees somewhere back there. Ky studied the waterline around the closer trees, but was unable to pick out anything unusual.

The two bodies were pulled into the boat and Ky pointed into the swamp at the swimming figure.

‘That one next.’

The helmsman engaged the gearbox and the boat started forward again, slower this time as they entered the tree-line. Ky saw the swimmer stop, roll onto his back and look at the pursuing boat in wide-eyed fear. He tried to duck away to the right, but his efforts were slow, exhausted. Ky waved his arm and the helmsman brought the boat ahead of the escapee. As the bow loomed over the swimmer, Ky reached down and grabbed a handful of red hair, yanking hard. The man gave a breathless scream. The other men helped him drag the swimmer into the boat where he sprawled in the bottom panting and sobbing, but Ky was already searching for the remaining escaped passenger and payed no heed to the almost incoherent pleas.

* * * * *

From his hiding place among hanging tree roots Todd watched his friends being dragged into the boat. It wasn't until he saw their lifeless forms dragged over the gunwale like dead fish that he fully realised the danger of his position. He had believed that if he were captured he would simply be returned to the dining saloon with the other passengers. Seeing the gunshot bodies of Morgs and Wilky pulled out of the water drove home the deadliness of his position, the lengths the gunmen would go to to prevent escape. If he was recaptured it would mean certain death at the hands of the hijackers.

The boat moved into the trees maybe sixty or seventy metres from where Todd hid. For the moment it was out of sight and he took the opportunity to better survey his surroundings. The men were sure to come back this way, looking for him. Farther into the swamp he could see a thicker clump of trees. They grew close enough together to prevent the boat from getting in amongst them. Better still, a large clump of water hyacinth had been pushed into the trees by the current and its leafy-green mass would offer excellent concealment if he could get to it.

Carefully, Todd aligned himself with the trees. He stole one last glance in the direction of the boat and could just make out its bow in the distance. Still out of sight for the moment, he took three long, deep breaths, held the third one and slipped beneath the water. Instantly he heard the whine of the outboards, but muted with distance. He used his good leg to push off from the tree and struck out, hoping the current wouldn't push him off course. It was maybe thirty metres of swimming. He could do it in one breath easily, even with his injured leg.

Todd estimated he was halfway to his goal when he heard the whine of the outboards grow louder. The whine grew to a scream and he angled deeper. A turbulent wash of water buffeted him about. Then, just as suddenly, the turbulence was gone as the RHIB sped on and Todd was swimming through calm water once more. The propellers on the outboard motors must have missed him by mere centimetres.

He could hear the noise of the boat in the distance. The driver powered down and the whine became a throbbing pulse as the boat idled through the trees. Then Todd slammed up against something so hard it almost knocked the wind out of him. He resisted the urge to thrash to the surface and felt about.

Wood and slime.

More tree roots. He had reached the clump of trees. Probing upwards with his hand he found a stringy, spongy mass on the surface. The water hyacinth.

A new wave of fear gripped him as he realised the water hyacinth may prevent him from getting to air. But, as he probed with his hand, he found he was able to tear the leafy mass apart slightly. He tore at it for several seconds then pressed his face to the opening to breathe, treading water and clutching at the floating plant. With his ears below the surface he could hear the outboard motors idling in the distance, but it was impossible to gauge direction. The sound came from everywhere. Only the volume gave any indication of distance.

Very carefully Todd tore at the water hyacinth around his face, trying to improve his vision without exposing his hiding place. With more of the plant removed he was able to push his whole head into the opening. It was like looking up through a tangled green tube. The water hyacinth grew to thirty centimetres above the top of

his fully emerged head. He could see the trees high above him, their shadowy underside dappled with bright sunshine reflected from the water. The trees crowded around him on all sides. His dead reckoning had taken him almost to the centre of the grove. Better still, once his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he discovered that he was able to see through the tangle of intertwining stems and leaves, but anyone on the outside would be hard put to see in. With the water drained from his ears he could also hear the outboard in the distance, somewhere off to his right. He turned in that direction and saw the RHIB about a hundred metres away, moving closer but at a tangent to where he hid.

Machinegun fire filled the air. No bullets came near Todd, but he guessed what the gunmen were doing. After collecting the other three escapees, they had sped as fast as they could to the farthest possible point that Todd could have reached. Now they were working their way back through the swamp, shooting up any likely hiding places they couldn't get the boat into. Todd's heart raced as he realised his seemingly safe hide-out would soon be sprayed with bullets.

The outboards gave a brief burst of power and through the water hyacinth he watched the boat speed to another clump of trees. Moments later gunfire ripped out. They were close now and he knew his hiding place must be next.

There was only one thing Todd could do. He started taking deep breaths, hyperventilating as he prepared for a long submergence. The outboards gave another burst of power and he heard them heading for his clump of trees. The bow of the RHIB appeared through the tangle of foliage and the helmsman cut the power, gliding in the last few metres. Todd took a last deep breath and held it. He pushed himself below the surface and swam deep.

The bottom was about three metres down and covered with a layer of silty mud. He wriggled into it as far as he could just as the noise of the motor reached idle and a newer, deadlier sound replaced it.

Pfffft-pfffft-pfffft-pfffft-pfffft.

The firing went on and on as the water hyacinth was raked with bullets. Then the firing stopped but the boat remained overhead, waiting. Todd guessed the gunmen were watching for any sign that they had hit him. It was only seconds, but to Todd it seemed like ages before he heard the outboards increase power and the boat move away towards the next clump of trees.

He let himself rise to the surface under his own buoyancy. The water hyacinth had been tattered and blown into a hundred separate pieces by machinegun fire so he had no trouble finding an opening from which he could draw breath. Another burst of gunfire sounded as his head came clear of the water, but off to his left, at least fifty metres away. He waited until the boat moved on again and pivoted in that direction just in time to see it disappear into the distant gloom.

Will they give up when they don't find me, or will they come back and do a more thorough job?

Todd turned towards the lake. The sunlight out on the open water looked bright and inviting, but he knew he couldn't go in that direction. He would be too easily seen out there. Turning again, he examined the depths of the swamp. Water and trees disappeared into shadowed distance. There was no sign of a bank or a shoreline or any sort of island or firm ground. It looked as foreboding as a dark alley in a rough part of town. But Todd knew that if he stood any chance of

making it out alive, then he had to go deeper into the swamp. That was where he would find cover and concealment if the gunmen came back again.

He sank below the surface and swam out from beneath the water hyacinth. Once clear, he broke into a lazy breaststroke that didn't splash the water too much.

Turning his back on the sunlight, he swam into the shadows.

* * * * *

Ky stormed up the boarding steps, shoving the boy ahead of him. He wanted to remain in the swamps and find the last escapee, but they couldn't delay any longer. They had to get the Mekong Dawn into the channel before it was seen by another vessel.

Malko stood at the top of the boarding steps and looked down at the two dead bodies in the RHIB.

'Only three, Ky?' His face carried a look of anger that made the scar on his cheek puff out like a welt.

'The other one is dead, Colonel. I am sure of it. I machine-gunned every possible hiding place he could be in. His body has sunk to the bottom and is feeding the eels.'

'I hope you are right. Take the live one to the top deck. We need to demonstrate our resolve.'

'And the other bodies?'

'Leave them in the boat until we are deep in the swamps then throw them over the side.'

* * * * *

Scott watched the hijackers drag one of the boys past the dining room doors and up the companionway to the sundeck. Their captors were talking excitedly in Khmer and he had no idea what they were saying, although the ashen looks on the faces of the crew told him the topic was not a happy one. Malko and three men appeared in the breezeway and the guards ordered everyone to stand and move to the sundeck.

'What's going on do you reckon?' Fred was behind Scott as they climbed the companionway.

'Nothing good.' Scott could feel Nancy's terrified grip on his arm, her fingers sinking deep into his flesh.

The captors assembled the passengers and crew along the port rail. The recaptured boy knelt at the starboard rail, his hands secured behind his back by a black plastic cable-tie. The lad faced out towards the swamp, his shoulders heaving as he sobbed uncontrollably.

'Please! Please!' He tried to turn towards the unwilling audience but the one named Ky grabbed a handful of hair and twisted the youth's head back to the rail. 'I didn't want to do it. The others made me. It wasn't my idea.'

Scott watched in horror as Ky drew his knife from the sheath and realised what was about to happen. The other passengers realised too and pleaded for the young man's life.

Malko ignored the pleas as he walked to a position in front of the passengers. He carried an old mahogany pick handle that had split at some time in the past and been repaired with red electrical tape. The pleading faded as Malko pointed the pick handle at the passengers.

'It seems that some of you are not prepared to take me or my men seriously. You need a demonstration.' His face turned beet-red and the scar on his cheek stood out as an ugly white line. He turned to the young man. 'What is your name?'

Ky forced the boy's face towards Malko.

'Paul. Paul Karlsson. Please, sir! It wasn't my idea. God, please, I just want to go home.'

Malko ignored the hysterical sobbing and turned to one of his men who handed him a bundle of documents. Scott recognised the stack of passports Tamko had been forced to deliver up earlier that morning. Malko thumbed through the passports and picked one out. He held it up with the pages open and read aloud, like a thespian rehearsing for a part in a play.

'Paul Robert Karlsson; Born 12th of August, 1993; Nationality Australian; Place of issue Cobar, New South Wales.' He closed the passport and looked down at the young man. 'Tell me, Paul Robert Karlsson, is your father a rich man in Cobar, New South Wales?'

Paul looked up at Malko, his face streaked with tears. Snot ran from his nose and dribbled from his chin.

C'mon, kid! Scott thought. Give the bastard the answer he wants to hear. For Christ's sake!

'My father?' Paul had a quizzical look on his face.

'Yes, your father. Is he a wealthy man? Would he pay a lot of money for your safe return to Cobar, New South Wales?'

Give him the answer that will save your life, kid.

A look of uncertainty crossed Paul's face.

'My father is a diesel mechanic. He doesn't have much money. He works at the mine.' Paul's eyes flicked from Malko to the faces of his fellow passengers.

Scott felt his guts slide. Those words had just sealed the young man's fate.

Malko gave a nod and Ky's arm moved. The knife slashed across the boy's throat, his eyes widening in surprise. A fantail of blood splashed across the deck and ran in rivulets along the boards. Women screamed as the passengers surged backwards in an effort to put as much distance as possible between themselves and this horrific sight.

One man, a member of the crew, made a break for the companionway. Malko swung the pick handle and caught him across the back of the neck with a sound like celery snapping. The man went down hard and slid into one of the life raft pods where his legs twitched in a wild spasm.

Ky let go of the dying boy and Paul slumped onto the deck, face down in his own blood. He managed to get one hand to that terrible wound in his throat and tried to stem the flow of life blood, but any effort would never be enough. The colour drained from the boy's body as he bled out on the deck.

Malko signalled to two of his men and they moved to the little knot of crewmembers, dragging aside a man Scott recognised as the first officer. The man

struggled in their grip, but was forced to kneel by the far rail, facing out over the water.

'I have my own men to run this vessel,' Malko stepped up behind the officer. He brought the pick handle up and swung hard into the back of the man's head. The body shot forward under the force of the impact and slumped against the rails. The passengers screamed again and pleaded for mercy, but Malko's men were already dragging the navigator and chief engineer to the rail.

Someone retched and the stink of bile filled Scott's nostrils. Nancy had her face pressed into his side and he held her against him with all his strength.

'Alas, an Asian man's life is not worth the ransom of a Westerner.' Malko grinned at the terrified passengers. 'My little angel will see them on the way to their ancestors.' He patted the pick handle then positioned himself beside the engineer.

Scott lifted his face to the clouds as Malko murdered the engineer and navigator. But he was unable to block out the screaming or the horrific sound of wood striking bone. The palms of his hands were sweaty and he thought of the box of tablets in his cabin.

He expected the hijackers to execute every member of the crew, including the catering staff, but Malko stepped over the twitching body of the engineer and used the pick handle to point below.

'Take them back down to the dining saloon. I think they have seen enough of the fate that awaits should they defy me.'

Chapter 12

Ang leant over his desk, arms spread wide, palms flat on the large scale map as he and Klim studied it intently.

'What would Malko want with this area? There is nothing but water and swamp,' Ang said. There was something important here, some minor fact that could be a case breaker, the key piece to the puzzle. He knew it, but whatever it was remained beyond his grasp. 'Show me the notebook again.'

Klim slid the notebook to Ang. He opened it to the first page and twisted it to the light. The peanut-shaped outline formed.

Ang looked for any distortion in the paper where Malko, or whoever had drawn the shape, might have placed his finger or pressed hard with the pen to highlight a particular area.

Nothing.

'I know it's a long shot, but have the technicians in the lab go over this page. If anyone has touched it I want to know exactly where.' A small chance, he knew. The map, or whatever it was, had been drawn on the preceding page. This particular page may not have been touched at all. He handed the notebook back to Klim and glanced at his watch. 'I have to speak to the major general and brief him on our so-called progress.'

Ang left his office and walked down the hall to a corner suite. A secretary sat at a desk in an outer office, delicately tapping away at a computer keyboard. She looked up as Ang appeared in the doorway and smiled as she recognised him then pointed at the inner door with a manicured finger.

‘Go right in, Major. He’s expecting you.’

Major General Truan Sulem sat behind an expansive desk littered with papers and a few ornaments that doubled as paperweights. He was talking on the telephone as Ang entered the office, but waved at a vacant chair on the other side of the desk. Ang sat and studied the desk ornaments as he waited. His boss was in earnest discussion with someone over the force’s funding, a topic he knew always puts the major general’s blood pressure up a few points.

‘Well, they have to practice shooting on a regular basis.’ The major general rolled his eyes at Ang. ‘No, once a year is not enough. If my officers are expected to hit anything when the need arises they should practice at least every three months.’ The major general made a pistol of his free hand and shot it at the telephone hand piece. ‘I don’t care where the money comes from. It’s your job to find it. You had better damn well find it.’ He slammed the receiver down and looked at Ang.

‘Bloody bean-counters! They’ll be the death of me. I can’t be expected to run a police force on the budget they give me. I hope your news is good Ang?’

‘I don’t really have anything new to report, sir. Klim is working on the notebook page we found at Malko’s last known hideout. Best guess is that it’s a hand-drawn map of Tonle Sap and some adjoining waterways.’ Ang felt a little uncomfortable under his superior’s gaze, but he wasn’t about to pad out his report.

‘It’s all bloody swamps and trees. What would Malko want with that area?’

‘I don’t know, sir. Maybe another hideout. But it’s not his style to hide miles from anywhere. Malko prefers the cities, where he can blend in with the crowds. If he is up to something in there, it won’t be anything good. I can’t think what though. All the people in that area are pretty poor and there’s no localised infrastructure. I don’t believe a robbery would be worth the effort for him.’

The major general leant back in his chair and laced his hands behind his head. ‘And then there’s the guns you found at the last hideout.’

‘That’s right, sir. They are of Chinese manufacture. I’ve made a few enquiries through their embassy, but nothing yet. The Chinese probably don’t want to admit that they were careless enough to lose the weapons—or that those weapons have made their way into the wrong hands.’

‘Anything I can do?’

‘If you could find someone high enough up the chain to lean on them a bit harder, the Chinese may give us a lead as to who supplied the weapons to Malko.’

‘I’ll see what I can do.’ He leant forward, made a note on a piece of paper and added it to a pile. ‘Anything else?’

Ang looked briefly at the ceiling, unable to meet his superior’s gaze. ‘If this hand-drawn map turns up something, a definite location near Tonle Sap, I may need access to a helicopter.’

Ang lowered his eyes to find his boss staring at him as if he were some strange apparition.

'I can't find enough money for bullets to train the men to shoot straight and you want a helicopter?'

'It would be the fastest way to search the area, sir.' Ang met the gaze and held it.

'That will make the bloody bean counters have conniption fits.' A broad smile stretched the major general's face. He was obviously enjoying the thought the effect of a request for the use of a helicopter would have on the people who managed the purse strings.

Ang decided to push the matter. 'It could be our best chance of finding Malko.'

'Fine!' Truang nodded. 'You give me something solid to go on, Major, and I'll get you your damned helicopter.'

* * * * *

Van had never commanded a vessel as large as the MEKONG DAWN. His time on the rivers and lakes of Cambodia had been spent piloting rice barges and small tugs. He had worked the waters around the Mountain of the Sun for over a year and knew as well as any man which passages were capable of taking a vessel like the MEKONG DAWN and which would ultimately shallow out and trap an unwary skipper.

'How far to this accursed channel of yours?' Malko stood beside the helm and alternated between glancing at his watch and scanning the open water with his binoculars. 'If we don't get into cover soon, someone else will discover us.'

Van squinted through the windshield as he studied the shoreline. He had never approached the channel from this angle or this close to the trees, but Malko wouldn't let him take the vessel farther into open water so he could get his bearings. Everything seemed the same at this limited range.

'I believe it is just past that tall grove of trees, Colonel.' Van pointed through the shattered glass at a distinctive bulge in the leafy canopy. 'We'll be turning into the channel in the next few minutes.'

'I hope you're right. We're running out of time.' Malko looked at his watch once more.

Making three knots, they rounded a small headland. Van allowed himself a quick grin as he realised his reckoning had been correct. The opening to the channel lay almost abeam of them and he spun the helm hard. The MEKONG DAWN responded slowly. She wasn't built for rapid manoeuvring and the bow drifted lazily to starboard. Van would have liked a more direct approach from open water but had to make the turn in the time he had or they risked running aground. The helm came up hard on its stops and he held it there as the bow continued to swing. For one panicked moment it looked as if they would overshoot the opening and his hand hovered over the engine controls, ready to apply full reverse power before they ploughed into the trees. Then he realised they were going to make it and he pulled his hand away from the controls and spun the helm to centre the rudder.

A few branches scraped along the sides, grating and snapping off as the MEKONG DAWN penetrated the verdant curtain. Leaves and twigs rained down outside the wheelhouse windows. A loud ripping noise came from somewhere

above and Van realised the branches had caught the awning on the sundeck and were tearing it to shreds.

'We won't get too far like this, Van. You promised me the channel would accommodate this vessel.'

'It's only the opening that's overgrown, Colonel. The rest of the channel is clear. I travelled down it only a month ago. Once we push through the overhanging trees the passage will be clear.'

'I hope you are right.'

Making fine adjustments to the helm, Van eased the Mekong Dawn through the tangle of branches. The snapping and ripping continued, punctuated by the splash of falling debris. Then Van's heart gave a leap of despair. A low bough, as thick as a man's waist, stretched across their path from one side of the channel to the other.

'That will be a problem.' Malko pointed at the seemingly impassable barrier.

'It must have been dislodged by last week's monsoon wind.' Van reached for the throttles and applied full power. The low throbbing of the twin diesels increased to a roar. Only fifty metres separated the MEKONG DAWN from the fallen tree and he prayed they would build up enough speed in time. The riverboat surged forward like a horse given the spurs. From his position in the wheelhouse, he couldn't see the bow at the waterline, but he imagined the placid waters beginning to foam under the vessel's savage thrust. He eyed the fallen tree and could see a fan of unearthed roots on the left bank. The branches on the right still held green leaves. The jungle had not had time to begin rotting and reclaiming what was hers. The tree trunk would be as solid as steel.

'Hold on, Colonel.' Out of the corner of his eye he saw Malko grasp the edge of the control console.

The point of the bow made contact. The tree let out a soft groan and flexed under the weight of the vessel. They were losing headway rapidly and Van felt himself thrown against the helm. Loose objects crashed down to the deck, a smattering of noise, just audible over the almost human groan of the tree.

* * * * *

Nancy toppled out of her chair and onto Scott. About her, people were thrown to the floor and tables crashed onto their sides. From the galley up forward came the noise of shattering crockery. A dessert trolley hurtled between upended tables and sprawling passengers, narrowly missing an elderly man, but running over his wife's wrist. One of the hijackers by the serving counter saw the trolley coming at him and only just managed to sidestep out of its way before it crashed into the counter with a jarring thud. The noise of screaming passengers tore at Nancy's senses.

* * * * *

For one gut-wrenching moment it looked to Van as if the tree would win the battle of strength. They had lost half their forward momentum and were still slowing. But, with a report like a rifle shot, the trunk snapped in two and the halves pushed aside like the gates on a weir lock, the jagged ends clawing at the hull as if in a last desperate attempt to hold back the vessel.

Van reached for the throttles and reduced power before their speed could build again. His hand trembled as he clamped it back onto the helm. Dark patches of perspiration had spread on his fatigues but his face wore a broad grin of triumph. Ahead, the passage was clear.

‘We are into the swamps of Boeng Tonle Chhma, Colonel.’

Malko leant forward and looked up at the overhanging canopy of trees that closed over the top of the channel. ‘Good work!’ He slapped Van on the shoulder. ‘They’ll never find us in here.’

* * * * *

Nancy rolled off Scott and climbed unsteadily to her feet. She reached down and helped him off the floor.

‘Are you all right?’

Scott nodded. On the other side of their up-ended table, Fred and Collette looked dazed. Fred had a graze over his right eye and Collette rubbed at her elbow.

‘Is everyone all right?’ Nancy called loudly, her nurse’s instincts kicking into gear as she looked about the room, automatically triaging the passengers, ignoring those that were standing or yelling, seeking out the prone and the quiet.

Protect the unconscious!

Even as the emergency room mantra flashed through her mind, Nancy stooped to a man sprawled unmoving on the polished hardwood deck, a gash above his right temple. She scooped up a handful of paper napkins and pressed them to the wound.

‘Will he be okay?’ The woman beside him was still on the floor, but she managed to pull herself to a sitting position.

Nancy ran a quick, critical eye over her and decided the woman was unhurt.

‘Here! Hold this against his head. I have to check on the others.’ The woman hesitated briefly then took the wad of napkins and pressed them to the man’s temple.

Nancy stood and surveyed the room. All the passengers appeared to be conscious and alert. Most rubbed at bumps and sprains or were being attended to by companions. The screaming and yelling had subsided into a confused murmur.

Across the saloon a woman held her wrist to her chest. Tears of pain rolled down her cheeks as her husband tried to comfort her without much luck.

Nancy stepped over to the pair. ‘Can I help?’

The man looked up at Nancy, his eyes wet with tears. ‘That trolley ran right over her arm. I think it’s broken.’ His voice carried the lilt of north England.

‘My name is Nancy. I’m a nurse.’ She squatted beside the woman. ‘Would you let me take a look at your arm, sweetheart?’

The woman sniffled and said nothing, but she let Nancy look at her injured arm. The wrist was swollen and beginning to bruise.

‘What’s your name, sweetheart?’

‘Joyce.’

Joyce let Nancy take her arm. She hissed with pain as tender fingers touched the swelling.

‘I think your husband is right, Joyce. It looks as if your arm is broken.’

The terrified face dropped in dismay.

'But the break is clean and as best as I can tell the bones are together where they're supposed to be. I'll find something to splint it with and then we'll see about getting you something for the pain.'

'Is she okay?'

Nancy looked up to find Scott standing over her.

'Her arm is broken. I need to splint it and find some painkillers. Stay with her, Scotty.'

Scott nodded and stooped to Joyce, placing an arm on her shoulder.

Nancy glanced about the dining room. Some of the passengers had already righted their tables and were beginning to reposition the chairs around them, resuming their original positions. She noticed the proximity of the overhanging jungle on either side of the boat and wondered if this was a good idea. There may be more obstacles ahead.

Fred Deakin's voice called out: 'People! I don't think sitting at the tables is a good plan. We're in a tight channel here and making a good four or five knots. That might not be the only collision we have. These tables are solid mahogany and could be deadly missiles if we hit the bank.'

'What do you suggest?' A voice from the back of the room.

'Get all the tables up forward. The chairs too. We can sit on the floor until the boat stops or reaches open water again. It may be uncomfortable, but it will be safer.'

'Let's do what he says.' Another voice. 'He sounds like he knows what he's talking about.'

With the passengers beginning to organise themselves, Nancy continued her search for something to use as a splint. There was a magazine stand near the main doors and she moved towards it. A thick magazine rolled around the wrist would make an excellent splint. She could tear up a tablecloth for bandages.

A guard saw her moving towards the doors and stepped in front of her.

Nancy scowled at the man and pointed to the magazine stand. 'I need one of those.' She tried not to look at the machinegun in the man's hands. 'One of the passengers has a broken arm. I need to splint it.'

The guard's face creased in incomprehension. He lifted the barrel of his assault rifle and pointed back into the dining room.

'You don't understand.' Nancy struggled to keep her voice even. 'People are hurt. I need to help them.'

He doesn't speak English. He'll never understand.

The guard grabbed Nancy's shoulder and pushed her back into the dining room.

'What is the problem?' a voice said.

Nancy shrugged the guard's hand away and turned to find Malko standing in the doorway, one hand on his holster as he surveyed the scene of chaos in the dining room.

'The collision. Some of the passengers are hurt.'

The guard raised his arm to get a better grip on her, but Malko shook his head. The guard dropped his arm.

'What are you trying to do?' Malko's eyes were dark, like a reptile's.

Nancy suppressed a shudder. 'I'm a nurse. We have a woman with a broken arm. I was getting a magazine to use as a splint.'

A look of confusion crossed Malko's face.

'You know—a splint!' She grasped her own wrist and held it across her chest.

'Ah! You wish to fashion a splint out of a rolled up magazine? I have seen this done.'

Nancy nodded. 'And I'll need bandages. Some of the passengers have cuts and grazes. There must be some first-aid kits on this boat. If I am going to help the passengers, I'll need them.'

Malko pointed a finger at Tamko and fired off a rapid series of questions in Khmer. Then he spoke to the guard, who shouldered his rifle and followed Tamko out into the breezeway.

'You shall get your first-aid kits. Is there anything else?'

'As a matter of fact there is,' Nancy said, emboldened by her success so far. 'A lot of these passengers are elderly. They have medications in their cabins they need to take regularly. Your men herded them in here without any thought for their needs. If they don't get them they can become very sick. Maybe even die.'

Malko lifted his reptilian gaze from Nancy and looked about the dining room from one passenger to another. He looked back at Nancy and nodded.

'You will make a list of their medications. When you have it, I will allow you, and only you, to go to the necessary cabins and retrieve the medicine.'

'Thank you.'

Malko turned on his heels.

'There's one other thing.'

Malko turned back and raised an eyebrow.

'People need to go to the bathroom from time to time.'

'You are a pushy woman, miss—?'

'Morris. And it's Missus.'

'Treat your injured people, Mrs Morris.' Malko smiled, but Nancy saw no benevolence in his face. 'As for the bathroom, I will have buckets brought to the dining saloon. The recent escape attempt makes it necessary to keep you all together. You will just have to—what is it you Westerners call it—make do?' He turned and strode out into the breezeway.

Nancy returned to Scott and Joyce. She pulled a tablecloth from one of the tables and handed it to her husband. 'Make some bandages out of this.'

Scott took the tablecloth and used his teeth to start a tear while Nancy wrapped the injured arm in the magazine. Then she took a strip of cloth from Scott and bound the arm firmly, but not too tight. Finally, she fashioned a sling and tied the bandaged arm across Joyce's chest.

'How's that?'

Joyce offered a weak smile. 'You know, dear, it feels a little better already.'

'I'll get you something for the pain just as soon as I can.'

Tamko and the hijacker appeared in the doorway with several first-aid kits in their arms. The hijacker dumped his burden beside the magazine rack and left, but the purser brought his kits to Nancy.

'Here you go, ma'am.'

Nancy rummaged through the contents of the kits and made a mental note of what she had to work with. In one she found a blister pack of paracetamol tablets. She popped two out and found a bottle of water.

'Here you go, sweetheart.'

Joyce swallowed the tablets down in one gulp. 'You're the sweetheart. Thank you, my dear.'

One of the ship's staff, a waitress, sat with her back to the picture windows. The girl looked down at the deck, avoiding eye contact with everyone in the room. She wore an apron, the edges of a notebook showing above one of the pockets.

Nancy went over to her. 'What's your name, sweetheart?'

The girl looked up, her eyes wide with fear. She studied Nancy's face for a moment. 'Sanika, Miss.'

'Sanika. How's your English?'

'Good, Miss. I learned it at school in Burma.'

'I bet you can write it pretty good as well?'

Sanika gave a shy nod.

'Will you help me with a little job?' Nancy pointed at the notebook and hoped the girl still had a pen as well. 'As I go around the passengers, I need you to come with me and note down their medications and cabin numbers. Can you do that for me?'

The waitress turned and looked at Tamko who sat nearby. The purser gave a nod. Sanika turned back to Nancy and repeated the nod. She climbed to her feet and took out the notebook and a pen.

'I see you are gathering an entourage,' Scott said.

'She's noting down everyone's medications for me.'

Scott reached up and took her hand. 'Don't forget mine, will you.'

Nancy could feel the tremor in his hand. Her husband's face had that pleading look of a child in a toy store.

Hold it together, Scotty. For Christ's sake.

'I won't forget your tablets.'

The grip tightened. 'Small suitcase. Just inside the door.'

'I know where they are.'

Chapter 13

When compared to modern forensic laboratories available in developed countries, the laboratory in Phnom Penh barely rated higher than a high school science classroom. Despite this fact, Klim hovered over the page from the notebook and watched with interest as the technician placed it on the stand of a magnifying projector.

'This is a better method for document examination than fingerprint dusting,' the lab-coated technician said. 'The paper is too coarse to show any definitive prints.'

'I'm not really interested in fingerprints.' Klim didn't look up from the page as he spoke. 'This page was under one that was torn off. It probably wasn't even touched. We think the impression left on it might be a map. Can you see if any particular area on the page has received more attention than anywhere else?'

'I can try.'

The technician slid the page back and forth on the stand. A magnified image of a small portion of the page was projected onto a screen on the wall. The image was so enlarged the weave in the paper stood out as though it were a piece of Hessian cloth. Ruled lines, only as wide as a hair on the page, were five centimetres wide on the screen.

'I'll start with the bottom of the peanut shape.' The technician slid the magnifying head across the stand. Parallel blue lines moved across the screen in a blur then settled into stillness. The weave of paper dropped away into a valley running from top left to bottom right.

Klim stared at the valley for ten seconds before he realised he was looking at a magnified image of the impression left in the paper. 'If it is a map of Tonle Sap, what area are we focused on?'

The technician leant over the stand and squinted against the bright light. 'South-east end of Tonle Sap where it narrows into the river. North shoreline.'

'Follow it to the north.'

The image slid across the screen. Klim felt as if he was in a very fast jet, flying above the valley. Suddenly the valley stopped and a new one began, heading in the same direction. Whoever drew the map had lifted the pen momentarily and replaced it not quite in the same place.

For a full minute the image slid beneath the screen from bottom right to top left and back down again.

Klim watched, mesmerised, until the technician announced they were back at the start point. He felt the slide of failure in his stomach.

'Find the other shape. If that turns up nothing then search the whole page from edge to edge.'

The technician grunted and moved the magnifying head to the heart-shape drawn near the centre. Another valley filled the screen and he traced around it, moving counterclockwise.

This impression appeared much the same as the last, a furrow in the weave of the paper created by the tip of the pen on the page above. At this magnification it was possible to see fibres torn out of position and lying in the bottom of the valley.

The technician completed a circuit of the shape. 'Nothing!'

Klim shook his head in disgust. This page had been in the presence of Malko. The impression left on it from the page above may have been drawn by Malko himself, or if not him, then someone who tried to explain something using a rough sketch. The image was important. He knew it. He just had to figure out why. He wracked his brain and tried to think.

Is it a map?

It damn well looks like one. A quick sketch of Tonle Sap and Boeng Tonle Chhma.

Klim had the tourist brochure Ang had given him as well as a 1:25000 scale map of the region of Tonle Sap. He opened the brochure and looked at the map inside showing the route of the ferry between Phnom Penh and Siem Reap.

He was missing something. What?

'Can you zoom out? Give me an overview of the whole page?'

The image shrank down so that the notebook page filled the screen.

Klim glanced between the image and the map in the brochure.

The map showed the route the ferry took as a broken line progressing up the river into Tonle Sap and across the lake to Siem Reap in the north. Boeng Tonle Chhma was not marked on the map in the brochure.

Why?

Because it's unimportant. The ferry doesn't go there.

Klim was aware of the technician staring at him, waiting for instruction.

'If you were to draw a quick map for someone to explain something or show a rough location, you wouldn't put anything in it you didn't need.'

'I guess so.' The technician sounded as if he was becoming bored with the whole exercise.

Klim held up the brochure. 'Boeng Tonle Chhma is not shown on this map because it's not important to the meaning of the map.' A grin slipped onto his face as the realisation struck him. 'The person who drew that map also drew in Boeng Tonle Chhma. Why?'

The technician straightened as he realised he was being drawn into Klim's line of thinking. 'Um... because it was needed to show something?'

'Exactly! What do we know about Boeng Tonle Chhma?'

'My sister-in-law comes from a village near there.' The technician was now infected by Klim's excitement. 'I've been there once. It's mainly swamp. The lake is shown on most maps as having a solid shoreline, but that's not the case. It's just an area of open water, but the swamps extend much farther than that. Technically, I guess, Tonle Sap and Boeng Tonle Chhma are really the same lake, two areas of open water divided by swamps and trees. It's a maze of waterways and islands that only the locals know how to navigate.'

Klim waved the brochure like a spectator at a ship launch. 'Zoom back in on the sketch of Boeng Tonle Chhma. Examine the area around the lake. Go out as far as you think is needed to cover the waterways.'

Once more the image expanded and began sliding around the edge of the impression representing Boeng Tonle Chhma. After completing one circuit, the technician expanded the circle then started again. As the magnifying head moved up the east shore of the lake, blue lines slid past in regular order. The fibres of the paper were uncompressed, perfect. Then something that looked like a crater slid into view.

'What's that?'

The technician slid the circular depression into the centre of the screen and zoomed out slightly. It was only a quarter the depth of the impressions created by the drawn lines and would have been impossible to make out with the naked eye. 'It looks like someone pressed the pen or pencil point onto the page above.'

'Examine that area.'

Once more the image moved. Almost instantly another circular depression slid into view, then another and another. The technician adjusted the magnification to bring all four circles into view on the screen. 'It looks as if whoever drew this map tapped the pen against the page in this area several times.'

'What area is it?'

The image moved, slipped out of focus then sharpened again. 'The eastern edge of Boeng Tonle Chhma.'

'Can you print out what is on the screen?'

The technician shook his head. 'Not with this equipment.'

Klim spread the topographical map on a workbench, pulled a pen from his pocket and traced a circle in the air above the paper. 'If those dots were on this map they'd be somewhere in this area, wouldn't they.'

The technician leant over Klim's shoulder. 'A little farther out from the lake, I would say. There is no scale on the rough map on the notebook page. I'd expand the area a bit just to be sure.'

Klim drew a circle on the map.

'That would about cover it, I guess.'

Placing the pen across the circle he'd just drawn, Klim used his fingers to mark the diameter and then slid the pen down to the scale in the bottom right hand corner of the map. It measured fifteen kilometres wide. Quickly, he did a rough calculation in his head and felt his spirits plummet.

'That's an area of over two hundred square kilometres.'

'I don't know what you're looking for,' the technician said. 'But if it's hidden in those swamps, it will probably stay hidden.'

Klim cocked an eyebrow and scowled at the man. He gathered up the maps and notebook page and turned for the door.

* * * * *

Ang was in his office. He listened attentively while Klim explained about the dots on the sketch and how it related to the topographical map. Then he picked up the phone and asked the switchboard operator to put him through to the police commander in Kampong Chhnang, the closest town of any note to the area in question. Almost a full minute passed before a voice came on the line.

'Captain Turan.' A bored tone.

'This is Major Sinh in Phnom Penh.'

'Good morning, Major. What can I do for you?' The voice perked up a little, but not much.

'What can you tell me about the area to the east of Boeng Tonle Chhma?'

'Swamp, swamp and more swamp. There are a few jungle-clad islands and mountains of sorts. Why?'

'The area was mentioned in an investigation. I wanted to ask someone with a little local knowledge.'

There was a pause at the other end of the line, then the captain's voice asked: 'What sort of investigation?'

Ang had never heard of Captain Turan in Kampong Chhnang. With corruption running rife through the police force he knew better than to give up too much information. 'Nothing much. Just some information has come to light about a possible arms cache in the area. Left over from the civil war. Thought we could come and get it before some local finds it.' It was a believable story. Apart from thousands of landmines, Cambodia was riddled with arms caches left over from the Khmer Rouge revolution.

'Do you have map coordinates?'

'No. Just a rough area.'

'Then forget it. Without a good, reliable grid reference or a set of GPS coordinates it might as well be on the other side of the moon. You'll never find it in there.'

Ang ran a hand over his face and wondered how much he could tell this man. 'Any unusual activity in your area, Captain?'

'Nothing of note. Just a few touts ripping off the tourists. That sort of thing.'

'Call me if anything unusual happens. Anything that might be linked to major crime.'

'What has this got to do with an old arms cache?'

'The source of the information might be linked to a large criminal organisation.'

'I see. If anything crops up I'll be sure to let you know.'

Ang disconnected the call.

* * * * *

Captain Turan hung up the telephone and stared at the ceiling for a full minute. He fumbled with a set of keys hanging from his police issue belt, found the one he was looking for and used it to unlock the top drawer of his desk.

Under some carefully placed documents he found a special mobile telephone that he picked up and turned on. When the phone finished its start-up routine, he selected a coded name from the internal directory.

Turan heard strange whirs and beeps for a few seconds then a ringing tone. The phone answered on the second ring.

'Hello, old friend.'

'Sinh is interested in your area of operation.'

'What kind of interest?'

'Something about an old arms cache. I put him off coming to look for it.'

'Good. Anything else?'

Turan looked down at his desk blotter. 'He did ask about any unusual activity in the area.'

'He's like a hungry dog with a bone. Keep your eyes and ears open. Let me know if he sends people to the area.'

'Will do.'

'The other arrangements?'

'They are all in place.'

'I will be at the fishermen's wharf at 19:30. Pick me up.'

Chapter 14

From the bow of her father's boat, Soo-Li watched the trees glide past. Behind her, the old motor coughed and wheezed but kept running in an erratic kind of rhythm. Her father had drained the contaminated petrol into plastic jugs and allowed it to settle overnight. That morning the heavier water could be seen in the bottom of the jugs, a thin layer beneath the petrol. He had syphoned off the petrol, hopefully leaving the troublesome water behind. Despite the sickly noises, the

engine continued to run and power them deeper into the swamps. By noon they would reach the shores of the Mountain of the Sun.

Already the day had grown warm and the humidity of the swamps made the breeze created by the boat's motion very welcome. Soo-Li lifted her face and drew in a lungful of air. Some might find the atmosphere of the swamps a distasteful mix of tepid vapours and rotting vegetation, but Soo-Li savoured the smell of pure nature, untainted by humanity. Trees kept the swamp in deep shadow. Only a mottled, filtered sunlight penetrated the overhead canopy. It was a magical kind of twilight world where she loved to travel.

Ahead, the vista of water and tree trunks were broken here and there by little islets of mud covered with low, scrubby vegetation. Navigation through this area was always difficult, the boat often grounding in unseen shallows. Her father reduced speed and called forward. 'Watch our depth, Princess.'

Soo-Li pulled a bamboo pole from the bottom of the boat and stood in the bow. As the boat neared one of the muddy islets, she dipped the pole into the water. It sank two metres before touching bottom.

'Clear ahead, Father.'

For an hour they carefully felt their way through the maze of muddy islets. There was a deeper channel to the west, their normal route to the Mountain of the Sun. But the armed men in the boat had spooked them both and the less-travelled waterways of the deeper swamp felt safer. Sometimes, Cambodia's dark past was not so distant.

* * * * *

Todd McLean hauled himself out of the water and onto the muddy bank of a small island. He lay panting for a few minutes then rolled onto his back. Mud caked him from head to foot and he felt things moving against his skin.

Sitting up, he looked down at his legs to see thirty or more leeches clinging to his skin.

'Hey! I need that blood.'

He found a half-rotted stick and pried at one of the leeches, but only succeeded in bursting a bright scarlet star of blood. The leech's head remained to continue its grisly work.

Todd dropped the stick, tilted his head back and tried to forget the leeches for the time being. The sun stood high above. Close to midday.

What time did he leave the MEKONG DAWN?

They had been preparing for breakfast when the gunmen came. Maybe a little after 6.00am. He and the other boys had made their escape attempt about an hour later. He had been swimming through the swamp for over four hours. After escaping from the gunmen in the speedboat he had maintained a northerly course, easy at the start with the sun low in the eastern sky. As long as he kept the sun on his right he was heading north. Now, with the sun directly overhead, it was far too difficult to maintain a sense of direction.

He looked about at the water and the trees. The shadowy twilight world of the swamp was the same in every direction. It was impossible to tell north from south, east from west. He might spend the next few hours going in circles, exhausting

himself further without making any progress. Better to wait here and rest up until the sun was low enough to gauge direction.

His mind made up, he edged towards one of the low bushes, but something stopped him. There was a change in the swamp, something beyond the sounds of insects and birds. Todd tilted his head to one side and listened.

Beyond the buzz and whine of insects another noise was just audible. An intermittent rumble and pop grew louder, but still too far away for him to distinguish a direction.

A motor.

Somewhere out there in the swamp a boat was approaching his little islet.

Todd shimmied along on his backside and crawled under the thickest bush he could find. Was this the hijackers come looking for him? The noise came from a motor that was barely running. This wasn't the same high-powered boat that had chased him after his escape.

He lay and waited, trying to make himself as small as possible in the limited space of the bushes. A small open boat appeared out of the shadows on his right, moving at a tangent that would bring it past Todd's islet at a distance of about thirty metres. The boat was made of planks of unpainted wood. A man sat at the rear, steering the boat by swivelling a small engine on a mount. A young girl crouched in the bow and was using a length of bamboo to sound their way through the group of islets.

Todd's mind was torn between two courses of action. He could jump to his feet, wave his arms and shout. The man and girl would see him and maybe stop and pick him up. They might take him to the local authorities. But what if they were in the employ of the hijackers? Sympathetic locals paid to be on the lookout for a foreigner swimming through the swamps?

Todd decided his chances were better on his own. He just couldn't risk being recaptured.

He drew a deep breath and held it as the boat passed by. The man and girl never so much as glanced in his direction. Todd watched them round a nearby island and disappear from view. He waited until the noise of the motor faded then crawled out from under the bush. He stared off after the boat for a while and wondered if he had just let his only chance at salvation pass him by.

* * * * *

The MEKONG DAWN eased her way along the channel.

Malko stood beside Van in the battered wheelhouse watching the river pilot manoeuvre the large vessel around a bend using deft movements of helm and small adjustments to the throttles. The diesel engines barely throbbed at reduced power.

'Not too much farther, Colonel.' Van spun the helm to full port rudder and held it there for only a second before beginning a turn in the opposite direction.

Malko watched with some concern. It appeared the bow was about to strike one of the numerous little islands lining the channel. He grasped at the splintered console in preparation for the collision, but Van had become used to the MEKONG DAWN's handling. With consummate grace, the bow came around to face down the length of open channel.

Van grinned at Malko as he centred the helm. 'That is the last sharp bend. Our mooring is at the end of this stretch, close to the base of the mountain.'

Malko made no effort to smile back. Van had almost ruined the operation by not conducting a thorough examination of the channel entrance. If they had been unable to penetrate into the backwaters, it would have only been a matter of time before the vessel was discovered and reported to the authorities. He glanced at his watch. The MEKONG DAWN was due to anchor in the river off Kampong Chhnang at 11.30 am. It was now 12.15. The locals expecting to make a little money off the tourists when they went ashore would now be wondering where the ship was, and maybe making enquiries of the local authorities. The local police chief could only stall for so long before someone would decide to go around him and report the matter to Phnom Penh. Then the river and Tonle Sap would be subjected to an aerial search. To deter that search, Malko had to have the next phase of his plan well and truly underway by then.

'Pick a place with as much tree canopy over us as possible. As soon as you have us in position tell the crewmen to make us fast to the trees.' He turned at a slight noise from behind him. Ky stood in the wheelhouse doorway. 'We will be stopping soon,' Malko told him. 'Once we do, I will have the engines shut down, including the generator. I don't want any locals coming to investigate engine noises. Is everything else ready?'

Ky nodded. 'I have the nets on the lower deck. As soon as we stop I will get them into position over the boat.'

'Once we are stopped, have the RHIB brought alongside. I'll need to make all haste to Kampong Chhnang before it gets too dark for Van to see the way.'

Ky left to do his superior's bidding.

Malko turned back to the view beyond the shattered windows. As far as he could see, from left to right, was one massive sheet of water. It was hard to tell where the channel ended and the swamp began. Years ago, during the construction of the microwave repeater tower on the mountain, the government had dredged the channel through the swamps so that materials could be barged to the site. The dirt they removed had been dumped out in the wider swamplands, forming numerous little islands, most of which nature had already reclaimed and covered in vegetation. He knew Van had worked the waterway back then, piloting barges to the construction area. Once the work had finished, the channel had been abandoned and forgotten. Only local hunters and fishermen and the likes of Van knew of its existence, but the waterway only led to a little mountain sticking out of the swamp and was rarely used. Smaller, shallower draft boats could take a direct line through the swamps without bothering about the channel.

To his left the mountain climbed above the water, its jungle-clad sides like the buttresses of a castle. At the base the trees had been cleared from the swamp, giving a wide expanse of open water about fifty metres across. Malko guessed that this area had been used as a turn-around-point for the construction barges. Once they had off-loaded their cargo, they would have needed a fair amount of room to turn and face back down the channel.

Van did not take the vessel out into the open. He remained close to the trees and carefully brought them alongside the mountain where the rotting remnants of a wharf remained. Here, the jungle overhung the water by thirty metres or more,

all but concealing the MEKONG DAWN from above. With a little reverse power the pilot brought the vessel to a stop then shouted through the broken window at the crewmen.

‘Make fast lines fore and aft.’ He looked at Malko. ‘We are here, Colonel.’

‘Shut all the engines down and the generator. Shut everything down that makes a noise. As soon as my boat is brought alongside I’ll fetch the passports and manifest. No rest for you, Van. I need you to take me back to Kampong Chhnang.’

Chapter 15

With the engines and generator shut down the dining saloon soon became stifling. Scott felt perspiration break out on his face as the temperature climbed. A few passengers uttered moans and complaints, but for the most part, everyone remained quiet, sensing their captors were up to something else now the ship had stopped. Through the side windows Scott could see crewmen, under armed guard, securing lines to nearby trees.

Fred inched his way over to Scott. ‘Looks as if we’re staying here for a while.’

Nancy lifted her head at Fred’s words. ‘Do you think we could set up the tables and chairs again? It’s not too comfortable on the floor. Especially for the elderly.’

Scott gave her a smile. Mother duck had found some ducklings to care for. ‘I don’t see why not. But I’d better ask before too many of us move.’ Since the young lads’ dash for freedom, the guards had positioned in each corner of the saloon where it would be impossible to rush them all at once. Two more men with assault rifles stood in the breezeway. They weren’t taking any chances on another escape attempt.

Climbing slowly to his feet, Scott made eye contact with the nearest guard. ‘We want to set up the tables and chairs again.’

The guard gave a nod. ‘Two men only. Everyone else stay down.’ He babbled off a string of Khmer to the other armed men and an immediate chorus of safety catches being flipped echoed about the saloon.

Scott looked to where Tamko squatted on the floor.

‘He just told them to be ready to shoot if you try anything.’ The purser climbed to his feet. ‘I will help you with the tables.’

With Tamko’s help, Scott positioned the tables end to end down the middle of the dining saloon. He figured if the tables were all together there wouldn’t be a chance of another spur-of-the-moment escape attempt. All the passengers were in this together, no one person should jeopardise the rest by their own actions.

They finished positioning the tables and chairs and Scott made a general announcement. ‘Okay. In little groups so we don’t spook the gunmen, you can sit back at the table.’ He pointed to his left at an elderly man who rose stiffly to his feet then helped his wife up. Together they went and sat at a table. When they were seated the next pair did the same. Five minutes later everyone was back at the tables. Fred, Collette and Nancy had saved a space for Scott and he slid onto the chair.

Fred arched his back and performed a couple of stretching exercises. 'This is far better than the floor.'

Scott wasn't listening. He watched as one of the hijackers used a line to tow the RHIB towards the boarding steps. The fast little boat must have been towed along behind the MEKONG DAWN.

Malko came into view through the windows, striding down the deck from the wheelhouse. He stopped and said something to the man handling the boat then moved out of sight beyond the corner of the dining saloon. Moments later Scott saw him in the breezeway doors.

'I see you are making yourselves comfortable. That is good.' Malko carried the stack of passports and the passenger manifest. 'I will be leaving you to go and make preparations for your release. Please do not try anything foolish. My men have been instructed to shoot any troublemakers.' He gave a sly grin and turned for the breezeway doors.

Beside Scott, Nancy stirred. 'What about the medications? You said I could fetch everyone's tablets from their cabins.'

Malko paused and looked back. 'And so you shall Mrs Morris. Just as soon as the ship is made fast Ky will have one of the men take you to the cabins. You have made the list?'

'Right here.' Nancy waved a sheet from the notepad on which Sanika had jotted down cabin numbers, the names of medications and where the passengers kept them.

Malko nodded and turned to go, but Nancy stopped him again.

'What about the airconditioning and access to a toilet. It's stifling in here, and the—'

'You Westerners are far too soft. Be thankful I don't lock you all below decks. You will be given buckets as soon as my men have finished preparing the ship and not a moment before.' He turned away before she could argue further.

Nancy settled back into the chair.

Joyce reached over and patted Nancy's arm. 'Thanks for trying dear. But don't piss him off any more.'

Malko descended the boarding steps to the RHIB. Moments later outboard motors rumbled into life. The RHIB pulled away from the MEKONG DAWN and swung wide in the open water. Malko sat in the stern of the smaller boat as it headed back down the channel at full throttle.

As soon as the boat was gone from sight Ky stepped into the dining saloon and singled out four male crew-members and those male passengers closest to the door, including Fred and Scott.

'You men will follow me.'

Scott and seven other men followed Ky out into the breezeway. One of the hijackers kept his weapon on them the whole time.

'Pick these up.' Ky pointed at several shaggy bundles lying on the deck. 'Take them up top.' He pointed up the companionway leading to the sundeck.

Scott and Fred positioned themselves at either end of one of the bundles. It was heavy but not beyond the strength of two men. Scott manoeuvred so he would be the one walking backwards and edged towards the companionway. At the other end Fred studied their burden with a quizzical expression.

‘What are these?’

‘Camouflage netting.’ Scott turned his head to negotiate the first step. ‘And by the looks of it they’ve got enough to hide the whole damn boat. With this stuff spread out it’ll be next to impossible to spot us from the air.’

Fred lifted his end of the net to shoulder height as he followed Scott onto the steps. ‘Seems they’re going to a lot of trouble to keep us out of sight. We’re miles into the swamps, and now this.’ He gestured at the net with his chin. ‘I think we’re going to be their captives for some time.’

‘Yeah. Me too.’ Scott lowered his voice to a whisper. ‘We need to get that phone and get a message out.’

Fred inclined his head to show he understood.

They reached the sundeck, both breathing hard from the climb. Two guards were already there and Scott was dismayed to see one leaning lazily against the pot in which the phone was hidden.

Ky came up the companionway ahead of two more hostages hauling another net. Scott recognised one of the men as the South African, Simon Western. Ky pointed to the net in Scott and Fred’s hands. ‘Get that net spread out over the forward sun shade. Make sure it is well forward so that it will hang to the waterline at the bows.’

Scott nodded and he and Fred made their way to the foremost sun awning, lugging the net with them. The awning was torn in places, pieces of it strewn over the deck after their penetration into the swamps. The support framework was twisted towards the stern, but otherwise still upright. They positioned one of the tables to stand on and hauled the net up onto the white vinyl awning. With a little bit of jiggling they managed to get it open and pull it forward. Two of Ky’s men were waiting in the bows a deck below. They took the edge of the net and dragged it out and over the gunwales.

The next pair of men positioned their net behind the first. Ky made sure they overlapped enough so that no white showed between the joins. This net reached to the mid point between the fore and aft awnings, hanging low where there was no support. Scott noticed that part of the net had caught on a navigation light fixed to the railing, very close to the pot where he had hidden the phone. The guard who had been leaning on it had now moved farther down the deck to make room. Sensing his chance, he hurried towards the pot.

Ky grabbed his shirt. ‘Where are you going?’

Scott pointed at the navigation light. ‘The net is caught. I’ll lift it clear.’

Ky looked to where Scott pointed and nodded. He released his grip.

Scott had to bend almost double to fit under the low net. The navigation light was right beside the pot and he was momentarily out of sight of the guards. This would be his only chance. But when he glanced behind, Ky had squatted on the deck and was watching him intently.

Scott moved to the navigation light and made a play of trying to free the hooked net. ‘It’s too tight.’ He turned to where Ky watched him. ‘I can’t get it free. Tell them to give me some slack.’

Ky nodded and ordered the others to feed the net towards Scott. As the slack increased, the net between Scott and Ky drooped lower to the deck until Scott was

hidden from view. Only the railing around the sundeck held the net clear of the deck. The palm tree in the pot had bent in half under the weight.

Scott thrust his hand into the pot and felt through the mulch.

‘Come on! What are you doing?’ Ky’s agitated voice from behind him.

‘It’s tangled.’ His hand searched desperately through the mulch.

Where the hell is it?

He had visions of Ky crawling under the net to help him, spoiling his chance of finding the phone. ‘I’ve almost got it. Just a few more seconds’

His fingers brushed against something smooth.

At last!

He lifted the phone out of the pot and slipped it into his shorts pocket. Then he turned his attention to the net. It took only a moment to free it from the light.

‘There. You’re clear now.’ He felt the net slide across his shoulders as the men dragged it into position. As the slack was taken up he found Ky beckoning him.

‘Get out from under there.’

Scott crawled out from under the net and stood in the sunlight. For one panicked moment he thought Ky was about to search him. The Asian pointed aft.

‘Go and help them with the other nets.’

Scott nodded and moved down the deck.

For two hours they toiled to position the camouflage nets. Even after the bulky nets were in place, draped over the MEKONG DAWN like a giant blanket, Ky wasn’t happy. He sent two of his men ashore with a machete and they returned fifteen minutes later with lengths of bamboo cut from the jungle. Ky had them place the bamboo poles under the nets in random positions to create odd-shaped bulges here and there and take away the vessel’s neat lines. By the end of it, all eight hostages were sweating and exhausted. They huddled in a small group in the mottled shade beneath the camouflage nets.

Fred looked to Ky. ‘How about some water?’

Ky gestured to one of his men who slipped into the alcove behind the bar. He returned moments later with a carton of water bottles. The guard dumped the carton unceremoniously into Fred’s arms.

Ky sneered at him. ‘Take it below with you. Share it with the others. They must be thirsty by now.’

‘Thanks.’ Fred hoisted the carton onto his shoulder.

Ky pointed at the companionway. ‘Move!’

The men filed down the steps. Scott could feel the phone bouncing in the pocket of his baggy shorts and fretted that it might give him away. But the guards payed them little attention as they were herded back into the dining saloon.

Fred placed the carton of water bottles on a table and tore it open. He dispensed the bottles among the other passengers.

‘There’s enough for one bottle between two. We’ll try and get more later.’

Scott looked around the saloon, now in half-light with the camouflage nets covering the windows.

‘Where’s Nance?’

Colleen patted his arm. ‘One of the guards took her to gather up everyone’s medications. Some of the elderly passengers are beginning to suffer, so she insisted.’

Nancy would do her best to make sure everyone was well looked after. His wife had a stubborn streak that served her well in her job. He only hoped she wouldn't piss anyone off and place herself in harms way. He glanced at Ky, leaning casually against the far bulkhead, watching them through half-closed eyes.

That bugger would slit her throat in an instant and think nothing of it.

He realised his hands were shaking. Thrusting them into his pockets, he watched the door for Nancy and his tablets.

* * * * *

From the breezeway, Ky watched the passengers with a distracted detachment. Something nagged in the back of his mind—something he was missing. The feeling had started as he watched the male passengers unrolling the camouflage netting and, even now, still sat heavy in his stomach.

The men who had been on the sundeck working on the camouflage nets each had a bottle of water and were drinking thirstily. His eyes settled on the man he'd found hiding in the bilges and the nagging feeling returned, stronger than before. Ky studied the man from the top of his balding head to the sneakers on his feet.

Western seemed like an average sort of man. He carried a little weight around his middle. Too much weight to be any sort of physical threat. He watched Western lift the water bottle to his lips and the skin of his upper arm hung loose, the muscle around his biceps ill-defined, hardly filling the sleeve of the white cotton shirt he wore. The sleeve itself had been stained by something. A perfect dark ring ran all the way around his upper arm.

Ky stared at the stain as his brain worked. Then it occurred to him. Western had placed his arm into the filthy bilge water in the bottom of the boat. Why would he have done that unless he was hiding something? A gun? A weapon of some kind to be retrieved later if possible?

Not likely.

What then? Something important to him that he doesn't want us to find? His passport? No, the purser had collected all the passports. They were all accounted for. Money maybe, or other valuables?

It's possible. Western had obviously seen them approaching the MEKONG DAWN and hidden in the bilges before they boarded. Ky fought the impulse to go into the saloon and drag the man out, to beat the truth out of him. He knew Western would only lie to protect whatever he had hidden.

He slung his AK74 onto his shoulder and headed aft.

The engine room was quiet without the big diesels running. Despite the lack of the generator, several bare bulbs glowed in wire cages over the machinery and Ky guessed they must be running on power from the batteries. He walked to the bench and picked up a torch then un-dogged the hatch leading forward. No lights showed in the space and he flicked on the torch before stepping through.

The space had no lighting. The bulbs were all dark. With the MEKONG DAWN stopped there was no slosh of bilge water and he could hear something dripping in the distance. He played the torch beam along the grated flooring and could see the light reflecting off oily water beneath. The grating itself looked untouched and he moved farther into the space. Western had been cowering at the far end, near the

water tanks where the walkway divided left and right. Ky headed for the forward bulkhead.

He studied the spaces between the mess of pipes and equipment. In several places the flooring didn't cover the bilges and he plunged his arm into the tepid, stinking water, feeling about until he was sure that nothing had been concealed in the ooze lining the inside of the hull.

He tried in several different places and found nothing. Ky wasn't given to cursing, but he felt his anger rising. He would go back to the saloon, drag Western down here and force the man to retrieve what he had hidden in the water.

His mind made up, he started back along the walkway but stumbled and had to brace himself against the pipes. Shining the torch at the floor, he saw that the edge of one of the square grates didn't sit flush with the others. He wedged the torch into a gap in the pipes so that it shone onto the grate then squatted and hooked his fingers through the steel mesh. The grate came away surprisingly easy and Ky pushed it back along the walkway out of the way then picked up the torch.

A rainbow-like sheen of oil glittered on the surface of the water, but the light couldn't penetrate into the murky depths. He dropped to his knees and plunged his arm below the surface. Forty centimetres down he felt the inside of the hull coated with a thin layer of slime. He worked his way methodically around the opening and his fingers brushed against something. Grinning with triumph, Ky lifted the object out of the water—a black vinyl case, the type used to carry a laptop computer.

Undoing the flap, he found the bag did indeed contain a laptop. Water ran from every hole and seam in the laptop's casing. If the machine had been valuable, it was now ruined. No electronic device would work after being submerged like that. Ky folded the screen open and stared at its dark face for a moment. Maybe there was valuable information on the hard drive? If there was, Malko would have access to people who could retrieve it. People who would be able to analyse it and understand its worth.

He closed the dead laptop and turned for the hatch to the engine room. Replacing the torch on the workbench, he noticed a rack of screwdrivers on the tool board. On a whim, he selected one and started removing the back of the laptop. The small hard drive would be much easier to manage than the larger computer. He removed the screws and lifted away the plastic covering.

There were no electronic components. The black casing was an empty shell. A green baize bag lay in the gutted space. He lifted the bag and it filled his cupped hands, the contents hard and lumpy. Undoing the drawstring, he held the bag close to one of the bare bulbs hanging from the ceiling. Rocks glinted in the light.

Some kind of drug in its raw form? Perhaps Western was a drug smuggler.

A lot of trouble to go to for a pitiful amount of drugs.

It hardly seemed worth the effort.

Ky took one of the rocks from the bag. The size of a grape, it felt glassy to the touch. He held it up to the light and was instantly captivated by the fire in its depths. Even in the weak light of the battery-powered bulb the stone glowed with an energy of its own. He upended the bag onto the workbench. There were about forty stones, varying in size from peas to plums.

Diamonds!

Ky didn't know much about the value of gems, but if Western had gone to this amount of trouble to conceal them, then they must be worth a great deal; possibly more than the ransom on the passengers.

With great care he placed the diamonds back in the bag and then secured it in one of the large pockets in his fatigue trousers.

He went back up the steps to the deck. The dusk was growing, the swamps bathed in purplish shadow. High above, the summit of the mountain glowed in the last rays of the setting sun. Ky touched the bulge in his pocket and turned for the saloon.

This had indeed been a great day for the cause.

Chapter 16

A string of lights burned along the waterfront at Kampong Chhnang as Van guided the RHIB towards a poorly lit dock on the edge of town where a few dilapidated water taxis bobbed at their moorings. A rice barge had anchored in the channel, its deck lights throwing a ring of glittering yellow onto the muddy surface of the Mekong. On the high ground behind the waterfront scooters shuttled back and forth where a road serviced the dock area. Beyond the lights a four-wheel drive with police markings sat parked in the shadows.

Malko jumped to the dock as soon as Van manoeuvred the boat alongside.

'Stay close to the boat.' He held up a mobile phone. 'I will call you when I am ready to be taken back to the ship.'

Van nodded and Malko walked up the stone steps towards the police vehicle. The driver leant across and opened the passenger door.

Police Chief Turan smiled broadly. 'A fruitful day, my friend.'

'Now the hard part begins.'

Turan started the engine and put the four-wheel drive into gear. 'I would have thought the hardest part is behind you. You have taken the boat and hidden it and the passengers.'

Malko shook his head. 'Do you know where most kidnappings come undone?'

Turan edged the vehicle into traffic. 'No.'

'At the ransom payment. That is where it usually all goes to pieces. For that is where the link is between the kidnappers and those paying the ransom.'

'Maybe, if you are dealing with cash, but in this electronic age, money comes in many forms. It can be moved about at the push of a button.'

Malko took out a pack of cigarettes and lit up without offering one to Turan. 'True, but even an electronic transfer is still a link. And the money can be traced out of the account. Withdrawals can be tracked, giving authorities a trail, however flimsy, that can be followed.' He drew hard on the cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke against the roof. 'The trick is to convert the electronic transfer into cash or some other form of negotiable funds.' He studied the glowing end of the cigarette. 'And then to disappear.'

Turan drove them through Kampong Chhnang and out into the countryside beyond. They skirted the airfield and followed a wide dyke between rice paddies to a squat little concrete building in a grove of palm trees. He parked beneath the trees and they walked to a metal-sheeted door in the wall. Rattling through a collection of keys, Turan found the one he was looking for and unlocked the door. He pushed it open and felt around the jamb. A fluorescent light flickered on.

Malko stepped into a room that contained four chairs and a bench on which sat a fax machine, a photocopier, a telephone and a laptop computer.

'I have provided everything you asked for.' Turan swept his hand towards the devices.

'None of these items is traceable?'

Turan shook his head. 'The phone and fax are hooked into the main exchange on false numbers. They may be able to trace them back eventually, but I have been assured by the man you sent me that it will take a week or more to sort out the mess of lines he has used.'

Malko nodded and handed Turan the stack of passports. 'Make copies of the photo pages of each of these. You have the numbers I requested?'

Turan unbuttoned the top pocket of his police uniform and removed a slip of paper. 'Direct numbers to the duty desks of the embassies. Also the fax numbers.'

'Thankyou, my friend.' Malko took the piece of paper and sat in the chair by the telephone. 'Let us begin.'

* * * * *

Peter Hartman had his feet up on the desk, a cup of coffee in one hand and his gaze fixed firmly on the TV on the far wall. The football game was coming in live from Australia via satellite, West Coast Eagles versus Fremantle Dockers, and his beloved Eagles were down by three points in the final minutes of the game. He had twenty dollars riding on the outcome with one of the girls on the clerical staff.

The phone beside his feet rang and Peter glared at the thing. No one rang after hours, not unless there had been some kind of incident involving an Australian citizen. Here in Cambodia they were few and far between. He placed his feet on the floor, his hand hovering over the ringing phone. West Coast had the ball and were making a play towards the forward lines. But he knew he had let the phone ring as long as he could and picked up the receiver.

'Australian Embassy. Peter Hartman.'

'Mr Hartman, my name is Malko. Colonel Malko.'

The voice sounded distant and feint. The line hummed with strange static.

'What can I do for you, Colonel?' As Peter spoke, the fax machine in the far corner of the duty office beeped into life.

'I have twenty-eight Australian citizens in my custody, as well as some other nationalities.'

'Twenty-eight!' He wasn't aware of any sporting teams touring Cambodia at the moment. It wasn't uncommon for a group of lads to have a little too much to drink and fall foul of the local authorities. 'What have they done?' The embassy would offer what assistance they could, but if some bar had been busted up in a drunken brawl, the boys would be paying for it themselves.

'You don't understand, Mr Hartman. These people are hostages of the Cambodian Liberation Army. For their safe return I will require the sum of one million dollars per person.'

Peter snatched up the TV remote and hit mute. His training had taught him to deal with most situations he would come across, but this was something new.

'You have got to be kidding me?' It was a lame response and the words were out of his mouth before he could stop them.

'I never joke, Mr Hartman. You have a fax machine in your office, yes?'

Peter turned to where the fax was pumping out page after page into the holding tray. 'Uh, yes?'

'I suggest you check it now.'

Peter took the cordless phone and crossed to the fax machine. A face stared up at him from the tray, a woman in her sixties. He picked up the sheaf of papers and riffled through them.

All faces. All from Australian passports.

'Do you see the passport photos?'

Peter had almost forgotten the phone in his hand. 'Yes?'

'These are your citizens that are now in my custody. I will be in touch with the necessary details for payment. One million dollars per person. Any stalling on your part and people will die. Any military activity in this area and people will die. Good evening Mr. Hartman.'

The line went dead.

Peter stared at the phone in his hand for a few seconds then punched in a number.

'This is Peter Hartman at the duty desk. I need to speak to the ambassador. Immediately!' He flicked through the pile of faxes as he waited and wondered how many of these faces would survive this.

'What? No, I don't care where he is. Get him on the line now. This is an emergency.'

* * * * *

The telephone woke Ang out of a sound sleep. Beside him, his wife slept on, conditioned to ignore any late-night calls for her policeman husband. They had no telephone extension in the bedroom, so he slipped from the bed and padded across the cool tiles to the kitchen.

'Hello?'

'Major Sinh?' He recognised the major general's voice.

'Yes, sir.'

'Get in here now. We have a crisis in the wind.'

He tried to shake sleep from his befuddled mind. The kitchen clock told him it was 4:30 am.

What crisis? What the hell is he talking about?

'What is it?'

The voice at the other end of the line sounded sharp, gruff.

'It's to do with Malko. I'll explain when you get here.'

The line cut off.

Ang showered and dressed as quickly as possible. His wife and children still slept as he left the house. It was a little after five. Too early for the water taxis. He kicked his old scooter into life and pattered down to the river and across the bridge. A few motorbikes and trucks made their way into the city as Phnom Penh stirred into life. Ang was grateful for the light traffic. He reached police headquarters in record time to find the parking lot crowded with vehicles, some with diplomatic plates.

A bored-looking sergeant sat at a desk in the foyer. He watched Ang walk through the doors and called out, 'Briefing room, Major. They're expecting you.'

Pausing in the doorway to the briefing room, Ang looked at the crowd of concerned faces. The major general saw him standing there and waved him over.

'Gentlemen.' The major general addressed the men and women in the room. 'This is Major Sinh. He is the man currently running the investigation into Malko and his activities.'

Ang couldn't help but notice his boss's use of the word currently.

'What's happened?' Ang wished he had been given the courtesy of a briefing before this impromptu meeting.

'Malko has seized a tourist boat on Tonle Sap. He is holding the passengers to ransom. A million dollars each.'

Ang could do little more than stare at his boss. Tonle Sap? So this was Malko's plan. The hand-drawn map suddenly had much more meaning.

The chief inclined his head at three well-dressed Western gentlemen on his right. 'These are, in turn, the ambassadors of Great Britain, Australia and the United States. Their embassies all received phone calls from Malko during the night, along with faxes of the hostages' passports.'

The Australian ambassador leant forward and offered Ang his hand. 'Barry Thompson, Major. The major general tells us you have been chasing this Malko for years. What can you tell us about him?

Ang shook the offered hand as he collected his thoughts. 'Malko calls himself a colonel, though it is not an official rank of any sort. He was once a member of the Khmer Rouge and is suspected of many atrocities while they held power in this country. Now he is little more than a common thug and criminal.'

'He called his organisation the Cambodian Liberation Army.' This came from the American. 'Are they a rebel organisation?'

'Not one that is considered a serious threat to Cambodia's sovereignty, sir. My intelligence puts his organisation at no more than fifty men, and very few of those are permanent operatives. He uses patriotic-sounding titles for his recruitment purposes, but really they only hide his criminal activities.'

'Are his threats against our citizens likely to be carried out?' The British ambassador held a mobile phone to his ear. Ang could only guess who was on the other end of that call.

'Malko is as capable of murder as he is of brushing his teeth. You have been to the Killing Fields memorial?'

All three ambassadors nodded as did some of their aids. The Killing Fields, site of the notorious purging of enemies of the state by the Khmer Rouge, was now a memorial to the tens of thousands who had perished there. A glass stupa, fifty feet high, was filled with human skulls removed from mass graves. The memorial and

surrounding grounds were as chilling and sombre as Auschwitz—and a place Ang had no desire to visit.

‘A great number of those skulls in the memorial were people killed by Malko. It was his job during the reign of Pol Pot.’

‘So if we refuse to meet his demands, our people are as good as dead?’ The American placed a hand to his forehead and massaged his temple with his thumb.

Ang could do little more than nod. He had no words of comfort to offer these men. Nothing he could say would ease their burden.

The Australian looked up. ‘So what’s the plan? My country has a policy, as I know do the countries of these gentlemen, of not negotiating with terrorists.’

The other two men nodded their agreement. The British Ambassador added: ‘If we were to pay these demands it would open the floodgates. Our citizens would not be safe anywhere in the world.’

The major general gave a little cough, shifting the focus back to him. ‘While the negotiations are taking place with Malko, we have a small window of opportunity to find the MEKONG DAWN and do something about releasing the passengers. Major Sinh will be on his way to the area at first light. If we can find the ship, then we can change the game.’

The American leant forward. ‘A military option?’

‘It’s far too early for such plans. First we must find the vessel. The swamps surrounding Tonle Sap are very dense and very large. Malko has given us twenty-four hours, of which fifteen hours still remain. Even if you agree to pay the ransom, there will still be a little time in which to act. Now, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I have a busy day ahead.’

The ambassadors and their entourages left with the police chief promising to keep them informed of any progress. Ang hovered in the background and waited until his boss had seen them off.

‘If I am to head to this area, sir, a helicopter would be very useful. Perhaps we can persuade the air force to help with a search of—’ He stopped as the major general shook his head.

‘Malko has threatened to start killing hostages if he sees military helicopters flying overhead. What do you think he will do if he thinks we have discovered where he is hiding the Mekong Dawn?’

Ang didn’t have to think about the question. He knew exactly what would happen if Malko believed his operation was about to be busted. ‘He will cut his losses and run, sir. That may or may not include disposing of the passengers.’

‘What do you think?’

‘He will kill them all. Just to spite us.’

The major general nodded. ‘Follow me.’

Ang followed the major general upstairs to his office. He went to his desk, sat down and picked up a piece of paper.

‘We can’t use military helicopters, Ang. It’s far too risky. But I have another option. A Japanese survey company is planning to conduct business in Cambodia. They already have a helicopter and pilot here in Phnom Penh and are waiting on the necessary approvals to commence. I have offered them a fast-track on those approvals in exchange for the use of their helicopter. I only got off the phone with their director as the embassy officials arrived. You have your helicopter, Ang. For

the next two days.' He handed Ang the sheet of paper. 'This is your authority for fuel in Kampong Chhnang. The bean counters will have a fit, but I'll deal with them as best I can.' He fixed Ang with a steely gaze. 'I have discussed the situation with the Prime Minister and we both agree that a poor outcome on this will be bad for Cambodia. I don't need to tell you how important the tourist industry is to our country, to our economy. If Malko were to commit this atrocity the tourists will stop coming. It will be bad—for everyone.'

Ang could see the concern in the depths of his boss's eyes. He thought about the hundreds of square kilometres of swamp and a small ship hidden in the middle of it.

'I'll do my best, sir.' He turned for the door.

'There's one other thing.'

'Sir?'

'The navy has reported one of their patrol boats overdue. There has been no contact with the vessel for nearly twenty-four hours.'

'You think Malko did this?'

'Nobody is sure. They may have broken down and be unable to raise anyone. But, if it is Malko, then he has the capability to take out an armed patrol boat.'

'I'll be careful, sir.'

He headed to his own office and telephoned Klim.

'Be here in half an hour. We will brief the strike team at 06:30.'

'What's the target?' Klim's voice sounded sleepy on the end of the line.

'Malko.'

Chapter 17

Hundreds of leeches clung to Todd's legs, arms and torso. During the night he had tried to pluck them off, but only succeeded in rupturing the blood-filled bodies. He remembered reading somewhere that leeches need to be removed whole, or the head remains in the skin to rot and cause infection. That thought stopped him from pulling at the slimy, black sacks pulsing on his skin. But he couldn't ignore the feeling that his life blood was being drained from him. At least his injured leg seemed to be coping all right. His calf muscle still ached, but the leg was not hampering him too much.

With barely enough energy to keep himself afloat, his progress through the swamp had diminished to brief periods of swimming and long rests while clinging to a tree branch or laying panting on one of the muddy islets. At sunset he had seen a mountain through the trees, the antennas on its summit shining like a beacon. The sun had been on his left then, so the mountain must be somewhere to the north. Now, as he swam, he tried to keep the sunrise on his right, but the daylight and the shadows played tricks on him and he often found himself heading in the wrong direction.

Holding on to a low branch, he rested and peered through the canopy, but the mountain remained hidden from view. The vegetation was thicker here, and he was hard put to see any farther than fifty or sixty metres.

Dappled sunlight reflected from the water, which appeared onyx-black in this world of perpetual twilight. He twisted around the tree to judge where the strongest light came from, placed it at his right shoulder, picked another tree in the general direction of north and pushed off.

The tree he had chosen was only twenty or so metres away, but Todd didn't have the strength to reach it in one leg. Winded, he trod water, barely able to keep his face clear. If he didn't reach solid ground soon, he would have to find a tree he could climb into so he could rest.

A leech swam towards him and he thrashed at it to prevent it from joining the others attached to his skin. He flicked the leech into the distance and turned for the tree. Twenty strokes and he reached it, using the trunk to hold himself up while his breath sawed in ragged gasps.

He got his breathing under control and repeated the process. Sun on the right shoulder. Pick a tree in the distance—not too far. Swim towards it.

* * * * *

Soo-Li woke at the first hint of daylight, long before her father. For an hour or two her time would be her own, and she wandered along the edge of the swamps, staying close to the base of the mountain. Whenever they foraged for wood in this area she loved to visit one of two places, and they were both not far from where they had camped. For a few minutes she contemplated going to the ruins, the remnants of an ancient civilisation with its smiling stone faces peering out from beneath jungle growth. But the ruins were a little farther than she was willing to walk this morning in case her father should call her early.

Her mind made up, she turned towards the water and made her way out onto a narrow spit of land.

The aircraft sat half-submerged in the water. One wing had been ripped off during the crash and lay behind the main body. The other wing was still attached to the fuselage, its tip resting in the branches of an old banyan tree.

Soo-Li wasn't sure what type of aircraft it had been, but the white star and stripes on the wing told her it had once belonged to the Americans, a remnant from the war that had driven her family out of Vietnam. Her father had warned her not to touch anything in the machine, that there were things left over from the troubled times that could still cause death and mutilation. Soo-Li had no desire to play with the aircraft. Her only interest in it was to use the wing to reach a beehive in the banyan tree and retrieve some honey.

She climbed onto the fuselage and opened her backpack. In it was a parcel wrapped in a large green leaf. Carefully, she unfolded an edge of the leaf, exposing the dry grass and ember inside. A few puffs of breath had the grass smoking and she eased her way along the wing and into the branches of the tree.

The bees had built their hive into a hollow where the trunk forked. A few bees droned away from the hive, heading out across the swamps. Soo-Li locked one leg about the branch and blew into the grass until the smoke billowed. Then she wafted the smoke into the hive.

'Go to sleep, my little babies. I don't want to hurt you. I just want some honey for Father.'

She waited until the bees became lethargic in the smoke and then reached into the hive and broke away a piece of honeycomb the size of a large book.

'Thankyou.'

Sliding down the trunk to the wingtip, she wrapped the dripping honeycomb in a piece of plastic and slipped it into her backpack. In the fading shadows she climbed off the aircraft and onto the spit. It had not taken too long to get the honeycomb and she contemplated a visit to the ruins. There was an ancient shrine among the tumbled pieces of masonry and Soo-Li had several pieces of fruit in her backpack to leave as an offering for her mother.

She made up her mind to go there, but heard something splashing through the water. Thinking it might be one of the small crocodiles found in the swamps, Soo-Li slipped her backpack from her shoulders and climbed back onto the plane. Her father found the white meat delicious, and she smiled at the thought of the look on his face if she returned to camp with honey and a crocodile.

She spotted a shadow moving through the water near one of the islets about fifty metres from the shore.

A confused frown creased her forehead. 'Too big to be a crocodile.'

A man emerged from the water and Soo-Li gasped.

* * * * *

At the next tree Todd could reach the lower branches. With a little effort, he might be able to climb into it and rest, free of the water and its creatures. But beyond the tree he could see a small islet with a few low shrubs growing on it. The islet would be far easier to climb onto than the tree so he struck towards it.

Twice he had to stop and rest. The second time, while he trod water, his foot brushed against something. The cry that came from his throat was barely audible. He kicked out at whatever lurked beneath him, thinking something big was about to make him its breakfast. But he wasn't going without a fight. His foot struck something spongy and with a rush of relief he realised it was the bottom. He pushed his foot into the mud, found firm ground and was able to hold his head out of the water by simply standing.

The islet was twenty metres away. He turned towards it and skipped forward. Each skip brought his head a little farther out of the water, then his chest and, finally, he was able to walk.

Todd waded out of the water and collapsed into the bushes. The leeches squirmed against his skin but he didn't care. Exhausted, his breath ragged gasps, he rolled onto his back and closed his eyes.

'No farther. This is where I die.'

A voice spoke back to him, though he didn't understand the words. He opened his eyes to discover the face of an angel peering down at him.

* * * * *

It had been a rough night for the passengers and crew of the MEKONG DAWN. They slept fitfully in little groups, huddled as best they could around the walls of the dining saloon. The hot night had been filled with the whine of mosquitos and

the occasional flicker of a torch beam as their captors did a head count. Those people needing to relieve themselves were forced to do so in buckets behind a makeshift tablecloth screen Nancy had organised. A horrible stink wafted from that corner of the saloon.

Scott sat on the floor with his back against the wall, munching on scrambled eggs.

Ky had examined the adjoining galley area and found no way in or out apart from through the saloon. Stationing a guard in there, he had allowed the catering staff to return to their duties and prepare meals for the passengers and his men.

Nancy had also been escorted through the cabins to retrieve the passengers' medications. Scott had popped three pills as soon as she handed him the box and had taken two more this morning. He felt better. Much better. But the clarity offered by his medication also enabled him to see that he was overusing his supply. At this rate he would be out of tablets in four days. Then what?

He hated the fact that he was dependent on medication for his well-being and peace of mind. The helicopter crash had taken two lives in an instant, but it was taking him a little piece at a time. It had been a long, hard push back to physical fitness, months in hospital, more months of rehabilitation. As far as he could tell, his body was back to normal. Maybe not the peak of fitness he had enjoyed in the army, but pretty good for a thirty-six-year-old.

His mind—well, that was another matter. The nightmares had been relentless at the start, keeping him from the valuable sleep he needed to aid recovery. There were times when his hands shook for no apparent reason and, even with his eyes wide open, sudden visions of the ground rushing towards him were overpowering.

Some of his work colleagues had rallied about him, offering encouragement. In an act of good but misguided intentions, they had taken Scott to the airfield for a flight in a helicopter. Scott had agreed readily enough. After all, what was the old saying? If the horse bucks you off, get back on the horse as soon as possible.

On the walk out to the aircraft his hands had started shaking so much he couldn't do up the seat belt buckle. When the starter kicked in to turn the engines, the fear had been too much. He'd undone the seatbelt, flung the door open and ran for the terminal.

The next day Nancy had found him trying to tie a noose in a length of rope thrown over a patio beam. More time in hospital, more shrinks. The progress had been slow but steady, until Scott had agreed to a vacation that involved a little flying, if only in an airliner. Another step on the road to recovery, to getting back into the pilot's seat and going to work.

He shovelled the last of the scrambled eggs into his mouth and scowled at the armed men in the doorway.

How much have you bastards set me back, now?

'Did you take your tablet, Honey?' Nancy stood over him with a cup of coffee that she offered.

'Uh huh.'

She'd be shocked to learn he had taken five days' worth in just twelve hours.

Outside, the light was growing. The heat in the saloon was already oppressive.

'Another day in paradise.' Nancy smiled and squatted on the floor beside him. Her dark hair framed her face in dank, sweat-soaked wisps. She had worked

tirelessly to ensure the passengers' comfort and health, and had been up through the night to attend their medical needs.

'I wonder what they have in store for us today?' Scott felt for the bulge of the phone in his pocket. There hadn't been a chance to use it since being herded back to the saloon and he dared not use the phone in the darkness in case the illuminated screen alerted the guards.

Nancy saw where his hand rested. 'Fred and Collette are going to organise a few games. They'll make enough noise to cover you while you try and get a message out.'

'Sounds like a plan,' he said.

* * * * *

Jenkins had found the only place in the dining saloon that might be considered private. The Australian woman playing nursemaid had arranged for some tablecloths to be set up as screens around buckets the hijackers had provided as toilets. Sitting in the corner where the screen met the windows, Jenkins spooned scrambled egg into his mouth and watched the other passengers as they fussed about each other.

He was amazed at the amount of cohesion that had developed between a group of people that, two days ago, were total strangers. Everyone was polite and smiling, the young taking care of the aged, seeing to their comfort and needs. He wondered how long that cohesion would last if the hijackers started killing people to demonstrate their resolve to the various governments.

He let his gaze drift along the opposite wall, taking in each face in turn. There wasn't one person here he wouldn't sacrifice if it meant getting off this tub with his precious cargo. The hijackers held the winning hand at the moment, but games change, people make mistakes. Jenkins was a patient man. He was prepared to watch and wait, to play the hopeless hostage—for now. Sooner or later, his chance would come, and when it did he would take it and run with it. He would get his diamonds and get out of here—and to hell with anyone who got in his way.

* * * * *

After breakfast Scott helped collect the dirty dishes and took them to the galley. The catering staff were doing the best they could on limited resources. With no power to run the fridges they were trying to use up any food that would spoil, watched over by a guard with an AK74.

He found Fred and Collette sitting with Nancy as he came back into the saloon.

Fred leant close as Scott sat down. 'How do you want to play this?'

Scott looked about the saloon and tried to figure out where would be the best place to try and use the phone. His eyes settled on the curtained-off area where the toilet buckets were. It was out of sight of the guards and they would be unlikely to watch him if they thought he was just relieving himself. The nearest guard stood six metres away in the breezeway entrance.

'If you can get the passengers to make a little noise, just enough to cover my voice.'

Fred saw where Scott's gaze had settled. 'Good idea. Who are you going to try and call?'

‘Scott has a few emergency numbers pre-programmed into my phone,’ Nancy whispered. ‘Isn’t one of them the Australian embassy in Phnom Penh?’

Scott nodded. ‘I’ll try them first. They should be able to pass on the details to whoever needs them.’

Fred pulled a deck of cards from his pocket. ‘We’ll start the noisiest game of Pontoon ever played. You slip into the corner whenever you feel the time is right.’

With the help of several passengers, they pulled a table closer to the curtains. One of the guards, alarmed by the movement of furniture, came in from the breezeway and pointed his gun at Fred.

‘What are you doing?’

‘A game of cards, my old China.’ Fred held up the deck of cards. ‘Would you like us to deal you in?’

The guard looked from the cards to the table where Scott, Nancy, Collette and a few other passengers were positioning chairs and sitting down in anticipation of the game. He shook his head, ‘No, thankyou,’ and went back out to his station in the breezeway.

For an hour they played Pontoon, making as much noise as possible, laughing loudly at the slightest nuance of the game. Collette kept a tally of everyone’s bets on a paper napkin.

Scott watched the guards, noting the way they had relaxed into this new routine of the hostages. At first, the bouts of raucous laughter had them watching the game intently, but now they had retreated to the far wall and were chatting among themselves. Judging his moment, he excused himself and slipped behind the curtained area in the corner.

The guards had allowed the buckets to be emptied during the morning, but a few passengers had used them since then. Scott almost gagged at the stench and fought down the need to dry-retch. One of the high windows had been pushed open and he thought of positioning as close as possible to the fresh air but checked himself. If one of their captors was lurking close to the other side of the window, they may hear what he was up to.

Pulling the phone from his pocket, Scott pressed the stand-by button. The screen glowed into life. He was elated to see full bars on the signal strength icon, but his spirits plummeted as he realised the battery symbol was flashing. The phone had been left switched on for too long. He could only hope there was enough power left.

The card-playing passengers erupted into laughter and he heard Fred blurt out, ‘You’re bust,’ as he scrolled through the menu to the phonebook and found the listing for the Australian Embassy in Phnom Penh. Then he hit the green phone symbol and held the phone to his ear.

* * * * *

It had been a crazy night for Peter Hartman. Since taking the call from Malko and rousing the ambassador, the embassy had gone into overdrive. People had been brought back in to help run the emergency. Since midnight, the place had filled with ringing phones, shouted instructions and brief moments of quiet as the ambassador briefed the prime minister and others in Australia on what was happening and what was being done.

Australia had offered whatever assistance the Cambodian government required of it, but no requests had been received as yet. And, Peter wondered, what could they offer anyway? Australia possessed very few assets in the region. It would take time to organise any sort of response, especially one of a military nature. He had read the intelligence dossier on Malko and knew that time was one thing the passengers of the MEKONG DAWN did not have.

‘Why don’t you go and get your head down for a few hours, Pete?’

He looked up to see his immediate supervisor, Gerry Caldwell standing over him. Like the others, she had been on the go since midnight and had bags forming under her eyes.

‘You’ve been on duty for sixteen hours already. If you drop from exhaustion you won’t be any use to anyone.’

Peter nodded and placed the file on the desk, a Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade printout of all known Australians on the MEKONG DAWN.

‘Maybe just a couple of hours.’

There wasn’t much point in him being there, anyway. In eight hours they hadn’t come one step closer to any sort of resolution. The prime minister, as expected, had refused to pay the ransom, as had the leaders of the United States and Great Britain. No country was prepared to make its citizens the targets of terrorists looking to make easy money.

‘You can use the guest room on the second floor.’

Peter pushed his chair out from the desk and was about to stand up when the phone in front of him rang.

‘I’ll just get this.’ He lifted the handset. ‘Australian Embassy?’

A few whirs and clicks sounded over the line. The voice on the other end was faint and distant.

‘My name is Scott Morris. My wife and I are passengers on the MEKONG DAWN. The vessel has been seized by terrorists.’

Peter waved his hand for silence. The voice was barely audible.

Gerry saw the gesture. ‘Shush, people!’ The room fell into an uneasy silence.

‘You are on the MEKONG DAWN now?’

‘Yes.’

‘What is the condition of the passengers, Mr Morris?’

‘Three passengers are dead. The captain and senior officers are dead. They have all the survivors together in the saloon.’

Peter looked down as Gerry scribbled on a piece of paper.

GET LOCATION?

‘Do you know where you are Mr Morris?’

‘They have the vessel near a mountain. After leaving Tonle Sap, they steamed—’

The line went dead.

‘Mr Morris? Hello, Mr Morris, can you hear me?’ Peter looked over at Gerry. ‘He’s gone. The call just dropped out.’ He examined the LCD display on the handset. ‘The phone has captured the number. He was calling from a mobile. Should I call him back?’

Gerry shook her head. ‘No. The terrorists may not know he has a phone. We don’t want to alert them to the fact and get Mr Morris killed.’ She picked up the DFAT file and thumbed through it then lifted out a page. ‘Scott Morris. Thirty-six

years old. Pilot. Travelling with his wife.’ She searched out the ambassador and saw him across the room.

‘Sorry, Pete, that lie down is going to have to wait. Write down everything that was said, word for word as best you can remember it. We need to get whatever information we have to the Cambodian authorities.’

* * * * *

Scott looked at the blank screen on the phone. The battery had died in the middle of his call. Had he got enough information out? Had the guy on the other end heard him say the direction before the battery quit?

You idiot, Scotty. Why didn't you give them the location up front?

He slipped the phone back into his pocket and stepped out from behind the curtain to find every face at the table looking up at him with hopeful expressions.

‘I got the Embassy. They know about us.’ He couldn’t bring himself to say the phone had gone flat before he finished telling where they were.

‘What do we do now?’ Collette asked.

‘We wait.’ Scott was unable to meet her eyes. ‘We stay alive and we wait.’

Chapter 18

Todd came awake as something burned into his leg. He opened his eyes to a perfect blue sky that seemed so out of place after the verdant canopy of the swamp. Only the sky wasn’t so perfect. A line bisected it from horizon to horizon. He shifted his head and discovered it wasn’t the sky at all, but a blue tarpaulin stretched over a ridgepole. He could smell something, too. Something familiar. It took a few moments before he realised the biting stench of petrol filled his nostrils.

Voices murmured in a language he didn’t understand. He lifted his head. A man dabbed at his legs with a rag. At each touch leeches shrivelled and dropped away. A young girl picked up the blood-filled leeches and flung them into the distance. She saw Todd looking at her and smiled.

The angelic face he had seen before passing out.

The girl said something to the man but he just grunted and continued his work with the rag.

‘You speak English?’ The girl had a hopeful look on her face.

‘Yes.’ Todd’s voice was barely a croak. ‘Where am I?’

‘I found you in the swamps. My father loaded you into our boat and brought you to our camp. You have many leeches on you. The petrol is removing them.’

‘I was swimming in the swamps for a day, trying to find a village or something.’

The girl inclined her head. ‘There are no villages near here. The nearest one is many hours by boat. Where did you come from?’

Todd raised himself on an elbow. The man said something and pushed him back down.

‘You mustn’t move. You will burst the leeches on your skin. They must be removed in one piece. My father wishes to know where you came from?’

Todd lay back and let the man work. 'I was on a tourist boat. The MEKONG DAWN. Men hijacked the boat. We tried to escape but I was the only one who made it. My God, they killed Morgs and Wilkie. Shot them while they were swimming for the trees.' He bit his bottom lip to stop it from trembling.

The girl translated the story to her father then they discussed something in Khmer.

'We saw men with guns in a powerful boat two nights ago. They were heading for Tonle Sap.'

'Sounds like the guys. Can you and your father take me to a village—to the police?'

Once again the girl translated for her father. The man shook his head as he rattled out his response.

'My father says we must collect firewood before we return to the village. If we take you back now, we will not have enough money for petrol to come back here.'

'Firewood? But... When will you be going back?'

The girl shrugged. 'Tomorrow, maybe the next day.'

'I have money. I will pay you for the petrol to take me to the village. I'll buy you all the petrol you want.'

The girl ran her gaze up and down Todd's sorry form. All he wore was a pair of board shorts and a yellow T-shirt.

'I don't think you have money with you now.'

'I can get money. My wallet is still in my cabin on the boat. Once the police arrest the hijackers I'll use my credit card to buy you a whole drum of petrol. It's an emergency. People have already died for God's sake.'

The girl spoke with her father then turned back to Todd. 'Tomorrow. Today we collect firewood.'

Todd wanted to argue further, but realised it would be futile. These two locals wouldn't budge from their position. At least he had stumbled into friendly hands. They were helping him. Tomorrow would have to be soon enough. He only hoped the people on the boat could hold out that long.

* * * * *

The Russian helicopters used by the Cambodian Army and Air Force were unreliable at best—death traps at worst. Lack of funds for maintenance meant crashes were frequent and made flying in one a gamble, so it was with some relief that Ang looked on the machine in front of him.

A motif on the fuselage door proclaimed it to be a Bell Jetranger. He had seen the type before in movies and on TV, and this one appeared to be in pristine condition, all gleaming Perspex and white paint. The registration on the tail-boom was Japanese, as was the pilot who turned from the machine to shake hands with Ang, and two other policemen named Chee and Prak, whom Ang had selected to accompany him on the search. Klim and the rest of the strike team were making their way into the area by boat.

'You have the flight details?'

Tahki offered a polite bow and patted a large map pocket on the thigh of his powder-blue flight suit.

‘Phnom Penh direct to Kampong Chhnang, refuel and head to the search area under your direction.’

‘Excellent. When can we be airborne?’

‘I’ve just finished my walk-around. We can leave now.’

Tahki fussed about for a few more minutes, making sure the three policemen were secured in their seats. As the rotors whirled into life, Ang checked his watch. 8:05 am. The flight to Kampong Chhnang would take an hour. Maybe another hour to refuel and reach the search area. That gave them about eight hours of daylight to work with depending on the duration of the helicopter and transit times to refuel.

They took off and flew over Phnom Penh, circling onto a westerly heading. The Mekong River glittered brilliantly in the morning sun. The confluence of the river, where it branched towards Tonle Sap, was over three miles wide, a freshwater ocean crowded with rice barges and an assortment of commercial vessels bringing goods up from the delta in Vietnam.

From his position in the front left seat, Ang watched the suburbs slide away beneath them, replaced by jungle interspersed with the occasional road and kampong. On any other occasion he might have enjoyed the flight and the view, but his eyes couldn’t help but lift to the hazy horizon where he knew Malko lurked. At the same time his right hand drifted to the flap on his pistol holster.

The airport in Kampong Chhnang was little more than a narrow strip of bitumen with a few rusty old hangars and a concrete terminal building. A police car was parked near a small refuelling truck. Ang pointed it out to the pilot and Tahki manoeuvred the helicopter close to the truck, landed and shut down.

They alighted from the helicopter and the pilot went to organise the refuelling. A man wearing a police uniform wandered over to Ang.

‘Major Sinh?’

Ang looked up from his mobile phone. There were several missed calls registered. He recognised one number as belonging to his boss.

‘Yes?’

‘I am Captain Turan. We spoke on the phone yesterday.’

Ang closed his phone and slipped it into his pocket. ‘I remember, Captain. Thankyou for organising the fuel.’

Turan shrugged. ‘It was nothing. We have the fuel and the truck here—doing nothing most of the time.’ He gestured at the Jetranger. ‘This arms cache of yours must be quite important for the division to outlay for such a fine machine?’

Ang raised a quizzical eyebrow. ‘You haven’t been briefed?’

‘No. What’s going on?’

‘Terrorists have seized a tourist boat. They are holding the passengers to ransom.’

‘When did this happen?’

‘Yesterday.’

‘And it happened in my district?’ Turan’s voice held a hint of anger.

‘The boat was last seen on Tonle Sap. There has been no sighting of it since.’ Ang could understand the man’s consternation at being left out of the loop. As the district commander he should have been informed.

‘So the purpose of your flight is to search for the vessel. Do you have a rough location?’

‘Very rough. We only know it is somewhere in the vicinity of Boeng Tonle Chhma.’

‘That is a huge area for one helicopter to search.’

‘If we send the air force into the area it may spook Malko into doing something desperate.’

‘Ah, Malko.’ Turan offered a wry grin. ‘This is something of his calibre.’

‘Yes, he—’ His phone started ringing. ‘Excuse me.’ He turned away from Turan and answered his phone. The caller ID told him it was his boss in Phnom Penh.

‘Sinh? Thank God. I’ve been trying to reach you for over an hour.’

‘What is it, sir?’

‘One of the tourists got a message off the boat. He rang the Australian Embassy here in Phnom Penh. A man by the name of Morris.’

Ang looked at the helicopter. A black hose ran from the fuel truck to the fuselage. ‘Did he give us anything I can use?’

‘Not too much, I’m afraid. The call was cut off, but he managed to say that Malko has the boat moored by a mountain.’

‘A mountain?’

‘That’s what he said. I’ve had a look at some maps of the area. There are nine mountains sticking out of those swamps, and they’re spread over nine hundred square kilometres.’

‘Still a hell of a lot of area, sir. But at least the haystack just got a little smaller. We’re refuelling now and should be over the area in forty minutes.’

‘There is one more thing.’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Morris told us that Malko has already killed three passengers, and the captain and senior officers of the MEKONG DAWN.’

Ang ended the call and found Turan standing close beside him.

‘Good news?’

‘One of the passengers got a message off the boat. The mountains out in the swamps? Do you know which ones could be reached by a boat the size of the MEKONG DAWN?’

Turan tilted his head slightly and thought about the question. ‘I used to conduct water patrols in that area before I was promoted. Depending on the draft of the vessel, there are several in the south-west that might be accessible.’

Ang led him back towards the helicopter and asked the pilot for his map. ‘Show me on here.’

Turan took the map, opened it out on the side of the helicopter then took a pen from his pocket.

‘This one here.’ He circled a spot height to the south of Tonle Sap. ‘These two here and here.’ He placed two more circles further west, both on the south side of the lake.

Ang looked at the marks and frowned. The locations Turan had indicated were as far as possible from the area on the hand-drawn map in the notebook. ‘You are sure?’ He stabbed a finger to the north-east. ‘Nothing in this area?’

Turan shook his head. ‘Nothing that can be reached by a vessel that size.’

Ang took the map and folded it carefully. It was possible the marks in the notebook were just an accident—or related to something on another page before the hand-drawn map and transferred through. He thanked Turan and went to brief the pilot on the new search area.

* * * * *

The helicopter took off and Turan watched it turn into the west. He walked to the police car and drove around the terminal building to a hangar near the far end of the concrete apron and parked beside a huge set of doors. One of the doors had a smaller access door built into it that Turan used to enter the hangar. The floor was littered with pieces of aircraft, wings and tails, sections of fuselage with wires and pipes hanging out of them like the entrails of a butchered beast. Near the back of the hangar was a small office. Malko sat at a dusty desk smoking a cigarette.

‘They are looking for the boat?’

Turan nodded. ‘I sent them out to the south-west, but it won’t be long before they expand their search. They know the MEKONG DAWN is moored near a mountain.’

Malko flung his head back, his eyes wide. ‘How do they know this?’

‘One of the passengers got a message out.’

The scar on Malko’s cheek turned vivid white and dark shadows passed across his eyes. ‘A telephone?’

‘I assume so.’

Malko snatched up the mobile telephone on the desk. His finger stabbed at the keypad and he waited for a connection.

‘Ky? We have a problem.’

Chapter 19

With the crew given a little extra freedom of movement, Tamko, the purser, seized the opportunity to send his charges back to work. The catering staff were in the galley, and Scott could smell lunch being prepared on propane stoves. The other staff had been charged with cleaning the dining saloon and emptying the toilet buckets. Hijackers or not, the smiling little Tamko was going to cater to his passengers as best he could.

Nancy observed the guards relaxed attitude from the card table. ‘They seem to be settling into a routine,’ she remarked. ‘Maybe we should ask for access to the bathroom in a nearby cabin instead of those stinking buckets.’

Scott nodded. ‘Worth a try I guess.’

Fred shook his head. ‘The heads won’t flush without power for the water pumps. They’d become a stinking mess in no time. The buckets are far easier to empty.’

Nancy screwed up her nose. ‘I see your point. At least we’ve got coffee and they’re feeding us.’

‘And themselves.’ Collette used her thumb to point at the breezeway where four guards had their weapons slung and were spooning food into their mouths. ‘They’ve been filling up on noodles and such from the galley.’

Scott had seen it, too. The guards were relaxing into a routine. But even so, he saw no opportunity for escape. They always had their weapons with them and there were always at least two men in the breezeway and these were changed regularly to keep them fresh and alert. He had no idea where the hijackers spent their down time; probably in the lounge saloon up forward or sleeping on the passengers’ bunks.

Ky came into view in the breezeway. He had a mobile telephone pressed to his ear and his free arm waved in agitation as he spoke rapid Khmer to whoever was on the other end. Scott didn’t understand a word of it, but it was obvious something had angered the man. He stopped in the doorway facing into the saloon, his feet apart and his eyes flicking from face to face. He finished the call, folded the phone closed and slipped it into his fatigues pocket.

Fred let out a long breath. ‘Uh oh! This looks like trouble.’

Ky stepped into the saloon and kicked the chair out from beneath one of the passengers, a bespectacled elderly Englishman Scott remembered had introduced himself as Terrence. The man dropped to the floor and Ky took a handful of his thinning grey hair and dragged him back to his feet.

Gunmen rushed into the saloon and dragged passengers off their chairs. Women screamed and a few protests were voiced that the gunmen ignored as they shoved everyone into two lines down the sides of the saloon.

Ky watched them work, holding Terrence by the hair. He pulled him into the centre of the room and used the leverage of his grip to tilt the terrified man’s face back. Terrence whimpered at the pain and Ky slapped him hard across the face, knocking his spectacles to the floor. He turned slowly, dragging the hapless Terrence with him as he glowered at the passengers. Terrence had a grip on Ky’s hand to try and relieve the pain of being supported by his hair as he was pulled around, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

‘Who has the phone?’ Ky yelled.

Scott felt the sudden slide of fear in his stomach.

How the hell do they know?

His hand started to slip down towards the bulge of the mobile in his pocket and he had to check himself.

‘Who has the phone?’ This time Ky didn’t wait for an answer. He slapped Terrence again. A mixture of blood and spittle splashed across the floor and onto a tablecloth.

‘For the love of God! Please!’ Terrence’s wife tried to go to her husband but was held back by other passengers. She struggled in their arms, a look of absolute terror on her face.

Ky ignored the woman. He took the curved knife from his belt. ‘I will ask one more time. If no one answers, then this man will die.’ He placed the blade against Terrence’s throat. ‘Now! Where is the phone?’

‘I have the phone.’ Scott slipped his hand into his pocket and held the phone up for Ky to see. ‘Here it is.’ He felt Nancy’s hand on his arm, but there was no way he

could let this little tyrant execute an innocent man. 'Let him go. I'm the one you want.'

Ky let Terrence go and the old man slumped to the floor. Two gunmen moved to either side of Scott and pushed him towards Ky, who stood with his legs slightly apart, that stance he liked so much. Scott's eyes followed Ky's thumb and forefinger as they slid down the length of the blade.

'Who did you call?'

'I tried to call the Australian Embassy. But the phone went flat before I could tell them anything.'

Ky used the fist created by his grip on the knife's handle to punch Scott in the face. Scott's head snapped back with the force of it and a warm flow of blood ran from his nose and soaked into his shirt. A few passengers voiced their protest and he heard Nancy's voice.

'Please don't hurt him. It was everyone's idea. We all had a part in this.'

'Hey, don't bring us into this.' A man standing behind Ky pointed across the saloon, presumably at Nancy, though Scott couldn't tell. 'We had no idea this guy had a phone. Whatever he did, he did alone.'

'That's not true.' Nancy's voice countered. 'Scott acted in the best interests of everyone.'

The saloon broke down into a shouting match between the passengers. The arguments died into silence as Ky held the knife to Scott's throat.

'Oh my God!' He could hear the dread in Nancy's voice.

The blade held a very keen edge. Scott knew it wouldn't take much effort on Ky's part to sever his windpipe and carotid artery. Just a flick of the wrist and he would bleed out in a few seconds, right there on the dining saloon floor. He waited for it, resigned to his fate, his only regret that Nancy would witness the horror of it. The muscles in Ky's arm bulged as they tensed for the killing stroke. Scott held his breath.

Beyond the silence in the room a small noise became audible in the distance. Despite his fear, Scott recognised it straight away. He saw Ky's eyes blink in incomprehension. The whirring clatter grew steadily louder and the eyes flew wide as Ky recognised the beat of an approaching helicopter. He slipped the knife back into his belt and turned to the guards, rattling off a string of Khmer. They rushed out into the breezeway and peered up through the small gaps in the camouflage netting. The noise was louder now, maybe four or five kilometres away.

Scott slumped as Ky released him, but he didn't hit the floor. Nancy was at his side, holding him, hugging him, tears rolling down her face.

'I thought I'd lost you.'

'I'm still here, sweetheart.' And he threw his arms around her.

Fred walked over and slapped him on the back.

'Close one there, buddy.'

Collette hugged both Scott and Nancy. 'Too damn close.' She looked up at the wood-panelled ceiling. 'Do you think the helicopter is here looking for us?' Her voice held just the faintest glimmer of hope.

Scott tilted an ear towards the now diminishing noise. 'If it is, it's already moving away.'

Fred shook his head in dismay. 'Never got closer than a few kilometres. Maybe it was just passing by and not associated with us at all?'

The other passengers were abuzz with excitement, but they fell into a sudden hush. Scott turned and found the reason why. Ky had returned to the saloon and was standing in the doorway, his knife in his hand.

'Your little nuisance was all for nothing. They cannot find us here. But—' His eyes narrowed with a cruel malevolence. '—I cannot let your insolence go unpunished.' Ky stepped into the saloon and advanced on Scott. 'Now I will cut your throat.'

Scott got to his feet. This time he wouldn't go like a lamb to the slaughter. If Ky wanted to kill him, then he was determined to make a fight of it. He pried Nancy's arms from around his neck. His legs were like jelly and he swayed as if drunk, but still brought his hands up in a defensive posture.

Ky took in the aggressive stance and his face broke into a wicked grin. He held the knife low with the razor edge uppermost. His eyes flicked left and right and Scott knew the hijacker was judging the space he had to move in. When that movement came, it would be swift and it would be deadly. The passengers pulled back to the walls where they watched on in shocked silence. The guards in the breezeway moved into the saloon to watch the sport.

'Please don't kill him.' Nancy stood beside Scott. Her voice trembled as she pleaded with Ky.

Scott opened his mouth to tell her to get out of the way, that she would only get hurt as well. Before he could speak, Fred stepped into the space between the two men.

'Kill him and you can say goodbye to a million dollars. Maybe even more than a million.'

'What are you talking about? Get out of my way or I will kill you, too.' Ky's voice was low and menacing. He didn't take his eyes off Scott.

Fred held his hands out in a gesture of nonaggression. 'If our governments won't pay the ransom money, then the Cambodian Liberation Army will have to negotiate with the hostages' families to get their money.'

Ky glared at Fred. 'So?'

'So, the families are going to want proof of life before they pay a cent. Scott Morris comes from one of the wealthiest families on the west coast of Australia. Of all the people on this boat, he is probably going to earn your cause the most ransom money—but only if he's alive.'

'You're lying.' Ky's glare shifted back to Scott. The menace was still there in the dark depths, but now there was something else as well.

Doubt.

Fred's open-handed gesture turned into a shrug. 'Google it if you don't believe me. Morris Constructions is a big concern. Really big. They won't have any problem getting the money together.'

Ky looked from Fred to Scott and back again. The knife wavered uncertainly in his hand. Scott's heart pounded fit to burst as he watched the knife slowly lower.

'You are lucky your value goes beyond being a mere example to the others Mr Morris.' Ky slipped the knife into the sheath on his belt. He turned for the breezeway without another word.

Scott slumped against Nancy and she hugged him tight. Over her shoulder he could see Fred watching Ky's back.

'Thanks, buddy. That was quick thinking.'

Fred turned and placed a fatherly arm over Scott's shoulders. 'I'm pretty sure Malko would have spared that kid up on the sundeck if he'd thought his family could pay a big ransom. These boys are running on greed. I just gave them a little sweetener.'

Collette broke out of the knot of passengers and gave Fred a big, wet kiss. 'You always were a quick thinker, but what happens if he Googles Morris Constructions and comes up with nothing?'

'He won't come up with nothing,' Fred said through a huge grin. 'Morris Constructions really exists, and they have a web page. Remember our new boat storage facility at the marina?'

Collette stepped back and looked up at Fred. 'Yes. So what?'

'It was built by Dave Morris of Morris Constructions. They're a really big concern in Melbourne. It's lucky Scott has the same last name.'

'Not that I'm not grateful, buddy,' Scott said, 'but what happens if this whole hostage thing plays out to the end and my ransom money isn't forthcoming?'

The grin dropped from Fred's face. 'I'm hoping something else turns up in the meantime. For all our sakes.'

* * * * *

From three thousand feet Ang could see for forty kilometres in three directions. Out to his left, south of the river, a carpet of green jungle and swampland dwindled to the distant horizon. Tonle Sap, the great freshwater lake fed by the mighty Mekong, lay spread out ahead of him. The sun was nearing noon and the water shimmered like a mirror. Here and there the wakes of boats steaming to one destination or another marred the surface. Out to the right, through the tropical haze, he could make out the heart-shape of Boeng Tonle Chhma, the large lake adjoining Tonle Sap.

Ang counted at least seven mountains rising out of the wetlands. Some were no more than low tree-clad domes, maybe thirty to forty metres high; others were mountains in the true sense, steep-sided with bald cliffs of rock clawing at the sky. He checked the map on his lap and orientated it with the outside world, identifying those mountains Turan had said a vessel the size of the MEKONG DAWN could approach. He pointed through the Perspex at the nearest and thumbed the intercom button.

'We shall try that one first.'

Tahki gave a nod and banked the helicopter to the south, descending slowly. A wide river or canal stretched towards the mountain from the lake. Ang could see a few small fishing boats using the river, their wakes leaving long, white V-shapes on the brown water. He counted nine before they reached the mountain and realised that this particular waterway was too well-travelled to afford Malko any chance of concealment. The base of the mountain was interspersed with bamboo huts and washing hung on lines.

'Too well-populated.' He recognised Chee's voice on the intercom.

'Circle it anyway.'

Tahki responded by dropping lower and throwing the Jetranger into a hard right bank. Ang was forced to look past the pilot to see the ground as it rushed by in a blur. Chee, on the other side in the rear, would have a better view.

They completed a circuit and Tahki climbed away on course for the next mountain. This one had no visible connection to the lake, but they circled it anyway. Ang caught a glimpse of small patches of open water, but there was nothing capable of holding the MEKONG DAWN if she had reached this far from the lake.

The next mountain Turan had marked was nothing more than a low hill. A village sat near the south end, buildings of bamboo and corrugated iron constructed on piers above the water. Children ran along raised walkways and waved up at the helicopter as it circled overhead.

Chee's voice came through the intercom again. 'I see nothing, sir.'

'Nothing this side either.' Prak's voice.

Ang felt his frustration seething just below the surface, a feeling that was aggravated by the pilot's next words.

'Only another forty minutes more flying time. We need to head back to Kampong Chhnang and refuel.'

He had thought it would be easy to locate a vessel the size of the MEKONG DAWN. There were only a few places the boat could have gone. Malko had pulled off an excellent disappearing act. Looking out at the lake he tried to think—to guess—where Malko had hidden the vessel.

They had come into the search area on a track close to the south shore of Tonle Sap, for that was where Turan had indicated the most likely locations to be. The hostage who made the call to the Australian Embassy had said they were moored near a mountain. Near did not necessarily mean close. Perhaps he could see a mountain in the distance, the only landmark of note? On a whim, Ang pointed at the north side.

'Take us back to Kampong Chhnang over the far shore. We can look for a channel or something. Maybe they went into that side.'

* * * * *

Todd had heard the helicopter pass over earlier. He had no idea where he was or in what direction the aircraft had travelled, but if it came back, or another one flew by, he was ready.

The girl—he had learned her name was Soo-Li—and her father, had gone off up the mountainside to collect firewood, leaving him at the camp to rest and recover after his ordeal in the swamps. After hearing the helicopter, Todd had rummaged through their meagre belongings to find something with which to signal a low-flying aircraft. The best he could come up with was a small plastic mirror not much bigger than the palm of his hand. The surface was scratched and his image distorted, but it would have to do.

Forty metres up the mountainside was a small clearing that Todd climbed to with the mirror in his pocket. Exhausted after his long swim and the effects of the leeches, he panted hard as he broke out of the jungle and into bright sunshine. Finding a seat on an exposed piece of rock that gave him a good view out across the treetops, he settled down to wait.

Maybe the helicopter wouldn't come back. Maybe it had got to wherever it was going and the pilot was enjoying a cold beer. He licked his lips at the thought of beer and leant back against the sun-warmed rock. His eyelids soon drooped and closed.

The sound of the helicopter snapped him awake. He tried to shake the sleep from his foggy mind and focus on the brilliant sky.

What I wouldn't give for a pair of sunglasses about now.

Squinting and shading his eyes, he picked out the helicopter against the blue sky. The aircraft was travelling from his right to left, about sixty metres above the trees.

Todd fumbled in his pocket for the mirror and tried to remember everything he had ever learned about signal mirrors as a boy scout in Cobar. He found the sun, almost directly overhead, and angled the mirror to catch the light. Holding his free hand in front of him at arm's reach with index finger extended, he followed the helicopter with his finger, flashing sunlight from the mirror over his fingernail.

Desperately, he played the light back and forth.

The helicopter continued on its course.

* * * * *

The search of the north shore had turned up nothing. Once they refuelled, Ang would have the pilot fly them around Boeng Tonle Chhma. He hadn't been able to pick out a large channel joining the lakes in the section they had overflowed, but who knew what lay beneath the dense tree canopy? He would have them continue for as long as daylight lasted. And tomorrow. He would keep searching until his superiors told him to stop or the Japanese survey company decide they want their helicopter and pilot back.

Checking his watch, Ang was surprised to see it was a little after noon. Over four hours had passed since leaving Phnom Penh. He squirmed in the seat to ease a little of the stiffness from his body and resigned himself to the fact he would be doing this until nightfall.

'Sir? Something is flashing over there.' Prak leant forward and tapped him on the shoulder.

Ang turned his head to the left. 'Where?'

'Over there at the base of that mountain with the antennas on it.'

Ang picked out the mountain immediately, pyramid shaped with the stark outline of antennas at the peak. He remembered passing it on the way into the search area. It was only on the edge of the area, but he had planned on including it in the search, maybe tomorrow.

As he watched, a tiny pinprick of light flashed near the base of the mountain, disappeared and then flashed again.

'Can we go and take a look?'

Tahki examined the fuel gauges, his face a frown. 'We can spare five minutes. That's all.'

'Let's do it then.'

The helicopter banked sharply left. The mountain was about six kilometres away, but large enough to fill the view through the windscreen. The flashing light increased in intensity the closer they flew.

In forty seconds they had covered the distance.

A man stood in a small clearing on the lower slopes. He wore a pair of shorts and a yellow T-shirt. It wasn't until they were directly overhead that Ang could see the man was a Westerner, waving his arms wildly at the hovering machine.

'Do you think he's from the MEKONG DAWN?' Chee's voice.

Ang keyed the intercom. 'It's highly possible. He appears very happy to see us and he is a long way from civilisation. Can you put us down?'

Tahki shook his head. 'Not here, the ground is too steep.'

'Find a place.'

'I'm already into my reserves. We need to head back to—'

Ang didn't bother with the intercom. He yelled as loud as he could over the engine noise. 'Find a place to land. Now!'

Tahki pivoted the helicopter on its axis and searched for a place to put down. He finally settled on a spit of land covered in grass about a kilometre away. It wasn't connected to the island mountain, but wasn't far from the shore. He manoeuvred the Jetranger into position and landed, the rotor wash sending up a storm of swirling grass.

'Shut down the engine. Save your fuel. We may be some time.'

Leaving Tahki with the helicopter, Ang led Prak and Chee towards the mountain. They waded from islet to islet, holding their pistols above their heads to keep them dry. Once on high ground they wrung the water from their clothes.

'We must be cautious.' Ang could feel Malko's malevolent presence beyond the patchwork of sunlight and shadow that disappeared into the distance. He pulled the slide partly open on his pistol and checked there was a round chambered. 'Anyone for miles around will know that a helicopter has landed. Malko and his men could be on their way here right now.'

The others nodded and checked their weapons also. Then they set off around the mountain towards where they had last seen the young man.

Chapter 20

Scott leant against the wall of the dining saloon and tried to remove the top of a plastic bottle of drinking water. His hands shook so much that the task was impossible. In his mind he could still feel the razor-sharp edge of Ky's knife against his throat as he waited for that sudden, sideways slash that would open his carotid artery and end his life in a pool of his own blood.

The sensation overpowered him and he stopped trying with the lid and placed a hand to his throat to check that it was still intact. His fingers found no damage, no blood, no gaping wound, so he lifted his tablet box out of the breast pocket of his shirt. Popping five tablets out of the blister pack, he ran his tongue around his mouth to summon up all the saliva he could. The bloody water bottle wouldn't open. He'd improvise, adapt, overcome.

He looked at Nancy standing by one of the tables. His wife and Collette were going through the first-aid kits, putting them into some kind of order that only

Nancy understood. If she saw him take this many tablets at once she would have a fit. Hell, she'll probably come and stick her fingers down my throat and make me puke them onto the deck.

Scott knew there weren't many tablets left in the box. He should be rationing them, hoarding them like a miser. God only knew how long they were going to be stuck out here in this backwater.

He considered dropping four tablets back into the box, but one was never enough to get him to the place he wanted to be. Two weren't enough for that matter. His mouth was half-full of saliva. He looked at Nancy again. She still had her back to him, counting bandages or something.

Scott threw all five tablets into his mouth and swallowed them down with a gulp. He leant his head back against the wall. That razor-edged sensation had returned and his hands moved to his throat.

Not long now!

Through closed eyes, Scott could see the numbness coming. It arrived like a blanket thrown over him, blocking out the light and enveloping him in its protective embrace. Inside its warm folds the world went dark and he drifted down into that place where his demons couldn't find him.

* * * * *

The buzz of low conversation in the dining saloon died as the sound of the helicopter returned. Nancy looked up from the contents of the first-aid kits and tilted her head to one side as she listened to the drum of rotors.

'Looking for us do you suppose?' Fred sat at the next table, dealing cards to a group of passengers.

'Still a fair way off.' The thud-thud noise carried a familiarity to it, but she couldn't quite place the type of aircraft. The noise faded out then came back in a series of confusing echoes off the side of the mountain. 'Maybe four or five kilometres away. Scotty will know.' She looked about the dining saloon and saw her husband leaning against the wall, his eyes closed, and decided to let him sleep.

'It's got them stirred up.' Collette pointed to the gunmen in the breezeway, lined along the rail and peering up at the sky through chinks in the camouflage nets.

'Word of our disappearance must have filtered out by now.' Nancy held a handful of compression bandages and noted their size and number on a notepad. 'Even if Scott's call got cut short, the boat was due in Phnom Penh today. Somebody will be missing us. The authorities will be out looking for us.'

'Unless Malko has made threats against us at the first sign of a search getting close.' Fred dropped the deck of cards onto the table and pointed vaguely at the mountain. 'That's just one helicopter by the sound of it. If they were running a search in this area they would have scrambled a whole squadron. I don't think that helicopter is anything to do with us, I'm sorry.'

'Our hosts think it is,' Collette countered.

Fred turned to look out at the breezeway. Two gunmen held the camouflage net high while two others manoeuvred the aluminium gangway through the opening and positioned it against the bank. Ky stood close by, his assault rifle unslung.

Fred nodded his agreement. 'That helicopter has them worked up.'

Ky came back to the two guards by the saloon doors and said something to them in Khmer, pointing at the passengers. Tamko, sitting with some of the crew at a nearby table, flinched involuntarily.

Fred saw the reaction. 'What did he say?'

The purser's normally smiling brown face was ashen. 'He said to wait two hours. If he doesn't return in that time, then start killing passengers. One every five minutes.'

* * * * *

Ky led his men around the island at a run. Where vegetation blocked their path he used his knife like a machete to slash a way through. Malko had warned him the police were using a civilian helicopter to search the area. The aircraft had not overflown the MEKONG DAWN. He was sure the vessel remained undiscovered, but the helicopter had landed somewhere on the far side of the island. Morris had given away more information than he was letting on? Whatever the reason, if armed police have landed nearby, he needed to deal with them quickly.

The only place where a helicopter might land was on a little group of grassy islets to the south-west of the mountain.

For thirty minutes they pushed as hard and as fast as they could. When Ky judged them close to the area, he slowed to a more cautious pace and unslung his AK74. Ahead, a grove of palm trees extended from a rock outcrop and down to the water, the trunks enmeshed in thick undergrowth. Opting for stealth, Ky sheathed his knife and eased into the vegetation. Vines and thorny branches snagged at his body, but he was hardened and trained to the jungle and made steady progress. After a few metres he was able to see beyond the thicket and out into the swamps where a white shape sat wraithlike on the water.

Ky dropped to his haunches as he made out the helicopter sitting on a grassy islet, a hundred metres from the shore. The aircraft was side-on to where he hid and he could see a man sitting in the pilot's seat. There was no one else in sight.

'The pilot waits with the helicopter,' he said.

Mani squatted beside him and peered at the aircraft. 'Only one? Surely there are more aboard?'

Ky looked back the way they had come. Steep ground prevented anyone from traversing the island too far above the waterline. If the helicopter had held more than one occupant—and he was sure it had—then they had gone the other way around the mountain, leaving the pilot with the machine.

'The others have gone off around the island.' He pointed ahead with the barrel of his rifle. 'We will deal with the pilot and wait for them to return.'

Ky left the two men in the trees and stepped down into the water. He unsheathed his knife and circled wide to get behind the machine, into the pilot's blind spot. Moving as slowly as possible to prevent water sloshing about his legs, he came up on the helicopter and stooped under the tail rotor. The words NIPPON GEOLOGICAL were painted on the tail boom.

The pilot had his door open, probably in an effort to get a little airflow through the cabin. The helicopter sat in full sunlight and the interior must have been stifling. As he neared the bulge of the fuselage, Ky could make out the back of the

pilot's head through the side door, which was also open. He used this door to gain quick access, but as he stepped onto the floor his weight tilted the aircraft.

The pilot's head turned. He wore dark sunglasses and Ky saw the mouth opening to say something. The knife flashed forward across the man's throat and opened a wound like a pink smile that rapidly filled with blood. Whatever the pilot had been about to say died in a gurgling hiss that sprayed blood over the interior of the helicopter and splattered Ky's face. The pilot clutched at his throat and fell sideways across the centre console. Blood flowed in little rivers where it pooled among the switches and gauges and dripped onto the floor.

Ky watched, transfixed, until the pilot's legs stopped twitching, then he pulled the body upright, sat him back in the seat and adjusted the lifeless limbs to look as natural as possible. Satisfied, he called Mani and Parl to join him.

The two gunmen hurried through the water. They waded up onto the islet and stood beside Ky. Neither of them gave the pilot or the lake of blood in the helicopter a second glance.

Ky pointed to a nearby islet covered in knee-high grass. 'We will hide there. When the policemen come back we will kill them.'

* * * * *

The tent was nothing more than a blue tarpaulin stretched over a bamboo ridgepole. Inside, blankets were neatly folded, the plastic-sheeted floor swept clean, drums and boxes of provisions stacked in neat rows near the back wall. A woman's touch.

Three people waited by the tent; an Asian man in his forties watched the policemen approach with quiet wariness, a young girl at his side, clutching his hand. The Westerner who had signalled the helicopter stood a little apart from the other two, his eyes flicking from the policemen's faces to the guns holstered on their belts. His stance was tense, frightened, his fists clenched. Ang could tell he was ready to run for the jungle should these men show any signs of being a threat.

'Keep your hands away from your guns,' Ang warned his companions as he lifted his right hand in a friendly wave. The only Western language he spoke was English.

'Hello. My name is Sinh Ang. I am a major with the Cambodian National Police.'

The young man seemed to relax. The tension went out of his legs and his fists opened.

'Police?'

Ang nodded. 'Yes.'

'You came from the helicopter?'

'We saw your signal. The helicopter is a few kilometres away. We had to find a place to land.'

'Thank God!' The young man's face broke into a huge smile. He came around the campfire and held out his right hand. 'I'm Todd McLean. Me and my friends were on the MEKONG DAWN. Gunmen boarded the boat yesterday. My friends and I escaped.' The smile slid from his face and his bottom lip quivered. 'They were shot while swimming for the trees. I think I'm the only one that got away.'

Ang held up his hand to quiet the tumble of words. 'We know about the MEKONG DAWN. Malko is holding your fellow passengers to ransom. Do you have any idea where the vessel went after you escaped?'

'No idea. It was still out on the big lake when I went over the side. They were crawling along the tree line.'

'On which side?'

A look of confusion crossed McLean's face.

'On which side of the lake was the boat when you escaped.' Ang gestured at the man and child. 'They obviously found you and rescued you.' He turned to the man and switched to Khmer. 'Where did you find the boy?'

The man looked down at the girl. 'My daughter found him swimming in the swamp. We brought him to our camp.'

'You did not cross Tonle Sap?'

The man shook his head. 'He was not far from here. We were going to take him to the police station in Kampong Chhnang.'

So, the MEKONG DAWN had been steaming slowly on this side of the lake. Looking for the entrance to a channel? Somewhere they could hide the boat?

'What is your name?'

'I am Nguyen Hunh. This is my daughter, Soo-Li.'

'You live in the floating village at the lower end of Tonle Sap?'

Hunh nodded. 'We are wood gatherers.'

'Do you know of a large tourist vessel that is hidden in the swamps?'

'I only know of it from the young man my daughter found. I have not seen such a vessel in these swamps.'

'Do you know the waterways? Could a vessel of that size be brought into this side of the lake?'

The man hesitated and looked at the ground between his feet. Ang realised some sort of internal struggle was going on in Hunh's mind. The Vietnamese who lived in the floating village were refugees. They had no official citizenship, no legal entitlement to be in Cambodia. The government tolerated their existence because they kept to themselves. On the other hand, the Vietnamese realised their tenuous position and did their best not to bring attention to their existence. Hunh just wanted to hand over the troublesome Westerner and disappear into the swamps. He did not want to get involved in any police investigation.

Ang tried to quell the man's concerns. 'Please! I care only for the welfare of the passengers and crew on the boat. I will not involve you any further other than to help me get the young man back to our helicopter.'

Hunh looked up. 'Before my daughter was born, men came to this part of the swamp. They dredged a channel from Tonle Sap to the Mountain of the Sun.' He pointed at the peak looming above them. 'They used barges to bring in the antennas on the mountain. When they were finished they left. The channel they made is overgrown, but it is still there. Our people know about it and use it. A vessel like the one you describe could use this channel to reach the mountain.'

Ang felt a tingle of excitement well up from deep inside him. Was this where Malko had hidden the MEKONG DAWN? 'Where does this channel reach the mountain?'

Hunh pointed directly inland. 'On the opposite side from here. The ground is not so steep to the summit. The workers had a camp beside a temporary dock.'

'Thank you, my friend. You have been a great help. Will you help me further and take us in your boat back to the helicopter?' He ran his eyes over Todd's gaunt features. 'I don't think the young man is capable of walking that far.'

* * * * *

Todd sat in the middle of the boat and watched the afternoon shadows drift by. Soo-Li sat in front of him on the slatted wooden floor. It had been decided that the boat's motor was far too noisy to risk using. The three policemen sat in front of Soo-Li, with Major Sinh using a length of bamboo to steer them through the trees. Hunh stood in the stern, punting them along with another length of bamboo.

Todd couldn't believe his good fortune. The police would take him to the helicopter and fly him back to civilisation. He would probably spend tonight in a hospital bed, but that was fine. He relished the thought of clean sheets against his skin, of hot food and clean water. But behind the jubilation of his own survival he could feel the sting of guilt sitting in the pit of his stomach, gnawing away at his insides. Morgs and Wilkie were dead for sure. He had seen them machine-gunned as they swam for the trees. Paul had been recaptured, but Todd had no idea what had happened to his friend after that. He could only hope Paul had simply been put back with the other passengers.

He snapped out of his thoughts as Ang said something in Khmer and Soo-Li's father responded. The policeman pointed through the trees and Todd followed the line of his arm. A large white egg sat in the shadows, about three hundred metres away. It was a few moments before Todd realised he was looking at a helicopter from directly behind. The pilot had set the machine down on the largest of a small group of grassy islets. Probably the only landing place for kilometres in any direction.

The boat angled towards the aircraft. Hunh grunted in the stern as he poled them forward. Soo-Li's father was unhappy about this diversion from his wood gathering, but the Vietnamese would be glad to see him and the policemen gone from the swamps. Not that Todd really cared. He wanted to be gone from these swamps as well.

Ang used his bamboo pole to steer the boat around one of the islets. They had about a hundred metres of open water to cross before they reached the helicopter.

Ang called out in English, 'Tahki? We have returned. Prepare for take-off.'

There was no response from anyone at the helicopter. One of the policemen said something in Khmer. Todd didn't understand a word, but he could sense the tension in the man's voice.

'Tahki?'

The major waited for a response, the silence lingering on. Water dripped from the bamboo poles and rippled along the hull, the only sounds in the following quiet. Then Todd saw starlight twinkling across the top of a nearby islet. The air about his head filled with a fluttering hum, as if a swarm of bees passes by. Then the noise of gunfire reached him and the policeman in front of Soo-Li pitched against the side of the boat, part of his head blown away.

Ang's right hand struggled with the flap of his holster. He drew his pistol and leapt from the boat, dropping into waist-deep water. The other policeman had his gun out and fired three quick shots in the direction of the muzzle flashes before he was hit squarely in the chest. He dropped his gun and slumped onto the floor of the boat. Then Ang had his gun up and began firing.

'Get into cover.'

Todd heard the major scream at him but he was stunned by the noise and the sight of the dead policemen. He stared open-mouthed as a row of holes appeared in the side of the boat beside a policeman's body. The holes worked their way towards where he and Soo-Li sat. Wood splintered out of the hull, splashing into the water.

'Move or die,' the major yelled.

The shout broke through into Todd's conscious mind. He threw an arm around Soo-Li and dragged her over the side. The girl struggled in his arms as he went deep. For the second time in two days he heard the *pffft pffft* sound of bullets hitting water and struck out in what he hoped was the direction of a large tree they had passed on the approach to the helicopter. The girl stopped fighting him and he could feel her body moving in a rhythmic motion, swimming with him.

His head hit something hard and slimy. He reached out with his free hand and felt the tree root that blocked their path. Todd grasped the root and pulled Soo-Li with him, his lungs beginning to burn. They came up on the far side of the tree, panting and coughing, squatting in shallow water with only their heads showing.

The gunfire had stopped and Todd risked a quick look around the bole of the mangrove tree.

The splintered remains of the boat floated low in the water with the bodies of two policemen floating facedown nearby. The other policeman, the major, had reached the islet. He lay face down in the grass beside the helicopter, not moving.

Todd felt the girl move beside him as she let fly a sob of despair. He looked down and her eyes were wide with fear and grief. She stuffed a fist into her mouth to stifle the next sob and Todd followed her wide-eyed gaze to the wreckage of the boat.

Hunh lay face down in the water, his body unmoving, the back of his shirt a mess of bloody holes. Todd placed his arm around Soo-Li's shoulders and pulled her tight against him. She turned her face into his side as her body heaved with wracking sobs.

As he tried to comfort the girl he saw something move out beyond the wreckage and the bodies. Three men rose up out of the grass on a distant islet and waded towards the remains of the boat. All carried assault rifles.

Todd lifted Soo-Li's face and held it between both of his hands. Her eyes were glazed and unseeing and he had to shake her head before they cleared and focused on him.

'The bad guys are coming. We have to get out of here.'

She seemed not to understand so he twisted her head. The men reached the wreckage of the boat and poked at the bodies with their guns.

Soo-Li nodded and Todd took her hand, leading her back towards the jungles of the Mountain of the Sun.

* * * * *

‘Two got away.’

‘A girl and the boy who escaped from the boat.’ Ky watched the two distant figures disappear into the jungle. ‘Forget them. They cannot hurt us. Search the bodies of the policemen for anything of value. Collect their weapons if you can find them.’

‘What about the helicopter?’

Ky pondered the question, his eyes studying the gleaming white aircraft. The pilot’s blood still ran in sticky rivulets and dripped from the open door. They could burn the machine. That would be the best way to ensure its destruction. But the smoke plume from such a fire would alert anyone for many miles around. On the other hand it would be a simple matter to break something vital so that the machine was incapable of flying. Then again, the machine was already useless without a pilot to fly it.

In the end, Ky’s mind settled on a more mercenary approach.

‘Leave it. It is very valuable. Its owners will pay well for its return.’

They dragged the bodies from the water and searched them, looking for anything of value. Wallets, watches and a few pieces of jewellery were quickly pocketed.

Prak turned over the body of the policeman near the helicopter and patted down his pockets. The policeman’s eyes flickered open

‘This one is still alive. I will finish him.’ He flicked the safety catch on his weapon. The muzzle touched the man’s head where blood ran from a graze above his right temple. Prak’s finger tightened on the trigger.

Ky waited for the sudden bark of sound as he watched the man’s head with a macabre detachment. It dawned on him that he had seen this man before, on television and in newspapers. Malko had warned him about this one, of the policeman’s tenacity in hunting him down.

‘Wait!’

Prak lifted his weapon, a look of disappointment on his face.

‘This is Sinh.’ The pleasure was evident in Ky’s voice. ‘Take him back to the boat. The colonel will be most pleased to meet him.’

Chapter 21

‘How’s the pain, Joyce?’ Nancy examined the unwrapped broken arm. A bruise the colour of a ripe plum had spread all the way from the woman’s wrist to her elbow.

‘Not too bad dear. The tablets you gave me are helping a lot.’

‘Don’t overdo it. They’re pretty strong.’ Nancy bandaged the arm and set it in the sling. ‘Take half a tablet whenever necessary.’ The powerful painkillers had been among one of the passenger’s medications. The owner of the tablets, an American named Miles Johnson, had readily offered the tablets for her to use as she saw fit.

'I only use them whenever I get a bad migraine. You give them out to those who need them,' he had told her. 'But be careful. They're pretty powerful. Too many will put a buffalo on its ear.'

Nancy patted Joyce's shoulder and stood up. She saw that Scott was now awake and sitting at a table with Fred and three other male passengers. Her husband was dealing out a hand of cards. His movements were slow, deliberate, like a novice handling the cards for the first time. Scott was no novice. The rescue crews often filled the long hours on standby by playing cards, and she had seen Scott deal out a five-card hand at a speed that would impress a Mississippi riverboat gambler.

Nancy walked over and placed a hand on her husband's shoulder. He looked up at her and grinned, but his eyes seemed to focus on a point far beyond her head.

'Hi, Honey. How's the hospital rounds going?'

'Scotty, can we talk for a moment?'

'Sure.' He shrugged apologetically at the other players and pushed his chair back. He had to place his hands on the table to pull himself to his feet.

They walked over by the door into the breezeway, the only place where they could put a little distance between themselves and the other passengers. Nancy turned Scott to face her.

'Scotty, how many of your tablets have you taken today?'

His eyes flicked about, looking everywhere except directly at her. 'Just the recommended dosage.' His gaze settled on something beyond the top of her head.

'You're lying.'

He tried to look hurt at the accusation, but she could tell it was an act.

'Show me your box of tablets.'

'You don't need to see them.'

Nancy stamped her foot on the deck and some of the passengers looked over at them. 'Damn it, Scotty! Show me your box of tablets. Now!'

He didn't move.

'If I have to get Fred and some other men to hold you down while I search your pockets, then I will damn-well do it.'

His gaze dropped to her eyes and she held the stare, waiting.

'Okay. Okay.' He unbuttoned the flap on his shirt pocket and took out the box containing his medication. Nancy snatched it out of his hand, opened the top and shook out one silver blister sheet.

'There are only three tablets left in here, Scotty.'

'Yeah. I'll be needing the other box soon, honey.'

'There were fifteen tablets in here when I gave you the box. You're only supposed to be taking one a day. There should be more left than just three.' She was surprised at how even and clinical her own voice sounded.

'But with the extra tension of being stuck in this situation—I took a few more than normal to take the edge off.'

'You've had over ten times the recommended daily dose. You've done more than just take the edge off, Scotty. You can hardly function. I watched you dealing those cards as if it were happening in slow motion.' She shook the box in front of his eyes. 'You're using these to escape into whatever peace they give you and

you're leaving me here, Scotty. You're leaving me here to deal with all of this on my own.'

She didn't want to cry. Normally, Nancy could reason things out in a cool, calm and detached way. That was what her training had taught her. But she couldn't stop tears from bubbling into her eyes.

'Is everything all right?'

Collette came to stand beside her, a concerned look on her face. Nancy ignored the woman and kept her gaze locked on Scott.

'I'll keep these with me and give you your tablets when you're supposed to have them.'

'I'm not a child.' He snatched the box out of her hand and strode off between the tables to the far end of the saloon where he slumped to the floor. He looked up at her standing slack-jawed near the breezeway, popped two tablets out of the blister pack and tossed them into his mouth, swallowing with theatrical deliberation. A few moments later he rested his head against the wall and closed his eyes.

Nancy didn't bother to fight the tears anymore and they rolled down her face. Collette's arms went around her and she buried her face into the other woman's shoulder.

'Oh, Collette. What am I going to do?'

Collette stroked her hair. 'Don't be too hard on him, dear. This is a lot for anyone to deal with.'

'This is not the real Scotty, you know?'

'I know dear. I watched the way he worked to get out a message on the phone. That was the real Scott. He'll sleep it off and be better to deal with—to reason with later. Come, let us sit down.' Collette steered her towards a couple of chairs a little apart from the other passengers and they sat side by side.

'Before his accident, Scotty was so vibrant, so full of life.' Nancy let the words gush out of her and Collette rubbed her back, encouraging her to let it all out. 'He was the dashing army officer when I met him. He swept me off my feet and I knew he was the one for me.'

'He certainly is a handsome fellow.'

'We married and Scotty discharged from the army. He took a job flying rescue helicopters so that he could be home all the time. We were going to start a family but, after years of trying, we found out Scotty can't father a child.'

Collette stopped rubbing and took hold of a hand. 'Did you try other options?'

Nancy shook her head. 'Scott had his accident the same week we found out. He was the only survivor of that crash. Two men died and I sometimes think Scotty wishes he had died with them. The crash didn't kill him, but he's using other ways to slowly kill himself.'

'Was the crash his fault in any way?'

'No. That's the hard part to understand. He blames himself even though the investigation revealed sub-standard parts in the tail rotor assembly. Scotty feels he could've done more to save his crew.'

Collette gave her hand a squeeze and Nancy returned the gesture. She wiped the tears from her face and forced a smile. 'Thanks. You're a good listener.'

'You're welcome, sweetie. Don't give up on him. We'll all get through this.' She swept her arm at the guards in the breezeway. 'And Scott will beat his demons. I

haven't known him for that long, but I just know he is the sort of man who can overcome anything.'

'I hope you're right. I just—'

The guards on the gangway began yabbering and pointing back along the shoreline. Nancy craned her neck to see what had them so excited. Near the edge of the jungle Ky led his little procession back towards the ship. There was another man with them, wearing what looked like a military or police uniform. He limped along ahead of the gunmen, goaded forward by jabs in the back with gun barrels. A few paces short of the gangway the man fell to the ground. Ky took hold of the man's hair and dragged him to his feet, up the gangway and shoved him through the doorway. The man managed to keep his feet but swayed as if drunk.

'Are you okay?' Nancy went to the man and led him to a chair. He went willingly and sat down. The passengers crowded around her and blurted out questions, yelling to be heard over one another. They could see the newcomer wore the uniform of authority and they all wanted answers.

'Quiet, please, people.' Nancy held up a hand and the yelling died away. She turned back to the man. 'Your head is bleeding.'

He looked at Nancy. 'Shot in the leg, too. Just a graze I think.'

'I'm a nurse. Will you let me take a look at it for you?'

The man nodded and stood up. He undid his belt and lowered his trousers just enough to show a long groove below his left hip.

Nancy pulled on a pair of latex gloves from the first-aid kit and gently probed the wound with her fingers. 'You're right. Just a graze. I'll swab it with antiseptic and put a dressing on.'

She cleaned and dressed the graze then turned her attention to the bleeding scalp. 'What happened? Were you in that helicopter we heard earlier today?' The voices behind her were starting to grow again and Nancy worked quickly to head them off.

'Yes. My name is Sinh Ang. I am a major with the Cambodian National Police. We were looking for this vessel. A survivor, a young man, signalled us. We landed and went to him but were ambushed on the way back to the helicopter.'

Collette grabbed the man's arm. 'A survivor?'

Ang nodded. 'He said he escaped not long after the boat was seized. We found him with a Vietnamese wood gatherer and his daughter.'

Fred punched the air with a fist. 'The other kid made it? Good on him!'

Ang looked down at the deck. 'He was killed in the ambush when I was wounded.'

Fred let his hand drop to his side.

'But the authorities are looking for us?' Miles Johnson pushed his way forward. 'Did you manage to radio our position?'

Ang looked up at him and shook his head. 'I'm sorry, sir. We only landed because the young man managed to signal us. We had no idea the MEKONG DAWN was in this area. When Malko made the ransom demands he swore he would start killing passengers if any military helicopters even came close. We were using a small civilian aircraft to try and locate you without getting anyone killed.' He looked about the saloon and Nancy could see his lips moving as he counted heads.

‘There are thirty-six passengers and nine crewmembers left. Malko murdered anyone capable of sailing the vessel. Only the catering and housekeeping staff are left.’

‘I see.’ Ang lowered his eyes and looked at his hands resting in his lap.

Fred asked the question everyone wanted answered. ‘So what happens now?’

‘Your governments have refused to pay any ransom. Malko will be left with two options; He can try and negotiate a ransom with your families—a process that will take months to—’

‘I’m not bloody-well staying here for months.’ The yell came from the back of the knot of passengers and crew. Others joined in the protest.

‘And option two?’ Nancy already felt despair in the pit of her stomach. The voices quieted down as everyone waited for an answer.

Ang couldn’t meet her eyes. He didn’t look up as he spoke. ‘Malko will make good his threats and cut his losses. He will kill everyone here and then run and hide. In a month or a year he will surface again with another murderous plan to get rich.’

A few gasps went up, but nobody screamed or wailed. Nancy looked to where Scott leant against the wall at the far end of the saloon. He had his head tilted back and his eyes shut, peaceful in the embrace of his medication. She felt tears welling into her eyes again and moved out of the crowd. Sitting by her comatose husband, she took his hand.

‘Please come back to me, Scotty. I really need you, darling. Don’t let me go through this alone.’

Chapter 22

Soo-Li set a fast pace as they traversed a patch of jungle-shrouded boulders high on the mountainside. She longed to return to the camp, to the meagre possessions and their memories, but Todd had said they should stay away from the shore where they might be discovered by her father’s killers.

There was only one place she knew of that wasn’t near the water. Reaching the ancient temple complex meant a steep climb through thick jungle. There wasn’t much there, but at least they would have a place to hide amongst the weathered, overgrown, tumbledown stones. But then what? They had no boat to escape the swamps.

Her mind had created a sort of blank wall, behind which all her grief and sorrow was stockpiled. Sometimes the wall cracked and she could feel the emotions seeping through, coming to overwhelm her. But, with a great deal of mental effort, she managed to patch the cracks and move on.

So far.

She knew the time would come when she would break down into tears. The same thing had happened when her mother died. She had built her wall and stayed strong for her father, comforting him and caring for him until the wall came

crashing down and she was unable to leave her bed for two days, crying constantly and eating nothing.

‘Please slow down.’

She paused by a boulder and looked back down the slope. Todd’s breath came in short gasps and sweat had darkened the front of his shirt. He reached her and leant against the boulder.

‘How much farther?’

‘Not too far.’ She pointed diagonally up the slope.

‘That’s what you said half an hour ago.’

‘Ten, maybe fifteen minutes.’ Soo-Li turned away to continue up the mountain, but Todd’s voice stopped her.

‘What’s that down there?’

She turned back to find him pointing downhill, at a mass of vegetation floating in the water far below.

‘There’s something strange about that patch of jungle,’ he said.

Soo-Li nodded. That particular area of vegetation seemed to be made up of flat, angular planes. The leaves carried a dull, lifeless hue, like plastic flowers. The strange prominence was attached to the island mountain and she couldn’t ever remember seeing something like that before on her trips to this area. But even in its strangeness there was something familiar to the lines of this clump of vegetation; the nearer end appeared to be blunt, while the far end tapered to a point in almost perfect symmetry.

‘It looks like a boat.’ Soo-Li dismissed the sight and turned away to continue up the mountain.

Todd grabbed her arm so tight she cried out in alarm.

‘It is a boat! Look at it. They’ve covered it in some sort of netting. I’ll bet it’s the MEKONG DAWN. This is where they’ve hidden her.’

Soo-Li studied the floating shape and realised Todd was right. The hijackers had rigged some sort of camouflage over the vessel to make it look like part of the island. Without using a little imagination it would be impossible to pick out the boat against the real vegetation. It gave her chills to think her father’s murderers were only a few hundred metres down the mountainside.

‘We should go,’ she said.

Todd held back and examined the vessel with a thoughtful expression.

‘What are we going to do when we reach this hiding place of yours?’

Soo-Li shrugged. ‘Hide. Wait until the men are gone or someone passes this way.’

‘But, how long will we have to wait?’

She shrugged again. ‘I don’t know.’

Todd pointed down at the MEKONG DAWN. ‘If I can slip aboard I may find a radio or mobile phone. I can get help.’

Soo-Li shook her head vigorously. ‘But the men with guns...’

‘There were only twelve or so that boarded us. It’s a big boat. I could sneak aboard easily.’ He must have seen the doubtful look on her face. ‘Look, I don’t like the idea of getting close to those gun freaks either, but we can’t hide in the jungle forever. If I can slip aboard and get to the wheelhouse, then maybe I can radio

someone. I can get the police here. The army. Anyone. I feel responsible for what has happened to you today. I need to do whatever I can to get you home.'

Home!

She turned her face up the mountain to where she knew the ancient ruins sat shrouded in jungle growth. She would be safe there, hidden away from the world until she figured out what she was going to do without her father. She had no relatives left alive. Maybe one of the other Vietnamese families in the floating village would take her in. Though most of them barely scraped through on their meagre earnings. Would anyone want an extra mouth to feed? She looked back at Todd, at the eager expectation on his face. Maybe he was right. Maybe boarding the boat was their best chance at getting out of here.

'Okay.' She could hardly believe she was agreeing to this madness.

'It will be dark soon. I can try and get aboard then,' Todd said.

Chapter 23

Scott came awake and peered through a chink in the camouflage netting at the growing darkness. His mouth felt dry and gritty so he reached for the plastic bottle of water someone, probably Nancy, had placed beside him. The thought brought a deep, gnawing guilt sliding into the pit of his stomach. She was so good to him and looked after him despite his faults and failings. They were in this situation together and he knew he had no right to hide himself in the cocoon of his medication and leave her to deal with the real world.

He undid the flap on his shirt pocket and took out the foil strip. There was only one tablet left in its little silver blister. The guilt of a few moments ago gave way to dread at the realisation he might have to get through the night without his demons in check. Without his medication they would be free to roam the corridors of his mind, to create havoc with his thoughts and dreams.

But Nancy had another box of tablets.

One box was supposed to have enough tablets for a month, but at his current rate of consumption he would be lucky to get a week out of it. And that was his last box.

The sense of dread coalesced into real fear. If this hostage situation wasn't resolved soon, he'd be in real trouble.

Most of the passengers had settled onto the floor and were making themselves as comfortable as possible. Without power it was too dark for Fred and the other card players to continue and they had split up into little groups, scattered around the walls so that Tamko and the catering staff could set the tables for dinner. Here and there he could hear the low buzz of voices. The smell of cooking permeated from the galley where the harsh white glow of a gas lantern threw a square of light through the doorway. Soon the cooks would offer up the evening meal.

'Welcome back.'

Nancy leant against the wall beside him. She studied him through narrow eyes and pointed at the foil in his hand.

'You have a severe problem, Scotty.'

He couldn't meet her eyes. 'I know.'

'When all this is over you are going to get help. The right kind of help. You are going to get through this. Hell—we're going to get through this. We are going to get our lives back on track, Scotty.'

He looked down at his lap. 'Uh-huh.'

'Because if you can't get over this. If you can't put the past behind you, then I don't think I can be around you anymore.' Her words were strained, as if she spoke through clenched teeth, but Scott didn't dare look up at her. It felt as if his heart was tearing in two.

He risked a quick glance and saw the tears in her eyes and the pain on her face. Without thinking, his arm came up and wrapped around her shoulders, pulling her to him and holding her tight against his side.

'Oh, Nance. You've been the strength for both of us for so long. I can't do this without you.'

'That's the trouble, Scotty. You're not even trying to help yourself. You're relying on those damned tablets. Well, I don't have them anymore. I can't trust you with them.'

The horror returned in a cresting wave, looming large and dark.

'You didn't throw them away? I need them. I know I've been overdoing it, but I need them, Nance.'

He felt her head shake against his side. 'No. I didn't throw them away. I gave them to someone; someone who will make sure you don't overdo it while I'm busy.' She pointed across the floor to where Collette sat with Fred.

Collette held up the box of tablets. 'I'll be administering your meds from now on. Next one is due at seven tomorrow morning. Not a minute before. Oh, and if you're thinking of stealing them back off me...' She stuffed the box inside her blouse and made a show of readjusting her undergarments. '...I'll be keeping them in a really safe place.'

'Nance, I can't survive on one a day. I just—'

'If I feel you need an extra dose, then I'll okay it with Collette.'

'Is this the right time to be making adjustments to my meds? In this of all places?' He heard the desperation in his own voice and felt ashamed that it had come down to this.

'There's no time like the present, Scotty. I'm not having you slip away into a drug-induced catatonic state and leaving me here in the real world to do battle on my own.'

It was pointless to argue further. Nancy had made her mind up and that was that.

Putting his head back against the wall, Scott stared at the far wall and thought about what his life had become. The crash hadn't been his fault, but he bore the burden of it every day—every waking moment.

He shook his head and tried to clear it, and became aware of a man sitting near Fred that he hadn't seen before. The Asian man had a bandage around his head and was watching him with curious eyes. The newcomer climbed to his feet and crossed the saloon, squatting in front of him.

'You are Scott Morris?'

'Yes. Yes I am.'

'You are the one who telephoned the Australian Embassy in Phnom Penh.' The man appeared to be wearing some sort of uniform, but it was too dark to make out the markings.

'Yes.'

The man put out his right hand and Scott shook it.

'I am Ang. I am with the Cambodian National Police.'

'Major Sinh came looking for us earlier today.' Nancy's voice in the darkness. 'Ky killed his men and brought him here while you were... indisposed. I treated his wounds as best I could.'

Scott ran his gaze over the bandage. A little bloodstain showed above the right temple. 'I thought that looked like your handiwork.'

'Your wife is an excellent nurse.' Ang offered Nancy a polite bow of his head.

'So you got my message? From the embassy I mean. When does the cavalry arrive?'

Ang shook his head. 'Malko has vowed to kill passengers if there is any attempt at a rescue. I have a team of men in a boat, searching the swamps, but they are on the wrong side of the lake.'

'Yes. But you found us. They might have the same luck.'

'And I am all that is left of my little expedition. The only reason I am still alive is that Ky wants to make a gift of me to his superior. Malko and I have—what do you Westerners call it?—history?'

'No rescue?' Scott tried to make it sound like a statement, but he couldn't keep the disappointment out of his voice.

'For now, no. The team in the boat will be alerted to the fact that we didn't return to Kampong Chhnang for fuel. But I do not know what Klim will do. Even if he risks the passengers' lives and launches a full-scale search and rescue mission, our information wrongly places the MEKONG DAWN to the south of Tonle Sap. They will search the wrong area. It is only by a fluke of chance that we came to the north.'

Collette stepped up beside Ang. 'Dinner is served, you lot. It's noodles again. What a surprise. But then, I suppose it's the only stuff left after the refrigeration was shut down.'

Two of the catering staff wheeled a trolley from the galley and ladled out bowls of steaming noodles. Those passengers sitting on the floor returned to the tables for the evening meal. Despite the strange situation, Tamko still had his people working to the comfort of the passengers as best they could. The wait staff had set the tables and stood by with plastic bottles of water in place of wine. To Scott, the whole image had a surreal look to it. They were all hostages to a madman, but they sat down to dinner as if it were any normal night on the cruise.

* * * * *

Emerging from the jungle, Todd found they were about three hundred metres astern of the MEKONG DAWN. Soo-Li had led him unerringly through the darkness. The girl seemed to have gotten over her first apprehension at sneaking aboard and appeared eager to get on with their little mission.

‘Let’s wait here.’ Todd pulled her into the shadows of the undergrowth. ‘We’ll watch the ship for a while and make a plan.’

They sat together in the darkness and watched the MEKONG DAWN. No lights showed anywhere, but every ten minutes or so torch beams swept around the walkways and companionways, their light filtered by the overhanging camouflage nets.

‘Guards doing their rounds,’ Todd whispered.

Soo-Li nodded and gripped his arm. She pointed to the shore where an aluminium gangway spanned the gap to the ship. ‘Two more there.’

Todd could see nothing. But then he became aware of two pinpricks of light on the bank near the gangway. The glowing tips of cigarettes.

‘Good girl. Well spotted.’

He had planned on using the gangway to sneak aboard between the guards’ patrols, but the presence of at least two men on the bank thwarted that idea. He had already discarded any thought of swimming to the far side of the ship and climbing aboard. The MEKONG DAWN was so quiet that the water dripping from his body would alert anyone within earshot.

That left only two other options.

The MEKONG DAWN had been moored to the island using hawser lines as thick as a man’s wrist, secured to trees on the shore, one fore and one aft. The ship’s rail was about three metres above the shore and, from what he could see, the mooring lines only ran about five metres across open space, an easy traverse for a reasonably fit person. Knowing the radios would be up forward in the wheelhouse, he discounted the aft line, for that would mean sneaking down the whole length of the ship.

That left the fore line.

He leant close to Soo-Li’s ear. ‘We need to get around to the front of the ship. I’ll use the line to get aboard.’

The girl nodded and moved back into the jungle. She cut left once they were well out of sight of anyone on the boat. Todd followed her slow pace, being careful where he placed his feet, feeling for anything on the ground that might make a noise and alert the gunmen. Soo-li seemed to have cat-like vision. She picked out a path relatively free of obstruction and, fifteen minutes later, Todd squinted in the darkness and made out the mooring line snaking around a tree. He gave the girl a thumbs-up signal and smiled.

‘I’ll sneak aboard and find a radio. You wait here. No sense in us both being caught.’

The girl nodded and Todd moved towards the shore. He placed a hand on the line and tested it. The rope hung slack in a lazy arc that disappeared through a hawser hole. The camouflage net was draped over it, almost hanging to the waterline at either side.

He turned his head towards the gangway, three quarters of the way back down the ship. He was close enough to make out the silhouettes of the two guards there. One of them threw something to the ground and mashed at it with his foot. Then the other one repeated the action. They shouldered their weapons and moved away along the shoreline towards the stern.

Smoke break was over.

Todd waited until the two shadowy figures had faded into the gloom then ran his gaze along the length of the ship. Nothing else moved. Somewhere amidships a faint light showed, but there was no sign of any guards doing their rounds. He stepped out of the shadows and moved as close to the side of the boat as he could without entering the water. The line ran up past his shoulder. Grasping it in both hands, he placed his weight on it as slowly as possible. He doubted his seventy-eight kilograms would have any effect on a vessel the size of the MEKONG DAWN, but he took no chances, waiting until the rope was tight under his weight. The MEKONG DAWN didn't budge an inch and he climbed hand over hand to the camouflage net, shimmied underneath it and slipped over the rail onto the forward deck area where he waited and listened.

Nothing moved.

From where he lay he could see past the wheelhouse door and along the walkway. Faint light spilled out onto the deck about fifteen metres away. Beyond that, the vessel was in darkness. Todd rolled to his feet and crept to the port side. This walkway was in total blackness so he decided to approach the wheelhouse from this side. The deck was littered with ropes and broken glass from the smashed windscreen. He picked his way carefully, avoiding the larger pieces of glass that might snap or crunch and alert any nearby guards. The port wheelhouse door was ajar, the glass window of its upper-half shattered. Gently, he pulled it open. The door slid silently and Todd looked inside.

The captain's body still lay along the aft wall of the wheelhouse, his white uniform a mess of blood-stained holes. Todd felt his bile rise at the stench of death and fought hard to prevent himself dry-retching. He turned his attention to the rest of the wheelhouse. Even in the dim light he could see bullet holes in the woodwork of the instrument panel. The radios were in an overhead console, the spiral microphone cords dangling in little loops above the smashed windscreen.

He stood up, reached for a microphone and unhooked it, tracing the cord back to the radio. Instead of switches and dials, his fingers found a gaping hole filled with loose wires and broken circuit boards. He felt his way to the next radio, but its innards hung from the console like the entrails of a slaughtered animal.

The gunmen had destroyed all the radios. His only chance at getting out a call for help had been dashed. He looked down at the captain's body and wondered if he might find a mobile phone. But the man's trouser pockets had been pulled out. Someone had already gone over the corpse for anything of value.

Time to get out of here.

He moved to the port door to retrace his steps back to Soo-Li, but a noise from the other walkway stopped him. Low voices grew louder as they neared the wheelhouse. Dropping to his hands and knees, Todd crawled in under the instrument panel. The voices, speaking in Khmer, passed by the starboard wheelhouse door and moved onto the forward deck. Moments later he heard the unmistakable flick of a cigarette lighter and smelled tobacco smoke.

Broken glass pressed into Todd's knees. The men on the foredeck smoked and talked. The agony became unbearable and he had to risk moving. As slow as possible, he lifted one knee and brushed his palm over it. Little cubes of glass fell to the floor. He used his hand to sweep a little area of floor then placed his knee back on the deck before doing the same with his other knee. Now the pain was

gone and he knew he could wait out the two gunmen who chatted on, oblivious to his presence. Pressing in hard under the console, he waited in the darkness for his chance to return to Soo-Li and give her the bad news about the radios.

* * * * *

Klim tilted his watch to catch the light from the campfire.

19:06.

He had a satellite phone resting in his lap. Down at the boat, moored amongst the trees, the HF radio and marine band radio were turned up to full volume. He had not received a call on any device for four hours, not since a report had come in from headquarters in Phnom Penh to inform him that Major Sinh's helicopter was overdue in Kampong Chhnang and all attempts to raise the aircraft had failed.

The men lay around the campfire, their weapons close at hand. It was far too hazardous to navigate the swamps in the darkness, so Klim had reluctantly agreed to bivouac on the nearest piece of high ground, a spit of land where a large creek flowed into the south of Tonle Sap. At first light he would have them back in the boat to continue the search.

He checked his watch again.

19:08.

It was going to be a long night.

* * * * *

Soo-Li stood motionless in the jungle shadows watching the dark shape of the MEKONG DAWN, her heart thumping with apprehension. The two guards from the gangway were walking by no more than five metres from her, conducting a shore patrol from stern to bow. They had their rifles slung and spoke softly to each other, so close the girl heard every word.

'Another thirty minutes before we are relieved.'

'And not a moment too soon. My stomach is growling like a tiger.'

'I could smell the food the crew is preparing. It is well that Ky allows them to cook for us, otherwise it will be cold rations.'

They stopped near the mooring line and Soo-Li felt her panic rising at the thought of Todd suddenly shimmying down the rope into their midst.

'Yes, it is good food. The beds are soft, too.'

'Hah! Mine smells like an old woman used it. I might change to another cabin.'

'Why not? There are plenty to choose from.' They laughed and did an about-turn then started back down the shoreline.

Soo-Li watched the backs of the guards disappear into the gloom. Their voices faded and she turned her attention to the mooring line, hoping to see Todd climb back down now the guards were gone.

Where is he? He should be back by now.

She fretted alone in the darkness, her eyes flicking from the gangway to the forward mooring line. She had no watch with which to check the time. How many minutes had passed since Todd had slipped aboard? Thirty? Forty?

Nothing moved down the length of the ship and she ventured out of her hiding place, approaching the side of the ship. No noise came from anywhere near her.

The high bow of the MEKONG DAWN loomed overhead, a dark shape against the stars.

'Todd?' She hissed the name, as loud as she dared.

'Todd?'

No response.

Soo-Li turned and looked back at the safety of the jungle then up at the railing.

Where is he?

The loneliness crept in on her and she felt the tendrils of fear snaking about her belly. She had only known the boy for a day, but his presence was a comfort to her and she longed for him to come back down the mooring line so they could hide in the jungle together.

Reaching a decision, she slipped her arms around the mooring line and, with the agility of youth, shimmied along it and under the camouflage net. The hawser hole was in front of her and she peered through it onto the foredeck.

A few ropes and chains were visible in the darkness and the wheelhouse appeared as a pale shape to her left. From where she clung to the mooring line it wasn't possible to see down the companionways on either side of the wheelhouse so she adjusted her position for a better look. Something moved beyond the hawser hole, blocking her line of sight. Before she could even think of escaping, a hand grabbed her by the shirt and lifted her over the railing.

* * * * *

Todd heard Soo-Li scream. The noise wasn't more than five metres away, somewhere on the foredeck. The two gunmen jabbered with excitement. Then the girl's voice in Khmer, a pleading tone that dissolved into frightened whimpering.

There was absolutely nothing he could do to help her. Todd pushed himself as far under the console as possible as the men dragged their captive aft along the companionway. He listened to the noise fading and hoped like hell the girl would not tell them he was on the ship.

He felt wetness on his face and realised there were tears rolling down his cheeks. Shaking his head, he dared not move a hand to wipe them away.

'Oh, Soo-Li. You silly girl.'

* * * * *

Ky sat in a swivel chair with his back to the door of the purser's office, the diamonds spread on the desk before him giving off brilliant sparkles under the glow of a penlight. There was a safe in the corner of the office, the door hanging ajar after the purser had removed the passengers' passports. But Ky did not want to trust the diamonds to a safe where he was not the sole holder of the combination. He had no idea how many members of the crew could access the safe besides the purser. No, the diamonds were too valuable to be trusted to a mere safe. He kept them in an ammunition pouch on his webbing belt and only took them out in the brief moments he found himself alone so that he could marvel at them and dream of what they would provide for the cause, convinced the little stones on the desk would propel the movement to greatness.

Heavy footfalls moved down the companionway and he scooped the diamonds into the baize bag then dropped them into the ammunition pouch and did up the

flap. He had not shown or mentioned the diamonds to his men; they were all common thieves and pirates and could never be trusted. Nor had he told Malko of the existence of the diamonds. Their only communications since the colonel had left the ship had been by mobile phone, and Ky had no way of knowing how secure the transmissions were or who might be listening in at the other end. He would show Malko the diamonds when the colonel returned to the MEKONG DAWN. Malko would know how best to use them.

The footfalls stopped outside the office door. There came a discreet knock. Ky opened the door to reveal two of his men standing there, a young girl slung between them by her arms. The girl struggled against her captors and looked up at Ky through fear-filled eyes.

‘What have we here?’

‘We found her trying to sneak aboard. She was looking for someone.’

Ky took a handful of the girl’s hair and forced her head back. ‘She is from the little boat we ambushed today. She was with another man, a Westerner. They escaped into the swamps.’ He twisted the hair so that the girl cried out, taking delight in the child’s whimpering.

‘Why were you sneaking aboard? Where is the other one you escaped with?’

The large, dark eyes filled with tears but the girl remained silent.

Ky twisted harder. ‘Tell me.’

‘The other man is dead. He was wounded in the shooting and he died in the jungle.’

‘You are lying.’ Ky tightened his grip.

The girl cried out, ‘No! He is dead. He died in the jungle.’

‘Why did you come to the ship? Who were you looking for?’

‘I am hungry. I came looking for food. I could smell the cooking.’

Ky held her and considered her words. The child kept her face screwed up, her eyes looking down in a show of submission.

‘What were you doing here in the swamps?’

‘We came to collect firewood from the jungles on the mountain.’

‘We?’

‘My father and me.’

‘Where is your father now?’

Now the eyes looked up. Her face was contorted with pain, but Ky caught the flash of hatred in those big, dark eyes.

‘You killed him today, in the boat with the policemen.’ She did not look away, and Ky knew she was telling the truth. He could see it in the depths of her eyes. This child wanted him dead for what he had done.

He thrust her backwards and the girl would have sprawled onto her back if not for the grip of the two gunmen.

‘Put her with the passengers. Then search the ship and the jungle along the shoreline. Make sure her friend is truly dead and not hiding somewhere.’

* * * * *

Nancy was surprised to see a young Asian girl dragged into the breezeway by her arms. The guards pushed her through the doorway and turned towards the trolley the catering staff had placed by the doors for Ky and his men. They ladled

out two big bowls of noodles and walked aft without another glance into the dining room.

The girl stood in the middle of the floor watching after them. Ang excused himself from the table and went to the girl.

‘Soo-Li?’

The girl looked up at the policeman and her face crumpled into a mask of grief. She sobbed uncontrollably and Ang just stood there, staring down at her.

Nancy pushed her chair back and went to the girl, squatting on the floor beside her.

‘Hello. My name is Nancy. Can you speak English?’

The girl didn’t respond. Nancy reached out and placed a hand on her heaving shoulder. At the touch the girl looked up, her eyes big and wide and wet with tears. Nancy couldn’t resist. She pulled the girl to her and hugged her tight.

‘It’s okay, sweetheart. I’ll protect you. You let me look after you.’

The girl buried her face into Nancy’s shoulder.

‘Her name is Soo-Li. Ky killed her father when he captured me.’

Nancy gave the policeman a nod and waved him back to the tables where the other passengers watched on.

Soo-Li cried in Nancy’s arms. Nancy stroked her hair and spoke softly, telling her she would be safe with her, though she knew if the guards wanted to harm this girl there would be nothing she could do to prevent it. After several minutes the wracking sobs died away and the girl lifted her head. Nancy used a napkin to wipe away tears.

‘I do.’ The girl’s voice was soft and fragile.

‘Huh?’

‘I do speak English.’

Nancy smiled at her. ‘Yes you do. You speak it very well. Are you hungry, sweetheart?’

Soo-Li nodded and Nancy took her to the table and sat her on a chair. Then she went to the food trolley by the door and filled a clean bowl with noodles, placing it in front of Soo-Li.

The girl ate ravenously, emptying the bowl in record time.

‘Would you like some more?’

Soo-Li nodded. ‘Yes please.’

Nancy refilled the bowl. When she returned, she sat beside Soo-Li.

‘I am so sorry about your father.’ She regretted her words instantly. The girl’s face screwed up a little, but she fought bravely to control her tears.

‘He was a good man.’

‘I’ll bet he was.’ Nancy quickly changed the subject. ‘How long since you last ate?’

‘Not since breakfast this morning.’ Soo-Li spoke around a mouthful of food.

‘Well, you eat up. There’s plenty more if you want it. I’m sure the guards won’t mind.’

Soo-Li smiled at her, a broad smile that filled her face with light.

Nancy felt her heart melt.

* * * * *

After dinner Tamko set his people to cleaning up the dining room. Without power and with no lights permitted outside of the windowless galley where the crew worked, most of the passengers settled onto their own little patches of floor around the walls.

Nancy leant against the wall with Scott on one side and Soo-Li on the other. The girl lay on the floor with her head in Nancy's lap. She could tell by the shallow breathing that Soo-Li had drifted off to sleep and she stroked the girl's hair as she listened to the low buzz of conversation in the room.

Scott and Fred were discussing the movements and number of gunmen with Ang.

'There were twelve men all up when they boarded us.' Scott was back to normal now the effects of his medication had worn off. 'Malko remained on the ship until we tied up here, then he left in a RHIB with one man.'

'To go and make his ransom demands from somewhere with a fax machine and an untraceable telephone.' Ang swept his arm to encompass the whole ship. 'What have Ky and the others been up to since he left?'

Fred's voice came out of the darkness. 'Pretty much what you've seen since you've been here. They don't see the crew as much of a threat. They let them use the galley to prepare and serve two meals a day. That purser fellow, Tamko, is marvellous the way he has his people working to our comfort. If it wasn't for the guns and the fact we're not allowed to leave the saloon, you'd think the cruise was going on as per normal.'

'I don't know how much longer the food will last,' Collette added. 'The fridges have been off for two days now and most of the frozen stuff has already thawed. It's just noodles and dry food left, a few tins of stuff. The last time I went in the galley I reckon we've got maybe two more days before the food runs out.'

Sanika shuffled past in the darkness and collected the food trolley from near the breezeway door then pushed it back towards the dim light in the galley.

Ang watched the trolley as it passed. 'Do the guards always eat what we eat?'

Scott replied, 'They have the past two nights—and in the morning as well, come to think of it. Tamko feeds the passengers from one trolley and the guards from another. But I think it's all cooked together.'

'It is,' Collette's voice confirmed. 'Without power, and with just one gas stove, the cooks only have a limited space for cooking.'

Nancy heard movement beyond Fred and Collette. A few moments later a shadowy figure loomed over her. Ang was standing before her.

The policeman squatted on his heels. 'How's the girl?'

'Sleeping. The poor thing is exhausted.'

'She will be fine. You are taking good care of her.' He remained silent and Nancy sensed he had something further to ask.

'Mrs Morris?'

Nancy had told the policeman to call her by her given name, but he seemed incapable of informality.

'Yes?'

'Do you have anything in your medicines that are poisonous? Something that will take the guards out if we put it in their food?'

Nancy thought for a moment, her mind running through the available medications. 'Nothing that will kill them. There is a powerful sedative that belongs to one of the passengers. It won't knock them out cold, but it will make them groggy.'

'Groggy?'

'Really sleepy.'

'It will slow their ability to react quickly?'

'You bet. If we get enough of it into their food they won't be able to stay on their feet. Kind of like being really drunk.'

'How long does it take to affect someone?'

'Everyone's different. But for the average person... say, twenty minutes. There are enough tablets that, if crushed up and put in the food, will be sufficient to affect them all.'

Scott spoke up. 'There's just one problem with that. The guards don't all eat at the same time. The ones in the breezeway and some of the off-duty chaps eat as the food is served, but the others can sometimes take up to thirty minutes before they front up for chow, and they usually disappear to other parts of the ship. We won't be able to jump them all together.'

'It's worth a try though. Better than waiting for that murderous bastard to come back and finish us off.' A voice from farther along the wall. Nancy didn't recognise the speaker.

'Yeah, it's worth taking the chance.' A different voice. Several more piped up in agreement. It seemed to Nancy that every passenger within earshot was keen on the idea. No one wanted to wait around for Malko to decide what to do with them now the governments had refused to pay the ransom.

'So, if we only take out the guards in the breezeway, what then. It will be a hell of a fight trying to take back the ship.' Scott was the only one who didn't like the idea.

'Then we get everyone ashore.' Ang wasn't giving up on his plan so easily. 'We find a place where we can hide and defend ourselves and we wait for help. I have a team of men in a boat out there somewhere, looking for us. It will only be a matter of time before they shift their focus to the north side of Tonle Sap.'

'But where will we hide?' Scott countered. 'From what I've seen this island is nothing but jungle. These guys are ex-jungle fighters. We're just a bunch of tourists and most of us are of retirement age. They'll hunt us down in no time.'

A few voices came out of the darkness, some agreeing with Scott and some offering argument. A soft, angelic voice quieted them all.

'I know a place where we can hide.'

Nancy felt the girl's head lift off her lap.

'There's a place in the jungle. An ancient temple. It has high walls and only one small entrance.'

'This could be just the kind of place we need.' Ang's voice carried true excitement. 'A couple of men with guns could hold off an army if the girl is right.'

'I am right.' The tiny voice sounded indignant. Nancy placed a hand on Soo-Li's shoulders.

'Sounds like we have a plan.' Fred offered his agreement. 'When are we going to do this?'

'I think with the morning meal,' Ang said. 'We need to be out of here before Malko returns. He will start killing people just out of spite.'

Chapter 24

A torch beam played along the walkway, a spot of gleaming yellow light, and Todd pressed himself under the control console. He had not moved for so long that his leg muscles burned with the fire of cramps and his right calf shuddered in constant spasms. Gritting his teeth, he accepted the pain and waited.

Footsteps followed behind the beam. They approached the starboard door to the wheelhouse and stopped. The beam played through the broken window, over the console and across the deck. It stopped momentarily on the dead body of the captain then moved on, crossing the rear bulkhead. Todd watched the circle of light out of the corner of his eye and saw it pause on a red-painted box fixed to the bulkhead. The beam disappeared and footsteps moved out onto the foredeck. Vague light flickered about, washing through the shattered windscreen. Then the footsteps and the light moved aft down the port walkway.

Todd waited five minutes, partly to give the searcher time to move away and partly to summon up the courage to move. He crawled out from under the console and stood in the darkness, trying to ease his cramped legs back to life. Through the starboard window he could see more torches moving through the jungle along the shoreline, also heading aft.

Judging his only moment of escape had come, he slid the starboard door open and scanned the walkway. There was nothing but darkness and he was about to slip out onto the foredeck when he remembered the red-painted box on the rear bulkhead. The box was right near his head. He had missed it when he entered the wheelhouse and only the beam of the torch had made him aware of it now.

Todd reached up and felt the box. It had a simple snib that he fumbled with for a moment then pulled the door open. It was far too dark to see inside so he used his fingers to explore the contents. There were metallic tubes, like small deodorant cans, lined up in holes along a shelf. Beyond the tubes he discovered something that felt like a leather purse. It had a flap folded over the top with a press stud holding it closed. He lifted the purse from the shelf, undid the press stud and felt inside. His fingers closed around a pistol grip.

A gun!

Todd drew the weapon from its holster. It felt heavy in his hand, heavier than he expected. By touch he examined the trigger guard and trigger, feeling along the short, stubby barrel. There was something strange about this pistol, something different from a normal firearm. The barrel was far too thick, like a piece of water pipe. Then his fingers found the catch above the trigger guard and the barrel flipped downwards, opening the breach like a shotgun and he knew what this pistol was.

A flare gun.

Todd felt back along the shelf and found the metallic cylinders. He lifted one out and slid it into the breach, snapping it closed. The flare gun was now loaded. It was no Glock or .38 Special, but he felt a little comfort at the weight of it in his hand. He slid the pistol into the right pocket of his board shorts then stuffed as many flares as he could into the left.

Now he felt along the bottom shelf of the cabinet. There were books of some kind, but it was too dark to see what they were. Maybe emergency procedures, maybe last month's Playboy. He kept going and felt something hard and oblong lying in the bottom. This object was about twenty centimetres long, ten wide and five deep. It had a short protrusion at one end and several small dials. Todd's heart pounded with excitement as he realised what it was.

A walkie-talkie radio.

This one was probably used as portable communications if the captain should need to move about the vessel in an emergency. He turned one of the dials. A small screen glowed to life on the front of the walkie-talkie. The display showed full battery power and two words:

MARINE EMERGENCY.

Todd moved to the starboard doorway and checked the companionway. It was clear, so he went back to the port side. This companionway was also empty and he decided to take a chance, pressing the transmit button.

'Hello. This is Todd McLean aboard the Mekong Dawn. Can anyone hear me?'

He released the button and the radio gave a brief hiss of static. Todd turned the volume down, waited ten seconds then tried again.

'Hello. This is Todd McLean. I'm aboard the vessel MEKONG DAWN. Hijackers have taken over the ship. The captain is dead. Does anyone copy me?'

* * * * *

'...So Chehn's in this brothel, pants around his ankles, the girl naked on the bed when... Wham! The front door is kicked in. A raid! Led by none other than Chehn's father-in-law, the local police chief.'

A chorus of laughter erupted around the campfire. Klim laughed too and tried to forget the gnawing feeling of worry in his guts. He still nursed the sat-phone and sat closest to the boat and its radios. At 21.00 he'd called in a report to headquarters and learned there had still been no word from Ang. The helicopter was still missing.

'So what did Chehn do?' One of the men goaded the storyteller to continue.

'Chehn has his pants up in an instant. He leaps through the window and drops into an...'

The marine radio gave a hiss of static, drawing Klim's attention away from the story. The static died away, but the radio wasn't totally quiet, there was something else there, a faint voice, more imagined than heard. Klim cocked his head and tried to listen. It was a voice, barely audible, the origin probably many kilometres away. Maybe two barge captains passing the time by having a good chat.

'...Then he realises he's left his gun and holster up in the brothel. But ol' Chehn is not finished yet. He tacks himself onto the back of the raid and goes in through the front door with the rest of the boys and...'

The voice was still there, but it wasn't barge captains or any other local. This voice spoke in English.

'The girl was most surprised to see ol' Chehn turn up in her room. She—'

'Shut up!' Klim stood and headed for the boat. The men watched him go in silence. The radio was quiet now. He climbed over the gunwale and stared at it, willed it to make a noise, to bring back the English-speaking voice.

He got his wish.

'I say again, this is Todd McLean. I am on the MEKONG DAWN. Terrorists have seized the vessel. The crew is dead. Some passengers are dead. Can anyone hear me?'

* * * * *

Todd released the transmit button on the radio. This was the fifth time he had tried to raise someone. The guards must soon come back around on their rounds. When that happened he would need to turn the radio off and hide. He moved to the port doorway and checked the companionway. Clear! He went to the starboard doorway. Nothing but darkness.

With a growing feeling of despair he looked at the walkie-talkie. Maybe it didn't have the range to get a signal out very far. Maybe he needed to be higher. He could try climbing up onto the wheelhouse roof, maybe even the sundeck, but the thought of leaving his hiding place drove that idea from his mind. He would be in plain sight of any hijackers up there.

The radio crackled. A voice came through, louder than Todd expected. He fumbled with the volume control and felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead.

'This is Captain Klim of the Cambodian National Police. I have you weak but readable, Mr McLean.'

Todd pressed the transmit button so hard it hurt his thumb. 'Thank God! Terrorists have seized the boat. They've killed the captain and some of the passengers. They're killing everyone. Please help me!'

In his excitement and desperation he forgot to release the transmit button. When no response came through he realised his mistake and lifted his thumb.

'Do you know where you are, Mr McLean?'

'They have the boat moored beside a mountain. A big mountain with antennas on it.'

* * * * *

Klim looked up at the men standing on the island. They stared at him wide-eyed.

'Don't just stand there gawping! Get me a map of Tonle Sap.'

No one moved.

'Now!'

One of the men snapped out of the trance and went to a pile of equipment. He picked up a map and brought it to Klim.

Klim folded out the map on a seat and took a small torch out of a pouch on his belt.

'A mountain with antennas?' He moved the circle of torchlight over the map as he muttered. 'A mountain with antennas?' Quickly, he picked out the spot heights

around Tonle Sap. Three showed structures on the summits, two to the south and one to the north. He glanced down at the scale. The mountains were forty to fifty kilometres apart. It would take at least a day to reach the farthest one and that didn't include the time needed to search the other two mountains along the way. He needed more information.

'Mr McLean? Do you know where you are? Are you north or south of the lake?'

Klim released the microphone button.

The radio remained quiet.

'Mr McLean?'

The silence lingered on. Klim punched his fist into the seat back and cursed.

* * * * *

The beam of torchlight moved around the interior of the wheelhouse. Todd crouched under the control console and watched it cross the captain's corpse and climb the rear bulkhead.

He'd almost missed the footsteps on the starboard companionway and had only moments to turn off the radio and hide. The hijacker's outline was silhouetted in the window of the wheelhouse door. The barrel of a rifle followed the beam of light wherever it went.

The beam of light crossed the bulkhead and stopped on the red-painted cabinet on the wall. The cabinet hung open and Todd swallowed hard as he realised his mistake. The mistake that was about to get him killed.

The hijacker muttered something in Khmer. The words were lost on Todd, but not the inflection, which was something akin to, 'What the hell!'

The beam of light moved quickly now, urgently. It lit the space beyond the helm and, finding nothing, jerked to the floor. It crossed towards the console and found him crouching there.

Todd blinked in the glare of the beam. He heard a metallic snick and knew it was a safety catch being flicked. The hijacker yelled and more yells answered him from somewhere aft. Running feet pounded on the deck.

The hijacker decided to open the wheelhouse door. He took a hand from his weapon and slid the door on its track but had to lift the barrel to clear the window frame.

Todd saw that the assault rifle no longer pointed at him. The hijackers would kill him, of that he was sure. His only chance was now, while the hijacker brought his gun around the window frame. He raised the flare gun, cocked the hammer and squeezed the trigger.

The noise was softer than he expected, like a champagne cork released from a bottle. The flare gun kicked slightly in his grip and a streak of red light erupted from the stubby barrel, crossed the wheelhouse in a nanosecond and embedded itself into the hijacker's chest.

The hijacker stumbled backwards, the terror on his face illuminated by the fizzing red flare that burned deep into his torso. He screamed and tried to pry the flare from his chest but the searing heat defeated him. In desperation he backed onto the railing and didn't stop, launching himself over it.

Todd heard the splash as he moved for the opposite door. Out of the corner of his eye he saw another hijacker running down the companionway towards him,

gun up. Todd leapt over the railing in a flying dive, clearing it as the sound of machinegun fire filled the air. The water closed around him and he angled deep, the sound of shooting replaced by *pfffffft pfffffft* as bullets struck the water somewhere over his head.

For the third time in two days, Todd McLean swam for his life.

* * * * *

Nancy snapped awake at the sound of gunfire. The other passengers were awake too. Nervous chatter came out of the darkness in the dining saloon. She could hear the hijackers yelling and running along the port companionway. A few more bursts of automatic gunfire split the night and then the few brief moments of pandemonium came to an end.

Nancy settled back against the bulkhead. Soo-Li's head was on her lap. She could feel the girl's fingers digging deep into the flesh of her leg.

'It's all over now, sweetheart. Nothing to worry about. Go back to sleep.' She rubbed the girl's back and felt the fingers relax.

Ky appeared in the doorway. He held a torch in one hand, his knife in the other. Two gunmen flanked him, the barrels of their weapons pointing into the saloon. He flicked the torch about, running the beam of light across the faces of the passengers and crew lining the walls. Nancy knew he was looking for someone in particular.

The beam of light ran down the starboard side then started back up the port. It lit up Collette's face, then Fred's, stopped on Scott's for a moment before it moved on to her. Nancy squinted in the brilliance of the beam. She held up a hand to shield her eyes and realised Ky had crossed the floor and was standing over her.

'Come with me.'

'What's going on?' Nancy asked.

'One of my men is hurt—burned. You will treat him.'

Nancy lifted Soo-Li's head from her lap and shifted her towards Scott. Ky lowered the torch beam and saw the girl there. He stooped and grabbed her arm, dragging her to her feet.

Soo-Li cried out in sleepy protest. She opened her eyes, saw Ky and tried to pull back towards Nancy.

'You lied to me, you little whore! That boy was on this boat the whole time.'

No! I—'

Ky brought his arm back and made to punch the girl in the face with the fist wrapped around the handle of his knife.

Nancy grabbed the arm. His flesh felt as hard as iron. 'Hit her or touch a hair on her head and you can treat your man yourself. I won't do it.'

Ky's menacing stare shifted to Nancy. 'Then I will kill you, too. I will cut your throat right here so your husband can watch you bleed out in front of him.'

The hatred in his eyes almost defeated her resolve, but somewhere up forward a man screamed, a man who was obviously in a great deal of pain. Ky's eyes flicked to the sound.

'If you want me to treat him then let the girl go.'

Another scream and Ky looked at Soo-Li. 'Another time.' He pushed her towards Scott and grabbed Nancy's arm. 'Get your stuff. Come with me.'

The hijackers had placed the injured man on a bunk in one of the forward cabins. He lay on his back and at first Nancy thought his shirt was open, but as she played Ky's torch over the writhing figure, she saw the material had been completely burned away from his chest, exposing a charred, black crater.

'Can you help him?'

Nancy stared at the wound. Her nostrils twitched at the stench of burned flesh. 'He needs a hospital.'

'He can't have one. Do what you can.'

Pulling on a pair of latex gloves, Nancy examined the wound closer. Pieces of material, presumably from his shirt, were burned into the blackened flesh. She used a pair of tweezers to delicately pull away the bits she could. The casualty writhed about on the bunk and Ky detailed two men to hold him still.

'Can't you give him something for the pain?'

Nancy thought about the powerful sedatives in the first-aid kit and about Major Sinh's plan to dope the guards. For it to work, she would need to use every one of the tablets in their food. But her patient cried out in agony and she knew she must do her best for him. She decided to sacrifice two of the tablets and removed them from the kit. The man was barely lucid. She doubted he would be able to swallow them whole.

'I need two spoons.'

Ky disappeared down the companionway and returned moments later with two spoons from the dining saloon. He handed them to Nancy.

She placed the tablets into one spoon and used the back of the other to crush them to a fine powder. Then she fed the powder to the wounded man, trickling it into his mouth. The sedatives were good for four to six hours normally, but she knew they weren't meant to treat burn victims or trauma. The pain would soon eat through whatever relief they gave, and she couldn't afford to squander the tablets if their escape plan was to have any chance of success.

The man settled into a kind of uneasy stupor. The writhing stopped, replaced by an incoherent muttering. The two guards let go of his limbs and backed towards the door.

'I've done all I can. He needs a doctor and a hospital with the right equipment—fluids, antiseptics.'

Ky stepped aside and let her out onto the companionway. 'I do not have any way of getting him to a hospital. Perhaps when the colonel returns with the boat tomorrow.'

Nancy nodded and tried not to walk too fast as she headed back to the dining saloon. Ky followed as far as the breezeway. She found her way to Scott, Ang and the others.

Scott moved aside and made room for her to sit on the deck. 'How'd it go?'

'If they don't get him to a hospital he'll be dead in two or three days, but that isn't our problem. Malko is returning to the boat tomorrow.'

'How do you know this? Ang's voice out of the darkness.

'Ky told me the colonel will be back with the small boat tomorrow.'

Scott put his arm around her shoulders. 'So, if the governments aren't paying our ransoms, we can expect retribution.'

'He will make an example of some of us, yes,' Ang said.

Nancy moved into Scott's side and placed a hand on the sleeping girl's back. 'Then this plan of ours had better work, hadn't it. It's our only chance.'

Chapter 25

Todd clung to the bough of a tree and looked back over his shoulder. The swamps were in darkness and he couldn't see the MEKONG DAWN or any sign of pursuit. He had no idea how far he'd swum, but it must have been three or four hundred metres. He'd deliberately swum away from the island, for that was where the hijackers would expect him to go, and where they would concentrate their search. It would be much safer out in the swamps, at least until daylight. But he must get out of the water.

It wasn't until he reached up to grab the branch with his other hand that he realised he was still holding the flare gun. He slipped it into the pocket of his board shorts and hauled himself up onto the bough. Water dripped from his body and he winced at the noise it made. As he climbed higher, he hoped he was concealed a little by the tree's foliage. He settled into a fork some five metres above the water and listened. There was only the sound of frogs and insects.

He felt the weight of the flare gun in his pocket and pulled it free.

Why the hell didn't I keep the bloody radio?

A foolish thought. It probably wouldn't have survived the immersion anyway, but he couldn't help but think there were police out in the swamps, looking for the MEKONG DAWN. He hadn't had time to give them a direction or to tell them he was on the north side of the lake.

So bloody close!

He recalled the captain's questions, the urgency in his tone. They were out there somewhere looking for him, looking for a needle in the proverbial haystack, and he hadn't been able to tell them where he was.

He lifted the flare gun and looked at it, just a vague shape in front of his eyes. That walkie-talkie wouldn't have had a lot of range. Maybe ten or twenty kilometres at most. The police had to be fairly close.

Close enough?

Todd felt his other pocket. The flares bulged the material of his shorts. Shifting his weight on the bough, he slipped a hand into his pocket and pulled out one of the small, bullet-shaped cylinders. Breaking open the flare gun, he ejected the cartridge from the spent flare, blowing through the barrel to clear it of as much water as possible.

'Do you really want to do this, Todd?' His voice sounded weak in the darkness. 'It's a two-edged sword, you know. The hijackers will be able to tell where you are.'

He recalled the words of his Uncle Harry, an ex-soldier. 'Never fire from the same place twice, Toddy. Always move after shooting, matey. Fire and move.'

Making up his mind, Todd slipped the flare into the gun and snapped the breach closed. 'I hope you're right, Uncle Harry.'

He stood on the bough and tried to peer up through the darkness. He couldn't tell if there was open sky above him or not, but decided to take a chance. Maybe the flare would punch through the foliage?

He lifted the flare gun, cocked the hammer, aimed straight over his head and pulled the trigger. The gun kicked in his grip and the flare shot away, a streak of red light that travelled all of two metres before it hit a branch and ricocheted back towards him. Todd ducked as it passed a centimetre over his head and plummeted into the water where it fizzed out.

But the brief moment of light had shown him a gap in the foliage just a metre to his right. He quickly loaded another flare and fired.

This time the flare zoomed into the sky like a laser beam and burst into a bright red star that began to float back to earth. Todd watched it for only a second or two then pocketed the flare gun and climbed down into the water.

Fire and move!

He swam away from the tree as fast as he could.

* * * * *

Across the lake the party of police had settled down for the night. Klim was exhausted, but sleep eluded him. He sat in the boat, as close as possible to the marine radio. The volume was turned up full, but there had been nothing for nearly an hour, not even the banter of barge pilots. He strained to hear the young man's voice on the ether. All he needed to hear from him was a simple direction. West or north? If he knew which way the Mekong Dawn had steamed after she was hijacked, then they might stand a chance of finding her tomorrow. But all he could hear was the whine of insects as they swirled about his head.

One of the men roused from his place by the campfire and walked beyond the circle of light, unzipping his fly as he went. Klim watched him for a moment, his eyes drawn to the movement. Then he settled back into the seat and closed his eyes. If he couldn't re-establish contact with Mclean, they would have to follow the original plan and search the areas south-west of the lake first. Mclean had said he was near a mountain with antennas on the summit. There were two such mountains to the south of Tonle Sap, and the police commander in Kampong Chhnang had said the only waterways capable of taking a vessel the size of the MEKONG DAWN were on the south side of the lake. That was the area the helicopter had been searching. Unless they got better information, he had no choice but to start there.

'Captain?'

Klim opened his eyes to see the man standing on the lakeshore above the boat. He was pointing to the north and Klim turned his head.

A faint red star sat a few degrees above the horizon, sinking slowly. A signal flare. It was a long way off, maybe twenty kilometres or more and would be gone below the horizon in a few seconds.

'Get a map and a compass.' Klim leapt from the boat and picked up a stick that he used to scratch a line in the dirt that pointed directly at the flare. When he looked back up the flare had gone.

A few moments later the man returned holding a large-scale map of Tonle Sap and a prism compass. Klim snatched the compass and stood at the end of the line

he had drawn in the dirt, farthest end from the flare. He unfolded the lid and prism and sighted along the line to where he'd seen the flare, reading the bearing aloud.

'Three-five-three degrees.'

He took the map, unfolded it on the ground and orientated it to the real world by the light of a torch. Then he took a pen from his pocket and traced a line from their position on the map, following a bearing of three-five-three degrees. His method was crude, he knew. He should have had the map on a flat surface and been using a protractor and ruler to plot the bearing more accurately, but he only needed a rough gauge of direction. North and west were ninety degrees apart, and all he needed to know was should they explore north or west?

'That flare could have come from anyone, Captain,' the other officer said. 'It could have been a barge pilot who has had a little too much rice wine or somebody's birthday celebration. Who knows?'

Klim ignored the man. He projected the line up from the south shore of Tonle Sap. It crossed the lake near the southern tip, about eight kilometres of open water. Then it reached the swamps on the far side and climbed to the east of Boeng Tonle Chhma.

'Well, I'll be damned.'

The line passed close to a spot height marked on the map. There was a symbol on the spot height, a Y with a line across the top. Klim flicked the torch beam down to the legend and found the symbol and its meaning.

Antenna.

He shifted the beam back up to the spot height. It was marked as reaching three hundred and twenty metres above the surrounding terrain. It even had a name.

Mountain of the Sun.

Klim stared at the symbol on the map, his mind racing. Then he reached a decision.

'Get the men up. We're crossing the lake tonight.'

'But it's too dark to see.'

'Not on the open water. We need to be at the north shore by first light.'

Chapter 26

Sipping a cup of coffee, Scott watched the growing daylight through the camouflage netting and waited for the tablet Collette had given him to wash the tension from his body. He lowered his eyes to the murky brown liquid in the cup. It only sloshed about a little bit. The tremors were easing already.

Beside him, screened from the guards in the breezeway by a tight group of passengers, Nancy used a spoon and bowl to crush the sedatives into a fine powder. She worked carefully, adding two or three tablets at a time until the entire pack of thirty had been reduced to dust.

Miles, the owner of the tablets, eyed the powder with a raised eyebrow. 'I only take one whenever I get a migraine and it knocks me out for eight hours. That amount should put an elephant on its ear.'

Nancy stirred the powder around the bowl. 'It will have to be mixed through their food thoroughly. We need it to affect them all if possible.'

Tamko offered one of his brilliant smiles. 'You leave that to me. The chefs will do a good job of stirring it through the food.' He paused. 'No, I will mix it in myself. It is the only way to be sure.'

Nancy folded a paper napkin into an envelope and then poured the powder into it, using the spoon to scrape out every last remnant, then she cleaned the crumbs from the spoon, dropping that, too, into the napkin. She gave the napkin to Tamko. 'It's all yours.'

Tamko took the napkin and smiled at the passengers as he went into the galley.

With his medication taking effect, Scott could think with some of his normal clarity. 'I hope this works. They are going to be really pissed off if we only succeed in making a couple of them a little dopey.'

Fred placed a hand on his shoulder. 'We have to try something. We can't just sit around and do nothing – waiting for our end like lambs in a slaughterhouse.'

The other passengers murmured their agreement and Scott realised that everyone, including the remaining crew, were gambling on them pulling this off.

Five minutes later Tamko emerged from the galley pushing a serving trolley ahead of him on which stood two large pots of steaming noodles. He reached the tables, took one pot from the trolley and set it on a stand in the middle of the room. 'Breakfast is served,' he announced.

As they had done the last two mornings, the passengers formed a queue and the serving staff ladled out the noodles into bowls.

Scott looked into his bowl as he and Nancy sat at a table. 'I'm sick of bloody noodles. If we get out of this I don't think I could ever eat them again.'

'If we get out of this, they may just become my favourite food. Besides, with the fridges off, they're the only thing the chefs have left.'

Tamko pushed the trolley with the other pot to the breezeway doors and spoke in Khmer to the two guards there. As on previous mornings, he refused to ladle out the food for them or allow any of his staff to do so. The guards slung their weapons and picked up bowls from the trolley, taking turns with the ladle. They took their bowls to the far wall of the breezeway and leant against it while they ate.

Scott and the other passengers ate their breakfast and watched the guards eating hungrily. More gunmen came and filled bowls then disappeared with them to other parts of the ship. He knew the major problem in the plan would be to overpower all the guards at once without any of them getting off a shot. The two in the breezeway were close enough to be reached in seconds, but the pair at the bottom of the gangway had a clear line of sight up into the breezeway. Even drugged and groggy they might still shoot at the passengers as they came out of the dining saloon. He watched this pair of guards fill their bowls then move back down the gangway. They ate standing with their backs to the ship.

Ang looked over at Nancy. 'How long?' It was the fifth time he'd asked the question.

'Twenty minutes, no more. It probably won't knock them out totally, but they will be very sleepy and react slowly.'

Scott locked eyes with Ang 'How do you want to play this?'

Ang looked first at the two guards in the breezeway and then through the starboard windows and camouflage netting at the outline of the two men at the bottom of the gangway. He used his chin to point into the breezeway. 'Those two will be easy. We give them to the slower men.' He looked at Fred. 'My apologies, sir.'

Fred grinned mischievously. 'Hey, I'm a little over the hill, but I'll do my bit. I'll need some help, though.'

Ang scanned the other passengers.

Scott was dismayed to see Ang's gaze settle on the South African, Simon Western. Western had kept pretty much to himself since Ky had deposited him in the saloon, mostly sitting alone in the corner and talking to no one. Scott was about to suggest that Ang pick someone from the crew, but Western looked up and nodded.

'I'll do it.'

'Okay. That takes care of the two in the breezeway.' Ang turned to Scott. 'Do you think you could help me with the pair at the bottom of the gangway?'

Nancy snapped up straight. 'I don't think Scott is fit enough to—'

'Count me in.' Scott squeezed her arm.

'Scotty? Are you sure?'

'I'm a bit screwed up in the head, honey, but the rest of me works just fine.' He turned to Ang. 'I'll help you.'

'Great!' Ang grinned. 'We have our little strike team. We need to position ourselves as close to the doors as possible, with a clear run. Once we start, there will be no stopping.'

They finished breakfast and Tamko and his staff cleared the tables. The passengers repositioned themselves around the saloon as they had done on the preceding days. Some sat on chairs and others on the floor. Ang had Scott, Fred and Western place chairs as close as possible to the doors. Scott realised the chairs would be easier to get a running start from, with Fred and Western closest, then Ang and Scott. To the guards it would look as if the four men were waiting for a table to be cleared so that they could start a game of cards.

Out in the breezeway the guards finished eating. They placed their bowls on the trolley then leant back against the wall. Scott watched their eyes. The blinks were becoming slower and longer. From where he sat he couldn't see out onto the gangway, but he hoped those two men were beginning to feel drowsy as well.

For five minutes they sat and watched. The guards spoke softly to each other and the one on the left placed the butt of his rifle on the deck, holding it by the barrel as he leant on the wall. The other man had his weapon resting across the crook of his arm, but Scott could see his eyes were closed. The guard on the left resisted for a minute or two more, shaking his head and rubbing a hand over his face. As soon as his head drooped, Ang stood up.

'It's now or never.'

Scott climbed to his feet and readied himself behind Fred and Western, crouched like runners about to start a race.

Ang chopped a hand towards the doors. 'Go!'

All four men moved off at a jog.

Fred angled for the guard on the right, snatched the AK74 out of his hands and brought the butt up in one smooth motion, collecting his man under the temple. The guard's knees buckled and he went down without a sound.

Western was not so lucky. He tried to snatch the rifle but the guard's eyes snapped open. Western dropped his shoulder and rammed it hard into the man's stomach, knocking the wind out of him. The rifle clattered to the deck as Western took hold of the guard's head and slammed it back into the bulkhead with a sickening crack.

Then Scott was through the breezeway. He followed Ang onto the gangway, their feet stamping loudly. The two guards at the bottom were leaning on the handrails, one on each side. The one on the right saw the attack coming and managed to get his weapon up. A burst of automatic fire ripped the air between Scott and Ang, the bullets tearing into woodwork above the breezeway. Then Ang hit the shooter hard with a chopping punch to the side of the neck and he dropped like a sack of wheat.

The other guard was slower. His weapon came up and pointed at Scott's belly, but his trigger hand was still holding the noodle bowl. Scott launched himself over the handrail and took the guard around the throat in a flying tackle that carried them both to the ground. Finding himself on top of his adversary, Scott brought his knee up hard into the man's groin. The guard screamed in agony and Scott punched and kicked for all he was worth. The guard kicked and struggled beneath him until Ang hit him between the eyes with the butt of an AK74.

'Cover the walkways!'

Scott rolled off the unconscious guard and snatched up his weapon. He dropped to one knee and flicked the safety catch to automatic. 'Fred! Get them moving! Now!'

At Scott's shout Fred waved the passengers and crew out through the doors. Soo-Li was the first to appear, then the woman with her arm in a sling followed by her husband. He knew Nancy would be the last down the gangway, following along behind like a mother hen after making sure everyone else has left. Scott cursed his wife's sense of duty.

Then, through chinks in the camouflage net, he saw a cabin door open on the right. A gunman appeared and raised his weapon. Scott fired a three round burst and the man ducked back through the doorway. Off to his left Ang opened fire. The policeman had his weapon aimed high and Scott looked up to see shadowy movement on the sundeck. He fired another burst in that direction, but couldn't tell if he'd hit anyone.

* * * * *

Todd snapped awake at the burst of automatic gunfire and nearly fell from the branch on which he had spent the night. He rubbed a hand over his face and tried to take stock of his position. Have the hijackers found him? Are they shooting at him?

More shots rang out and he realised the shooting was some distance away. He couldn't see the MEKONG DAWN from his position, but he knew that a gun battle was going on somewhere near the ship.

The first thought that crept into his mind was that the hijackers were killing the hostages, but the firing didn't sound right for that, too sporadic and intermittent.

What then?

That policeman, the captain on the radio. He'd seen the flare and found the ship. They could be releasing the hostages right now.

Suddenly, Todd felt very lonely in his hiding place in the swamp. What if the passengers were freed and he was left here to die?

Another shot sounded out and he decided to give it half an hour then swim back to where he could see the ship. He needed to find out what was going on.

* * * * *

The passengers and crew ran down the gangway in single file and past where Scott and Ang covered the escape. Tamko and Nancy were the last to emerge from the saloon, having made sure their charges were safe before getting out themselves. Fred followed them down the gangway but Scott couldn't see Western anywhere.

Ang slapped Scott's shoulder as Nancy and Tamko passed. 'Fall back! Get to the tree line then cover me.'

Scott leapt to his feet and ran behind Fred. They reached the trees. 'You cover left,' he told the older man. 'I'll take the right.'

Fred gave a thumbs up and positioned himself on one knee beside a large tree. Scott moved right and found cover beside a boulder. Squinting down his sights, he scanned the MEKONG DAWN from the bow to the breezeway.

Nothing moved. The hijackers were all taking cover.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Ang get to his feet and turn for the jungle. Two hijackers ran into the breezeway from the far companionway and Scott fired two shots. One figure fell to the deck but the other managed to escape back around the corner.

Ang reached the jungle and paused behind Scott. 'I'll position on higher ground to cover you and Fred. Don't waste your shots. Just keep them from getting off the boat. Give me fifteen seconds then fall back past me.'

'Okay.'

Scott started to count in his head. He reached ten and told Fred to fall back then kept on counting. Fred got to his feet and followed Ang up the hillside. Something moved in the breezeway and he loosed a single shot. The movement stopped. Then, near the bow of the boat, he saw the camouflage net lift as someone tried to climb over the gunwale. Scott fired twice and a body fell into the water.

Flicking the fire selector to safe, he retreated. Ang was fifty metres back, laying prone behind a log, his weapon aimed down the slope. Fred had taken a covering position thirty metres behind him.

'Keep them moving.' Ang waved at the backs of the retreating passengers.

The panicked run had now broken down into a mulling crowd. Scott found Soo-Li helping Nancy with Joyce. He grabbed the girl's arm.

'Which way to the temple?'

The girl looked dazed and stared at the gun in Scott's hands. He shook her arm. 'Which way, Soo-Li?'

The girl looked up at Scott then turned to point obliquely up the mountain. 'That way.'

'Keep moving as fast as you can. But keep the old people in sight. Don't lose them in the jungle.' The girl nodded and moved off. Scott turned to Nancy.

'Keep them moving, sweetheart. Follow Soo-Li as fast as you can.'

'Are they chasing us?'

'Not yet. But we can't hang around here too much longer. Once we lose sight of the boat we won't be able to hold them there. The buggers will get off and hunt us down.'

Nancy took hold of Joyce's good arm and led her after Soo-Li.

For a few moments Scott watched the passengers climb higher onto the mountain then looked for a position from which to cover Fred and Ang as they leapfrogged up the slope. He could barely make out the shape of the MEKONG DAWN through the undergrowth.

'This just might work out yet,' he muttered to himself as he went to ground and flicked the safety catch to fire.

* * * * *

Through one of the curtained windows of a cabin door, Jenkins watched the gunmen running by as they tried to get a handle on the situation. There was shooting and screaming and he felt terribly exposed and alone, but there was no way he'd leave the MEKONG DAWN without his diamonds.

This cabin gave him a view of part of the breezeway and down the walkway towards the stern on the port side. Ky and three other gunmen crowded against the wall by the corner. Every few seconds a shot crashed out from somewhere on the mountain and they were forced deeper into cover. That Cambodian fellow and the two Australians were doing a good job of making the hijackers keep their heads down, but with the gunmen on this side of the ship there was no way Jenkins could get out of the cabin and reach the engine room and his diamonds.

He stepped back from the door and looked about the cabin. Two suitcases, their lids wide open, lay on the floor. Someone had spread the contents over the bunks. Jenkins picked up a few scattered items of clothing and tossed them from one bunk to another. Something silver caught his eye and he picked it up, a little battery-operated reading light with a single LED at one end and a clip at the other to hold the lamp to a book. He flicked the switch and the LED glowed into life. Switching it off, he placed the lamp in his pocket then went back to the door to wait and watch.

Footsteps sounded up the companionway and onto the sundeck. No shots had been fired for a few minutes now and the gunmen were getting braver. Only Ky remained near the breezeway. Malko's lieutenant pulled a mobile phone from his fatigues pocket and punched in some numbers. It took thirty seconds for a connection to be made and he gabbled away in Khmer. He walked down the companionway away from Jenkins, his voice loud and excited, then stepped into one of the forward cabins. His voice faded as he shut the door.

Jenkins cracked the cabin door and put his eye to the opening. He could still hear movement up on the sundeck but the walkway down the port side remained clear so he stepped out and pulled the door closed. Moving quickly, he crossed to the breezeway and stole a glance around the corner.

Empty.

He continued aft to the engine room door. When he un-dogged and pulled the insulated door open he was greeted with deathly silence and blackness. Stepping into the narrow companionway, he closed the door behind him. The darkness was complete.

Pulling the reading lamp from his pocket, he switched it on. The little bulb illuminated the top four steps of the companionway leading down into the engine room. Jenkins held the lamp in front of him and descended the steps. Moving quietly, he passed between the two large diesel engines and found the hatch leading forward. The hatch hung open and Jenkins tried to remember if Ky had closed it after he was dragged from the compartment. He supposed it had been left open and stepped through onto the grating.

The lamp threw light only a couple of metres and the far reaches of the walkway remained in darkness. With each step Jenkins could see a little more of the compartment. He found a section of grating had been lifted from the walkway and now lay against the side. Shining the lamp up and down the space, he tried to work out if this was the section where he had hidden the diamonds. It took only a moment to realise that it was.

He dropped to his knees and plunged his arm into dark bilge water, feeling desperately through the silt and slime.

The laptop was gone.

He knew of only one person who would have any reason to come down here and search.

* * * * *

Ky held the phone away from his ear as Malko's voice screamed from the speaker.

'Find them, Ky. Find them and kill five or six of them. The passengers' governments are refusing to pay or to even negotiate with us. We will leave a few bodies on the steps of their embassies and see if that doesn't soften their resolve.'

Ky wiped a hand over his face. He hadn't slept for more than a few minutes at a time since they boarded the MEKONG DAWN. His head felt fuzzy and he had trouble focusing.

'The passengers may not matter, Colonel.'

'What do you mean?'

'One of them was smuggling something on the ship.'

'Smuggling what?'

Ky subconsciously placed a hand over the ammunition pouch on his belt. 'Diamonds, Colonel. Many, many diamonds. I cannot be sure, but I think their value may far exceed any ransom we could hope to get for the passengers.'

The phone went silent for a long time and he checked that the call was still connected. Malko's voice came through once more, the tone softer.

'You have these diamonds?'

'I have them on me.'

'Do any of the others know?'

'I've told no one. I was waiting until you returned.'

'Good man. Keep it that way.' Another long pause. 'This may be the turning point, Ky. If what you tell me is correct, this may be the boost in funds the cause needs. We can buy arms, machinery, even mercenaries. Cambodia will be ours.'

'I look forward to that day, Colonel.'

'As do I, Ky. I am already on my way back to you. When I get there we will deal with the meddlesome passengers. Then we will find someone who knows about diamonds and can help us.'

Malko disconnected the call and Ky folded the phone closed. He slipped it into his fatigues pocket then pulled the office chair into the middle of the purser's cabin and sat in it, wondering how things had changed so rapidly. The prisoners had been docile and compliant for two days. Now they were gone and one of his men was dead, another wounded beyond the point of being useful. Including himself, he was left with eight able-bodied men to round up the prisoners.

'It's that policeman's doing. When I find where the passengers are hiding, I will personally cut Sinh's throat.'

Chapter 27

Nancy had one arm looped under Joyce's good shoulder. The first-aid kits banged against her side as they struggled upwards. The old woman panted heavily, but kept up a steady pace, a look of determination on her face. The fitter passengers had paired themselves off with those less capable to help with the climb. Soo-Li plodded on twenty paces ahead of the main group.

The jungle was thicker here than on the lower slopes, but every now and then a break in the canopy gave Nancy a view out across the swamps. The horizon remained hidden behind that perpetual tropical haze but here and there sunlight glinted off patches of open water.

The escapees were strung out in a long line that extended a hundred and fifty metres down the mountainside. She caught a glimpse of Scott, his stolen AK74 held at the ready as he, Ang and Fred covered the escape.

Nancy called ahead: 'Soo-Li?'

The girl stopped and peered back, her brown face slick with sweat.

'The slower ones are having trouble keeping up, sweetheart. We need to stop and wait for them.'

'No need, Miss Nancy. We are here.' She pointed across the slope at what looked to be just another jumble of mountain boulders. But then Nancy saw that the stones were neatly squared and mated together to form a wall some four metres high.

Nancy and Joyce followed Soo-Li along the base of the wall to an opening that faced down the slope. A mass of vine and jungle growth blocked the ancient

gateway which had partly collapsed, littering the ground with stone blocks. The girl found a passage near the left-hand wall and led them through.

Nancy exited the undergrowth to find herself standing in a large, paved courtyard. The inner side of the wall had a two-metre wide roof, like a veranda, running around three sides. The roof protected a stone fresco cut into the wall. There were thousands of images.

‘It looks like a piece of Angkor Wat.’ Joyce’s voice was breathless as she stared about in wonder.

Nancy nodded and led the older woman to one of the stone stairways leading up to the fresco. She helped her to sit in the shade. ‘Probably built by the same people.’

Near the back of the courtyard a large statue, five metres high, faced the opening. The statue depicted an oriental woman wearing a pointed hat. She had her hands together in front of her chin and a serene smile on her face.

Joyce saw the statue. ‘I hope she’s a deity for good luck.’

‘Me too.’

Nancy watched the passengers file through the gateway. Tamko and his staff arrived and began distributing bottles of water. She wondered at the dedication of the man, always looking after his charges, and vowed that if she survived this, she would write a glowing recommendation to the purser’s employers.

Tamko came over and thrust a water bottle into Nancy’s hand. ‘We made it, Mrs Morris.’

‘So far. At least we’re out of their clutches for a while.’

‘And that is good.’

Tamko had been forced to watch as the ship’s officers were executed, leaving him the senior person on the MEKONG DAWN. Nancy knew if the killing started again, the purser would probably be the next to face Malko’s evil angel. ‘That is very good. Have you seen my husband?’

Tamko pointed back through the gateway. ‘He and the other armed men are taking up positions just beyond the opening.’

Nancy thanked the man and took three bottles of water from him. She found Scott and Ang moving a fallen log into position by the gateway. Fred lay in the undergrowth with his weapon at his shoulder, watching the approach. She gave each of them a water bottle and then stood near Scott.

‘What happens now, Scotty? We can’t stay here for ever. We’ve got water, but no food.’

‘There can’t be more than eight of them left, Honey. If we can hold them off, show them we won’t be recaptured without a major fire fight, we may just force them to give up and go away.’

‘And if they don’t? What if they decide to starve us out? They can do that, you know.’

‘Ang has a plan for that.’

‘Oh?’ She turned to the policeman who was busy counting the rounds in his magazine. ‘What’s this new plan?’

Ang pointed up the hill. ‘Once we get ourselves fixed here, we send a couple of people up the mountain to break something on the antennas. The

communications company will send people out to fix them, and hopefully find and rescue us.'

Nancy looked up to where the tips of the antennas showed on the skyline. It seemed a good plan, but she worried about the timing. 'That might take days. Some of the elderly passengers will find it hard waiting for that long.'

Scott pointed down the mountain with his water bottle. 'You think they'd be better off back on the MEKONG DAWN?'

'Well... no. I'm just concerned about them.'

'They'll get through this, honey. We'll all get through this if we work together.'

Nancy glared at him. Fine words from a man who escapes into his own drug-induced world when the going gets tough. But she held her tongue. At least Scott was rational and functional. They would not have made it this far without him. It felt good to have the real Scott back.

* * * * *

As far as Jenkins could tell, Ky's men were all up on the sundeck watching the shore for any sign of the passengers.

He moved quietly along the port companionway and stopped against the wall beside the door to the purser's office. With a flick of his head he stole a quick glance through the window. Ky sat at a desk, his back to the door. He had his head resting in his hands and looked to be asleep.

Jenkins slipped the safety catch on his AK74 to 'fire,' opened the door and stepped through. He pressed the flash suppressor into the back of Ky's neck. The head came up but Jenkins pushed it back down with a savage thrust.

'Make a sound and I'll blow your brains all over the desk. Do you understand?'

The head gave a nod, but Ky's right hand moved to the knife in his belt.

'I'll have that.' Jenkins pulled the knife and held it against Ky's throat with one hand, the other pushing down hard with the rifle. Ky whimpered but remained still.

'Where are my diamonds?'

'I don't know what you are talking about.' The voice was muffled against the top of the desk.

'The diamonds I hid in the bilge. You went back down there and found them. Where are they?'

'I don't—'

Jenkins slashed the knife upwards. Ky's earlobe parted before the razor edge and a flap of skin fell onto the desk blotter, forming a little ring of blood.

'I will cut you up piece by little piece until you tell me where my diamonds are.' He moved the blade back to Ky's ear and the man squirmed.

'Tell me!'

'I have them here.'

'Where?'

'In my ammunition pouch. They are all there.'

'They had better be.'

Jenkins looked down at the pouch but he couldn't get at it with Ky sitting down. He slipped the knife around Ky's throat so that it rested above his Adam's apple then let the gun drop so it hung from his shoulder by the sling.

‘Very slowly, get up. One wrong move and you’re a dead man.’

Ky used his hands to push himself up from the desk. Jenkins kept the blade hard against his throat.

Ky reached a standing position and Jenkins used his free hand to reach for the ammunition pouch. He fumbled with the clasp but managed to get the flap open. He felt the baize bag with his fingertips and lifted it from the pouch. The size and weight seemed right, but he couldn’t be sure.

‘This is all of them?’

‘Yes. Yes. I swear.’

Jenkins dropped the bag into his pants pocket then raised the AK74. ‘Sit back down.’ He released the pressure from Ky’s throat and let him sink back onto the chair.

‘You’ll never get away.’ Ky had one hand pressed to his bleeding ear. ‘You will never get out of these swamps.’

Jenkins backed towards the door. He hadn’t thought of what he would do once he got his diamonds back. He was still a long way from civilisation, and with no boat to get him there.

‘He’s right, you know.’ A voice said from behind him.

He whirled to see Malko looming over him, a pistol in his hand. The pistol moved with lightning speed and slammed into the side of Jenkins’ head. His vision swam but he managed to keep his feet. A second blow sent him crumpling onto the floor. He felt the knife being pried from his fingers. The blade pressed against his throat. His vision cleared and Ky’s face was only centimetres from his own.

‘Now I am going to cut your throat and watch you die.’

Jenkins felt the pressure increase and imagined he could already feel the skin parting beneath the razor-edged blade. Ky’s eyes were only a hand’s span from his own and filled with hatred. Malko stood behind him, smiling as he watched the sport.

Jenkins’ mind raced. He needed something – anything to stop what would happen next. He had lost the diamonds as a bargaining tool. Malko would take them from his lifeless body in just a few moments. He remembered the two Australians in the saloon and how one had saved the life of the other by playing on the hijackers’ greed.

‘There are more diamonds.’

His words came as a strained hiss and he didn’t know if they had been heard until Malko reached down and placed a restraining hand on Ky’s arm.

‘You’re lying,’ Malko said.

‘No! No! I swear it’s true. I only brought enough with me to get me out of Asia and get set up somewhere. The bulk of the diamonds are in Siem Reap. I was going to come back for them later.’

‘Where in Siem Reap?’

‘In a hotel safety deposit box. I will take you to them. Let me live and they are all yours.’

He saw the flash of uncertainty in Malko’s eyes and knew then that he had just saved his own life. Malko was driven by greed, and no one understood greed better than Liam Jenkins.

'He is lying.' Ky leant forward and applied more pressure against his throat. 'There are no other diamonds. I should kill him.'

'No. We will deal with the passengers then take the RHIB and our friend here to Siem Reap. If there are no other diamonds, then you can kill him.'

Chapter 28

Scott unclipped the magazine from his AK74 and examined the contents.

'Fifteen rounds here and one up the spout,' he said.

Ang locked his own magazine onto his weapon. 'I have twenty plus a fresh magazine.'

Fred looked forlorn. 'You boys must be saving up for a rainy day. I'm down to eight rounds.'

Ang's eyes swept the jungle downhill from the ruins. 'It may be enough to keep them at bay for a little while, but there is no way we can engage them in a sustained firefight.'

Scott knew the policeman was right. If Malko's men came for them, they would be out of ammunition in a very short time.

'We stand a better chance of holding them off if we concentrate our defences,' Ang said. 'As limited as our firepower is.'

'I agree with Ang.' Fred clipped his magazine back onto his AK74. 'I say we stay together and guard the approach. They can only come at us from one direction. If we make it through the night then we send some people up the mountain to disable the antennas and hopefully bring some help.'

Scott ran a hand over his sweaty face. 'It's going to be a long, hot wait in the sun. Tamko and his people only brought twelve bottles of water. That will be gone by noon. It may be days before someone comes to look at the antennas.'

Fred pointed back into the ruins with his thumb. 'Maybe the young girl knows where we can find water near here. Hell, I'll drink swamp water if it comes down to it. They can treat me for whatever bugs I pick up after we get out of here.'

'We'll survive a few days without food,' Ang said, 'but we do need water.'

'I'll go and talk to Soo-Li.' Scott shouldered his AK74 and climbed through the debris in the gateway.

He found Soo-Li sitting with Nancy in the shade of the narrow roof. She listened intently as Scott explained their predicament. Then her face broke into a broad smile.

'I know where there is water.'

'Is it far? We can't afford to have people separated from the main group for too long,' Scott explained.

'Not far.' She pointed to the right, along the cliff wall that backed the ancient temple. 'At the bottom of the cliffs. Five minutes to get there.'

Nancy gripped the girl's shoulder. 'Are you sure, sweetheart?'

'Yes, Miss Nancy. Not far.'

Scott looked in the direction Soo-Li had indicated. The cliffs were vertical and unclimbable, the jungle at the base a billowing mass of vegetation. Anyone going for water would be well hidden as they moved.

'I'll see if Tamko and some of his people will go and top up the empty water bottles.'

'I'll go with them.' Nancy stood up. 'We want good, clean, flowing water. If they come back with some stagnant crap then we'll all dehydrate from vomiting and diarrhoea.'

'I show you the way, Miss Nancy.' Soo-Li leapt to her feet and took Nancy's hand.

* * * * *

Malko placed Ky on point with himself and three other men strung out on the right, the other four able-bodied men likewise on the left. Apart from Van, all were ex-Khmer Rouge and experienced jungle fighters. They kept their spacing wide as they advanced stealthily through the undergrowth.

The passengers' tracks weren't hard to follow. The grass had been trampled flat, forming a path that led almost straight up the side of the mountain. Malko was a little surprised at this. He had thought they might try to skirt the island and maybe make their way to the helicopter and use the radio to call for help. He had questioned Ky about the aircraft and was disappointed to learn that it had not been destroyed or disabled. Ky had assured him that the pilot was dead and the helicopter useless.

Jenkins had been left bound and gagged in the purser's office. Once they found the passengers and killed them and the meddling policeman, he would take Jenkins to Siem Reap, retrieve the rest of the diamonds, and leave Cambodia forever. He glanced at Ky's back in the shadows. Ky still believed in the ideals. He believed the diamonds would provide the necessary funds to bring their cause to success. But Malko had long known that the cause was lost forever. He only hoped now to raise enough money to fund his escape and retirement, his original plan for the ransom money. But the Western governments had called his bluff and refused to pay. He would leave them with a few dead citizens to remind them of their folly. Hopefully, they would take some of the passengers alive so that he could have some fun with his little angel. Then he would take the diamonds and leave. And if Ky tried to stand in his way, then the young radical would become a martyr to his own cause.

Ky held his fist up beside his head. On cue, the patrol stopped and Malko crept forward to his lieutenant's side.

'What is it?'

Ky pointed through the undergrowth. 'Some sort of building.'

Malko could see nothing but rocks and jungle, but then he picked out shaped stone blocks and straight lines that could only belong to something man-made.

'It looks like an old temple.'

'The passengers are there. The path leads straight to the opening,' Ky whispered.

'But how could they have known it was here?'

'The girl. The wood gatherer's daughter. She must have known about it.'

Malko squinted down the open sights of his AK74 and scanned left and right. Now that he knew what to look for, the structure of the temple stood out. He picked out the long expanse of front wall and the jumble of stone blocks that had once been the entrance arch.

‘How many weapons do they have?’ Malko asked.

‘We recovered all but three.’

‘Enough to keep that narrow opening well defended. How many grenades do we have?’

‘Four.’

‘Give two each to Prak and Huong. Have them creep around to the left wall and throw them over. Make sure they land close to the entrance. That is where the defenders will be. When they explode we will assault the temple.’

* * * * *

‘Don’t scratch at it. You’ll only make it worse.’

Joyce looked up from where she scratched her broken wrist with a small twig pushed beneath the bandages. ‘It’s my arm, Harold. I’ll do what I like with it.’

‘Wait until Nancy comes back from collecting water. I’m sure she’ll have some sort of ointment in her bag of tricks.’

Joyce screwed up her face and poked her tongue at her husband. ‘Fiddlesticks! She said she might be an hour or more. The perspiration is irritating it.’ She resumed her probing with the twig.

Harold leant back against the stone fresco. The other passengers were strung out on his left, all resting in the shade. ‘Nancy shouldn’t have gone. We need her here.’

Joyce pulled out the twig and flicked it at her husband. ‘You leave that young woman alone. She has done a marvellous job of looking after everyone since this horrible business began. When we get out of this, I am going to write a letter to the Australian Prime Minister. That girl deserves a medal.’

Harold gave a little laugh under his breath. ‘If the Australian Prime minister cared anything about her, he would have organised to pay the ransom, not leave her in the clutches of a maniac. And I’ll tell you something else...’ He drew breath and Joyce realised she had triggered one of Harold’s famous political rants. ‘...our government is no better. Someone is going to get a good piece of my mind when we get back home. They—’

Joyce looked up to see what had cut Harold off mid-rant. He had his gaze fixed skyward and she followed his stare to see a drab-green, egg-like shape sail over the wall from somewhere behind them. The egg hit the ground with a metallic clunk then clattered over the flagstones. Three more followed it.

The first egg exploded with a noise like a thunderclap and tiny pieces of metal slammed into the fresco about Joyce’s head. Another egg hit one of the loose masonry blocks and bounced back towards her, coming to rest two metres away at the bottom of the steps on which she sat.

Harold pushed himself away from the fresco and pulled her down onto the steps, throwing his body over hers. The egg exploded and Joyce’s eardrums popped as the shockwave washed over her. Hot metal whizzed past her and

something tore into her leg. Harold cried out and his body shuddered as it absorbed the brunt of the explosion.

The other two eggs exploded near the gateway, but Joyce felt nothing of their effect. People were screaming, the sound muted by the terrible ringing in her ears. She tried to push Harold off, but he had her good arm pinned beneath him.

‘Harold! Harold!’

He didn’t move.

She heard the shooting start.

* * * * *

As the first grenade exploded Ang pushed his face into the pile of rubble. Shrapnel rattled through the foliage. Three more explosions followed, the echoes drowned out by the screams of people inside the temple.

‘We have to go and help them.’ Beside him, Fred tried to get to his feet, but Ang pulled him back down.

‘No! They were trying to take out our defences. They are coming for us.’ He looked across to where Scott lay among the blocks, sighting down his rifle. ‘Get ready!’

Scott gave a thumbs up and Fred chambered a round.

‘Single shot. Save your ammo,’ Ang reminded them.

The first movement came from the right. Two men broke cover and ran towards the temple, firing from the hip. Scott’s AK74 barked twice and one of the men went down. The other thought better of his headlong assault and threw himself onto the ground.

‘Get ready, Fred. Our side next,’ Ang warned.

He caught a flash of movement in the trees on the left and loosed off a shot. The movement stopped, but was replaced by the starlight twinkle of a muzzle flash as someone shot back on full automatic. Rounds slammed into the masonry in front of Ang and a ricochet whined off into the distance. Fred fired and the muzzle flash ceased, but Ang had no idea if the shooter was hit or not. Then he spotted movement farther left, three more men, and realised the shooting was covering fire for an assault on the entrance. He fired at the running figures, squeezing off five rounds in quick succession. A man screamed and fell into the undergrowth, another went to ground, but the third had a charmed life. He reached one of the larger trees about thirty metres from the entrance and took cover behind it then held his weapon out one-handed and fired blindly towards the temple entrance. Ang and Fred had no angle to hit the man, but he heard Scott fire. The gunman dropped his weapon and fell to the ground, clutching at his knee.

* * * * *

Nancy was delighted to see that the water flowing from a spring in the cliff face ran clear. She had no means of testing it for harmful micro-organisms, but a tentative taste proved it to be fresh and sweet.

‘You can fill the bottles,’ she told the two men.

Tamko and a crewman emptied their plastic bags of bottles onto the ground. Soo-Li unscrewed the lids and handed them to the men. The water only trickled from a cleft and the first bottle took a minute to fill.

While she waited, Nancy watched the jungle and tried to stop her feet from fidgeting about. They needed the water, but she felt terribly exposed out here beyond the temple walls.

The first explosion came as a distant crump and Nancy stifled a scream. A flock of birds took to noisy flight and winged away into the distance as more explosions shook the air. Then she heard the unmistakable rattle of distant gunfire.

'Leave the empty bottles. Bring the full ones. We need to get back inside the temple.' It didn't occur to her that the only entrance was now enveloped in a firefight.

Tamko and the crewman stuffed the full water bottles into bags and they started back along the cliff face. In the distance the shooting became more intense.

* * * * *

Malko watched the assault break down and withdrew back into the jungle. The defenders were not inside the entrance as he had first thought, but were hidden in the debris and undergrowth on the slope. The grenades had done nothing to harm them and he had lost three men. The others could now do little more than snipe from the undergrowth, a waste of ammunition, as the passengers were well protected by pieces of masonry. His only hope lay in flanking the defenders, and he was the only one in a position to do so.

Moving cautiously to his right, he hoped to get beyond the corner of the temple wall where he could approach close to the entrance. From there he had one last trump card left to play.

An unwieldy weapon, the RPG7 was not designed for close quarter combat in jungle, though guerrilla forces over the years had made good use of it in all manner of operations. Of the two RPG rounds left, Malko had only one with him. But one was all he would need for his plan to work.

Reaching the corner, he slung his rifle and lifted the RPG onto his shoulder. The entrance to the temple was mottled in filtered sunlight. Only sporadic single shots came from that direction, and he guessed the defenders were running low on ammunition, only firing at targets of opportunity. He found a firing position behind a fallen log, about sixty metres from the entrance. The temple wall stretched away on his right. Ahead, the gateway was a tangle of jungle undergrowth and fallen masonry.

He keyed the mike on his walkie-talkie. 'Ky. I am in position. Charge the entrance when you hear the explosion.'

'I am ready, Colonel.'

Malko propped himself on one knee and raised the sights on the launcher. The warhead was designed to take out armour. It would make a million pieces of flying shrapnel from the stone blocks the defenders were using for cover. He sighted on the biggest piece of masonry he could see, about twenty metres out from the wall and squeezed the trigger.

* * * * *

The attack had broken down into sporadic sniping from the trees. Every thirty seconds or so a bullet pinged off the masonry blocks and whined away into the

distance. The assault had failed, but the attackers were keeping the defenders' heads down. But keeping them down for what, Scott wondered.

He had counted every one of his shots away and knew he only had three rounds left. Fred must have been close to going dry, too, if he hadn't already. Ang had the only spare magazine, but he would surely be using that by now. The policeman had gone to automatic fire twice during the assault to drive the attackers back.

'Ang?'

The major looked over from his position.

'Is it worth me trying to get to that wounded man by the tree? I could do with the extra ammo.'

'Stay down. There are snipers in the tree line. I can't cover you. They're too far apart, and Fred is dry.'

'What then?'

'Hold position. It's all we can do.'

'Okay.' As he spoke, Scott saw a white puff of smoke in the jungle past Ang.

'Down!'

The rocket streaked through the jungle shadows in a split second and hit a masonry block somewhere to Ang's front. The warhead detonated and the shockwave forced the air from Scott's lungs. A thousand pieces of stone flew through the air and he felt his exposed arms and legs stung by tiny shards. The rain of debris stopped. His ears rang from the roar of noise. Slowly, he lifted his head and opened his eyes.

Ang and Fred had been closer to the explosion. He could see them writhing about, but couldn't tell if they were hit or not.

'Ang?'

The policeman rolled onto his side and shook his head. Blood trickled from his nose.

'I'm okay.' He wiped at the blood with a hand and looked at Fred. 'He's hit in the leg. It doesn't look too bad.'

Down the slope three men broke from the trees and ran up the hill at them. Scott recognised Ky and saw him raise an AK74 and start firing. Bullets smashed into the ground around him and flew over his head. The other men started shooting, the muzzle flashes little twinkles of deadly starlight.

'We can't stay here!' Ang's shout was barely audible over the gunfire. 'Help me with Fred. We'll fall back to the temple.'

Scott rolled to his feet. A few bullets whined over his head, but the shooters were running hard, their shots un-aimed.

Ang had Fred in a sitting position as Scott reached them. They grabbed an arm each, hauled him to his feet and dragged him towards the gateway. The attackers saw them moving and the rate of fire increased. Scott ducked instinctively as a bullet smashed into the wall only centimetres above his head. He stumbled on the loose footing and went down hard, carrying Fred and Ang with him.

Bullets struck the wall above them. The field of fallen masonry offered some protection, but the attackers were concentrating their fire on the gateway, still ten metres away. Scott glanced at it and knew they would never make it through without being cut down.

'How many rounds?' Ang asked. He had his AK74 up, facing back the way they had come.

'Three.'

Ang unclipped the magazine from his rifle and used his thumb to push two rounds out then clipped it back on. He tossed the two rounds to Scott.

'Now we have five each. Make them count.'

Scott unclipped his own magazine and pushed the rounds in then clipped it back on to his AK74, scanning the pile of debris for the hijackers that were coming for them.

* * * * *

Malko saw Ky and the others rushing towards the temple. He broke cover and moved closer to the wall. The amount of fire going into the gateway was murderous. The three figures that had made a break for it a few moments ago couldn't have possibly made it through. They'd gone to ground somewhere in the jumble of fallen masonry outside and would be facing down the slope, facing the oncoming attack from Ky and the others. If he could get closer to the defenders then he would be in the perfect flanking position.

Leaving the RPG launcher by the wall, he unslung his AK74 and advanced carefully forward. No shots came from the defenders. They were conserving their limited ammunition. This would all be over in the next few moments.

* * * * *

Scott heard running feet between bursts of gunfire. The attackers were close, maybe fifteen or twenty metres away.

For the twentieth time in as many seconds his thumb slipped to the fire selector as he made sure the weapon was on 'single shot'. Ang was on his left, the barrel of his AK74 facing out that way, so Scott concentrated on the right.

Beside him, Fred began to stir and placed a hand to his head.

'Stay down, buddy,' Scott warned. He didn't know if Fred had heard him and didn't have time to check. Something moved at the edge of the rubble pile, a vague shape that materialised into a head and torso. Scott shifted his aim and squeezed the trigger. The AK74 jumped in his hands and the head disappeared behind some stone blocks.

Two more shapes on the left. Ang fired twice. One shape was knocked over backwards, the other dropped into cover.

Now there were shapes and shadows moving everywhere in front of them. Scott snapped off two more shots.

One bullet left.

Ang was firing. And suddenly the firing stopped. 'I'm dry!' he yelled.

Scott could see the hijackers on the other side of the pile of rubble. They came over the top, their weapons up. He used his last bullet on the man closest to him, hit him in the arm, just a glancing wound that didn't even slow him down. The hijacker paused at the top of the pile. Seeing Scott, he aimed his weapon. Three more hijackers swept in from the left, their AK74s aimed at the pitiful huddle of defenders among the stones.

Scott waited for the rattle of automatic fire that would end their lives. He could feel the blood pumping in his ears, could see the barrel of the weapon that would kill him, the muzzle as dark as the eternity that would soon follow. The hijacker braced for his shot, leant into the recoil and then suddenly his body shuddered in a macabre dance as a burst of automatic fire cut him down. More automatic fire, and the hijackers on the left fell like toy soldiers before an angry child's wrathful hand. Some tried to make a break for it, but the concentrated fire was too heavy, too accurate. They managed only a few steps before bullets tore into them.

The shooting died away into a few sporadic bursts then finally stopped.

Scott lifted his head and looked about. Three bodies littered the top of the rubble pile, the limbs at strange angles, like discarded dolls. There were no other hijackers to be seen.

'What the Hell!'

Beside him, Ang stared wide-eyed at the carnage and risked climbing to his knees to peer over the pile of rubble and bodies.

'Careful, Major. Whoever gunned those guys down may still shoot at anything that moves up here.'

'Whoever it is, they are on our side.'

'They may not know what side we're on at first glance.'

Ang looked at Scott and shrugged. He dropped his empty AK74 and lifted his hands over his head. A shout came from the jungle farther down slope. Scott didn't understand a word of it, but the major's face broke into a broad grin. He shouted back in Khmer then turned to Scott.

'I think our cavalry has arrived in the nick of time, Mr Morris.'

Scott climbed to his knees and looked down the hill. A squad of men advanced out of the jungle with weapons at their shoulders and split into a perfect cover formation. He could tell at a glance that they were well-disciplined and well-trained. They also wore the same uniform as Ang. These men were Cambodian police officers.

* * * * *

The shooting died away and Nancy's stomach churned with dread. Had Malko's men killed the three defenders and recaptured the passengers? She pushed the image of Scotty's bullet-ridden corpse from her mind and concentrated on keeping up with Soo-Li.

Near the temple wall she called a halt to their mad dash. 'We don't want to rush back in and get recaptured. Let's take a careful look at what's going on from down at the corner of the wall.' There had been no shooting for at least five minutes. But who had won the battle?

Slowly now, they made their way along the temple wall. Soo-Li was near the front of the little group, Tamko and the crewman behind the girl with Nancy bringing up the rear. She was about to call the girl back to her when a hand came around from behind and clamped over her mouth.

'Hello, Mrs Morris.'

Malko's voice in her ear made her skin crawl. Her scream was muffled by the hand but it alerted Tamko and the other crewman. The purser dropped his load of bottles and charged towards Nancy and Malko. Malko raised his AK74 and fired

one-handed. A bullet ripped into Tamko's chest and he fell to the ground. Malko shifted his aim and fired once more, killing the crewman.

The gun barrel shifted to Soo-Li. Nancy struggled in Malko's powerful grip, but she might as well have been fighting a stone statue. But it was enough to spoil Malko's aim. The bullet missed the girl. Soo-Li turned and ran along the outer wall of the temple.

'No matter. I have you, Mrs Morris. And we shall have such fun together with my little angel.'

Chapter 29

The squad of police dispersed into a protective perimeter and Scott could see the pride on Ang's face as he watched them move. No one spoke. They moved quickly and silently into position, all but one man who climbed the rubble heap. Ang rose to meet him and shook the man's hand. They spoke for a moment in Khmer, then Ang turned to Scott and Fred.

'This is Captain Klim. He is with my unit. They were heading towards this mountain to look for the Mekong Dawn when they heard the shooting, so they came to investigate.'

Scott shook the captain's hand. 'Not a moment too soon, Captain. I am very happy to meet you.'

Klim's handshake was as hard as iron. He hardly met Scott's eyes as he looked out towards the jungle.

'You certainly made mincemeat of those hijackers.' Fred swayed a little on his feet, but he wore a grin from ear to ear.

Klim shook his head. 'Not all of them, sir. I saw at least two men slip away into the jungle. There may be more.'

Ang slapped the captain's shoulder. 'Not to worry, Klim. We'll round them up later. Leave six men to watch the perimeter. Have the others check the bodies and cache the weapons. We may have wounded in the temple. The hijackers used grenades on the entrance.'

They entered the temple courtyard to find most of the passengers and crew huddled into the farthest corner. Two bodies lay in the open, closer to the gateway. Scott saw Joyce huddled beside one form and hurried over.

'Are you okay?'

The woman looked up at him with tear-filled eyes. 'It's Harold. He used his body to protect me. He's so brave – so bloody stupid.'

Scott stooped to the man and saw blood staining his side and back. Harold opened his eyes and groaned.

'He's still alive.' Scott looked up to Klim standing in the entrance. 'Captain! We have wounded here.'

Klim came over and gave Harold a cursory glance. 'One of my men is trained as a combat medic. I'll get him in here.' He departed through the gateway and returned a minute later with another policeman in tow.

'This is Chann. He will see to the wounded.'

Chann squatted beside Harold and unzipped the first-aid kit he carried. Scott left him to his work and saw Collette standing with Fred beyond the entrance. He moved out to them.

'Nancy hasn't come back yet?' Scott said

Fred placed a hand on his arm. 'They're probably staying low because of the shooting.'

Scott looked past the cordon of police to the far corner of the wall, the direction in which the water collectors had gone. Soo-Li's sense of distance differed greatly from his own. The water might have been as much as forty minutes' walk from the temple. Nancy might be gone for another twenty minutes yet.

Just as he convinced himself that any fears were unfounded, a gunshot rang out from beyond the wall, muffled by jungle and distance. Everyone dropped into cover as the shot was followed by two more. The police had their weapons up, eyes to their sights. Then Scott heard his name being called by a shrill voice.

'Mr Scott! Mr Scott!'

Something yellow flashed in the shadows by the corner of the temple. 'Don't shoot! It's Soo-Li,' Scott yelled.

Ang bellowed in Khmer, presumably translating Scott's warning.

The girl rounded the end of the wall at a run, her face contorted in terror. She stumbled on one of the loose pieces of masonry but managed to keep herself from falling. Ang called to her, but she was already past him. She saw Scott crouching by the gateway and ran straight at him.

'Mr Scott! He has Miss Nancy.'

Scott stood and caught her. The girl flung her arms around him and buried her face into his chest.

'Where's Nancy?

The panicked run had winded her and she gasped for air.

'Soo-Li? Where's Nancy?' Scott tipped her head back and could see fear in her tear-filled eyes.

The girl swallowed and tried to control her breathing. Her voice came in a raspy hiss. 'He has her.'

'Who?'

'A man in the jungle... by the temple wall... he shot the men.'

Scott felt the acid bite of dread in the pit of his stomach. 'One of the men from the boat has Nancy?'

Soo-Li nodded. 'I didn't see him on the boat. He was a big man.'

'A big man? Malko?' Then he realised that Soo-Li had never seen Malko.

So Malko had returned to the MEKONG DAWN—and now he had Nancy.

* * * * *

Malko pushed the woman ahead of him. She stumbled and he grabbed a handful of her hair, pulling her to her feet.

'Keep moving, Mrs Morris.' He jabbed the barrel of his AK74 into her back.

He couldn't believe his plans had gone to hell so quickly. By this time next year he had planned on being in a coastal villa in Thailand, living out his days in wealth and comfort on the ransom money.

But there were still the diamonds.

He jabbed the woman in the back and forced her to greater speed. She cried out in pain and Malko grinned.

‘Colonel?’

He whirled to the voice, his finger taking up pressure on the trigger.

A man stood a few metres away in the jungle holding an AK74. His arms were scratched and bleeding, his clothing torn. It looked as if he had run through a thorn thicket.

‘Ky?’

‘Yes, Colonel. A police party has rescued the passengers.’

‘I know, Ky. I barely escaped myself.’

‘What do we do now?’ His face looked forlorn, beaten.

‘We still have the diamonds, Ky. We will take Western and the woman to Siem Reap and collect the other diamonds. Then we will kill them and use the money to continue our fight.’

* * * * *

Scott took hold of the wounded hijacker’s shirt and lifted him into a sitting position, propping him against the tree behind which he had tried to take cover. The man’s leg was bent at a peculiar angle, the knee shattered by Scott’s bullet. The movement set the man to screaming.

Some of the police squad were scouring the jungle, looking for any hijackers who might have escaped. Others were in the temple tending to the passengers. Scott saw Ang by the gateway and waved him over.

Ang looked down at the prisoner propped against the tree. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Gathering intelligence. I don’t speak Khmer. You do. We need to question this guy and find out what we’re up against when we go and get Nancy.’

‘I don’t think he’s in any condition to talk.’

‘You think so?’ Scott pressed the barrel of his AK74 against the man’s forehead. The screaming stopped and the man looked up at Scott with pleading eyes. ‘Start asking him questions.’

Ang shrugged and spoke to the prisoner in Khmer.

The hijacker’s answers were short and spoken through clenched teeth. He never once looked at Ang, his pain-filled eyes on Scott the whole time.

‘He says ten men assaulted our position, including Malko and Ky.’

Scott lifted the rifle from the prisoner’s forehead. ‘Malko has come back. He has Nancy.’

‘My men have not found Ky among the dead. He must have escaped. We have found eight hijackers either dead or wounded. There are only Malko and Ky left.’

‘But they have my wife.’ Scott fought hard to keep the emotion out of his voice. He only partly succeeded. Visions of the crew being murdered kept jumping into his head. His hands started to shake, and Nancy had given his medication to that stubborn little woman.

‘We will get her back.’ But Scott could sense the doubt in the policeman’s voice.

‘We need to offer Malko something for Nancy’s release. Something that will be too good for him to pass up.’

'We have nothing to offer.' Ang shook his head. 'Malko is only interested in money.'

'What about his life?' Scott looked sideways at the policeman. 'If we can corner him, we can force him into letting Nancy go. His life for hers. You said there is only Malko and Ky left. We have to try.'

'I'm for trying.' Fred stood a few paces away.

'Malko cornered may be more dangerous than you realise, Mr Morris,' Ang said.

* * * * *

Todd trod water fifty metres from the MEKONG DAWN and listened carefully. There was not a sound aboard the boat, no voice or footfall of a patrolling guard. The silence drew on. There had been no sound since the rattle of gunfire from high on the mountainside a little while ago. He didn't know what was happening, but as best he could tell, the MEKONG DAWN was now deserted.

He swam quietly around the bow and pulled himself up onto the bank. No guards stood at the bottom of the gangway, so he carefully edged his way forward. Looking up into the breezeway, he saw no movement there so stepped onto the gangway. Bullets had slashed and tattered the camouflage netting. A body, a hijacker, lay sprawled through the doorway of a cabin, a discarded weapon nearby.

What the hell happened here?

Avoiding shards of glass with his bare feet he crossed to the dining saloon windows. Enough light filtered through the camouflage netting to reveal the empty saloon.

Where did everyone go? Did the police or army come and rescue the hostages? Am I the only one left?

He moved to the serving trolley near the saloon doors. A large bowl contained a noodle dish. Todd's stomach growled with hunger, but flies had found the food and swarmed about it in a buzzing cloud. He stepped past the trolley and into the dining saloon. Chairs were upended and tables pushed aside. Whatever happened here, the passengers had left in a hurry.

With his hunger now stirred, he moved to the galley. He swung open the cool room door and recoiled at the stench of spoiled food. Quickly closing the door, Todd rummaged about the shelves and cupboards and found a packet of water crackers that he tore open, shoving biscuits into his mouth as fast as he could manage. A half-empty bottle of water sat by the stove and he snatched it up to wash down the biscuits.

With his hunger and thirst somewhat abated, Todd ventured back out to the dining saloon. If the passengers had been freed, then someone would eventually come for the ship. All he had to do was wait.

Heavy footfalls sounded on the gangway. Through chinks in the camouflage net he could see shapes coming aboard the MEKONG DAWN. Todd dropped to the floor and looked about for somewhere to hide. The galley was too far away, but he spied the servery table near the front of the saloon. The table had been clad in bamboo panels to give it a tropical look and he lifted a panel, crawling beneath the servery as the footfalls came right on into the breezeway and into the saloon.

'Sit down, Mrs Morris.'

Todd suppressed a shiver of fear at the sound of the voice. He recognised it from the day the MEKONG DAWN had been hijacked.

Malko!

A chair scraped on the deck and he heard someone slump into it. Pressing an eye to a gap in the bamboo he could see Malko standing in the doorway, an assault rifle in his hands. A woman sat in a chair in the saloon, her face buried in her hands and her shoulders shaking as she cried softly. Todd recognised her as one of the passengers.

More footsteps sounded from the breezeway and Ky appeared, pushing a Western man ahead of him. The man had his hands cable-tied behind his back. Ky forced him to his knees in front of Malko.

Malko took a handful of the man's hair and tipped his face back.

'There are more diamonds in Siem Reap?'

'Yes! I swear.'

'Where?'

'In a hotel safety deposit box.'

'Which hotel?'

'The Colonial. Please don't kill me. You can have them all. Just let me live.'

Malko turned the man's head from side to side as he spoke. 'I will take you to Siem Reap and you will get these diamonds for me. Then I will let you go.'

'Yes! Yes! I will do it.'

'Ready the RHIB, Ky. Make sure the tanks are full. Hurry. We don't have much time before the police come.'

Ky pointed to the woman. 'What about her?'

'Cable-tie her hands. We will take Mrs Morris with us. She may prove useful—or make a good shield if the need arises. After we have the diamonds she is yours to do with as you like.'

Ky grinned and pulled a plastic cable-tie from his fatigues pocket. He dragged the woman to her feet and secured her hands behind her back. Then he strode off down the walkway.

Malko waited with the two prisoners, holding his weapon by the pistol grip. With his free hand he removed a baize bag from his pocket and bounced it on the drawstring. The man on his knees watched every movement of the bag with longing in his eyes.

Chapter 30

From the mountainside the Mekong Dawn appeared deserted. Nothing moved except where a light breeze ruffled the camouflage nets and spread tiny ripples across the water. Scott wanted to rush down there and demand Nancy's release, but Ang and Klim advised caution. After all, Malko still had teeth—and Ky.

'We need to spread ourselves along the shoreline.' Ang waved to the left and then the right. 'Cover as much of the boat as possible.'

Klim set the men to work, splitting them into three groups, two to cover the vessel with their weapons and a third to make the boarding. Before they could move off to their positions, outboard motors growled into life. The RHIB came into view through the breezeway with Ky standing at the controls. Figures filed out of the saloon and into the breezeway. He recognised Simon Western, his hands tied behind his back. Then Nancy came into view, her hands also bound, pushed along by Malko who steered her towards the waiting RHIB.

Scott's heart thumped in his chest. Malko was making a run for it and taking Nancy with him.

Western and Nancy, unable to use their hands, dropped clumsily into the RHIB. Malko stepped into the boat and forced them to sit on the deck.

Scott leapt to his feet. 'Nancy!' He screamed as he ran down the mountainside, but his wife made no sign of having heard him.

'Nancy!'

Ky gunned the twin outboards, drowning out Scott's shout. The RHIB spun in a broad arc and faced down the channel, throwing up a rooster tail of white water.

Scott reached the gangway and thumped up it in time to see the RHIB disappear into the shadows of the swamp. He slammed his fist into the railing.

'Malko, you bastard. You hurt her and I swear...' But the words of anger and frustration died in his throat.

'We didn't count on that.' Ang had reached the bottom of the gangway.

'Did you see that?' Scott pointed after the RHIB. 'They had that guy Western as well. Where the hell is he taking them?'

'I don't know.' Ang shook his head.

Scott stared after the boat, but all that remained was the wash of its wake slapping against the hull.

'I may be able to help you with that.'

Scott whirled to see a bedraggled figure standing in the doorway of the saloon. The young man wore a pair of board shorts and a tattered yellow T-shirt. His face carried a gaunt and haunted look that only partly disappeared when he smiled.

'I reckon they might be going to Siem Reap to pick up some diamonds.'

* * * * *

Jenkins sat with his back to the gunwale and watched Malko keenly as Ky manoeuvred the boat along the channel. The Australian woman sat on the deck beside the fuel tank, her knees drawn up to her chin and a defiant look on her face.

There were three weapons on the boat and Jenkins let his gaze drift to each one as he calculated his chances. Malko covered the two prisoners with an AK74. Ky had his AK74 propped beside the control console and his knife in his belt. Of the three, Jenkins' best chances lay with Ky's AK74, untended and only two metres away. But with his hands cable-tied behind his back, it would be impossible for him to use the weapon if he could reach it. Besides, Malko had only to turn slightly to keep the prisoners covered with his rifle, a movement he performed every few moments.

Jenkins knew he couldn't let them reach Siem Reap. Once Malko realised there was no second stash of diamonds, he would make Jenkins' death a slow and

painful affair, of that he was sure. At least the ruse had bought him some time. All he needed now was an opportunity. So he looked at the rifle and at Malko and Ky, and he waited for his opportunity to come.

* * * *

The police fetched the surviving passengers and crew and escorted them back to the MEKONG DAWN. The wounded were lined up along one wall of the saloon, tended to by Chann, the police officer with the first-aid kit.

Fred explored the engine room and started the generator to get the airconditioning and water pumps running. Some of the passengers went straight to their cabins to shower in the still-cold water.

Scott felt sweaty and grimy, but a shower was the farthest thing from his mind. He found Ang in the breezeway with Fred and Klim. The captain was talking on a portable radio, speaking rapidly in Khmer. He finished and looked at the major.

‘A navy patrol boat is leaving Phnom Penh. They have a doctor on board, but won’t make the channel entrance until nightfall. I doubt they can reach us before tomorrow morning. There is nothing else in the area, at least nothing big enough to carry all the passengers. An air force helicopter will be overhead in two hours. They can start ferrying out the wounded, but it will take time.’

Ang shook his head. ‘Chann tells me the elderly gentleman is in a bad way. He doesn’t have much time.’

Scott looked at Klim. ‘What about the boat you came in?’

‘It has deck space for about four prone passengers, seats for twelve.’

‘No, I mean is it fast?’

‘Just a little four-cylinder inboard engine,’ Klim said. ‘It’s not fast at all.’

‘Okay. Okay.’ Scott looked about, thinking. His gaze settled on Fred. ‘We have a working boat. Think you could get us moving? At least that solves the problem of getting all the passengers out at once. If we meet the patrol boat and the doctor out on the lake, it may save enough time to make a difference for Harold.’

Fred grinned and rummaged through his pockets for a cigar. He had only two left in the packet. ‘I can get the diesels running. Hell, they’re my bread and butter back home. I’ve never handled a boat as big as this, but I’m willing to give it a go. Trouble is I don’t know the waterways. I’d probably wind up putting us on a mud bank.’

‘So we need a local to act as pilot. What about one of the catering staff?’ Scott said.

Fred shook his head. ‘There are only five of them left, and they’re either Vietnamese or Burmese.’ He fumbled in his trouser pocket, pulled out his lighter, flicked it open and applied flame to the cigar.

Scott looked beyond Fred and into the dining saloon. The surviving catering staff had righted the tables and chairs. A few passengers sat drinking coffee and tea. Soo-Li sat beside Fred’s wife. With Nancy gone, the young girl had attached herself to Collette.

‘We may have someone who can help.’ He pushed his way past Fred and into the saloon.

Soo-Li looked up at him, her eyes big and brown and filled with tears. ‘Miss Nancy?’

'We're going to get her back. I promise.' He knelt and took the girl's hand. 'Soo-Li, do you know how to find the channel that runs from this mountain to the lake?'

She wiped at a tear with the back of her hand. 'Of course. My father and I used it all the time.'

'If Mr Deakin can get this boat moving, do you think you could tell him how to follow the channel?'

Soo-Li nodded eagerly. 'We can get out of here. We can go and get Miss Nancy.'

Scott didn't have the heart to tell her the MEKONG DAWN could never catch up with Malko's powerful boat. 'We'll try, kiddo.'

Scott let go of her hand and went back out to Ang and Fred. 'Soo-Li knows the channel. She'll guide us out.'

Fred looked sceptical. 'She's just a little girl.'

'The girl and her father were wood gatherers in this region.' Ang quieted his concerns. 'She worked with him every day. If anyone knows the channel, then she does.'

'It looks like I have my pilot.' Fred drew on the last of his cigar and flipped the butt into the water. 'I was thinking. What about the helicopter?'

Scott threw his head back. 'What helicopter?'

Fred's grin dropped. 'That's right. You were, ah, pretty out of it when Ang got here. He flew here in a helicopter.'

Scott looked at Ang. 'I thought you came here in a boat. I mean... Hell, I just assumed...'

'No, I flew here in a helicopter. But Ky ambushed us. My men were killed, along with Soo-Li's father.'

'The helicopter you came in—where is it?'

Ang pointed across the mountainside towards the south. 'On an islet over there.' 'Is it damaged?'

'There was some shooting near it, but no, I don't think it's damaged. But Ky killed the pilot. There is no one to fly it.'

Scott felt his hands begin to shake and willed them to be still. Sweat ran into his eyes and he blinked it away. 'What type of helicopter?'

'A Bell. I believe it is called a Jetranger.'

Scott's gaze flicked from the direction Ang had indicated to where he had last seen the RHIB through the trees. Visions of the ground rushing towards him filled his mind and he shook his head to clear it. 'I'm a pilot.' He could hardly believe he was saying the words. 'I can fly a Jetranger.'

Ang's eyes widened in surprise. The policeman looked him up and down and Scott wondered just what kind of man Ang saw. He felt like a wreck. His bare legs were scratched and bleeding from the jungle and the firefight at the ruins. He hadn't shaved in three days and the stubble on his face itched with sweat. And his damned hands were shaking. He thrust them into his pockets and hoped Ang hadn't noticed.

Where is Collette with my bloody medication?

Ang turned his face away, following Scott's gaze out to where the channel disappeared into the trees.

'Then maybe we can still catch Malko,' he said.

Chapter 31

Nancy's hands tingled from the too-tight cable-tie around her wrists. She wriggled her fingers and tried to get some blood flowing. Her bottom ached from the hard deck in the back of the boat and she shifted her weight in an attempt to ease her discomfort.

She guessed they had been in the boat for an hour or maybe a little more, but she had no way to gauge the time exactly. They were still travelling through the swamps. Ky stood at the console, deftly flicking the wheel left and right as he kept them in the channel, working the throttles for the twin outboards and gunning the engines to full power whenever the way ahead was clear. Close to the motors where Nancy sat the noise was deafening.

Western, if that was his real name, sat opposite her, his back against the gunwale. He fidgeted nervously, his gaze fixed on the AK74 beside Ky. Nancy thought about the time she had first met the South African when they boarded the MEKONG DAWN, the way he'd clutched that laptop case so possessively.

Diamonds!

Western was a diamond smuggler. It all made sense now. Malko or Ky had found his diamonds, and Western was trading more diamonds in Siem Reap for his life and his freedom. Nancy wasn't quite sure where she fitted into Malko's plans. She had nothing to offer for her life. When they reached Siem Reap she would become a liability. What then? She looked to the length of mahogany, Malko's pick handle, laying in one of the equipment pockets beneath the gunwale, and tried not to think about 'what then?'

Her wriggling fingers brushed against something running along the deck of the boat. Hoping it was something she could use as a weapon, she gripped it, but was disappointed. Whatever it was, it felt round and flexible, like rubber, about as thick as a garden hose. It seemed to pulse with the beat of the engines. As she held it, Ky pulled the throttles back and spun the wheel as they headed into another turn. The pulsing in the hose settled into a dull vibration. When Ky gunned the throttles again the pulsing increased, and she realised she had hold of the fuel line running from the portable tank to the outboards.

With the life-blood of the engines pumping through her hands a thought occurred to her.

Stop the engines and I'll stop the boat!

As carefully as she could, Nancy felt along the hose in both directions, hoping to find a fuel cock or tap, but her reach was limited and she could only feel about twenty centimetres. There was nothing but the smooth, pulsing hose.

Her mind working quickly, she gripped the hose in one hand and worked the other hand as far along as she could. The cable-tie bit painfully into her wrist, but she managed to get a good hold and then rolled her fists together, crimping the hose.

The outboards roared along for another fifteen seconds. Then the one closest to Nancy gave a cough and died into silence. The other motor ran for five more seconds, then it too spluttered and wound down. The bow of the RHIB dropped as the boat slowed. With the roar of the motors gone, Nancy could hear water gushing past the hull, quieting as their speed bled away.

Malko looked back at the motors and cursed. 'Get them running.'

Ky jabbed at the starter for one of the outboards. The engine whined over but refused to fire. Ky leant on the other starter. The motor gave a cough but didn't start.

'Something mechanical?' Malko looked at the engines with a puzzled expression.

Ky shook his head. 'Both engines stopped at the same time. It has to be the fuel.'

Malko slung his AK74 onto a shoulder and moved aft. He knelt beside Nancy and took the top off the fuel tank, eyeing the contents.

'Still near full.'

'Try the fuel line.'

Malko replaced the fuel cap and then traced his hands along the hoses coming from the top. Nancy was sitting over part of the fuel hose, so he grabbed a handful of her hair. She let go of the hose and squealed in pain as Malko yanked her aside.

Nancy thought he must see the distortion in the fuel line where she had crimped it, but the rubber was resilient and had sprung back into shape. Malko finished tracing the line to both engines then went back to the tank. The fuel line had a rubber ball built into it so that air could be bled from the line before starting the motors. Malko pumped the ball five or six times.

'Try again.'

Ky pushed a starter button and the left outboard roared into life. He started the other engine and pushed the throttles to full power as Malko climbed back to the console.

Feeling rather pleased with herself, Nancy struggled back into a sitting position. As soon as she had her back to the gunwale, her hands moved towards the fuel line again.

* * * * *

Scott made his way to his cabin and found the door already open. Both suitcases had been upended on the bunks and the safe door hung open. He rummaged through the debris and found a pair of jeans and long-sleeved, cotton shirt. He still wasn't sure if he'd be able to fly again, but if he could, he was damned sure he wasn't going to do it in shorts and T-shirt. He found his sunglasses sitting on the table between the bunks and slipped them on then pulled covered shoes onto his feet. As he stepped back out onto the walkway he heard the main engines rumble into life.

'Good ol' Fred.'

Ang was waiting for him by the gangway, Collette beside him.

'You think you can do this, sweetie?'

'I don't know. I have to try.' He saw the quizzical look on Ang's face and wondered what the policeman would think if he realised his new pilot was a drug addict.

Collette reached into her blouse and pulled out the box containing his medication. He expected her to remove one tablet from the foil blister, but instead she held the box out.

‘Take the box, you may need them at some stage.’

Scott took the box and turned it over in his hands. He read the label and the pharmacist’s sticker as if for the first time in his life. The box was no bigger than a pack of cigarettes and he wondered how something so small could exert so much influence on his life.

Opening the cardboard flap, he slipped the foil sheet out into his hand. Maybe they held something more than his past? Maybe his future was here as well, defined by the little white tablets in their foil cocoons? Images of the crash flooded into his mind. His hands shook again and he felt the cold hand of fear twisting his guts. He forced the bad images out and replaced them with thoughts of Nancy.

‘You okay, sweetie?’

Scott gulped and nodded. He broke one tablet out of its blister and tossed it into his mouth. Fear had dried his saliva so he snatched a bottle of water from Collette to wash the tablet down.

Fred came along the walkway from the engine room with Todd McLean and Soo-Li on his heels.

‘I got the engines running, as you can hear.’

‘You going to be able to manage this thing?’ Scott handed the bottle back to Collette, but kept hold of the box.

‘All the controls are in the wheelhouse, otherwise I’d be in a bit of difficulty. The policemen are going to pull the camouflage netting up onto the sundeck and then slip our mooring lines. Besides, I’ve got the best local pilot a skipper could ask for.’ He patted Soo-Li’s shoulder and the girl smiled at him.

‘You go get Miss Nancy now?’

‘I’m sure going to try, kiddo.’

Ang held two AK74s in his hands. He passed one to Scott along with a couple of magazines. ‘We had better get moving. Malko will be on the lake by now.’ He turned and started down the gangway.

Scott dropped the spare magazines down the front of his shirt and turned to follow. As he passed Collette he slipped the tablet box back into her hand.

‘You keep them. I only need one.’

Collette threw her arms around him and hugged him tight. The magazines pressed into his ribs and he squirmed uncomfortably. Then Collette let him go and turned him towards the gangway. Todd and two policemen were waiting to pull the gangway aboard.

As he followed Ang onto the bank he heard Collette’s voice behind him.

‘Go get your girl, sweetie.’

* * * * *

Jenkins watched the Australian woman through slitted eyes. From his position low in the stern he had seen what she did with the fuel line. Part of his mind thanked her for the delay. Every minute longer they spent on the boat was a minute more he had before they reached Siem Reap and the undeniable truth that would send Malko into a deadly rage.

Jenkins worked at the cable-tie binding his wrists by rubbing it back and forth on the edge of an aluminium rib he could feel behind his back.

When Malko had come aft to inspect the engines, Jenkins had panicked at the thought of being discovered. Malko had only to see the wear on the binding and it would all be over.

He watched the woman's arms moving and knew she was trying for the fuel line again. This time the two hijackers might smell a rat and inspect the prisoners' bindings. He sawed his wrists up and down the aluminium rib as fast as he could. While they were running, the noise of the engines hid any noise he made.

Bright sunlight suddenly flooded into the boat. Above them, the canopy of trees was gone, replaced by an azure-blue sky. They had reached the edge of the swamp and were out onto Tonle Sap.

The beat of the engines increased to a howl as Ky pushed the throttles to their stops. The RHIB rose onto a plane and skipped across wind-driven chop towards the north and Siem Reap.

* * * * *

Fred pushed the throttles forward a couple of millimetres and sensed, rather than heard, the diesels increase their beat. The camouflage nets had been rolled up onto the sundeck and he had a clear view through the shattered windscreen. The bank began a slow glide aft and he spun the wheel to bring the nose away from the island. The MEKONG DAWN responded sluggishly with the limited headway, but the land gradually moved away. The bow came around to point across the open water and Fred gave the throttles another nudge. He looked down at Soo-Li. The girl stared intently over the bows at the distant trees.

'Okay, darling. Start pointing out the way.'

Soo-Li shifted her weight on her feet and squinted. 'See that big tree with the fork in the trunk, Mr Fred?'

Fred followed the point of her hand. 'Yeah, I got it.'

'Go to the left of it. About five metres out.'

Fred gave the engines a little more throttle so the rudder would have some bite. Beyond the place where Soo-Li had indicated he could see a row of trees blocking their path and knew he would be making a turn as soon as they entered the channel.

'You will be turning right, Mr Fred.' Soo-Li seemed to read his mind.

'Right it is.' Smart girl this one.

Like an elegant lady the MEKONG DAWN slipped into the channel. Fred kept them on course, flicking his attention from the approaching trees to the direction in which he would have to turn.

'Now, Mr Fred!'

He spun the wheel to starboard and watched the bow post drift lazily across the line of trees. A grating, grinding noise shook the boat as the hull scraped the edge of the channel. He pushed the throttles to half-power to prevent them from getting stuck. The MEKONG DAWN offered up a protest of groans and creaks but kept her headway. Fred brought the wheel back to midships. The noises stopped and he spun the helm again to continue the turn.

'Sorry, Mr Fred.' Soo-Li looked up at him with her big, brown eyes.

He grinned down at the girl. 'Not your fault, darling. I doubt you've navigated something this big either. We'll do better at the next turn.'

Chapter 32

The helicopter looked to be in one piece. It sat on an islet of mud and low shrubs, the main rotors drooping and untied. The aircraft didn't look all that old to Scott, but it was hard to tell. The owners obviously kept it well-maintained. The paintwork was a dazzling-white, even in the late afternoon shadows.

They approached from behind the helicopter, wading through waist-deep water, and Scott made his way down the right side towards the open pilot's door. Three bodies lay near the water's edge, bullet-riddled and with their pockets turned out, but he was unprepared for the carnage he found in the cockpit. The pilot's body lay slumped across the centre console which was a mess of half-congealed blood that ran onto the floor where it had pooled about the tail rotor pedals. Scott reeled back in surprise and startled a cloud of flies into the air.

'Sorry. I did not realise Ky had been so brutal,' Ang apologised as he came up to the opposite door. 'I did not see the pilot before we were ambushed.'

Scott felt bile rising in his throat, but wasn't sure if it was caused by the sight of the murdered pilot or something else.

'Not your fault.' He swallowed and cleared his throat. 'Help me get him out of the seat. I'll need to clean up a little before we can fly.'

Carefully, they lifted the pilot's body from the helicopter and laid it by the others at the water's edge. Scott tore off a section of the corpse's flight suit and dipped it in the water then went back to clean some of the blood out of the helicopter.

'So you can fly this machine?' Ang's voice sounded edgy.

Scott stopped wiping at the instrument panel and let his gaze rove over the gauges and dials. He hadn't been this close to a helicopter in months. Tremors started in his hands and he quickly returned to wiping.

'I haven't flown in nearly a year. But, yeah, I can fly it. It's a civilian version of the same type I flew in the army.'

'I see.' The policeman's voice still sounded concerned.

Scott worked his way down to the console. Twice he had to return to the water to wash out the cloth.

'You know what Malko will do to your wife when he has what he wants?' Ang asked.

'I saw what he did to the crew—and the boy who was recaptured.'

'Then you know how important it is that I catch him.'

'All I know is that I want my wife back. You are a policeman. It's your duty to capture Malko.'

'Yes, my duty,' Ang said vaguely.

Scott finished cleaning the console and turned his attention to the controls. There was nothing he could do about the blood that had soaked into the seat, nor would he take the time with it anyway.

'Why did Ky keep you alive?' Scott didn't look up as he asked the question. 'He seems as keen on killing as Malko is.'

'He was going to present me to Malko as a gift.'

'A gift? But why?'

Ang was silent and Scott turned to see the policeman gazing thoughtfully out across the water.

'To finish something he started over thirty years ago.' Ang walked around to the other side of the helicopter and opened the door. He patted his right cheek. 'Did you notice that scar Malko has on his face?'

'Yeah?'

'My mother did that to him. Then he killed her and dropped her body in a pit with hundreds of others. I was next. But while my mother fought him I had the chance to run away. I have hunted him ever since. Through my years as a policeman I have chased Malko from one rat-infested hole to another. This is the closest I have ever been to making him pay for what he did.'

'Then we had better make sure we catch up with him.' Scott finished wiping and tossed the rag into the distance. 'Strap in. I'll do a quick walk-around and we'll be on our way.'

The tail boom had a bullet hole in it. Scott placed his eye to the hole and could see daylight on the far side. It didn't look like the bullet had struck anything vital. He completed his external check of the aircraft without finding any other damage, so he closed the aft sliding doors and climbed into the pilot's seat.

The instrument layout was exactly like the Kiowa he'd flown in the army. He hadn't thought to rummage through the pilot's flight bag and find the checklists, but knew his memory would see him through. He reached for the battery switch. His hand shook so much he had to try twice before he managed to flip the toggle. Ang saw the fumble but said nothing as a dull whine filled the cockpit and the gauges moved from their rests.

The nausea started deep down in the pit of Scott's stomach. He closed his eyes but that only brought a vision of tree branches and rushing ground, so he opened them. Two deep breaths put the nausea in check. It was still there, just not getting any worse, so he placed his feet on the pedals and worked them back and forth.

His breathing steadied a little as he gripped the controls to test their range of motion. The grips felt familiar in his hands and did a little to ease his racing mind. Next, he ran through the fuel checks, only fumbling once as he flipped switches and opened valves. He raised a concerned eyebrow at the fuel quantity gauge. Barely an eighth of total capacity remained. Maybe forty minutes flying at most, he calculated.

Bloody hell, Scotty, you're starting to think like a pilot.

With that thought the feeling of nausea lifted like a curtain. Sitting in the pilot's seat of the helicopter, Scott Morris suddenly felt functional. Better than he had ever felt in months.

He reached for the starter switch and his hand was as steady as any surgeon's in the operating theatre.

The turbine whined into life and the main rotors sped into a blur. Scott settled the headphones on his ears and nodded for Ang to do the same, then he pulled the helicopter into a hover.

The machine rocked gently in the air as he ran his gaze over the instruments. Everything appeared normal so he applied more power and climbed above the trees.

‘Which way, Ang?’

The policeman fumbled for the intercom switch on his headphones. ‘Malko should be out on the lake by now. Head southwest. He’ll probably be the fastest moving boat in this area, heading northwest to Siem Reap.’

Scott clicked the intercom button on the cyclic in acknowledgement and dropped the nose. The helicopter gained speed and he turned southwest. As they climbed higher he could see a faint haze on the horizon. At three thousand feet the silver waters of Tonle Sap became visible through the haze. The far shoreline was still hidden below the horizon. Scott had the impression he was flying out to sea.

Three specks were visible on the water, boats traversing the lake. Ang rummaged through the door pocket and pulled out a pair of binoculars then studied the vessels.

‘Heading south. They look like fishermen.’ He swept the binoculars in a slow arc to the right.

A few more specks materialised in the distance as Scott began his turn into the northwest.

‘Fisherman. Fisherman.’ Ang’s voice carried a tone of disappointment as he bracketed each vessel in his field of view. ‘Malko will be moving very fast in that boat of his. Can we go higher? We may be able to pick out his wake.’

‘Higher it is.’ Scott applied more collective. The helicopter responded by rising. When they reached five thousand feet he returned to level flight. The lake stretched away into the distance. Here and there a few boats moved about, but none seemed to be throwing out any sort of a wake.

‘Hold this course. We must come across them soon.’

Scott eyed the fuel gauge. The needle quivered near the bottom of the scale. He swallowed and tried to will it to move higher. But the needle refused to budge.

* * * * *

The RHIB bounced across light chop making it difficult for Nancy to get hold of the fuel line again. Every time her fingertips brushed against it the boat skipped over a wave and the fuel line bounced beyond her grasp. She struggled on, ignoring the pain in her wrists as the plastic strips bit deep. Then Ky flicked the wheel savagely to swerve around a floating island of water hyacinth. Unable to hold on, Nancy was thrown across the deck and slammed into the opposite gunwale, the non-slip deck scraping skin from her bare arms and backs of her hands.

She lay dazed on the deck until rough hands grabbed her and manhandled her back into her original position beside the tank.

‘You should be more careful, Mrs Morris.’ Malko grinned at her, the scar on his cheek pulling his face into a menacing grimace. ‘I would hate to see you hurt before we arrive at our destination.’

Nancy offered him her brightest smile by way of a thankyou. As Malko turned to look ahead she grasped the fuel line firmly in her fists.

At full power and sucking fuel at their maximum rate, the outboards ran down instantly as Nancy crimped the line.

* * * * *

Ang swung the binoculars back and forth as he scanned the surface of the lake. The waterway was a major part of Cambodia's transportation system and there were at least twenty vessels within sight now, though none of them moved fast enough to create much of a wake.

Scott's voice crackled through the intercom. 'Check out that boat at one o'clock. Looks like he's moving pretty quick. And going our way, too.'

Ang shifted his field of view to the right and immediately picked the large, white V formed by the wake of a fast moving boat. He followed the creamy lines to their apex where a long, cigar-shaped boat moved at high speed. The spaceship-like hull rode high out of the water and a foaming tail, spat out by powerful engines, flew twenty metres into the sky behind the boat.

'It's just the hydrofoil to Siem Reap.' Ang lowered the binoculars and wiped at his eyes with a thumb. The sun sat above the western horizon and the lake had become a shimmering sheet of glare. He looked at Scott's sunglasses with envy.

They flew on for another minute then Scott twisted in his seat and reached for the pilot's flight bag. He lifted it up onto Ang's lap.

'Have a look in there. See if you can find an aeronautical chart.'

'Why? We're not lost. I know where we are.'

Scott pointed at one of the gauges on the instrument panel. 'We're on bingo fuel. We'll have to put down somewhere. Preferably somewhere with jet fuel so we can fill up and get back into the search.'

'Bingo fuel is not good?'

'It means we're down to our last few litres. We should be looking for somewhere to land.'

Ang reached into the bag and pulled out a folded map, but he didn't have to look at it to know they were out of luck.

'Kampong Chhnang is about forty minutes flying time behind us. Siem Reap is an hour to the north. They are the only places I know of that have jet fuel.'

Scott took a hand from the control stick and pushed his sunglasses onto the bridge of his nose. He gave Ang a wry look. 'Then I hope you can swim.'

Ang looked down at the lake. The golden water didn't look too bad. He wasn't sure how well the helicopter would land in water. 'What do you suggest?'

Scott was quiet for a moment and Ang could see his head pivoting as he surveyed the lake. 'We fly for as long as we can. When the engine flames out I'll auto-rotate us close to one of those rice barges. Hopefully they'll stop and pick us up. Sorry, Ang. We'll just have to catch up with Malko some other way.'

Ang tossed the flight bag into the space behind him and slammed his fist into the door.

So, Malko was to escape yet again.

Will the murderous dog's luck never run out?

With nothing to do but look, he picked up the binoculars and returned to scanning the lake. Defeat hung heavily in his stomach and he was too angry to concentrate. He brought one of the rice barges into view. The vessel steamed along

at maybe six knots. Washing hung on a line strung behind the bridge, flapping in the wind like bunting at a parade. While he watched, a crewman came out onto the aft walkway and waved up at the helicopter.

Ang ignored the waving crewman and shifted his gaze to the north. The waters of the lake blurred through the binoculars' lenses. Something white flashed by and he shifted in his seat and tried to pick it up again. It took a moment before he found the creaming wake of a fast moving boat, another moment to adjust the focus. He could pick out four people in the open boat.

Ang lowered the binoculars and thumbed the intercom switch. 'I think that's Malko's boat.' He pointed through the Perspex at the wake, barely visible in the glare.

'I see it.'

The RHIB was about five kilometres away, powering hard into the north. Ang lifted the binoculars to his eyes and could pick out little flashes of white water from beneath the bow as the boat skipped across wave tops. As he watched, something strange happened.

The RHIB suddenly lost headway and the frothing wake overtook it as it settled into the water. A figure moved aft to the engines and Ang recognised the swarthy bulk of Malko.

'Something's happened. They've stopped.'

'I'm taking us lower.'

* * * * *

The RHIB carried on under its own momentum, bounced off a wave and the nose fell heavily into a trough. Nancy's grip on the rubber line kept her from sliding forward, but Western rolled across the deck and cracked his head against the edge of the console.

Malko and Ky were luckier. They had the console to keep themselves upright. They ignored the injured Western and immediately set about trying to restart the engines.

'What is wrong with these cursed motors?' Malko made his way aft and tried the little priming pump again, working it savagely in his huge fist. 'Try the starter, Ky.'

The engines wound over without firing. Nancy kept her grip on the line despite Malko's proximity. She had no idea what her delaying tactics might achieve, but anything that kept Malko from his destination must be good.

Ky tried the starters for thirty seconds without result. 'It has to be a fuel problem. Check the line.'

Nancy let go of the fuel line and managed to shuffle out of Malko's way before he could grab her hair and drag her aside. He checked the large orange fuel tank and traced the line towards the motors. When he reached the area where Nancy had been sitting, he held up the line for closer inspection. Blood from her skinned knuckles had run into her hand and a bloody handprint could be seen on the black hose.

Malko looked at Nancy and threw the fuel line down on the deck. He reached down and took a handful of her hair. Nancy screamed in pain as he lifted her to her feet.

'You bitch! You crimped the fuel line.'

Nancy tried to gather enough saliva to spit in Malko's face but fear had dried her mouth.

Malko cocked his arm back and hit her hard across the face. The blow tore her hair out of his grip and sent her crashing onto the console. Bright points of light floated in Nancy's vision. She tried to clear her head and shook it gently from side to side, but Malko grabbed her again and his arm went back. This time his fingers formed into a fist and Nancy closed her eyes.

A rhythmic beating filled the air, growing louder with each passing moment. Nancy opened her eyes and looked back past Malko's cocked fist. A helicopter approached the boat from astern, about three kilometres away.

Malko paused, his arm ready to strike. He looked back at the helicopter. 'Start the engines. Get us moving.' He let go of Nancy, picked up his AK74 and flicked the safety catch.

* * * * *

Ang felt a sudden swoop in the pit of his stomach as the helicopter lost altitude. He lost the boat and found it again. Some sort of commotion had broken out among the four occupants. With a start, he realised that Malko was holding Nancy Morris by the hair, but he prudently kept this observation to himself.

The helicopter dropped through two thousand feet and closed rapidly on the RHIB.

Ang wondered what he would do now they had caught up with Malko. He was in a helicopter and Malko was in a boat with two hostages. There wasn't a hell of a lot he could do.

You didn't think this through too well, Ang.

The thought had barely formed in his mind when the water behind the boat surged into foam and the RHIB shot forward.

'They're moving again. Get us ahead of them.' He lifted the AK74 and worked the action.

'What are you going to do? My wife's on that boat.'

'Just get us ahead. I'm going to let Malko know we're onto him. Don't worry, I won't shoot the boat.' Scott gave a curt nod and Ang turned his attention to the Perspex window in the door. The rubber seal had a wire running around the circumference of the window with a tab labelled, EMERGENCY ESCAPE – PULL. He grabbed the tab and pulled. The wire cut through the rubber like a scalpel and the Perspex fluttered away in the slipstream. Rushing wind filled the cockpit with a noise that drowned out the rotors.

The helicopter passed over the top of the boat at sixty metres. Ang poked the barrel of his AK74 through the window and squeezed the trigger on full automatic. The weapon jumped in his hands and a row of white geysers formed a path across the bow of the RHIB. Instantly, the RHIB went into a sharp left turn as the driver tried to avoid the bullets.

He saw Malko raise a rifle and then pinprick muzzle flashes as he returned fire. Several bullets struck somewhere aft on the helicopter with a sound like large hail hitting a tin roof. Then they were past the boat and Scott had them climbing again.

* * * * *

Empty shell casings rained down on Jenkins as Malko fired at the helicopter. With Ky and Malko preoccupied, he sawed his binding up and down the rib as hard as he could. The action caused a lot of friction and he could feel the heat of the plastic cable-tie against his wrists. He kept working as the helicopter climbed into the sky ahead of them.

Malko unclipped the magazine from his AK74 and replaced it with a fresh one. He and Ky gabbled away in Khmer, but their whole attention was on the helicopter.

Jenkins felt the resistance on his wrists suddenly part. The rapid blood flow back into his hands burned like fire and he groaned with the agony of it.

The helicopter was maybe a thousand feet up now and turning back towards the boat. Malko blazed away at it, on single shot now, taking careful aim down the open sights.

Wriggling his fingers, some of the feeling returned to Jenkins' hands and he brought them around in front of his body. The Australian woman saw that he was free and nodded encouragement at him. Jenkins ignored her and lifted himself onto his feet, crouching low as he judged his moment.

Ky was the closer of the two terrorists, standing at the wheel with one hand holding the throttles at full power. His AK74 had slid forward along the deck when the boat came to a crashing halt, but Jenkins would not need the weapon if he moved fast enough.

The helicopter turned away to move behind the boat, staying well out of range of Malko's AK74. Malko followed it with the barrel of his weapon, firing every two or three seconds. Jenkins stood up and moved behind Ky. Neither Ky nor Malko saw him there. He grabbed Ky by his fatigues shirt and pulled him away from the console.

Ky gave a startled shout as Jenkins threw him hard against the gunwale. His feet came out from underneath him and Jenkins added to the momentum, giving him a push that sent him tumbling into the water.

Malko turned as Jenkins moved towards him. The barrel of the AK74 came down. Jenkins grabbed it and held it high. Malko fired and the barrel jarred in Jenkins hand, but the bullet flew harmlessly into the sky. He yanked the weapon towards him, dragging Malko with it, and drove his knee as hard as he could into the big man's groin. Malko's eyes rolled back into his head and Jenkins brought his knee up again and again. Malko let go of the AK74 and dropped onto the deck.

'Where are my diamonds?' He screamed at Malko over the roar of the engines. He bent and patted the man's pockets. There was a lump in the right trouser pocket and he shoved his hand in. His fingers found the baize bag and he drew it out, holding it up triumphantly.

'There you are my beauties!'

The boat skipped and slewed across a wave top, travelling at top speed with no one at the controls. Unable to keep his feet, Jenkins fell, but reached out a hand for the gunwale to steady himself. As he tried to stand a hand gripped his wrist. Malko punched him in the side of the head. Jenkins' vision swam. He tried to pull away, but Malko had him in an unbreakable grip. Unable to kick, he mashed the bag of diamonds into the side of Malko's head, but he might as well have hit him

with a pillow for all the good it did. Reluctantly, he let go of the bag and formed a fist to fight back with.

Malko had recovered his senses and rolled his head to avoid the punch. Jenkins' fist slammed into the deck and he screamed a mixture of rage and agony. He looked about for the AK74, but it had slid against the far gunwale.

Malko's fist snapped out and landed in the middle of Jenkins' face. He felt the cartilage in his nose crumble and blood flowed down his face. Stunned, he reeled back. Malko came up on his knees and hit him again. Jenkins' head snapped back and he slumped to the deck.

Through the blood and the pain he saw Malko use the control console to pull himself to his feet. Too stunned to move, he watched Malko pick up the mahogany pick handle then turn towards him.

'My little angel will see you into the afterlife.' He tested the weight of the pick handle and widened his stance.

The pick handle went back and the muscles in Malko's arms bulged. Jenkins could do little more than throw an arm up in front of his face. He heard Malko grunt with effort and waited for the blow that would end his life.

The RHIB came to a halt in the space of a few metres, going from forty knots to nothing. Thrown forward, Malko hit the console and, still clutching the pick handle, somersaulted over the top and disappeared beyond the bow of the RHIB. Jenkins hit the console feet first. The Australian woman slid down the deck and slammed into him. The propellers came out of the water and the outboards screamed at full power, throwing a curtain of spray high into the air.

Jenkins kicked the woman off him and climbed to his feet. He shook his head dazedly, holding the gunwale to keep himself upright. It took him a moment to realise what had happened.

The RHIB had powered up onto a floating mass of water hyacinth and was stuck high and dry. Malko lay sprawled on his back in the vegetation five metres in front of the boat, his arms outflung like a scarecrow. The big man rolled onto his side and tried to climb to his feet, but the water hyacinth was incapable of supporting him and he slipped through the foliage and disappeared. Jenkins stooped to the baize bag at his feet, picked it up and stuffed it into a pocket.

* * * * *

Nancy struggled to her feet and stood by the console as Jenkins pulled the throttles back to idle. He then clambered into the forward section, picked up a boat hook and began pushing the water hyacinth clear of the hull.

'What happened?' Her hair had torn loose and blew into her face.

Jenkins ignored her. He jabbed the boathook at a patch of hyacinth and levered it away.

The helicopter was straightening for another pass from stern to bow. As it came closer she recognised Scott in the pilot's seat. Ang sat beside him, holding the barrel of a rifle through the side window. Her heart leapt and she wanted to wave at them, but her hands were still bound. All she could do was grin at the helicopter as it passed overhead.

'That's my husband. We can get out of here.'

Jenkins gave the helicopter a cursory glance and went back to pushing the water hyacinth.

The helicopter started another turn. Below it, a small wooden boat had turned towards them, probably coming to see if the stranded RHIB needed assistance. A few inquisitive faces peered over the top of a little cabin and washing hung on a line running from the cabin to the boat's bow.

The RHIB tilted and Nancy almost lost her balance and had to lean on the console. Malko was using the outboards to climb over the stern. His arms were scratched and bleeding as he cleared the transom and landed on the deck. He ignored Nancy and started for Jenkins.

Nancy screamed and Jenkins turned. He raised the boathook and charged at Malko like a knight at a joust. Malko sidestepped the brass point and grabbed the shaft, twisting it so that Jenkins was thrown sideways against the gunwale.

Nancy edged away from the fight and into the forward section of the RHIB. Jenkins had mostly succeeded in freeing the boat and it was now partly back in the water. She climbed up onto the gunwale. The fishing boat was about three hundred metres away, close enough for her to hear the throb of its engine over the idling outboards and the helicopter.

She heard a shout from behind and turned to see Malko wrench the boathook out of Jenkins' hands. Jenkins pushed himself away from the gunwale and made a move for the AK74 lying on the deck. His hand reached for it, but Malko swung the boathook and caught him in the chest.

Nancy heard Jenkins' ribs break with a sound like dry twigs snapping. The South African screamed and staggered sideways. He fell against the console as Malko reversed the boathook in his hands and thrust forward. Jenkins' scream rose into a howl of agony as the boathook pierced his chest. His hands came up and gripped at the shaft and he tried to pull it free. Blood soaked his shirt. Too much blood. Nancy saw the colour drain from Jenkins' face as he fell to his knees and toppled sideways onto the deck.

Malko stooped over Jenkins' body, removed the baize bag and slipped it back into his fatigues pocket. Then he pulled the boathook free and scowled at Nancy.

Nancy looked at the aircraft, halfway through a turn back towards the boat, too far away to be of any help, so she picked the thickest patch of hyacinth and leapt towards it, turning in the air so that she landed on her back, hoping to spread as much of her weight as possible across the floating plant. The water hyacinth gave beneath her as she hit and water closed over her face. Panic rose but she fought the urge to scream, holding her precious breath. Pale sunlight filtered through the water and bubbles rose before her eyes to burst against the surface, only five centimetres away. Her lungs burned for air and she had to fight the urge to struggle, knowing that with her arms tied behind her she would only sink deeper. She could feel the tendrils of water hyacinth against her back and legs, but they had lost their buoyancy. The surface was only a finger's length from her face, but it might as well have been a mile away.

* * * *

'She jumped!' Scott's voice screeched in Ang's ears. 'She jumped into the water. Her hands are tied. She won't be able to swim.'

Ang took his hand from the AK74 and thumbed the intercom button. 'I can see her. She's in the water hyacinth. The plant is keeping her afloat.' He could also see Malko in the boat, dragging a body away from the console. Two hundred metres away a fishing boat was closing on the RHIB. 'There's a boat coming in. They will pick up your wife.'

'You had better be right.'

Ang didn't acknowledge Scott. White water broiled behind the RHIB as Malko gunned the outboards in reverse. The RHIB backed out of the mass of floating water hyacinth, turned to the north and raced forward, the bow lifting high under full power.

* * * * *

Nancy tried to lift her head. The surface was so close, just millimetres away, and she was only moments away from losing consciousness. Arching her back, she managed to get her nose and mouth out of the water and took in two deep breaths.

She heard a motor run up to full power and moments later the floating island rocked violently as the RHIB pulled away, blasting the water hyacinth with its wake. The tenuous grip of the vines beneath her suddenly gave way and she gulped a last lungful of air before slipping beneath the water.

Bicycling her legs as hard as she could, she tried to tread water, but with her hands tied behind her back the task was impossible. She managed to get her mouth clear of the water long enough to draw another breath, but the effort required to repeat the process was unsustainable. Already, her muscles burned. The bicycling slowed and her head slipped back beneath the water.

Nancy felt a quiet calm come over her. People had said that drowning was one of the more peaceful ways to die. She stopped kicking and looked about. The island of water hyacinth floated above her, only half a metre away. Sunlight filtered through the opening her body had made when she fell through the tangle of vine. A shaft of light descended through the opening into the depths of Tonle Sap.

As she watched, a hand came down the shaft of sunlight. It touched the top of her head and felt down her neck to the collar of her blouse where it took a grip and pulled her towards the surface.

* * * * *

'Stay on Malko. Get out to the side of him.'

The helicopter tilted as Scott started the turn. Ang let go of the intercom button and sighted down the AK74. The RHIB was back at full speed, skipping across the waves, little spurts of white spray jetting sideways from beneath the hull every time the boat slammed into the water. With no hostages to worry about, Ang waited until the centre of the boat filled his sights and squeezed the trigger.

The AK74 jumped in his hands, but he hadn't allowed for the speed of the boat or helicopter. A row of fountains appeared three metres behind the RHIB. Ang cursed and shifted his aim. The fountains chased the boat and caught up with it. Black smoke erupted from the nearest outboard.

* * * * *

Malko felt the RHIB slow as the outboard disintegrated under the hail of bullets. He flicked the wheel right to try and get in under the helicopter where the passenger had no hope of shooting at him. The boat responded, but slowly. Malko looked up and could see the weapon poking through the side window. Then he was under the aircraft.

The pilot pivoted the helicopter sideways and tried to give the shooter a better line of sight. Malko pushed at the throttles, but they were already at the stops. The ruined outboard was only adding drag and slowing him further, but there was nothing he could do about it now. He glanced around the deck and found an AK74 lying near the fuel tanks. The helicopter, flying sideways, was opening up the distance again. Malko let go of the wheel and scrambled for the gun. He grasped the sling and hurried back to the console.

The shooter in the helicopter opened fire and bullets struck the bow. Holes appeared in the focsle, stitching a neat line that passed along the left pontoon. The rubber quivered like jelly and then lost some of its rigidity as the air leaked out.

Malko lifted the AK74 and fired one handed. He wasn't sure if he'd hit the helicopter, but the machine responded by straightening its sideways flight and accelerating away.

Given a brief respite, he went to the destroyed outboard and tilted it out of the water. Then he returned to the console and took the wheel. The RHIB responded a little better now, but the left pontoon was sagging alarmingly.

Out to his left he could see a thin line of green, the shoreline, maybe four or five kilometres away. He spun the wheel and headed for it, glancing back over his shoulder as the helicopter approached from astern.

* * * * *

A light illuminated on the panel at the same time as Scott heard the alarm in his headphones.

Ang looked across from where he was changing magazines. 'What's that?'

'Low fuel pressure.' Scott ran his gaze over the instrument panel. Everything else appeared normal, but he knew they only had a few moments more of flying time. 'Time for a swim.'

They closed on the RHIB once more. The boat travelled slower now, crabbing slightly under the power of one outboard.

'You've got one more chance to stop him. Then we're in the drink.'

Ang gave a nod then turned back to the side window, his weapon held at the ready.

Scott turned his attention back to the instruments. The turbine pressure gauge gave a flicker then settled back to normal.

Only seconds left!

Strangely, he felt no fear. They were moments away from crashing into the lake and all his concentration was fixed on giving Ang the best possible shot at Malko.

* * * * *

Ang had learnt to allow for the speed of the helicopter and the boat now. As Scott guided them down the right side of the RHIB, he let the sights drift down the length of the boat and out onto the water beyond. The boat now had only one

engine and was slower than before, so he let the sights gain maybe two metres and pulled the trigger.

The helicopter lost power and dropped as the AK74 chattered. Ang's bullets hit the water, travelled across the bow of the RHIB and then back into the water with no effect. Malko held his own weapon one-handed and little starlight flashes glittered from the muzzle. Bullets struck somewhere behind Ang. It didn't matter if they had hit anywhere vital or not. The helicopter was dead anyway.

* * * * *

Scott watched the gauges winding down on the panel and felt the life draining out of the controls. Their momentum carried them past the RHIB, but the airspeed was bleeding away rapidly.

'Hang on!'

He bottomed the collective, flattening the pitch of the rotors to save the kinetic energy of their motion. The helicopter dropped like an express elevator. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the RHIB slowly gaining on them, maybe fifty metres to the side and thirty metres below. Thinking fast, he angled the control stick to the left. The helicopter lurched towards the RHIB.

'What the hell are you doing?'

'If we're going to crash, we might as well make it worth our while.'

Ang shifted in his seat and pulled the seatbelt tighter.

Scott, his head turned sideways to see through the left chin bubble, caught one last glimpse of Malko staring up at them in astonishment. Then they were over the RHIB.

The helicopter shuddered as he pulled on collective and the windmilling rotors bit at the air. The rate of descent slowed, but the Jetranger had gone past the point of being a flying machine. From three metres it crashed down onto the RHIB, the skids straddling the control console.

For maybe three seconds the RHIB travelled on unchecked, the helicopter perched on its back. Then, as the weight settled, the bow bit deep into the water. The tail of the helicopter was thrown up and the lake waters broke over the windscreen as they nosedived into the boat's path. Noises of tearing, screeching metal filled the cockpit. Beside Scott, Ang cried out. Then the helicopter nosed deep and the view through the windshield was like looking into a dirty aquarium.

The helicopter rolled sideways and Scott searched desperately for his seatbelt release. Like most helicopters, the heavy engine was mounted high, and he knew what this meant.

'Ang! Get your belt off. She'll turn upside down before she sinks.'

Ang struggled to release the belt as Scott fought for his own survival. He found the release and jabbed at it. The seatbelt snapped away and he fell against the pilot's door, now twenty centimetres under water. Ang's window was on the upper side with the Perspex already removed. Sky and cloud were visible through the opening, but the policeman was having trouble with his belt release. Scott stood on the inside of the door, pried Ang's hands away and hit the buckle. Ang fell across the cockpit and against Scott, sending them both crashing into the side which was now the floor.

Scott was the first to regain his feet. He reached down to help the policeman, but Ang pointed at the patch of sky.

‘Get out of here. I’m right behind you.’

The sinking helicopter lurched beneath his feet and Scott didn’t need telling twice. Using the side of the radio console and the copilot’s seat he pulled himself towards the opening. Climbing through, he found the RHIB floating upside down a few metres away. Pieces of rotor blade and debris, a seat cushion from the RHIB floated on the water. There was no sign of Malko.

Scott knelt on the side of the helicopter and reached down to give Ang a hand up, but something hit him in the ribs and sent him sliding down the aluminium skin. He came up against one of the struts for the left skid and managed to hold on, looking back to find Malko had climbed up onto the helicopter using the partly-submerged rotor mast. The big man dripped water, his fatigues clinging to his skin. The crash had opened a gash above his eye and blood ran down his face. He had an AK74 slung over his shoulder that he now slipped off and aimed at Scott.

‘You and your wife have caused me enough trouble, Mr Morris.’

Malko thumbed the safety catch and Scott heard the metallic *click*. He threw his arm up in a useless gesture as gunfire shattered the air.

Scott felt nothing, but he heard bullets slamming into flesh. He lowered his arm to see Malko’s body twitch and dance. The hijacker fell sideways onto the aluminium skin and slid into the water, leaving a bloody smear behind him.

Ang stood in the open window, only his head and shoulders showing. The barrel of his AK74 still smoked as he looked down at Malko’s lifeless body floating beside the helicopter.

Scott climbed back up onto the side of the helicopter and took the rifle from Ang then reached down to help him out of the cockpit.

They sat side by side on the sinking aircraft. Scott put a hand to Ang’s shoulder. ‘Thanks. He had me there.’

Ang didn’t respond. He kept his gaze on Malko’s body and Scott left him to his thoughts.

The helicopter settled lower into the water, then Scott heard a motor and turned to see a fishing boat approaching. Someone called his name, the voice barely audible at that distance, but he recognised instantly the woman standing in the bows, waving frantically in his direction.

Chapter 33

With Soo-Li navigating, Fred was able to keep the Mekong Dawn in the channel. Twice he felt the hull scrape against something lurking in the depths, but nothing stopped their progress towards the lake. He allowed himself to relax and took his last cigar from the packet. He had left his lighter somewhere, but Soo-Li shot from the wheelhouse, reappearing moments later with it in her hand. She flicked it open and held the flame close to his face.

‘There you go, Mr Fred.

Fred drew hard on the cigar and exhaled a plume of blue smoke towards the ceiling. Outside, the shadows had lengthened into twilight and the channel stretched away into distance through the trees. Fred had the impression he was navigating the MEKONG DAWN down a tunnel.

Captain Klim stood in the wheelhouse door. ‘If we don’t make the lake soon, it will be too dark to continue and we will have to tie up for the night.’

Fred shook his head. ‘Harold needs that doctor. We keep going. Even if we have to do it by torchlight.’

Collette stepped into the wheelhouse and handed him a steaming cup of coffee. He placed it on the console then put his arm around her.

Collette peered ahead at the growing gloom. ‘How far to the lake? I don’t want to spend another night in these swamps.’

Fred looked down at Soo-Li, deferring the question to her.

The girl stood on her tiptoes and examined the surrounding swamp. Fred couldn’t see any difference outside. This part of the swamp looked just like the kilometres behind them, but Soo-Li reached a decision.

‘Not far, Miss Collie. One last turn coming up, Mr Fred.’ She angled her arm to the left to indicate the direction. ‘Start your turn ... now.’

Fred spun the wheel and watched the bow post drift across the trees.

‘Straight ahead now.’

‘Dead ahead it is.’ Fred brought the wheel back to midships. The MEKONG DAWN straightened on course and they were rewarded by a bright strip of daylight about two hundred metres ahead.

‘I think we’ve reached the lake.’ Unable to help himself, Fred nudged the throttles forward a little and nodded appreciably as the beat of the engines increased.

The MEKONG DAWN emerged from the twilight world of the swamps and into bright sunshine. A cheer erupted from those passengers who lined the rails. Out to the west the sun hung above the horizon and the waters of Tonle Sap were a deep gold.

Fred put his arm around Soo-Li and hugged her tight. ‘You’ve done it, darling! We’re out!’

Soo-Li rewarded him with her biggest and brightest smile.

Klim wore a broad smile also. ‘Well done! Move us out into open water. I’ll get headquarters on the portable radio. They can tell the patrol boat where to find us.’

Fred pushed the throttles to full power and the MEKONG DAWN surged ahead. He looked back at the tree line and the swamps.

Collette guessed his thoughts. ‘I’m glad to be out of there, too.’

Soo-Li got to her feet and stood on tiptoe again as she peered across the water. ‘Look!’

Fred followed the point of her arm and saw a large vessel rounding the headland and powering towards them.

‘You can forget about the radio call, Captain. It looks as if your navy is already here.’

* * * * *

Ky trod water and looked about, but the darkness hid the shore from him. He wasn't sure how long he had been swimming, how long it had been since Western threw him out of the RHIB. He had been steadily making his way towards the shore, but now he couldn't see it and didn't know which way to swim.

A few stars showed overhead and, at his limited horizon this low in the water, the navigation lights of a few vessels could be seen, but too far away to signal for help.

He was exhausted, and the few floating islands of water hyacinth he came across were too flimsy to offer any sort of support.

His ears slipped below the surface and he instantly heard a deep thrummm pulsing through the water. He lifted his head and looked about for the vessel that must be close. Pivoting, he saw a green navigation light, and a red one. A phosphorescent white glow bubbled the water between the lights. The ship was about eighty metres away and heading right at him.

Desperately, Ky kicked his legs and tried to swim out to the side. If he could get the attention of someone on the deck then he would be saved.

He swam into a large patch of water hyacinth, cursed and tried to swim around it. Vines tangled his leg and he kicked frantically, trying to get clear. Finally, he freed his leg, but when he looked up the vessel was almost on him, the bow blocking out a huge portion of sky.

The bow wave broke over his head and pushed him under. He scraped along beneath the ship, banging against the steel-plated hull, tumbling over and over in its turbulence. Then, through the noise of the engines and the rushing water, he heard the whine of twin propellers. The water changed, became less turbulent, but moved rapidly in a clean flow as it was pulled towards the large screws. Ky's body was pulled along with it, sucked down into the maelstrom of whirling metal.

* * * * *

On the bridge of the KHMER STAR the officer of the watch scanned the waters ahead. The way was clear. With luck they would reach Siem Reap, the ship's home port, at first light. Tomorrow was pay day and his thoughts turned to the gift he had bought his wife to help warm his homecoming.

The beat of the engines gave a slight miss, cutting into his thoughts. His eyes flicked to the repeater gauges on the console. Left engine revolutions had dropped by a hundred RPM. He watched the tachometer and saw the needle quiver then climb back to normal.

'Bloody water hyacinth!'

He went back to staring out the windshield and wondered if his wife would like the silk dress.

Epilogue

Kampong Chhnang

Captain Turan stared at the ringing mobile phone on his desk. The little screen was illuminated. The caller ID was not a name but a code word, one he'd thought he would never hear from again.

Tentatively, he picked up the phone, stared at it for a moment longer, then pressed the answer button.

'Hello?'

'You didn't find the boy that night, did you?' a voice said.

A frown creased Turan's brow. 'What are you talking about? Who is this?'

'Thirty-eight years ago Malko sent you to hunt down a boy who escaped one of the purges at the Killing Fields. You never found him, did you? Let me help you out.'

The voice sounded familiar, but he couldn't quite place it. 'Who are you? How do you know these things?' There was no response to his questions, but someone knocked at his office door.

The voice came back on the line. 'Why don't you get the door?'

Turan stood and went to the door. As his hand turned the knob the door was thrust open from the outside. Major Sinh Ang stood on the other side, a phone in one hand and a pistol in the other. Four armed men stood behind him.

'Good morning, Tepan.'

Turan reeled back. He hadn't used that name for nearly forty years.

'I did some checking,' Ang said. 'You are still wanted for crimes against humanity, Tepan. Your past has finally caught up with you.' He held up the phone in his hand. 'I found this phone on Malko's body and am working through the numbers stored in it. I was surprised to find your number in here. But, on second thoughts, you did send us off to search the wrong side of the lake.'

Turan backed against the edge of his desk. Ang and the men followed him into the room. 'You have it all wrong. This isn't my phone. I found it on a suspect. I thought it might have something to do with Malko. I was going to call you.'

Ang nodded and smiled. 'Very interesting. And if we study the address book stored in that phone, I'll bet we'll be surprised to see that the suspect also kept your wife's number as well as that of other members of your household. By the way, we have just come from a little building beyond the airport here in Kampong Chhnang. Someone has set it up as a communication centre of sorts, hooked into the exchange on false numbers. There are photocopies of passports and all sorts of stuff. The forensics boys are there now. The place is full of fingerprints. I'll bet we find some interesting ones, don't you?'

The fight went out of Turan and he slumped back against his desk. One of the armed men stepped forward, turned him around and put him into handcuffs.

The smile stayed on Ang's face. 'You're under arrest for terrorism and crimes against the Kingdom of Cambodia. Take him out through the main office, boys. Let everyone see what happens to traitors and crooked cops.'

Phnom Penh

Nancy had not felt so nervous in weeks. The waiting gnawed at her insides and she bit absently at a fingernail, not taking her eyes off the varnished wooden door,

beyond which a government bureaucrat pondered her future. Scott sat at her side, his hand resting in her lap. Despite the airconditioning, she could feel perspiration running down the small of her back.

'I'm sure it'll be fine, Nance,' Scott tried to comfort his wife. 'Ang has thrown in the best possible word on our behalf.'

'They're taking far too long.' She wrung Scott's hand. 'Surely they have come to a decision by now?'

'It takes as long as it takes, sweetie.' Collette tried to sound reassuring, but she was as nervous as Nancy. She threw the magazine she had been skimming back onto the pile on a low table.

Fred thumbed his cigarette lighter, an unlit cigar in his hand. He looked at the NO SMOKING sign and then at the ceiling without saying a word.

There was no comfort there so Nancy went back to staring at the door.

'So, you are back to flying?' Collette tried to break the terrible silence.

Scott nodded. 'I'm back to my old job. Things are pretty much back to normal. We're just hoping for a good outcome here.'

The door opened and Nancy jumped in her seat. A smartly-dressed Cambodian woman beckoned them into the office. The woman went to a side desk, sat down and picked up a sheaf of papers. A man, dressed in a business suit, sat behind a more ornate desk under the window. He had his head down, reading a document on the blotter.

There were no spare seats so Nancy stopped in the middle of the room and stared at the man behind the desk. He finished reading and looked up at her, his expression neutral.

'Ah! Mr and Mrs Morris. I have looked at your application and taken into consideration the excellent reference offered by Major Sinh. While the process of approval normally takes some considerable time, I am prepared to allow some leeway, given the special circumstances and events of a few weeks ago. You have both shown yourselves to be admirable people. I am told the diamonds recovered from the criminal Malko are being put to good use. Already there are plans for several new orphanages and a children's hospital.'

'I'm glad some good has come out of that whole mess,' Nancy said, but couldn't take her eyes off the documents on the desk, the documents that held so much of her future and the future of others.

The government official nodded. He picked up a stamp and thumped it onto the papers.

'Your application for the adoption of Nguyen Soo-Li is approved. Congratulations.'

Nancy stood dumbfounded as the Cambodian woman got up from her seat and went to a door across the office. She opened it to reveal Soo-Li sitting on a high-backed chair in a small room, her legs swinging back and forth in nervous anticipation. The girl saw Nancy standing in the office and the swinging stopped. She leapt to her feet and rushed towards her. Nancy squatted on her heels and took Soo-Li in her arms.

'Miss Nancy! Miss Nancy! Thank you.'

'You have nothing to thank me for, sweetheart.' Nancy felt her heart pounding fit to burst and struggled to hold back tears. 'You are a wonderful and bright young girl. It will be an honour to have you as part of our family.'

'And Miss Collie and Mr Fred?'

'They live on the other side of the country.' Scott squatted beside his wife and new daughter. 'But we will visit them often. I promise.'

'You'd better.' Fred's voice was gruff. 'I have plans to take my little navigator out cruising on Port Phillip Bay.'

'I will go to school in Australia?' The girl's eyes were big and bright. Her head turned constantly as she tried to look at everyone in the room at once.

Nancy turned Soo-Li so she could look into her eyes. 'You will go to school and to college, even university. If that's what you want.'

Soo-Li looked pensive for a moment. 'And when I am smart and grown up I can be a teacher? I can come back to Cambodia and help the children here to be as smart as I will be?'

Nancy pulled the girl to her chest and stroked her long dark hair—just like she had that night aboard the MEKONG DAWN.

'Your future is yours to choose, sweetheart.'

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