

INTO THE UNKNOWN

A NOVEL



HAI VAN LE



INTO THE UNKNOWN – International Edition

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination, or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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PRAISE FOR *INTO THE UNKNOWN*

I don't usually read adventure books, but this one had me after the first few pages! Hai Van Le managed to weave the best of humanity and ancient spiritual teachings throughout the pages of a brilliant international thriller. An excellent book!

Janet Nestor, Author of *Pathways to Wholeness* and *Yeshua: 100 Meaningful Messages for Messengers*

Author Hai Van Le crafts a thrilling adventure filled with suspense and danger at every turn. The sweeping, dramatic descriptions of exotic places and different cultures transport readers to the remote and unforgiving landscapes of Mali... The fast-paced narrative was structured well to offer lots of twists that kept me on the edge of my seat... There was also great attention to detail around the characters, with unique dialogue touches and action-packed descriptions that brought the characters to life and evoked a sense of palpable tension and urgency as plot events unfolded around them... *Into the Unknown* is a gripping tale of resilience, courage, and determination that fans of adventure and thriller novels are sure to adore.

K.C. Finn, *Readers' Favorite*

Hai Van Le's story hits the ground running with a daring kidnapping and Hall stumbling into the bloody aftermath... The author, who ably details colorful landscapes and harsh desert terrain, builds to a frenzied final act, upon which a sequel will assuredly elaborate. Memorable characters headline this absorbing... international thriller.

KIRKUS REVIEWS

DEDICATION

To the inquisitive souls navigating this earthly journey, who, at critical moments, ponder life's mysteries: What is my place in the grand scheme of the universe? Where do my loved ones go after death? And what's the meaning of suffering?





PROLOGUE

SNEAK ATTACK

LADAL, MALI

23:20 WAT

12 NOVEMBER 2010

In the dead of night, guided by instinct, swarms of termites stirred and emerged from underground. The air buzzed with the thrum of millions of winged virgins caught up in a frenzied search for mates. The creatures thronged the sky, some landing on the near-motionless men silhouetted against the pale glow of a waxing gibbous moon. Sidi Mohamed, tall and robust, crouched low as he lurked in the shadow of a massive termite mound. Four other members of his team were nearby, all awaiting his signal.

Overhead, the moon played hide-and-seek with them. One moment, it peeked through the dark clouds, faintly illuminating the ground. And then just as quickly, it disappeared. That would be just fine for Mohamed. The interplay of light and shadow were a perfect combination for their mission.

Their target of interest lived a short distance away inside a walled compound with four huts. For the last few weeks, his men had surveilled the compound, watching the comings and goings of the people living inside. They knew how many people lived there and what their routine was.

Their prey was neither Tuareg nor Malian. Rather, she was a stranger in a land where tribal affiliation was everything. They didn't know who she was or where she came from, but that didn't matter to them. They had a job to do and a lucrative reward upon completion of the task.

It had rained heavily during much of the afternoon, but as the sun set, the air had become calm. And tonight, just hours earlier, he had received a text message giving him the go-ahead.

At the wall adjacent to the gate, two men crouched low. Mohamed stepped onto their shoulders. The men rose, lifting him up. He pulled himself up and over.

Mohamed landed silently and ran to the gate, where he slid the latch and pulled the gate ajar. The men rushed into the compound and fanned out. Each of them knew what they had to do. One man, carrying a lighter and a rag soaked with gasoline, headed straight to the core shack at the end. Others positioned themselves outside the huts where the two helpers slept.

Followed by two men, with a flashlight in hand, Mohamed strode toward the rectangular, one-story building with a satellite dish perched on its roof. He was sure his target would be sleeping there. He turned the knob. The entrance to the room was not locked. They found themselves in the living room. At the far end, a narrow hallway led to a couple of smaller rooms.

All was quiet except for the snoring sound which rose and fell rhythmically like clockwork emanating from the bigger room immediately adjacent to the living room.

Mohamed pushed the door ajar. Once inside, he stepped aside and shone the flashlight on the bed as his two followers – Omar and Ahmad - dashed in. The master of the compound and his woman were there as expected. Within a few seconds, Mohamed was by the man's side and punched him in the face as the man groggily sat up. The powerful blow seemed to have had its intended effect for the man promptly fell back on the bed.

Before she knew what was happening, Omar shoved a rag in

the woman's mouth and dragged her off the bed with the help of Ahmad. Together they rushed her out of the room.

Smiling, Mohamed quickly scanned the room. Everything was proceeding according to plan. As he was about to exit the door, he turned to have a last look at the bed. To his surprise, he found the man sitting up, a gun in his right hand pointed at him.

A shot went off, hitting him in the left shoulder. The flashlight dropped to the floor and shattered on impact. Reeling in pain in the darkness, Mohamed instinctively grabbed the knife tucked into his waist and flung it at where he believed his target was. Almost as fast as a cheetah sprinting after its prey, the blade tore silently across the space between them. A loud groan broke out, followed by a thud as the man's heavy frame crashed on the mattress. Another shot rang out. The bullet whizzed past his cheek, missing him by a couple of inches.

Grimacing, his right hand pressing against his left chest, Mohamed staggered outside. "You don't belong here," he muttered under his breath. The core shack was already aflame, illuminating a large part of the compound. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Amir, who was tasked with the arson job, cut down the two Malian men with his sword as they scrambled outside.

As he approached the gate, Mohamed blew the whistle. His brother, who had been waiting outside, bolted forward with the camels. In less than sixty seconds, the men had shoved the woman on top of the saddle, mounted their animals, and trotted off into the darkness with their prize.

PART I



UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

“There’s no greater misfortune than keeping
company with a fool.”

Greg Nesbitt



LOST CATHEDRALS

Eight hundred kilometres away in Maranga, at the time of the attack, Jake Hall was sleeping in his company's exploration headquarters. Maranga Goldfields Inc.'s complex, about ten-minute drive south from the town's main street, was situated on a six hectares lot on the eastern bank of the Niger River.

At six thirty, Hall woke to the sound of chirping crickets from his wristwatch on the night table. He dragged himself out of bed, down the hallway, and into the shower. Already the temperature was more than twenty degrees Celsius.

Afterward he sat down to a breakfast already prepared and laid out for him by the resident housekeeper, Fadimata, a single Tuareg woman in her fifties. He quickly devoured *takola*, the flatbread topped with strawberry jam imported from France.

At 7:30 a.m., Hall turned on the short-wave radio. "Heavy rain flooded mine shafts and killed an untold number of illegal artisanal miners at Zimbabwe's biggest state-owned copper mine," a BBC news presenter announced over the airwaves. "Authorities are still hard at work pumping out the water." He turned the dial off.

With his close-cropped hair and casual attire giving him a chill vibe that belied his thirty-five years, Hall was, in fact, the one who planned the initial drilling campaign that resulted in the discovery of a substantial gold deposit in this part of Mali. In his mind's eye, he could visualize the flooding in detail: the cramped, labyrinth-like tunnels filling with water; young men flailing in the murky water.

“Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning,” Hall muttered, engulfed by a wave of sadness. “In the name of the Father,” he said reverently, his right hand touching his forehead, “and of the Son,” — his hand at his chest and then moving to the left and the right shoulder — “and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Close to 8:00 a.m., a helicopter whirred into sight. About ten minutes later, it landed at the edge of the apple-shaped putting green a short distance from the river and abutting the complex.

Hall unzipped his backpack and stuffed it with a water bottle, hand lenses and loupes, a field notebook, a compass clinometer, a hammer, chisel, sample bags, a measuring tape, and a couple of changes of clothes. He donned his orange geologist vest, then picked up the small pocket Bible from a nearby table nearby and slipped it into one of vest’s pockets.

He was barely outside the door when he was greeted with a chorus of insistent caws. Hall looked up. Three crows, their wings marked with white, stared back at him from a branch of the mango tree near the gate of the complex. Their glossy feathers caught the sunlight, glinting brightly. They were a regular fixture of the neighbourhood and he had seen them numerous times before, but never before had they shouted at him. It was as though they were objecting to the disturbance caused by the helicopter.

“What’re you up to?” Hall waved at them before hastening down the footpath toward the landing zone, the birds’ shrill cries reverberating around him.

Suddenly shadows flashed over his head. The crows had left their perch and were directly flying past him. And then a sound like liquid splattering hit the ground just ahead of him.

“Have you gone mad, or what?” Hall swore at the birds, now out of sight, relieved that their droppings had not splashed onto him.



When Hall first laid eyes on the compact, civilian helicopter, he liked it immediately. It had a wrap-around glass window at the front and a sleek body painted tawny brown with navy blue trim.

Ivan Prokov, the Ukrainian-born pilot with Desert Air, raised his hand in a military salute, as if he were still in the military. “Good morning, sir.” He was a broad-shouldered man of fifty-six with close-cropped hair and unruly eyebrows.

“Ivan, a pleasure meeting you,” Hall greeted, extending his hand. As they shook, he caught a glimpse of the hammer and sickle tattooed on the inside of the pilot’s forearm.

Prokov, towering over Hall, spread out a map of northern Mali on the ground. “I just want to confirm with you,” he said, pointing to a brown dot marked “Ladal” a few inches north of Timbuktu, “the place we’re looking for is somewhere in this area.”

Hall crouched and examined it. On the pilot’s map, the area around the destination was a featureless brown. “I was told it should be quite easy. His compound is the only major structure for miles around. How long do you think it will take to get there?”

“Should be about an hour.”

“Great!” *A road trip would easily take nine to ten hours*, Hall thought, pleased his boss had allowed him the luxury of a helicopter for this assignment. He had driven from Bamako to Maranga in the past and had found the drive to be an unpleasant, bone-rattling, brake-slamming journey fraught with danger, especially after a rain. “Anything else?”

“No. We can go now.”



Bathed in early morning sunlight, the swath of land stretching along the Niger River unfurled before Hall. It looked surreally lush and peaceful: a checkerboard of millet fields and vegetable gardens of various sizes, dotted with greyish-brown single-level mud huts.

They flew past women, some with their babies swaddled on their backs, waiting patiently in line with their buckets for their turn at the company-funded water pump; women and men with hoes heading to their farm plots.

About ten kilometres northeast of the town’s main street, lay

Monashee, Maranga Goldfields' prized asset. Soon, the helicopter was above it.

Ever since he first set foot in this town five years ago, Hall had seen them up close at work on the ground numerous times. From 200 metres up in the air, the perspective changed.

In an area smaller than a football field, more than a hundred men and women were already at work with their shovels and pickaxes, transforming the semi-arid landscape into mounds of rock and dirt, while others were tunnelling deep below in search of gold.

Like a Rorschach test, Hall mused, the phantasmagoria of irregular-shaped excavations could suggest anything depending on one's predisposition and background. To aquaculturists, the water-filled holes could easily pass for fish ponds, except the water containing leached minerals from ore is toxic to aquatic life; to environmentalists, wanton destruction of the Earth; to space buffs, moon craters; to war historians, bomb craters in Laos; to biologists, burrows of some gigantic animals.

His thoughts bubbled to the surface and then disappeared quickly as the helicopter climbed higher, revealing a semi-arid landscape further out where the desert had been creeping closer and closer to the edges of town every year.



More than an hour later, they were greeted by the spectacle of big termite hills dotting wide stretches of land. The majestic natural structures, spaced on average about ten metres apart, were awe-inspiring: huge, mysterious, with diameters exceeding five metres and heights up to eight metres. They reminded him of church spires.

Greg Nesbitt's voice echoed in his mind, "The Cathedrals enchant you and never release their hold. What's more, there's gold in every single one of them. The big mystery is: Where is the source of all this gold?"

Suddenly he understood why the famed geologist named his exploration project Lost Cathedrals. The man with the Midas touch

had been obsessed with the search for the holy grail of gold exploration: the mother lode of gold responsible for traces of gold brought to the surface by the termites. For the last seven years, he had toiled away in secrecy in the outlying reaches of Mali's vast and inhospitable northern region. If Roger Hoffman, his boss, was to be believed, Nesbitt had found it, and his job today was to learn as much as he could about the project and report back to Hoffman.

The termite mounds also brought to his mind something else: Ayesha. Six months earlier, Nesbitt had shown Hall a picture of himself and his partner in front of a termite mound. Ayesha, with a dark-blue headscarf wrapped around her head and neck, was a voluptuous beauty. She seemed to be in her late thirties. The square-faced, broad-shouldered Nesbitt was dressed in a brown khaki shirt and shorts, and wore a pith helmet to protect him from the sun. Back then, Hall was immediately struck by the elaborate circular decorations on her hands and the age difference between the two of them.

"Sir, I believe that's Mr. Nesbitt's camp," the pilot remarked, gesturing towards a collection of structures emerging from the flat landscape.

The pilot's voice, coming through the speakers in the headset, jarred Hall out of his trance. As the helicopter swung low over the complex, Hall peered down.

"Oh my god," Hall muttered, as he caught a glimpse of the compound below, which felt like a world away from the creature comforts of his residence in Maranga. Protected by a mud wall with a wooden gate framed by two towering termite mounds, Nesbitt's exploration camp consisted of several adobe buildings, a vegetable garden, and a core shack, all arranged around a majestic shea tree that was visible for miles around. A satellite dish sprouted from one of the buildings. Two Land Cruisers were parked near the front.

Has Nesbitt completely gone native? Or is it just the way he has always been: someone obsessed with making the next discovery? Questions swirled in Hall's head.

It blew his mind that the seventy-two-year-old multimillionaire,

a legend in the mining industry in his own right, could be living in such seemingly primitive conditions. By contrast, his own house in Maranga was built with concrete cinder blocks and sported a red-tiled roof. It was graced with a huge mango tree in front. At the back could be found a couple of small cabins for the housekeeper and guard. A satellite dish provided high-speed internet. He had air-conditioning and flush toilets. In a town where a majority of the residents lacked indoor plumbing, these were luxuries the town's residents could only dream about.

Hall gasped as the core shack came into sharp focus. Its roof trusses were charred and rows of wooden shelves had partially collapsed, scattering a jumble of sawn-off cores on the ground.

Prokov expertly guided the chopper lower for a landing in a clearing a stone's throw from the compound.

Hall hopped out. In the thirty-degree-plus heat, the still air hung heavy with the lingering tang of smoke. He was taken aback by the eerie silence. He glanced anxiously at the wooden gate framed by two towering termite hills a short distance away. It was ajar.

Something seemed wrong!

Hall anxiously bounded toward it. With trepidation, he gave it a slight push. In the shade provided by the shea tree, chickens and roosters roamed nonchalantly. In a corner was a square plot, about an acre in size, where lettuce, tomatoes, and cabbage were growing. There was no one in sight. It was as though the inhabitants had been plucked from the ground by an alien spaceship.

"Hello. Anybody here?" he shouted.

As his voice echoed across the compound, Hall spotted a trail of blood. He turned and found Prokov next to him, a pistol in his hand.

The pilot nodded, as if saying, *You're all right. I'll watch your back.*

The blood on the ground led to the main building.

"Greg, are you there?" Hall shouted as he cautiously poked his head into the doorway.

To his surprise, the temperature inside was a lot cooler than outside. In the dim light, Hall spotted a lone figure on the dirt floor. It was Nesbitt. Three steps later, Hall was by his side and crouched down next to him.

Nesbitt's pyjamas were stained with blood. A knife lay nearby.

"Good heavens!" Hall propped him up. "What happened? Are you all right?"

Nesbitt wore a pained expression on his face, as if he had suffered from an incurable disease, and been confined to the intensive care unit for a long time. "I've been ..." he stammered, "waiting for you all morning. I'm glad ...you came."

He tugged at Hall's arm. "Water...please!"

Hall looked around. He spotted a small fridge in a corner. He darted there, opened the door, and found a half-empty plastic bottle of water sitting on the shelf. He grabbed it and rushed back.

Nesbitt drank it all in one gulp.

"Last night they came and attacked us," Nesbitt recounted, dead-eyed with exhaustion. "They took Ayesha. They killed my assistants."

"Who are they?"

Nesbitt shrugged. "I don't know." He coughed. "There are always smugglers around. I never thought this could happen!" He paused a moment, then added with sudden gravity, "Frankly, I'm scared. Not for me, but for my wife. Please, help me find her. It should be easy with the helicopter."

Hall glanced up at the vaulted ceiling above. *Hmm. Who knows where she may be by now. Finding her in this vast desert is like finding a needle in a haystack.*

He bit his lip. "Sorry, I'd be in way over my head for something like this."

"She's my greatest happiness," Nesbitt said. "I don't know how I can live without her. Please!"

"Look at you," Hall said, gesturing to Nesbitt's abdomen. "You need urgent medical attention. We should get you to a hospital in Timbuktu. It'll be quick. And then you'll be okay."

Nesbitt clutched Hall's hand. "There's no time to lose," he said slowly between light groans and heavy breaths. "I need to find her. God forbid anything should happen to her."

"But you're in no shape to go anywhere right now but the hospital."

"I think I'll be all right. If I die, well, so be it. I have no regrets. I have had a very good life...Ayesha's everything to me." He gazed into Hall's eyes. "She's pregnant. We must do everything we can to bring her back."

Hall was struck by his heartfelt pleading, but every bone in his body was saying, "It's a fool's errand. She could be anywhere by now." He looked up and caught Prokov's eye. The man didn't have to say anything. Hall understood his concern already: *How in the world are we going to find her?*

"Don't mistake what I'm saying," Hall said. "I can't leave you like this by yourself. Let's get you to Timbuktu — now."

He threw his arm over Nesbitt's shoulder. "After we get there, I'll alert the police. Maybe one of them will come with me to search for your wife."

He paused. "Who knows, with some luck, I'll be able bring her back for you."

"Well, all right," Nesbitt sighed reluctantly.

Arms extended and supported on either side by Hall and Prokov, he reluctantly rose and tottered out of the room, across the courtyard, past the gate, and toward the helicopter.



INTO UNCHARTED TERRITORY

Seated behind Nesbitt, as the helicopter eased off the ground and headed toward Timbuktu, a vague unease that Hall couldn't put his fingers on gnawed at him.

Minutes glided by.

The landscape dominated by termite mounds had now given way to salmon-coloured dunes of varying sizes and heights. They sprawled as far as the eye could see, shimmering in the heat. They undulated, rippled across the landscape, and glinted amber in the sun. Their sharply delineated ridges gave them the appearance of slumbering dinosaurs frozen in time and whose necks were truncated by the scouring action of winds over millennia.

Ordinarily, Hall would have very much enjoyed the view below, but not today. Not this moment. He worried where he might find a hospital in Timbuktu, a city he had heard a great deal about, but had never visited.

"Hmm, a caravan!" Nesbitt let out an unexpected cry from his seat. He turned to Hall. "Jake, would you mind taking a look at that?"

Hall stood up and peered out. Blobs of animals and people threading their way through the trough between two tall dunes. "It's just a caravan. Nothing special!"

"Those bastards got away by camel last night," the famed

geologist grabbed Hall's hand, his voice barely audible above the din of the engine. "Ayesha could be down there."

"She may be, or she may not," Hall shrugged.

"As I lay on the floor last night, I vowed to find her, come hell or high water, and make the bastards pay for their crime."

Hall looked at Nesbitt dubiously. "It's a long shot."

"I know the odds are against us," Nesbitt squeezed Hall's hand, "but if we don't check them out now, and if for any reasons she was there, I would never be able to forgive myself."

"Okay, let me think about this!"

Nesbitt pierced Hall with his bloodshot eyes. "Jake, for God's sake, please."

Hall bit his lip a moment. And then something in him snapped. "All right."

Hall leaned forward and tapped the pilot on the shoulder. "Our friend here," he gestured to Nesbitt and then to the caravan, "would like to have a close look at those people down there, if you don't mind."

The pilot stared at Hall. "Huh. Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"All right," Prokov nodded, the curls at both ends of his handlebar moustache twitching excitedly.

The helicopter swiftly descended until it was just shy of six metres above the tallest dune. As it was about to streak past them, the men, amid a swirl of dust, jumped off their camels and scattered like billiard balls.

Prokov hooted in his native language.

Hall felt faintly dizzy, as if he were on a small pleasure boat navigating through two-metre-high waves, alternately riding the crests and then plunging precariously into the troughs.

Hall leaned forward. "What were you doing?" he cried, feeling a sudden twinge of regret. "Are you crazy? You frightened them out of their wits."

Prokov shrugged. "Just for the hell of it." He glanced over his

shoulders at the passengers. “I used to do this all the time when I was still in the Soviet Union Military Air Force.”

“I didn’t know you were in the Soviet air force,” Hall said, shifting uneasily in his seat. “Mali is sure a long way from Russia.”

“Ukraine, actually,” Prokov corrected him, as he took the helicopter higher. “The Soviet Union disintegrated and Ukraine became independent. But before that, I served in Afghanistan for five years. When I was there, I was flying a powerful transport helicopter. I took *spetsnaz* on secret missions against the *mujahideen*. You’ve heard of them? Primitive, stubborn men. They almost got me killed several times.”

“For a moment there, I thought we were going to crash into one of the dunes – or something,” Hall wryly noted.

Prokov grinned. “Impossible,” he said. He was now visibly bubbling with excitement. “After I arrived in Africa, I also flew Mil Mi-17 attack helicopters against the Hutu militias outside Rwanda. Those devil-possessed men killed close to a million Tutsis before they were driven out of the country.”

“Sir, shall we take another look?” Nesbitt said, his voice tinged with impatience. He had bitten his lip to refrain from saying aloud, “*I don’t care what you did in Africa. Where’s Ayasha? Damn. Only if you had not flown so fast.*”

“With pleasure!” Prokov roared enthusiastically.

“And then I was hired to fly Antonovs between Tel Aviv and the DRC,” Prokov recounted as he zoomed up and circled the helicopter right. “Guess what was in the cargo?”

In no time at all, they were above a huge dune looking down at the men furiously taking positions at ground level.

“No way!” Hall cried, his heart skipping a beat, as the chopper slowed to a near hover. A rush of alarm swept over him at the sight of the men kneeling on the ground, taking aim at the helicopter with their rifles. He was starting to sweat, but Prokov did not seem the least rattled.

“Diamonds, straight from the artisanal pits of Kasai,” Prokov

gushed. “Guns and ammunition and luxury vehicles going the other way.”

“Come on!” Hall shouted at the top of his lungs over the din of the engine, as the bullets grazed the fuselage, “Let’s get the hell out of here!”

He had barely finished his sentence when flashes of green solid light hit the windshield, creating a blinding glare. The beam swept back and forth across the window, making it almost impossible to see ahead. Prokov groaned as the light hit his eyes. The helicopter swayed from side to side.

A hail of bullets whizzed past the cockpit. Some ricocheted off the aluminium-alloy frame of the helicopter. One hit the windshield with a thud. Almost immediately, cracks started spreading on the surface like tributaries of a river seen from space, and blurring the view outside.

Hall snapped to his feet and peered down at the rolling dunes below. A dozen Tuareg men had stood up and were aiming their rifles at the helicopter. A slight groan from Nesbitt caught Hall’s attention. The man was slumped in his seat, only his seat belt and shoulder harness keeping him from hitting the instrument panel in front of him.

“Dr. Nesbitt, are you all right?” Hall cried out, his voice tinged with alarm.

There was no reply. With trepidation, Hall leaned forward, grabbed Nesbitt by his collar, and peered down. Blood was oozing from his chest. He placed his fingers on the man’s neck. There was no pulse. A sudden sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach gripped him, as he realized the famed geologist was dead.

“Damn,” Hall mumbled. “We should have left them alone.”

Bullets whistled through the air around them. There was another thud on the glass and almost instantaneously, more than half of the cockpit glass shattered and splintered. Tiny pieces rained down on the instrument panel and the floor. Hot air from outside rushed in.

“Sit down, please!” Prokov shouted.

Hall sank into his seat, dejected, deeply regretting that he had acceded to Nesbitt's request.

As the helicopter banked sharply left, a bullet hit the tail rotor gearbox. Immediately it started spinning around and around. Prokov adjusted the anti-torque pedals and lowered the collective pitch to trigger autorotation. Then he flicked on the radio.

"Bamako Control, this is Guinea Coast 16," Prokov said, beads of perspiration rolling down his forehead. "Do you read me, over?"

Hall leaned forward, his eyes fixed to the instrument panel at the front. For what seemed like an eternity, they were greeted with the crackling static of an empty radio channel.

"Guinea Coast 16. What's happening?" The scratchy voice of some unnamed operator in the Malian capital crackled over the radio. "What's the situation on the ground? Over."

Prokov replied, "We are thirty-four kilometres northeast of Timbuktu. We've been hit by bandits. Rotors are broken. We're going down. Over."

"Roger that," the operator said. "We'll alert the government and send a crew there as soon as we can. Over."

"Do hurry. Thanks. Over and out," Prokov said as he made the sign of the cross on his chest.

With no power, but air rushing upward to keep the main rotor spinning weakly, the helicopter began to wobble about five metres above the ridge of a large dune, tossing Hall from side to side.

"Sir, we're going down," Prokov announced calmly, jerking his head at Hall, who was starting to shiver with fear.

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God," Hall blurted out, his hands gripping the armrests on both sides of him, "just for this time, please save me. I promise I'll be more honest with investors when I'm out of here."

"Sir, get ready to jump out soon!" Prokov hollered over the whine of the engine, as he raised the collective pitch to keep the helicopter from crashing into the dune.

The air crackled with gunfire. Bullets grazed the chopper's frame.

A knot formed in Hall's gut as he unbuckled his lap belt and shoulder harness. He took off his headset, stood up, and peered out at the enormous dune below. His eyes darted back and forth between the men wielding the AK-47s in the distance and the pilot. Time seemed to stand still and everything in his vision magnified in detail. He held his breath as he contemplated a jump. Given the steep slopes on both sides, he might conceivably roll uncontrollably all the way to the bottom, flailing in a sea of hot sand.

Or maybe not.

There was no telling if he would break his leg or arm in the process or not. Nothing he had done in his life up to now had prepared him for this pivotal moment. There was no time to contemplate the fate awaiting him outside the helicopter. A decision had to be made quickly. And soon.

"Okay," Hall cried, steeling himself for the daring jump he knew must come if he were to have any chance of surviving. "What about you?"

"I'll get out after you," Prokov replied, his eyes fixed on the men about five hundred metres further down the dune.

Adrenaline pumping rapidly through his veins, Hall inhaled deeply, bracing himself for the inevitable impact below.

"O Blessed Madonna, I beg you! I'm praying to you," Hall murmured, his stomach twisting into knots, "just for this time, help me survive."

As the engine began to sputter, Prokov turned and waved his hand at Hall. "Now! Go!" he roared.

Hall turned and glanced at the pilot. For a brief moment, their eyes met. "With God's grace, we'll both make it through this," Hall silently wished, before lunging towards the door. As he slid it open, he was slammed by a powerful gust of scorching air, as if a giant blow dryer were aimed directly at his face.

After a moment of hesitation, he leapt, screaming. His legs flailed. His body instinctively curled up with knees bent. He landed with a thud and felt his body sink into the hot sand up to his thighs. He remained still for a moment, gulping air, panting. And then,

gathering strength, he frantically clawed his way up and out of the little depression of shifting sand.

Moments later, he was on his feet. Propelled by a sudden burst of energy, he scrambled down the slope. But as he ran, he couldn't shake the shame that was swelling within him.

Before long, Hall froze in his tracks as the thump of the helicopter crashing into the dune reverberated through the air. He glanced back and gaped in awe at the sight of the rotor craft partially buried within the dune, enveloped in a swirl of sand and dust.

For a moment, an eerie calm descended. It did not last long. It was pierced by pops of small-arms fire mingled with spontaneous shouts of jubilation.

Something in Hall snapped. He wiped the sweat off his brow and sprinted back up the slope. Beneath him, the coarse, copper-coloured sand crumbled, sliding and shifting with each step.

Prokov was slumped over the instrument panel. The helicopter started to belch smoke as Hall frantically pried the door open. The threat of the remaining aviation fuel about to explode weighed heavily on his mind as he felt the pilot's neck. There was still a pulse.

Hall wrenched Prokov out the door and threaded his arm beneath the man's armpit. Propping him up, Hall tore from the wreck as fast as he could, his heart pounding.

Fifteen metres, then another five. A thunderous creak reverberating in the air halted him in his tracks.

Hall threw a quick look over his shoulder. His mouth fell wide open. The helicopter had unhinged from the sand and was tumbling downslope toward them. Like a deer caught in headlights, he froze. After ten metres, the smouldering wreck screeched to a halt amid a cloud of dust.

As Hall was about to dash away, a blinding flash of light exploded before his eyes, stunning him. A fraction of a second later, shock waves slammed into his body, jolting him with intense force. Hall winced in pain, breathless. It was as though someone had landed a powerful punch to his solar plexus.

Hall staggered on his feet and then crashed onto the sandy

surface face down, his arms splayed. At that moment, a deafening explosion reverberated through the air. The next instant a powerful spray of sand and debris whizzed by. Shards of metal and glass flew in every direction.

Hall's body ached all over. All around him everything was a blur of white and orange as a mixture of sand and dust whirled around him.

An acrid smell hung thickly in the air. It burned his nostrils like a whiff of rotten eggs and caused his eyes to involuntarily tear up. Mustering all his strength, he scabbled over the sand in the direction where he thought the pilot might be.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted half a dozen men charging up the dune, their rifles brandished, their cries echoing across the sand dunes.

His heart beating like a drum, Hall quickened his pace. Moments later, he found him. The pilot was lying on his stomach, motionless, arms limp. With considerable effort, he heaved the body over.

Hall was filled with hope as Prokov stirred lightly. "*Batkú... batkú, vy shche zhyví. Vy pryishly za mnoyu.*," the pilot beamed, his face radiant with bliss. "Father ...father, you're still alive. You've come for me!"

And then he exhaled his last breath.

Hall pressed his fingers against the pilot's nostrils, but there was no hint of air movement. He shivered as he caught sight of Prokov's eyes. They were wide open, staring at the sky.

"NO, NO," he cried, drowning out the ringing in his ears that had started shortly after the explosion. Belatedly he realized, with a stab of guilt, his impulsiveness to acquiesce to Nesbitt's request had caused his pilot to die. Heart filled with sorrow, he gently brushed the eyelids and watched as they closed.

"Give him eternal peace, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him," Hall murmured, crossing himself. "May his soul rest in _"

"Aaargh!" Hall screamed in agony as an abrupt, searing pain

shot through his back. He turned and saw that he had been surrounded by more than half a dozen men. Some were waving their AK-47s, while others glowering at him.

Hall convulsed once more in response to yet another forceful kick. Before he could recover, he found himself dragged across the hot sand towards the base of the dune. Limp and exhausted like a caravanner who trudged on after running out of water and who discovered at the next well that it had run dry, he was too bone-tired to resist.

A short distance later, the men released their grip and pushed him down into the ground. Hall slammed face first into the sand within centimetres of an odd-shaped, jagged metallic fragment the size of a laptop. It had been creased, partially twisted, and charred by the blast.

Hall grimaced as the exposed flesh from his thighs down smarted from the searing sand. Still dazed, he looked about him and saw thick, dark smoke billowing from the wreck. Scattered remnants of the helicopter lay strewn about here and there. Directly ahead of him, less than six metres away, perched regally atop a camel was a man in a flowing indigo *boubou*, his feet resting at the base of the camel's neck. A sombre air surrounded him as though he had seen many tragedies in his life. His face, except for the two eyes and the upper part of the cheekbones, was completely covered by an indigo cloth.

For a brief moment, their eyes locked. Hall shuddered as the anger and displeasure emitted from those glowering eyes bore into him. His legs trembled involuntarily.

"Damn," he said quietly to himself, breaking the man's gaze, "if only Ben Kramer were here! He'd be able to explain perfectly to these people in their own language that I meant no harm. Where are you now when I need you the most?"

Hall's eyes flickered up to the man's gun by the side of his camel. It looked completely different from all the other Kalashnikov wielded by the men. It had an optical sight and a truncated barrel that resembled a cylinder.

The man encapsulated everything about the Tuareg people whom Hall only knew superficially: aloof, inscrutable, and existing at the margins of Malian society.

Though quaking inside, Hall steeled himself not to shake. He never felt more awkward in his life. It was as if he had been magically picked up by a tornado from the fast-moving, hectic Western lifestyle and involuntarily delivered into an ancient world of dunes, enigmatic nomads, and unrelenting sun.

For years, he'd driven by Tuareg men and women passing through Maranga with their herd, oblivious to their presence. On those occasions, they had elicited no emotions whatsoever in him except for a passing curiosity. Kramer's voice suddenly reverberated in his head: *To successfully explore here, you have to respect them and you have to earn their trust.* But at the time, his senior colleague's admonition had gone into one ear and out the other. Now, he regretted not making a greater effort to get to know them better or at least obtaining a rudimentary grasp of their language.

The impulse to bolt away arose, but his rational mind quickly put a stop to the idea. Before he knew what was happening, the men grabbed him by the collar of his shirt. They stripped him of his vest and rifled through its many pockets and inner linings. Afterward, they flung the vest on the ground, walked over to their leader, and handed the items to their leader, who briefly examined them before putting them into a pouch by his side.

A groan pierced the still air. Hall turned his gaze from the leader to where he thought the source of the sound was. Less than fifteen metres away, a camel was dripping blood, and tottering on its feet as two men riding side by side with it were cutting the ropes that secured the packs to its sides. As the packs fell, the animal keeled over with a thud onto the sand. There it lay, its chest heaving with each breath.

The leader galloped over. He quickly dismounted and knelt down by its side. He gently pressed his forehead against the side of its neck, murmuring soothing, comforting words under his breath.

The mood among the men who had surrounded their leader had turned from jubilation to subdued sadness and anger.

The leader unsheathed a knife, its blade gleaming brightly in the sun, and in a single deft move, slashed the animal's neck. Blood gushed out. The animal's legs twitched and then its body went limp.

Watching the last act of mercy from a distance, Hall flinched.
Sorry for that. Rest in peace.