

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*

“This book has an excellent premise and wonderful descriptions and knowledge of its varying settings. The extent of geographical knowledge here scratches a specific itch in my and many other geography/history buffs’ brains, incorporating action in these places that not only feel accurate to what they are and have been but also bring them to life in very unique ways. Well done there! I never felt lost while reading this book, which demonstrates a mastery of ensuring the reader is along for each part of the ride. This was aided by the varying perspectives, especially Ayesha’s, who, in my reading, was the star of the show.”

Judge, 12th Annual Writer’s Digest
Self-Published E-book Awards

“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

“INTO THE UNKNOWN by Hai Van Le is a riveting thriller that explores the depths of human resilience and cultural discovery as it traverses hostile landscapes and tense geopolitical contexts. Le’s dynamic storytelling and the suspense of a high-stakes adventure keep readers on edge, while the rich details of exotic settings lend authenticity and vibrancy to the journey.”

IndieReader

“From the moment on an early page where I encountered the enchantingly drawn West Africa map with the allure of Timbuktu, this book captivated me. The recurring symbolism of termite mounds to the forlorn image of “a godforsaken place like Timbuktu,” ensures the book’s imagery is striking. The dialogue carries both the believable and unimaginable vignettes, leaving tension the most common carry forward as the reader turns the page. Characters earn their reputations whether that be “plucky” or “shame” or “impulsive,” staying true throughout. *Into the Unknown* reads like a Paul Theroux novel with the landscape always, meaningfully hovering, albeit it “probably the most inhospitable terrain on earth.” Admiringly, minor personalities have roles that matter, not lost among those driving the narrative. While reading, I personally felt back again in the wonder of a quest that involves the very real, vibrant yet docile Timbuktu, though this time with danger ever present.”

Rick Antonson, Author,

To Timbuktu for a Haircut: A Journey Through West Africa

“Definitely a page-turner and sure to keep people on the edge, and learning things they never thought they may learn!”

Solara Solstice

Philosopher, Channeler and Author of *Spiritual Light*

“As the son of a geologist who worked in remote and often dangerous regions, *Into the Unknown* brought back memories of the quiet risks we lived with. My father survived two helicopter crashes—thankfully, he was never kidnapped—but the uncertainty of his work was always there. One moment in the book truly stayed with me: Hall’s dream of his father, who reassures him that he’s always watching over him, even in the hardest moments. This struck close to home, as it beautifully captures the feeling that, even in danger, our loved one’s guide and protect us in unseen ways. Le creates a vivid and heart-felt narrative, balancing moments of tragedy with an enduring sense of hope. This is a meaningful read for those with connections to exploration or an interest in survival stories.”

MICHAEL MCCLINTOCK, P.Eng.,

Founder & Principal, McClintock Group

“Very enjoyable reading. Love the way the author lays out the story line, by developing the characters in a story within a story. Ready to read the next instalment of this series. I recommend to anyone who enjoys reading a very well written thriller.”

Jesse Fussell

Library Thing Early Reviewers

“Hai Van Le’s aptly titled *Into the Unknown* is a riveting read that offers a fascinating glimpse into a part of the world and an industry largely unknown to many. Resilient characters, stunning imagery, and wise teachings left me looking forward to the next adventure in the trilogy.”

Andrea Perchotte, Author, *TravelSmarts:*

Essential Tips & Strategies for Travelling Smart, Safe, & Affordably

“The story of *Into the Unknown* is brilliant, and I loved the thrilling journey the author took me on. Hai Van Le managed to incorporate many unexpected twists effortlessly so that the readers will turn the page with haste! As I read this book, I found myself re-reading parts because of how shocking it was! It was magnificent to feel this, and I love it when an author does this to a reader, this is how reading should be! Full of shocks and surprises and great thrilling moments that you will remember for a long time; if not forever!”

Aimee Ann

Blogger, Red Headed Book Lover

“In the end, this is a book of contradictions: simple yet profound, harsh yet beautiful, grounded yet spiritual. The story will linger with you. For readers who crave a story that challenges both heart and mind and also invites us to peek at situations from a spiritual point of view, “*Into the Unknown*” by Hai Van Le will be a welcome addition to your library—with two additional spots waiting beside it, strongly marked—for the concluding novels of the trilogy.”

Sara Lancaster, ReaderViews

INTO
THE
UNKNOWN
A NOVEL

HAI VAN LE



INTO THE UNKNOWN: A Survival Thriller

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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DEDICATION



To my parents, who brought me into this world.

*To my maternal grandfather, who enchanted
my young mind with timeless Buddha's tales.*

*To my mother, who encouraged me to learn English—and
once even offered to pay me for every new word I learned.*

INTO THE UNKNOWN

BOOK ONE IN THE TRILOGY





PROLOGUE

SNEAK ATTACK

Ladal, Mali

11:20 p.m. GMT

November 12, 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 a sliver of a crescent 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.

For Mohamed, the play of shadow and faint light gave him the edge he was counting on.

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 sprinted to the gate. He slid the latch free and eased it open.

The men poured into the compound, fanning out in practiced silence. One, gripping a lighter and a rag reeking of gasoline, made straight for the core shack at the far end. The others took their positions outside the huts where the two Malians slept.

Mohamed, flashlight in hand, led the two men toward the rectangular one-story building with a satellite dish perched on its roof. He was certain his target would be sleeping inside.

He turned the knob. Unlocked.

They stepped into a quiet living room. At the far end, a narrow hallway branched off toward a pair 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, just as expected.

Within a few seconds, Mohamed was at the man's side. As the man groggily sat up, Mohamed punched him hard in the face.

The blow landed with brutal precision, and the man promptly collapsed 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 rang out, hitting him in the left shoulder. The flashlight dropped to the floor and shattered on impact.

Reeling, half blind and bleeding, he reached for the knife and hurled it toward where he believed the shooter was. The blade cut through the air in a clean arc.

A groan rang out, followed by a heavy thud as the man collapsed onto the mattress.

Another shot fired. The bullet zipped past Mohamed's cheek—just inches from his face.

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, slashed 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, she was shoved up onto the saddle without ceremony and one of the men had settled in behind her.

Moments later, they all mounted their animals and disappeared 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

FIVE HUNDRED MILES 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 fifteen-acre lot on the eastern bank of the Niger River.

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

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.

Close to 8:00 a.m., a helicopter whirled 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 table nearby and slipped it into one of the vest's pockets.

He had barely stepped outside when a chorus of caws ripped through the air. Perched on a branch of the mango tree near the gate, three crows—each with streaks of white on their wings—stared down at him. Their glossy feathers glinted in the morning light.

He'd seen them before—regular sentinels of the neighborhood— but never had they cried out like this. It was as if they were objecting to the disturbance caused by the helicopter.

"What're you up to?" Hall muttered, as he hurried down the footpath toward the landing zone.

Suddenly a blaze of feathers tore across the sky above. The crows had erupted from their perch, their jet-black plumage flashing in the sun as they swooped low over his head.

Then a wet splat hit the ground just ahead of him.

"Wow. Wow," Hall muttered, startled.

He looked up, but the birds were already gone. He shook his head, relieved the droppings had missed him.



When Hall first laid eyes on the compact, civilian helicopter, he liked it immediately. It featured a curved glass cockpit and a streamlined blue fuselage.

Ivan Prokov, the Ukrainian-born pilot with Desert Air, was a

broad-shouldered man of fifty-six with close-cropped hair and unruly eyebrows. He raised his hand in a military salute.

“Good morning, sir,” he said crisply.

“Ivan—a pleasure meeting you,” Hall said, offering his hand.

As they shook, Hall glimpsed a hammer and sickle tattoo inked on the inside of the pilot’s forearm.

Prokov, towering over Hall, spread out a map of northern Mali on the ground.

“I’ve got the coordinates for Ladal,” the pilot said, pointing to a spot marked X some distance north of Timbuktu.

Hall crouched beside him and peered at the spot. Officially, it was not marked on any map he knew of, including this one. It had been described as a hamlet by the man he was visiting today.

“Never been there, but I believe it should be easy to find the place,” Hall said. “How long will it take to get there?”

“Just over an hour,” Prokov said.

A road trip would have taken nine to ten hours— a brutal, bone-rattling drive Hall knew all too well. He’d once traveled from Bamako to Maranga and hadn’t forgotten the potholes and the washed-out roads. He was glad his boss had spared him the ordeal this time.

“From what I gather, this won’t be a quick visit,” Prokov said, casting a glance toward the helicopter. “What’s up in Ladal?”

“There’s this famous geologist living there—the guy’s got the Midas touch.” Prokov squinted at him. “Midas touch?”

“Everything he touches turns to gold,” Hall explained. “Anything else?”

“No. We can go now.”



Bathed in early morning light, the land along the Niger River stretched out before Hall—peaceful, almost surreal. Rows of light-brown rammed earth buildings lined the town’s main street, giving way to a warren of narrow, sand-choked alleys that snaked between homes like ancient footpaths.

A bit further out, women queued at the company-funded water pump, babies swaddled on their backs, while men headed toward the fields, hoes in hand.

About five miles 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 600 feet up in the air, the perspective changed.

In an area the size of two football fields, 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 tunneling deep below in search of gold.

Prokov took the helicopter higher, revealing a semi-arid landscape further out where the desert had been creeping closer and closer to the edges of town every year.

After more than an hour of flying over a broad swath of semi-arid land—past thorny shrubs, scattered villages, and herds of cattle and goats—they crossed into a new terrain, one studded with towering termite mounds.

Rising from the sun-baked earth like ancient monuments, they were more than ten feet wide and soaring twenty feet into the air. Some resembled witches' hats; others, of cathedral spires.

Greg Nesbitt's voice echoed in his mind: "There's a trace amount of gold in every single termite mound. The big mystery is: Where's all this gold coming from?"

Suddenly, he understood why the famed geologist named his exploration project *Lost Cathedrals*.

The sight of the termite mounds reminded him of Ayesha. Six months earlier, Nesbitt had shown Hall a photo of the two of them standing in front of one.

Bathed in the soft glow of late afternoon, Ayesha, looked elegantly radiant in a flowing orange *melfha*, a delicate J-shaped boar tooth resting on her chest. Her large, wide-set eyes glimmered with alert curiosity, animating her oval face with a kind of easy warmth.

She was looking over her shoulder, smiling. She appeared to be in her late thirties, calm and luminous in that fleeting moment.

Standing beside her, Nesbitt, in a rumpled plaid shirt of warm browns, was beaming, his left arm draped protectively over her shoulder.

"Sir, I believe we've found it," the pilot said, jarring Hall out of his reverie.

“Oh my god,” Hall muttered, as he caught a glimpse of the walled compound rising from the flat landscape.

Nesbitt’s exploration camp was vastly different from his. Enclosed by a rammed-earth wall with a wooden gate framed by two towering termite mounds, it unfolded around a majestic shea tree, its broad canopy visible for miles.

Within the enclosure stood several flat-roofed, mud-walled structures trimmed in white, a modest vegetable garden, and a core shack glinting in the sun. A satellite dish jutted from one rooftop.

Two Land Cruisers sat parked near the entrance.

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 extremely basic conditions. By contrast, his residence in Maranga was built with concrete cinder blocks and topped with a red-tiled roof. A satellite dish provided high-speed internet. Inside, he had air-conditioning and flush toilets—luxuries in a little town where most residents lacked even basic indoor plumbing.

Hall gasped as the sheltered core shack came into sharp focus. Curls of smoke drifted through holes in the scorched corrugated metal roof. Its trusses were charred. Rows of wooden shelves had partially collapsed, scattering a jumble of sawn-off cores on the ground.

Prokov eased the chopper down in a clearing just a stone’s throw from the compound.

Hall stepped out into the ninety-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.

Hall bounded toward it, heart pounding. He gave the gate a cautious push.

Beneath the shade provided by the shea tree, chickens and roosters wandered freely, scratching at the dirt. In one corner sat a small square plot lush with lettuce, tomatoes, and cabbage.

There was no one in sight. It was as though the inhabitants had been plucked from the ground by an alien spaceship.

“Hello. Anyone here?” he shouted.

As his voice echoed through the compound, Hall caught sight of a trail of blood. He turned—Prokov was beside him now, a pistol drawn.

The pilot nodded, as if saying, *I've got your back.*

The blood on the ground led to the main building.

"Greg, are you there?" Hall called out, then cautiously poked his head into the doorway, eyes narrowing as he scanned the room. To his surprise, the air inside was markedly cooler than the dry heat outside.

In the dim light, Hall recognized the lone figure on the dirt floor immediately—Nesbitt. His pajamas were stained with blood. A knife lay nearby. His distinguished beard, normally immaculate, was speckled with crimson.

Hall rushed to his side and crouched down.

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

"I've been ..." he stammered, wearing a pained expression, like someone who'd spent too long in intensive care, "waiting for you all morning. I'm glad ...you came."

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

Hall scanned the room. In the corner, he spotted a small fridge. He dashed over, yanked open the door, and found a half-empty plastic bottle of water on the shelf. Snatching it, he rushed back.

"Last night they sneaked up on us," Nesbitt muttered between sips. "They took Ayesha. They killed my assistants."

"Who are they?" Hall asked quietly.

"I wish...I knew," Nesbitt said, the furrows on his high forehead deepening. "There are...always smugglers around. I never thought...this could happen!"

He paused a moment, then added with sudden gravity, "I'm scared. Not for me—for my wife. Please...help me find her. It should be easy with the helicopter."

Hall bit his lip. "Who knows where she is now. Sorry—I'd be in way over my head for something like this."

"She's my greatest happiness," Nesbitt said, his jowls tightening with emotion. The strain in his voice unmistakable. "I don't know how I can live without her. Please!"

"Look at you," Hall said, gesturing to his host'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."

“There’s no time to lose,” Nesbitt said, seizing Hall’s hand, his fingers like iron. “God forbid anything should happen to her.”

The strength of Nesbitt’s grip caught Hall off guard. “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,” Nesbitt said, he said slowly between light groans and heavy breaths. “I have no regrets. I’ve had a good life.”

He gazed into Hall’s eyes. “Ayesha—she’s everything to me. We must do everything we can to find her.”

Hall was moved by the sincerity in his voice, but every bone in his body told him it was a fool’s errand.

“She could be anywhere by now,” Hall said simply. “I can’t leave you like this by yourself. Let’s get you to Timbuktu—now.”

He threw his arm over Nesbitt’s shoulder.

“Once we’re there, I’ll contact the police. Maybe they’ll join me in looking for your wife.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Who knows, with some luck, I’ll be able to bring her back for you.”

Nesbitt sighed reluctantly. “Well, all right.”



CORN FIELD

M OHAMED LET OUT a slight, muffled groan. The throbbing pain from the bullet lodged in his left shoulder had kept him awake for the last few hours. He threw a glance at Ayesha, who was seated in front of another rider, her mouth gagged with a rag and her hands bound with a rope.

In the dim moonlight, he could see that her eyes were burning with defiance.

He heaved a sigh of relief when they came upon a modest cornfield. A path cut through rows of maize plants leading to a cluster of four thatched clay huts silhouetted in the pale glow of moonlight.

Alerted by the commotion, a wiry man in a flowing robe emerged, clutching a kerosene lamp. There was no hiding the fear in his eyes. Behind him trailed several groggy-looking children, rubbing their eyes and clinging to one another.

“Help me down, please,” Mohamed groaned.

His brother, Abu, commanded the camel to kneel, and Mohamed eased himself off the camel.

“We need a place to stay for a few days,” Mohamed explained, grimacing. He reached for a burlap sack tied to the saddle and pulled out a bundle of cash.

“Here, take this!” he pressed a wad of 100 CFA franc notes at the startled-looking man.

The man instinctively recoiled, but quickly regained his composure. He nodded, took the money without a word, and motioned for them to follow.

Mohamed limped across the dirt courtyard directly toward the largest hut. Each step sent a sharp jolt through his leg, and he clenched his jaw to keep from crying out.

The door swung open just as they arrived. A woman and a couple of kids skittered out.

Just before he entered the hut, he turned to his followers, who were trailing behind him.

“Abu, you stay with me,” he said. “The rest of you hurry to Timbuktu and bring back a doctor for me. I need to get the bullet out—fast. Steal a four-wheel drive vehicle if you must. Now go!”