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## DEATH IN THE KINGDOM

In his fifty something years, New Zealand based Andrew Grant has lived and worked in a variety of roles around the world, including being a professional hunter, merchant seaman and bodyguard. A small arms expert, competitive pistol shooter and keen photographer, he is a frequent visitor to Asia, regarding Thailand as his second home.

# DEATH IN THE KINGDOM

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Published in 2007  
by Monsoon Books Pte Ltd  
52 Telok Blangah Road  
#03-05 Telok Blangah House  
Singapore 098829  
www.monsoonbooks.com.sg

ISBN-13: 978-981-05-8492-4  
ISBN-10: 981-05-8492-X

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This is a work of fiction. Some locations, many objects and all of the people depicted, with the exception of historical characters, are figments of the writer's imagination.

Printed in Singapore

12 11 10 09 08 07      1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

*This book is dedicated to Clara*

# Prologue

When you jam a .357 Desert Eagle, a gun the size of a small cannon, into the side of someone's face and it goes off, one of two things are likely to happen. One, you have a very messy body on your hands, or two, you have just created a very ugly enemy who will do everything in his power to kill you. The latter is exactly what happened.

The problem was now, six years on, I was about to meet the man to whom I had given the extreme facial.

To say I wasn't looking forward to the meeting would be a total understatement. The thing was, it was bad enough being faced with a disfigured, hate-filled gorilla, but this time he wouldn't be alone. Thailand's top gang boss, Tuk Tuk Song, would be there as well.

My run-in with the gorilla, Choy Lee, and the very reason things had got out of hand way back in 1999, was that shortly before I rearranged Choy's features, I shot dead Arune Song, Tuk Tuk's son.

Tuk Tuk was one of the reasons I was back in Phuket, putting my life on hold. Now Tuk Tuk and Choy were on their way to fetch me. I was shitting myself, as any sane man would!

# 1

It had been a hell of a long flight and business-class comfort or not, I'd spent the entire time awake thinking about what was to come and trying to figure out how I was going to stay alive. Now Geezer was trying to confound me with some Zen bullshit.

'Life is a street, not a bloody footpath, Dan,' Geezer said from behind his beer, cutting across my morbid train of thought.

I struggled to focus my tired eyes on my friend's face. It was a difficult task for me at that moment in time, given the amount of alcohol I had consumed in the last five or so hours since I had landed in Phuket. Prior to that there had been a seriously short overnigher in Singapore, following the gut-buster from Heathrow. As for the booze, if I had to die I wanted to be inebriated enough not to feel the pain because, sure as hell, if Choy Lee got his hands on me it was going to hurt big time.

My confusion or simple lack of comprehension at Geezer's words came from that shattering combination of fatigue, alcohol and sheer, gut-churning fear. Of course, there was always the fact that Geezer was out of focus to the world and me, whether I was drunk or stone-cold sober. 'Since when did you start this damn Zen thing?' I asked him.

Geezer didn't even smile at that. In the twenty years I had known him he had never once smiled, not to my knowledge anyway. In fact, I doubted Raymond 'Geezer' Terrant actually knew how to smile. Where he came from, displaying a set of teeth generally invited someone to knock them right down your throat, then kick your arse until they fell out on the floor.

'Zen be bugged,' Geezer replied as he reached for another can of Singha from the ice bucket that resided at his feet. 'Life's a fucking highway and if you don't get up to speed and learn the damn road rules, you bloody well die. Simple fact!'

‘So what the hell happened to the footpath?’ I wanted to know, my brain spinning like a damned dervish on speed. Geezer lowered his beer and reached for the cigarettes that sat on the rattan coffee table by his chair.

‘What footpath?’ he replied through a cloud of blue cigarette haze, nodding at the ongoing chaos that was happening on the street below us. ‘You see a footpath down there?’ He was right. There wasn’t a footpath in sight, not from where we were sitting anyway. The only thing close to being a footpath that I could see had traffic lines painted on it in big wide white stripes. The wisdom of Geezer’s words, Zen or not, was plain enough for even a blind man to see. In this place it was either drive the crazy streets or walk on the broken concrete and weeds alongside—there was no alternative.

We were sitting on the patio of Geezer’s place at the northern end of Patong Beach. The house, a small two-bedroom Thai-style bungalow, was all tiles and plaster. It was cool and airy, most of the time anyway, and it had a view, a hell of a view.

Geezer had had his place built in 1986 with some of the proceeds of his retirement stash, when he quit the military. That was back in the days before foreigners could buy property in Thailand. The Thai Government had owed him some serious compensation for deeds done in his distant past up on the Burmese border, and appropriate arrangements had been made.

Now from the wide, white-tiled patio, Geezer lived the life of the perpetual voyeur with Patong at his feet. He sat, watched and smelt the world unfold below him as the entire known universe channelled itself into the two and a half very narrow lanes of Phra Baramee Road. The road was the main artery that allowed Geezer’s universe to drag its tired arse over the steep-sided ridge that separated Patong Beach from the rest of the world.

‘What a view,’ I thought aloud. As for the perpetual smell of diesel fumes and the racket from the traffic, that part I wasn’t so taken with.

‘Isn’t it just,’ Geezer agreed. I think he almost smiled then. He’d picked the site of his home for that very reason. To the left the jungle and plantations covered the ridge that encircled three sides of Patong. The town lay in front and below us. To the right was the bay with its yellow

sand. The waters of the Andaman would change colour with the mood of the weather and today the mood was grey. Tomorrow the waters could be green or a wonderful shade of blue. On the flip side, the ocean might just suck itself out to the horizon and come charging back, just as it had done on Boxing Day 2004.

Geezer had been sitting out on his patio having his first smoke of the new day when the tsunami came calling. He watched helplessly as the waterfront took the hit. Now the damage to the waterfront structures of the town had been repaired. However the damage caused to some of the people I’d seen in my few hours back here showed itself in their eyes. It was still as raw and as painful as in the immediate aftermath of the disaster.

Geezer prodded his beer can towards the black, mid-sized Mercedes that had pulled up on the street below. ‘He’s here!’ The car was black in every sense of the word, with windows of mirrored glass. It sat low and heavy. I didn’t need to be a genius to figure it was armour-plated.

The Merc was on the wrong side of the road, an obstruction to the oncoming traffic. No one seemed perturbed and the traffic just flowed on around it. It always amazed me how, being mainly Buddhists, the majority of Thais were pretty tolerant as a people. Road rage didn’t seem to be as common an affliction here as it was in the rest of the civilised world.

As I stood to go and meet my fate, my mobile phone vibrated.

‘Great timing,’ I snapped as I fished the beast out of my jacket pocket. It could only be one person: Bernard. Or, to give him his full title, Sir Bernard Randolph Sinclair, MBE, my boss. Bernard was a twitchy old bastard. I’d told him that I would check in once I was on the ground. He obviously couldn’t wait.

The mobile I carried was one of our special hybrid models and definitely wasn’t for commercial sale. It wasn’t a flip top and was fractionally larger than those cute fashionable ones. Apart from that it looked pretty standard and worked much the same as any other but sans all the bling. There was no voice mail function or address book. If the wrong person picked it up they wouldn’t realise what they had. There was no ring tone, just vibrator mode. Silence was golden in my world at times. A couple of the features the phone did have, however, were a built-

in scrambler and a big, power-off switch which was easy to reach on the side for those times when you didn't want to take a call. Moments like this. However I had no choice. I pressed the scrambler button.

'Swann!'

'You are precisely where at this moment in time?' The prissy tone of the old prick had the ability to raise my hackles, even though he was half the world away.

'Patong Beach and about to meet Tuk Tuk to get our little venture under way,' I replied.

'I require a daily progress report, Daniel.'

'I've only been here a matter of hours,' I replied, sounding like a sullen schoolboy even to my own ears.

'Once a day, Daniel. Once a day! I need to know where you are at all times.'

'Yes, Bernard,' I said. 'My ride is waiting. Goodbye.' I killed the connection and flicked off the power switch. I left the phone on Geezer's patio table. Where I was going I doubted I would need it. I quickly finished my beer, dropping the can into the empty carton that served Geezer as a receptacle for all things dead and finished with. I only hoped that by the end of the day I didn't find myself in the same position.

'Luck,' said Geezer almost to himself.

'Luck will have absolutely nothing to do with it,' I replied as I picked up my super-slim, super-sexy Toshiba laptop. I wasn't taking the laptop with me as some sort of yuppie fashion statement. It contained something that I knew might, just might, keep me alive.

I gave my old friend a sloppy salute and started down the steep steps towards the street below. It was a long way down to the asphalt but I wasn't in a hurry. As I emerged onto the roadside, the Merc suddenly swung across the traffic flow, causing momentary chaos. Vehicles braked heavily and took evasive action in every direction before the black beast alighted virtually on my feet. It barely rocked on its heavy-duty springs. I stood and stared at my reflection in the glass. Jeez, I looked shocking. My face sported three days worth of growth and my hair needed washing. I had the pallor of someone who had just escaped from a damp, sunless London winter, which was absolutely true.

The car's rear nearside door popped open. I didn't bother trying

to blink into the Merc's dark interior. I stooped my six-foot-two frame and slid in. The door closed automatically and we were away, heading upstream with the traffic flow. A very big and definitely non-spec engine pushed our several tons of metal effortlessly along with a deep rumble. I glanced ahead. It always surprised me how the occupants of a car with mirrored windows could see so much of the world outside. We were heading uphill, following the sweeping curves in the road. The tail of a Jeep full of tourists hovered in front of the gun-sight emblem on the bonnet.

The man sitting in the front passenger seat turned and put himself between the view and me. Choy Lee was known by his friends and enemies alike as 'The Cabbage'. This was mainly due to the fact that the shape of his head resembled the Chinese vegetable *bok choy*. He stared back at me, not blinking. Once, his round basketball of a head housed a broad grin. Now, Choy had no grin. I'd heard he didn't speak much either. He didn't speak now, he just grunted. It could have been a greeting but I doubted it.

When I had shot him, the 180-grain hollow point bullet went up through the right side of his jaw. It punched its way out just below his nose, taking most of his upper lip, teeth and lower right jaw with it. The plastic surgeons had done their best, but some things just can't be fixed. It was no secret that Choy definitely wanted me dead, slowly and very painfully dead for what I had done to him, and despite the dark mirrored lenses in his sunglasses, I could feel the heat of his gaze burning holes in me.

'It has been a long time, Daniel,' a very familiar voice said. I turned to my right. Tuk Tuk Song was seated beside me. He extended a short thick hand. His grip was just as strong as his voice, despite the fact he was almost eighty years old. 'A long time, Daniel,' he repeated, 'and if I remember rightly, we left a little unfinished business hanging in the wind.'

'Yes, Tuk Tuk,' I nodded in agreement. 'Unfinished from your end only,' I added softly. This was the moment when I lived or died. Tuk Tuk's next words were the most important I would ever hear in this lifetime. Tuk Tuk's smile was little more than a faint grimace, a fractional movement of his lips. I saw a flash of yellow teeth and gold, a lot of gold.

His eyes weren't hidden by dark glasses. They stared at me unblinking, jet black and as cold and hard as nuggets of coal. He regarded me for a long time, maybe a minute, maybe just a second, I wasn't sure because I was caught in a place between life and death—a place where time was made and not measured in neat, convenient units for mere mortals to toy with.

So, you ask, why the hell was I sitting in a car with a man who might have me killed at any moment and a sadistic ape who wanted me dead so badly I could almost smell it? And what the fuck did I do to get on Tuk Tuk Song's wrong side? I guess a little history might be in order here.

Tuk Tuk Song, a Chinese Thai, had made his name back in the late 1960s in Bangkok. Those were the days of the Vietnam era and R&R excesses. The days when literally hundreds of thousands of young men from the US military machine escaped Nam for a few short days to enjoy the delights of the ladies in the Land of Smiles.

Already a well-established gang lord, Tuk Tuk could see that there were plentiful suppliers of young ladies and countless bars on offer to the dollar-rich Americans. However, what he soon defined was that visitors to his city needed transportation, and plenty of it. In a matter of months Tuk Tuk Song moved into all things on wheels in a big way, hence his nickname. At that time the Thai Mafia was not the force that it is now, and Tuk Tuk formed the biggest criminal organisation in the land. So from about the time the world was starting to learn about Thailand outside of the nauseating film *The King and I*, just about everything you rode with wheels on it in Bangkok and most of the resort towns meant you were riding with Tuk Tuk Song.

The story of Daniel Swann and Tuk Tuk Song began in the early 1990s in Bangkok. I was doing unmentionable things for Betty Windsor's mob. Then, as now, the Queen's shilling was in my pocket. I am still a soldier in the dirty war, the war that takes place in the shadows, hidden from the world at large. It is a war that is seen by the public only in those occasional strobe flashes of violence and mayhem that make the headlines when some of the protagonists are caught exposed just for a moment, before they plunge back into the shadowlands.

In the 1990s I was attached to the British Embassy with the words FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND ASIAN TRADE CONSULTANT on my business card. I didn't

know shit about any trade, other than dope or arms, and I didn't spend much time in Bangkok either. I was mainly up north in what was known to the world as the Golden Triangle. The Thai, Cambodian, Laotian and Burmese borders didn't really exist for me, or for the people I worked for. Bangkok, however, was a home base between trade missions.

It was during one of my decompression spells in the City of Smiles that I had the fortune, good or otherwise, to meet Tuk Tuk Song. It happened quite by accident, as these things sometimes do in the real world. I saved his life back then but that's a story for another day. Right now I needed to persuade Tuk Tuk not to kill his old friend, the man who had killed his son.