

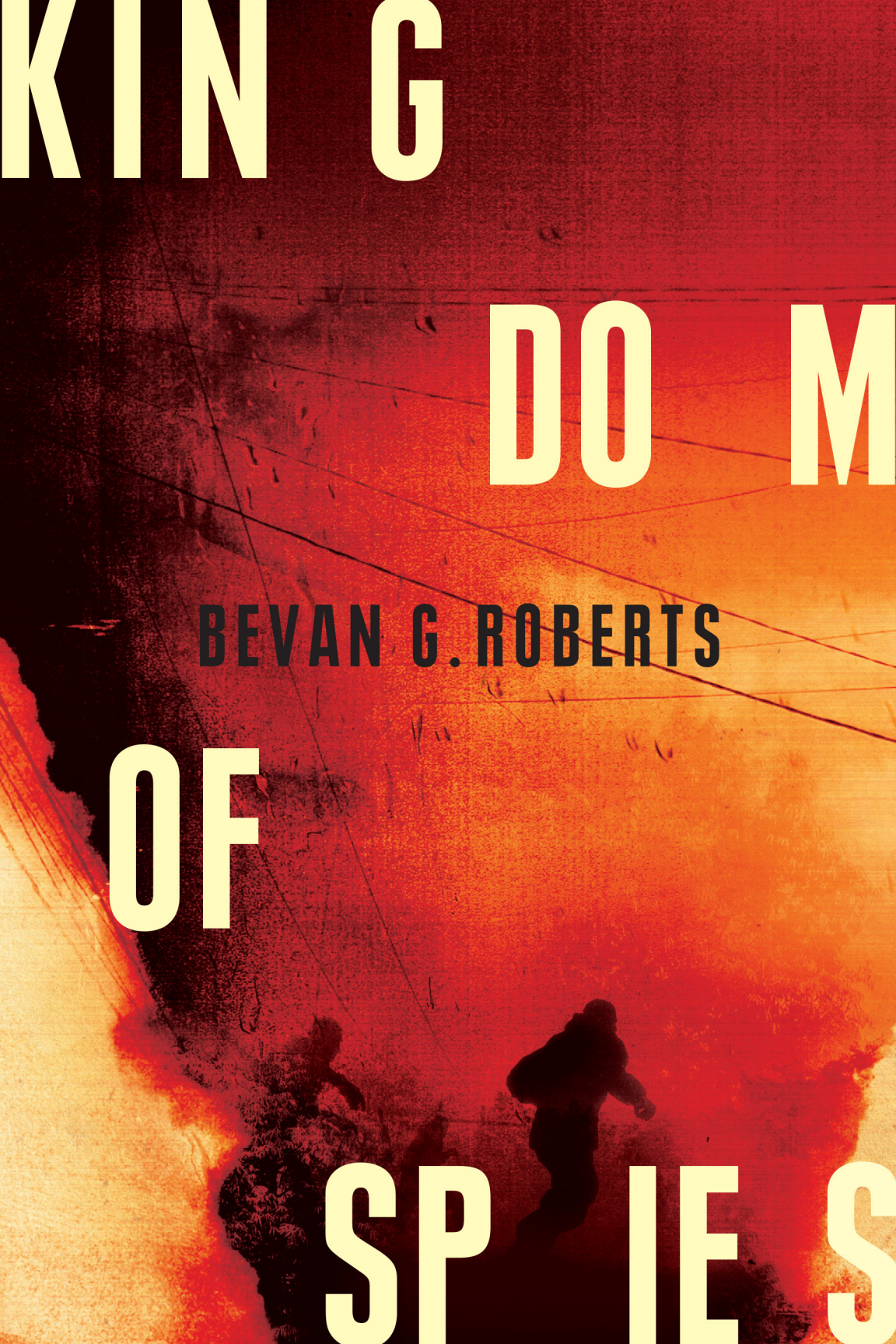
KING

DO M

BEVAN G. ROBERTS

OF

SP I E S



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For Serena, Ethan and Alec

**PROVINSI
MALUKU UTARA
NORTH MALUKU PROVINCE**



1

KAO, NORTH MALUKU, INDONESIA

Sugianto handed the camera through the driver's window and lit a cigarette. 'Eight of them so far,' he said, 'all male. Four motor-cycles, two cars, nothing suspicious.' He took a sharp drag. 'No sign of Maqsood.'

Carter flicked through the images on the viewfinder. Eight faces he recognised, each photographed from a vantage point outside the mosque gates. Local license plates. He passed the camera to Yoyok.

'Watchers?'

'None, bos.' Sugianto rested a thick arm on the roof of the jeep and looked out over the airfield. Behind him, several of his soldiers checked equipment and weapons. 'Two of my boys took a tour past the mosque half an hour ago. No-one paid them any attention. There's nobody here.'

Yoyok scanned the last of the surveillance shots and returned the camera. Eight photos captured the façade of the so-called grand mosque of Kao, a shell of breeze blocks painted off-white and green topped with a rusted terrace roof. Hardly Mecca, but well-frequented and in neutral territory. Useful cover for the rendezvous.

'If you ask me,' Sugianto continued, 'your guy isn't coming.'

He took a long drag and exhaled skywards. 'There should be sign of him by now.'

Familiar streets and landmarks filled the viewfinder. Carter and Yoyok had arrived that morning with Sugianto's special-forces team and spent eight hours reconnoitring every egress route and observation point in town. There was no trace of surveillance. Kao was clean.

'Not if he comes alone,' said Carter.

A passenger turboprop spooled up at the southern end of the runway. Sugianto ignored it, flicked the cigarette and leaned into the window, eyes darting between the two spooks. 'Anyone with Maqsood's profile and half a brain would have sent a scouting party, Pak.' His gaze settled on Carter. 'Something's not right about this.'

The turboprop lurched forward and began its take-off roll. Carter returned the captain's stare.

'Leave the spy shit to me, Sugi. Worry about keeping your men far enough away to not fuck anything up.'

Sugianto took another drag as the aircraft lifted off and banked west towards the highlands. 'You got it, Pak,' he said. He ditched the smoke and ground it under his boot. 'But I'll stay nice and close.' His face broke to a sarcastic grin. 'In case you need me.'

Carter made a final check of the photos and held out the camera. 'We won't need you.'

Sugianto took the camera by the lens barrel. 'If you say so, bos,' he said with a smile. 'Just remember only your mother was Indonesian.' He smacked Carter's shoulder. 'A half-*bulè* stands out in a place like this.'

A shit-eating grin stretched across Yoyok's broad face. Carter smirked and responded in a thick Ternate creole: 'I blend in better than you think.'

Sugianto sniffed as if to say, 'all right,' and felt for another cigarette. He decided against it and shouted at his men to ready up. Then he made to leave, hesitated, and turned back to the window.

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‘Like I said, Pak. Here if you need me.’ He patted the jeep roof and walked off.

Carter watched Sugianto return to his vehicle before retrieving his backpack from behind the seat. Inside was his own camera, laptop, satphone and a tactical radio. He placed the radio in the centre console and hooked up an earpiece.

Yoyok checked his own kit. ‘He could be right, bos,’ said the Indonesian. ‘We know Maqsood is paranoid.’

Carter reached into the pack again and found the Glock. Loaded, round chambered. ‘He’s also desperate.’

‘Hasan isn’t.’ Yoyok zipped his bag and stashed it between his feet. ‘His message was a warning.’

Sugianto’s voice crackled into the earpiece. *‘Comms check.’*

Carter thumbed the push-to-talk. ‘Check.’

Sugianto’s Land Rover moved off.

‘Maqsood will show,’ said Carter. He replaced the backpack behind his seat and started the jeep. ‘Hasan’s just spooked.’

Hasan had cowered in the passenger seat while a midday rainstorm battered the Landcruiser. He had tried to light a cigarette, but his shaking hands fumbled the lighter. Yoyok lit it for him.

The agent took an anxious drag. ‘I told them I would be back soon.’

Yoyok watched the mirrors. They had parked on a jungle track between two blocks of Tobelo suburb, concealed from the main road. Apart from an emaciated dog, nothing moved.

‘This won’t take long.’ Carter leaned forward and handed a flash drive to Hasan. ‘Give this to Abu Maqsood.’

Hasan examined the drive and frowned. A bead of water ran the length of his cheek. ‘What is it?’

‘Evidence the Indonesians will use when they try Maqsood for subversion if he walks back on his deal,’ said Carter. ‘We’d prefer they didn’t do that, but the only way that happens is if Maqsood cooperates.’

Hasan turned to face Carter. 'What do you want from him?'

'A meeting.'

Hasan opened the window a crack and flicked a stick of ash. 'That will be difficult, Pak. It is not safe for him.' He fidgeted with the drive and finished his cigarette. 'It's not safe,' he repeated.

Carter reclined and rested an arm over the back of the seat. 'It will be less safe if he backs out of our agreement,' he said. 'Tell him if he meets me within ten days, I can prevent his arrest.'

Hasan stared at the flash drive, cheeks gaunt and sullen. A spy's exhaustion.

'Ten days,' said Carter. He signalled to Yoyok to start the Landcruiser. The engine roared to life and they crept along the track. 'Tell me you understood me.'

Hasan turned to face him. 'Ya, Pak,' he had said. 'I will arrange the meeting.'

'Two mikes.'

Sugianto's Land Rover made a right turn onto the highway that led to the centre of Kao. Two minutes until he was in place. The observation teams were in position.

Carter continued and turned right onto a gravel road that ran parallel to the highway. Unlit houses of breezeblocks and rusted corrugated iron lined the track, broken only by the occasional abandoned lot that gave way onto the sea. The cresting sun caught tendrils of rubbish smoke in faint gold and soaked the street in twilight. *Adhan* rippled across the sky from minarets a kilometre away. It was fifteen minutes before the start of *Maghreb* prayer, the designated time for the rendezvous with Maqsood.

The radio popped with surveillance calls from the obs teams. '*Lorry, single driver, no cargo. Heading north.*'

'Two, seen.'

The spies continued south. Women in body-length hijab meandered along the roadside towards the mosque. School children in white school uniforms played soccer amongst construction debris

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and refuse in an empty street. Men loitered pointlessly in clumps of three and four, smoking but not talking, looking but not watching.

'Alpha, set,' said Sugianto.

They stopped at an intersection. Fifty metres to their right was the mosque. To the left, a small street led to a decrepit jetty over the still grey sea. Reports from the surveillance teams filled Carter's earpiece. An elderly couple turned the corner for the mosque.

'Give me two minutes,' said Carter.

'Got it, bos.' Yoyok donned a white *taqiyah* and tucked his ponytail into the back of his tunic. Carter watched the mirror while the Indonesian intelligence officer climbed out and entered a corner store. He had recruited the owner that morning as an informant.

Carter grabbed the backpack and chucked it on the passenger seat. He clicked the push-to-talk on his radio as he moved off.

'Yankee's on foot.'

'Roger,' replied Sugianto.

The road reached the southern edge of town and turned west, then north, onto the main street that led past the mosque. Carter stopped fifty metres south by a row of low-set dwellings. Opposite, a stray dog picked at rubbish piled along a high concrete wall that ran the length of the street. Carter opened his window to the tinny sound of the minarets and the smell of rotting fish and felt for the push-to-talk on his radio.

Click.

'Charlie, set.'

A moment of static.

'Copy Charlie,' said Sugianto.

Carter propped the camera on the dash and examined the front gate of the mosque under the fading light. Worshippers filed into the forecourt through a funnel of double-parked cars and motorcycles, drawn to the call to Maghreb prayer. An elderly man pushed a *kaki lima* cart in vain search of a sale, malnourished dog in tow. A scooter arrived from a side street and two men dismounted. Carter adjusted the zoom and set the exposure to capture their faces: locals

from Sugianto's surveillance report. Observation calls continued to ring in the earpiece. He checked his watch; Maqsood still had time.

Carter texted Yoyok to move in. The reply was immediate and confirmed the storekeeper had reported nothing suspect. A moment later the cool, stocky operative appeared in the viewfinder, weaved through the gathered crowd and disappeared into the mosque compound. Carter waited for a break in the surveillance traffic then reported on the radio:

'Yankee in place.'

'Roger.'

Seven minutes to Maghreb.

Hasan had stood at the sink, alone, eyes fixed on Carter in the cracked mirror. Carter ignored him and checked the cubicle. Empty; reeking of shit. He returned to the sink and started the tap.

'Anyone know you're here?'

'No.'

'Were you followed?'

'No.'

Carter left the tap running and watched the door that led back to the mall. 'What did Maqsood say?'

Hasan looked at his hands. 'He told me nothing, Pak. He will speak only with you.'

A door opened in the corridor outside. The room echoed with women's laughter. Hasan shuddered.

'Hasan.'

Hasan leaned against the sink. Sweat drained from his taqiyah. 'Something is not right,' he said. 'It wasn't like before. He was different.' His head fell. 'I'm sorry, Pak.'

Carter placed a hand on the agent's shoulder. 'This is important, Hasan.'

Hasan muttered something and said, 'I know.'

'Then you know I'll take care of you.'

Hasan inhaled deeply and nodded. 'He will meet you Thursday.'

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‘Where?’

‘Same as last time,’ Hasan had said. ‘In Kao.’

Minarets sang over Kao. Townsfolk had descended on the mosque in response to the call, each man, woman and child captured in the telescopic lens of Carter’s camera. He checked his watch; there were still three minutes to Maghreb. Three minutes to the rendezvous.

A radio call pierced the cries of the adhan. *‘Tally bus, inbound on the mosque. Looks full.’*

‘Acknowledged,’ said Sugianto.

Carter trained the camera on the main road beyond the mosque. Headlights lit the frame as a blue tour bus arrived and parked in the intersection, half-obscured by the wall of the mosque compound. Carter adjusted the exposure and caught movement.

‘They’re coming out... eight of them.’ A burst of static. *‘...look like workers.’*

A group of men in blue overalls emerged from behind the bus.

‘They’re from the mines,’ said Sugianto.

The *muezzin* was in full flight as the adhan approached its climax.

Carter checked his watch. ‘Keep eyes on,’ he said. ‘This could be him.’

‘Roger.’

A passing local blocked Carter’s field of view. Carter swore under his breath and waited. When the view cleared, the miners had formed a single file and had begun to walk south towards the forecourt gate. The first man’s face was youthful and shaven. The rest were obscured.

Carter reached for the radio. ‘I can’t get visual,’ he shouted. ‘Move someone in close.’

The *muezzin* reached a crescendo.

‘One, do a tour,’ said Sugianto.

‘Wilco.’

Carter scanned faces in the crowd as more vehicles arrived and parked in front of the gates. A man with a stoop emerged from a small alley and turned for the mosque. Carter got a shot of his weathered face and ignored him. He checked his phone. Nothing from Yoyok.

A trailbike arrived at the intersection in front of the gates. *'Stand by,'* said Sugianto's rider.

Carter retrained on the miners. The procession bobbed and weaved towards him through the camera, halfway to the gates, faces still out of view. They took no notice of the bike.

'Do you have him?' called Sugianto.

'Wait.'

One by one, the men reached the gates, turned, and filed into the forecourt. One of the men paused and glanced in the rider's direction. Carter pivoted the camera as a frail figure in full Islamic dress emerged from a van and approached the remaining miners.

Carter reached for the push-to-talk. *Click.* 'Check the woman,' he called. 'Green hijab.'

'Say again, Charlie,' said Sugianto.

'Just do it.'

The woman turned for the gates.

'Copy.'

The trailbike engine roared over the prayer calls as Sugianto's rider accelerated. He reached the woman as she arrived at the gates and joined up with the miner, her face hidden in shadow. The rider crept past, eyes on the two figures, before coming to a stop.

Carter clicked the push-to-talk. 'Well?'

The woman disappeared into the forecourt. Carter turned his lens to the motorcycle as the rider brought a hand up to his lapel. Carter sat forward. The radio clicked.

'Negative contact,' was the call. *'It's not Uncle.'*

Carter smacked his hand on the steering wheel as the trailbike burst north through a slalom of parked cars and disappeared. Sugianto's voice crackled in the earpiece.

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'He's not coming,' said the captain. *'We should stand down.'*

The adhan began to fade, replaced by the voice of the imam and the commencement of the Maghreb sermon. The plan gave Maqsood another fifteen minutes to show. If not: abort.

Carter picked up the radio and clicked the push-to-talk. 'Hold position.'

There was a short hiss.

'Roger,' said Sugianto. *'Holding.'*

Yoyok had rapped on Carter's front door at four a.m. They were due to rendezvous with Sugianto's team at seven for the flight to Kao.

Yoyok held up his phone. 'It's a warning.'

Carter took the phone and stared at the message: *'Nenekku sakit.'* My grandmother is unwell. Hasan's code for: *I think I'm blown.*

'Who else knows about this?' said Carter.

'No-one.'

Carter deleted the message and handed back the phone. 'Keep it that way.'

'He could be in danger, bos.'

Carter shook his head. 'We can't let Hasan fuck this up,' he said. 'Maqsood's too important.'

The voice echoed in the pauses between verses, indistinct and distant as it reverberated off the surrounding structures. Eleven minutes to cut-off; the street was still. Apart from the voices in the air, the only sounds were the occasional surveillance calls from Sugianto's teams. Carter gripped the wheel to steady his hands. His knuckles turned white.

The voice grew louder, off-cadence from the lines of verse.

Carter pressed to talk. 'Get eyes east of the mosque.'

'Eyes on what?' said Sugianto.

'Some sort of loudspeaker.'

'Could be an echo, bos.'

There was movement behind the jeep. Three men and two

women had emerged from one of the houses. Four others appeared further south.

'It's no echo. It's a chant.'

'Copy,' said Sugianto. '*One, get eyes on.*'

'Roger.'

The chants were audible now over the minarets. More onlookers had gathered in the street and were moving in the direction of the noise. A van arrived and parked fifty metres south of the jeep. A group of women climbed out.

'*This is Two. Tally new group. Two hundred metres west.*'

'How many?' said Sugianto.

'Wait.'

The radio hissed static. A group of bystanders had gathered near the jeep. Carter raised his window.

'*Twenty-four.*'

Sugianto shouted at One to report in.

More movement near the mosque. '*One's on the move. Thirty seconds.*' A woman in black burqa appeared from the side street carrying a red banner. Carter focused the camera and adjusted the exposure as the banner flicked in the wind. Eventually it unfolded to reveal the word GAMESHAR printed in black lettering.

'They're at the mosque,' said Carter. 'It's a rally.'

Eight minutes. Protesters gathered at the mosque gate. Each wore a red Gameshar shirt, their faces covered with bandanas. Carter strained to follow them through the crowd of onlookers.

'Eyes on,' said One. '*At least thirty of them.*'

The group's ringleader came into view and shouted into a loudspeaker:

'Allahu akbar! Maluku Utara merdeka! Masyarakat berdiri! Pemerintah larang di sini!'

God is great! North Maluku is free! People stand up! The government is prohibited here!

'Copy, One,' said Sugianto. '*Charlie, what are your instructions?*'

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Carter scanned the protest crowd. Most of the faces were covered or obscured.

'This is Two. They are almost on us.'

'Stay in position,' said Carter. He adjusted the camera lens. Spectators gathered around the jeep and blocked a clear shot of the protest.

Sugianto shouted into the radio: *'We have to abort.'*

Carter sucked a deep breath and checked his watch. His hand was shaking. He braced it on the wheel.

'Seven minutes.'

The front gate came into focus as a line of worshippers emerged onto the street to confront the horde of protesters. The calls from the loudspeaker grew louder, faster.

'All teams, move back,' commanded Sugianto.

Carter's view was blocked. 'Negative,' he shouted. 'Get eyes on the mosque. Uncle can still make the rendezvous.'

A light flashed in the side mirror. A motorcycle, slow-moving through the crowd.

'Not possible,' said Sugianto. Someone in front of the jeep shouted at the protesters. At the gate, two miners shoved a Gameshar Red Shirt and were set upon. Red Shirts ran through the gates into the forecourt. *'It's too hot.'*

The motorcycle weaved among the onlookers and stopped at the van, fifty metres away. The passenger leaned towards it and looked inside.

'Hold position,' said Carter.

There was a flash and screams from the onlookers as a firebomb exploded beyond the mosque gates. Yellow light spilled from the forecourt onto the brawling crowd. The minarets fell silent.

'We must abort, Charlie.'

Six minutes.

'Negative,' shouted Carter. 'We can still—'

The phone vibrated on the dash. Smoke billowed skyward from the mosque.

'Say again, Charlie.'

Onlookers rushed towards the burning structure. Ahead of them, a lone figure, engulfed in flames, stumbled from the mosque gates and fell onto the street. Bodies lay prone under a black plume while Red Shirt protesters danced and chanted around them. Helpless bystanders gathered near the jeep, their shouts drowned out by the motorcycle as it crept behind them. Sugianto shouted something garbled over the radio as Carter opened Yoyok's message:

Out. On foot.

The motorcycle was ten metres away. Carter ignored it and grabbed the radio.

Click.

The op was over.

Breathe.

'All teams abort.'

Carter grabbed the backpack and replaced the camera. As a reflex, he felt for the Glock.

'All teams abort,' repeated Sugianto. *'Charlie, can you egress?'*

Carter threw the backpack onto the passenger seat and fumbled for the ignition. The starter motor wailed. The onlookers turned to look at the jeep. Then, the motorcycle.

The jeep started as the two Red Shirts skidded to a halt beside Carter's window. The passenger leaned up to the glass and peered in, eyes wide on sight of his target. For a moment, he stared into the glass as if unseeing, his bloodshot eyes narrowing above the line of the bandana before he recoiled and turned to the crowd.

'Mata-Mata!'

Spy.

The motorcycle blared its horn and accelerated away. A dozen onlookers fell into its wake and crowded the jeep. Carter hit the horn as they shouted. The gearbox complained as he engaged reverse. Someone smacked the bonnet. Carter dropped the clutch.

The jeep skidded rearwards over the gravel verge. The crowd came with him. Carter shouted again to move as he shifted into first.

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A wall of bystanders stared at him under the headlights, their faces a mix of confusion and fear. He hit the horn and inched the jeep forward. Someone banged on the window. Another horn blast as he revved the engine. The motorcycle started up nearby. The crowd bashed the windows and bodywork as the jeep edged forward, then suddenly parted. Carter looked up as the motorcycle accelerated towards him, a point of yellow light cutting the darkness at its side.

'Charlie, what is your status?'

Carter gunned the engine and dropped the clutch. The motorcycle veered away as the point of light arced upwards into the night sky. The jeep lurched forward. Streetlights glinted off the sides of the glass bottle as it tumbled through the air – one turn, then two – before descending towards the jeep. Carter dived for the passenger seat as the firebomb bounced off the bonnet, broke into pieces and exploded in a wave of light and heat across the windshield. The cabin filled with smoke and noise. The radio fell into the passenger foot well and hissed with static. The jeep rolled to a halt and a woman screamed.

He covered his mouth and grasped the backpack with his spare hand. The door took two kicks to come free. The flames scorched his back as he pushed himself from the jeep and rolled from the inferno, coughing burning air as sirens wailed in the distance. Red and blue lights flashed on a column of white smoke that billowed from the mosque. Close by, stunned faces stared at him in the light of the burning jeep. He sat up and vomited.

'Mata-mata!'

Then there were Red Shirts.

One of the Gameshar men grabbed the backpack. Carter held onto it and rolled as the crowd shouted. Another man landed on his back and forced air and smoke from his lungs. An arm wrapped around his neck to pull him from the bag.

He kicked blindly to break the grip. His face was forced up towards the motorcycle spotter who was pulling at the backpack. Carter's right foot came free and struck something. Someone

shouted in pain, and his other leg was freed. There was a blur of red to his left. Something struck him on the hip and forced the last of the burning smoke from his lungs. Carter rolled onto his back, then forced his head backwards into the mouth of the man beneath him. The grip loosened. Carter sucked for air while saliva and blood drained from his hair over his neck. Horns blared nearby. A Red Shirt stepped out of the crowd and launched a barrage of kicks into Carter's stomach. Carter convulsed forward, swung his head rearwards and crushed the nose of the man on his back. The chokehold gave way. The spotter released the bag.

Carter lunged on top of the backpack and gasped for air. The man who had kicked him landed on him and wrenched his neck. Carter held his chin to his chest and felt for the zipper of the backpack. His hand slipped from the zip. Someone kicked him again, the crack of his rib shuddering up his spine. His fingers reached the metal tab again, and he pulled. One of the attackers forced a hand under his arm and tried to lift him, but Carter had his hand inside the bag. Horns filled the air as he found metal. The man on top of him lifted again and they rolled. The crowd was now bathed in light. Steel glinted under a streetlamp as a Gameshar man stepped up, crowbar high above his head, ready to strike, then hesitated. The crowd parted as headlights saturated the scene. The light first caught the Red Shirt, frozen mid-swing, then the Glock that was pointed at his chest before revealing Carter's arms, extended upright to absorb the report, finger around the trigger at first pressure, ready to fire.

The Land Rover skidded to a halt three metres away. Neither Carter nor the Red Shirt moved. Soldiers shouted at the crowd. Boots landed on gravel. Sugianto's men pushed people back.

Yoyok pushed the Red Shirt away and turned to Carter. Carter lowered the Glock and wiped blood from his eyes. The kid ran off.

Yoyok gripped Carter by the arm and shouted, 'Get up.'

More sirens had reached the mosque. Sugianto and two of his men stood on the bonnet of the Land Rover, weapons up. Carter,

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right leg numb from the blow to his hip, limped with Yoyok to the waiting vehicle. Two soldiers followed them on board.

The crowd began to chant.

'Pemerintah dilarang di sini! Pemerintah dilarang di sini!'

Sugianto didn't flinch. 'Back it up.'

The driver engaged reverse and accelerated.

'Masyarakat berdiri! Masyarakat berdiri!'

The driver backed into a three-point turn. They drove south, then east, to box around the mosque. Light and sound faded behind them.

Sugianto turned to Carter as they reached the airport road. 'You should have aborted when I told you, Pak.'

A column of smoke rose over Kao. A helicopter orbited somewhere in the distance.

'It was a protest.' Carter grimaced and opened the backpack. There he found the satphone, still intact and with signal. 'Shit happens.'

Sugianto pointed back at Kao. 'That was an attack,' he said. 'Someone wanted you dead, bos.'

Carter spat blood. 'If they wanted me dead, I'd be dead.' He wiped his mouth and dialled a number. After ten seconds he got a dial tone. 'Like I told you, Sugi'—they reached the airport gate and the helicopter touched down—'leave the spy shit to me.'



Bevan G. Roberts grew up in Canberra, Australia surrounded by technology, the military, and government. During a career in and around the departments of defence and foreign affairs, Bevan worked for a time at the Australian embassy in Indonesia, an experience that opened his eyes to Asia and inspired his first novel, *Kingdom of Spies*.

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