

## *Prologue*

---

# RENDEZVOUS FOXTROT

*0215 Hours, Arabian Sea  
5 Miles South of the Indus River  
Coast of Pakistan*

**A** *DARKENED SHIP is a burdened ship*, Moore thought as he stood outside the pilothouse of the OSA-1 fast attack craft *Quwwat*. She was indigenously built by the Karachi Shipyard and Engineering Works and based on an old Soviet design, complete with four HY-2 surface-to-surface missiles and two twin 25-millimeter antiaircraft guns. Three diesel engines and three shafts propelled the 130-foot-long patrol boat at thirty knots across waves tinged silver by a quarter-moon shimmering low on the horizon. Running at “darken ship” meant no range or masthead lights, no port or starboard running lights. International Regulations for Preventing Collisions

at Sea (COLREGS) dictated that were an incident to occur, *Quwwat* would be at fault regardless of the circumstances.

Earlier in the evening, at dusk, Moore had walked down a Karachi pier with Sublieutenant Syed Mallaah, trailed by four enlisted men, a SPECOPS team from the Pakistan Special Service Group Navy (SSGN), an organization similar to the U.S. Navy SEALs, but, ahem, their operators were hardly as capable. Once aboard the *Quwwat*, Moore had insisted on a quick tour that ended with a cursory introduction to the commanding officer, Lieutenant Maqsud Kayani, who was distracted as he issued orders to leave port. The CO couldn't have been much older than Moore, who was thirty-five himself, but the comparisons stopped there. Moore's broad shoulders stood in sharp juxtaposition to Kayani's lean cyclist's physique that barely tented up his uniform. The lieutenant had a hooked nose, and if he'd shaved in the past week, there was no clear evidence. Despite his rugged appearance, he had the twenty-eight-man crew's utmost attention and respect. He spoke. They jumped. Kayani eventually gave Moore a firm handshake and said, "Welcome aboard, Mr. Fredrickson."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. I appreciate your assistance."

"Of course."

They spoke in Urdu, Pakistan's national language, which Moore had found easier to learn than Dari, Pashto, or Arabic. He'd been identified as "Greg Fredrickson," an American, to these Pakistani naval men, although his darker features, thick beard, and long, black hair now pulled into a ponytail allowed him to pass for an Afghan, Pakistani, or Arab if he so desired.

Lieutenant Kayani went on: “Have no worries, sir. I plan to arrive at our destination promptly, if not early. This boat’s name means *prowess*, and she’s every bit of that.”

“Outstanding.”

Point Foxtrot, the rendezvous zone, lay three miles off the Pakistan coast and just outside the Indus River delta. There, they would meet with the Indian patrol boat *Agray* to accept a prisoner. The Indian government had agreed to turn over a recently captured Taliban commander, Akhter Adam, a man they claimed was a High-Value Target with operational intelligence on Taliban forces located along the southern line of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The Indians believed that Adam had not yet alerted his own forces of his capture; he had simply gone missing for twenty-four hours. Still, time was of the essence. Both governments wanted to ensure that the Taliban was not tipped off that Adam had fallen into American hands. Therefore, no American military assets or forces were being used in the transfer operation—except a certain CIA paramilitary operations officer named Maxwell Steven Moore.

Admittedly, Moore had misgivings about using a security team of SSGN guys led by a young, inexperienced sublieutenant; however, during the briefing he’d been told that Mallaah, a local boy from Thatta in Sindh Province, was fiercely loyal, trusted, and highly respected. In Moore’s book, loyalty, trust, and respect were earned, and they would see if the young sublieutenant was up for the challenge. Mallaah’s job was, after all, rudimentary: oversee the transfer and help protect Moore and the prisoner.

Assuming that Akhter Adam made it safely aboard, Moore would begin interrogating him during the trip back to the Karachi pier. For his part, Moore would use that time to determine if the commander was indeed an HVT worthy of serious CIA attention or somebody to leave behind for the Pakistanis to play with.

Forward of the port beam, the blackness was pierced by three quick white flashes from the Turshian Mouth lighthouse guarding the entrance to the Indus River. The sequence repeated every twenty seconds. Farther east, nearer the bow, Moore picked up the single white flash from the Kajhar Creek light, and that flash repeated every twelve seconds. The sealed-beam revolving beacon of the often-disputed Kajhar Creek (aka the Sir Creek light) was situated on the Pakistan-India border. Moore had taken special note of the lighthouse names, locations, and their identifying flash sequences from the navigational charts rolled out during the briefing. Old SEAL habits died hard.

With moonset at 0220 and fifty percent cloud cover, he anticipated pitch-black conditions for the 0300 rendezvous. The Indians were running at darken ship, too. In a pinch the Turshian Mouth and Kajhar Creek lighthouses would keep him oriented.

Lieutenant Kayani held true to his word. They reached Point Foxtrot at 0250 hours, and Moore shifted around the pilothouse to the only available night-vision scope mounted on the port side. Kayani was already there, manning the scope.

Meanwhile, Mallaah and his team waited on the main deck, midships, to haul the prisoner across once the Indian vessel came alongside.

Kayani backed away from the night scope and offered it to Moore. Despite the gathering clouds, starlight provided sufficient photons to bathe the Indian Pauk-class patrol boat in a green eerie twilight, bright enough to expose the numerals 36 painted on her hull. Approaching bows-on, at twice the weight of the *Quwwat*, the five-hundred-ton *Agray* carried eight GRAIL surface-to-air missiles and dual RBU-1200 ASW rocket launchers up on her bow. Each ten-tube system was capable of deploying decoys and ASW rockets for surface-to-surface and anti-submarine warfare operations. The *Quwwat* felt diminutive in her presence.

As the *Agray* began to drift down the port side and prepared to come about to make her approach, Moore spotted her name painted in black letters across the stern, rising above the mist agitated by the bow wash. He then glanced through the pilothouse door out to the starboard bridge wing and caught a short-long, short-long light flash. He tried to remember which lighthouse used that light sequence. The *Agray* completed her turn, and Kayani was now busy leaning over the port side, directing the placement of fenders to minimize any hull damage once the two ships came together.

The flashes came again: short-long, short-long.

*Lighthouse, my ass*, Moore thought. ALPHA-ALPHA was International Morse Code for, in practical terms, "Who the hell are you?"

A chill spiked up Moore's spine. "Lieutenant, we're getting an ALPHA-ALPHA on the starboard side. We're being challenged!"

Kayani charged across the pilothouse to the starboard wing, and Moore hustled up behind him. How many times had they already been challenged? They were in Pakistan territorial waters; what were Pakistan's rules of engagement?

A flare burst overhead, peeling back the night and drawing deep shadows across the decks of both patrol boats. Moore looked across the sea and saw it, a thousand meters out, rising up out of the waves, a nightmare with imposing black sail and dull black decks fully awash as she breached, her bow pointed at them. The commander had brought the sub to the surface to challenge them, then had fired the flare to visually confirm his target.

Kayani lifted the pair of binoculars dangling around his neck and zoomed in. "It's the *Shushhuk*! She's one of ours. She's supposed to be back at the pier!"

Moore's chest tightened. What the hell was a Pakistan Navy submarine doing in his rendezvous zone?

He craned his head to the *Agray*, where he assumed that by now the Taliban prisoner was on deck. According to the plan, Adam was wearing a black jumpsuit and turban, and his wrists were bound. His escorts were supposed to be two heavily armed MARCOS, or marine commandos, of the Indian Navy. Moore spun back to face the submarine—

And then, suddenly, he saw it—a line of phosphorescence

bubbling up in the water and streaking past their stern, heading toward the *Agray*.

He pointed. "TORPEDO!"

In the next breath, Moore came up behind Kayani, shoved him over the side, then jumped himself as the torpedo struck the *Agray* in a horrific explosion whose thundering and flashing was as surreal as it was shockingly close. A blast wave of debris pinged off the *Quwwat*'s hull and rained down to strike the water in dozens of splashes.

Moore's eyes widened as the steaming, hissing sea came up at them, heated now by all the white-hot shards of hull and deck and torpedo that continued to blast off the *Agray*. As he hit the water, narrowly missing a jagged piece of steel, a ball of flames set off the *Agray*'s GRAIL surface-to-air missiles and both clusters of ASW rockets on her fo'c'sle.

Moore sank below the waves, his shoes colliding with something below. He swam back to the surface and jerked his head around, searching for the lieutenant. There he was, just out of reach.

Suddenly, three of the *Agray*'s ASW rockets blew up into the Silkworm missile housings aboard the *Quwwat*. The resulting detonations boomed so loudly and brightly that Moore reflexively ducked back under the water for cover. He swam toward the lieutenant, who was floating supine and appeared only semiconscious, his face bloody from a deep gash along the left side of his head. He must've struck some debris as he'd entered the water. Moore surfaced at the man's shoulder. He

splashed salt water onto the gash as Kayani stared vaguely at him. "Lieutenant! Come on!"

Thirty meters away, the sea surface was aflame with burning diesel fuel. The stench left Moore grimacing as for the first time he felt the deep rumble of nearby diesel engines . . . the submarine. He had some time. The sub wouldn't approach the wreckage until the flames subsided.

Other men were in the water, barely visible, their shouts punctuated by more explosions. A strangled cry resounded nearby. Moore scanned the area for their Taliban prisoner, but the twin thunderclaps of another detonation sent him back under the waves. When he came up and turned back, the *Quwwat* was already listing badly to port, getting ready to sink. The *Agray's* bow was entirely submerged, the fires and deep black smoke still raging, ammunition cooking off with sharp cracks and half-muffled booms. The air grew clogged with a haze that reeked of burning rubber and plastic.

Willing himself into a state of calm as the heat of the fires pressed on his face, Moore removed his shoes, tied the laces together, then draped them around his neck. *Three miles to the beach* . . . but right now, this low in the water, he had no idea where the beach was. With the exception of the flames, everywhere he looked was inky black, and each time he glanced toward the conflagration, his night vision was ruined.

Flash-flash-flash. Wait a minute. He remembered. He started counting . . . one one thousand, two one thousand . . . at nineteen, he was rewarded with three more quick flashes. He had a lock on the Turshian Mouth lighthouse.



Moore seized Kayani and rolled him around. Still drifting in and out of consciousness, the lieutenant took one look at Moore, at the fires around them, and panicked. He reached out, seizing Moore by the head. Obviously the man wasn't thinking straight, and this behavior was not uncommon among accident victims. But if Moore didn't react, the frantic lieutenant could easily drown him.

Without pause, Moore placed both hands on the front of Kayani's hips with the heels of his hands against the man's body, fingers extended, thumbs grasping the lieutenant's sides. He pushed Kayani back toward the horizontal position, using this leverage to loosen the man's grip. Moore freed his head and screamed, "Relax! I got you! Just turn around and breathe." Moore grabbed him by the back of the collar. "Now float on your back."

With the man in a collar tow, Moore began a modified combat sidestroke around the burning debris, the pools of burning diesel beginning to swell toward them, his ears stinging from the continuous thundering and drone of the spitting and whipping flames.

Kayani settled down until they passed through a half-dozen bodies, members of his crew, just more flotsam and jetsam now. He hollered their names, and Moore kicked harder to get them away. Nevertheless, the sea became more grisly, an arm here, a leg there. And then something dark in the water ahead. A turban floating there. The prisoner's turban. Moore paused, craning his head right and left until he spotted a lifeless form bobbing on the waves. He swam to it, rolled the body sideways

enough to see the bearded face, the black jumpsuit, the terrible slash across his neck that had severed his carotid artery. It was their guy. Moore gritted his teeth and adjusted his grip on Kayani's collar. Before starting off, he looked in the direction of the submarine. It was already gone.

During his time as a SEAL, Moore could swim two ocean miles without fins in under seventy minutes. Collar-towing another man might slow him down, but he refused to let that challenge crush his spirit.

He focused on the lighthouse, kept breathing and kicking, his movements smooth and graceful, no wasted energy, every shift of the arm and flutter of the feet directing the power where it needed to go. He would turn his head up, steal a breath, and continue on, swimming with machinelike precision.

A shout from somewhere behind caused Moore to slow. He paddled around, squinting toward a small group of men, ten—fifteen, perhaps—swimming toward him.

“Just follow me!” he cried. “Follow me.”

Now he wasn't just trying to save Kayani; he was providing the motivation for the rest of the survivors to reach the shore. These were Navy men, trained to swim and swim hard, but three miles was an awful long way, more so with injuries. They needed to keep him in sight.

The lactic acid was building in his arm and his legs, the burn steady at first, then threatening to grow worse. He slowed, shook his legs and the one arm he was using, took another breath, and told himself, *I will not quit. Ever.*

He would focus on that. He would lead from the front,

drive the rest of these men home—even if it killed him. He guided them across the rising and falling sea, kick after agonizing kick, listening to the voices of the past, the voices of instructors and proctors who'd dedicated their lives to helping others unleash the warrior's spirit lying deep and dormant in their hearts.

Nearly ninety minutes later he heard the surf breaking on the shoreline, and with every rising swell he saw flashlights moving and bobbing all along the beach. Flashlights meant people. They'd come down to view the fires and explosions offshore, and they might even see him. Moore's covert operation was about to make headlines. He cursed and looked back. The group of survivors had drifted much farther back, fifty meters or more, unable to keep up with Moore's blistering pace. He could barely see them now.

By the time his bare feet touched the sandy bottom, Moore was spent, leaving everything he had back in the Arabian Sea. Kayani was still going in and out as Moore dragged him from the surf and hauled him onto the beach as five or six villagers gathered around him. "Call for help!" he shouted.

Out in the distance, the flames and flashes continued, like heat lightning that printed the clouds negative, yet the silhouettes of both ships were now gone, leaving the rest of the fuel to continue burning off.

Moore wrenched out his cell phone, but it had died. Next time he planned on being attacked by a submarine, he'd be sure

to pack a waterproof version. He asked one of the villagers, a college-aged kid with a thin beard, for a phone.

"I saw the ships explode," the kid said breathlessly.

"Me, too," snapped Moore. "Thanks for the phone."

"Give it to me," called Kayani from the beach, his voice cracking, but he seemed much more lucid now. "My uncle's a colonel in the Army. He'll get us helicopters here within an hour. It's the fastest way."

"Take it, then," said Moore. He'd read the maps, knew they were hours away by car from the nearest hospital. The rendezvous had intentionally been located opposite a rural, sparsely populated coastline.

Kayani reached his uncle, who in turn promised immediate relief. A second call to Kayani's commanding officer would summon Coast Guard rescue craft for those still at sea, but the Pakistan Coast Guard had no air-sea rescue choppers, just Chinese-built corvettes and patrol boats that wouldn't arrive until mid-morning. Moore turned his attention back on the surf, studying every wave, searching for the survivors.

Five minutes. Ten. Nothing. Not a soul. Between the blood and body parts strewn across the water like some ungodly stew, it was a safe bet that the sharks had come. And quickly. That, coupled with the injuries of the other survivors, may have been too much for them.

It took another half-hour before Moore spotted the first body rising up on a wave like a piece of driftwood. Many others would follow.

More than an hour passed before an Mi-17 appeared in the northwest sky, its twin turbines roaring, its rotors whomping and echoing off the hillsides. The chopper had been specifically designed by the Soviets for their war in Afghanistan and had become symbolic of that conflict: Goliaths of the sky slain by slingshots. The Pakistan Army had nearly one hundred Mi-17s in their inventory, a trivial detail Moore knew because he'd been a passenger aboard them a few times and had overheard a pilot griping about how he was stuck flying a Russian pile of junk that broke down every other flight and that the Pakistan Army had almost a hundred flying junkyards.

Slightly unnerved, Moore boarded the Mi-17 and was flown with Kayani to the Sindh Government Hospital in Liaquatabad Town, a suburb of Karachi. While en route, the flight medics administered painkillers, and Kayani's wide-eyed grimace turned to a more peaceful stare. It was sunrise by the time they touched down.

Moore stepped out of the hospital's elevator on the second floor and ducked into Kayani's room. They'd been at the hospital for about an hour now. The lieutenant would have a nice battle scar to help him get laid. Both men had been severely dehydrated when they'd come ashore, and an IV drip had been jabbed in the lieutenant's left arm.

“How are you feeling?”

Kayani reached up and touched the bandage on his head.

“I still have a headache.”

“It’ll pass.”

“I couldn’t have swum back.”

Moore nodded. “You got hit hard, and you lost some blood.”

“I don’t know what to say. Thank you is not enough.”

Moore took a long pull on the bottle of water given to him by one of the nurses. “Hey, forget it.” Movement in the doorway drew Moore’s attention. That was Douglas Stone, a colleague from the Agency, who stroked his mottled gray beard and stared at Moore above the rim of his glasses. “I have to go,” Moore said.

“Mr. Fredrickson, wait.”

Moore frowned.

“Is there a way I can contact you?”

“Sure, why?”

Kayani looked to Stone and pursed his lips.

“Oh, he’s okay. A good friend.”

The lieutenant hesitated a few seconds more, then said, “I just want to thank you . . . somehow.”

Moore used a tablet and pen on the tray table to scribble down an e-mail address.

The lieutenant clutched the paper tightly in his palm. “I’ll be in touch.”

Moore shrugged. “Okay.”

He headed out into the hallway, turned, then marched forcefully away from Stone, speaking through his teeth. “So, Doug, tell me—just what the fuck happened?”

“I know, I know.” Stone had deployed his usual calming tone, but Moore would have none of that, not now.

“We assured the Indians that the rendezvous would be clear. They had to cross into Pakistan territorial waters. They were very concerned about that.”

“We were told the Pakistanis were taking care of everything.”

“Who dropped the ball?”

“They’re telling us their submarine commander never received any orders to remain at the pier. Somebody forgot to issue them. He made his usual patrol and thought he’d sailed into some kind of engagement. According to him, he sent out multiple challenges without response.”

Moore snickered. “Well, it’s not like we were looking for him—and when we did see him, it was already too late.”

“The commander also reported that he saw the Indians taking prisoners on their deck.”

“So he was ready to fire on his own people, too?”

“Who knows.”

Moore stopped dead in his tracks, whirled, and gaped at the man. “The only prisoner they had was our guy.”

“Hey, Max, I know where you’re coming from.”

“Let’s go swim three miles. Then you’ll know.”

Stone removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “Look, it could be worse. We could be Slater and O’Hara and have to figure how to apologize to the Indians while making sure they don’t nuke Islamabad.”

“That’d be nice—because I’m headed there now.”