

An intriguing plot with all the twists and turns necessary to  
keep you riveted.”

—United News Service

# WALKING

K



*A political thriller by*

**Wes DeMott**

WALKING

K

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WES

DEMOTT

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

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Dedicated to my father,  
Arthur L. DeMott,  
and all warriors,  
throughout history,  
who answered  
their country's  
call-to-arms.

Many first chapters are written on inspiration, but most last chapters require the faith and encouragement of friends and family. Without those precious people, few authors would suffer the process through completion. In my case it was my daughters, Stacy and Kelsey, and their mother, Vicki, who kept me writing — never wavering in their strong support. Thank you, girls.

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and Kevin Casey, for the inspiration and breezes of his oceanfront porch.

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"Speaking for myself, I interpret the evidence as saying that P.O.W.s and M.I.A. have been alive, or were alive, up through 1989. I stand on that."—*Senator Robert C. Smith, Vice-Chairman, U.S. Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs.*

Senator John Kerry: "Now, with respect to the K up there, it has been referred to occasionally as a walking K. Without getting into great details about walking, does that appear to be a walking K?"

Mr. Erickson, JSSA: "To me, it does."

Senator John Kerry: "It does?"

Mr. Erickson, JSSA: "Yes, it does."

Senator John Kerry: "And it has the walking appearance, whatever that extra—I don't want to get into any classified area. Do you believe it's distinctly a K?"

Mr. Dussault, JSSA: "It to me looks like a K, and that's how I think we ought to consider it . . ."  
—*1992 sworn testimony from members of the Joint Services SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, & Escape) Agency*

"Yes, it is possible even as these countries (the United States & Vietnam) become more and more open that a prisoner or prisoners could be held deep within a jungle or behind some locked door under conditions of the greatest security. That possibility argues for a live-sighting follow-up capability that is alert, aggressive and predicated on the assumption that a U.S. prisoner or prisoners continue to be held."—*1993 Report of the United States Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs*

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# 1

Jacob Slaughter paced to the bed and turned. He made another slow lap of his hotel room as he waited for Lu Kham Phong. His lean, six-foot frame crowded the small spaces, his blue eyes checked his watch, and his mind wrestled with the delay.

He tried to avoid the mirrors, but they seemed to be everywhere, reflecting back the image he had never wanted to see again. It was the frightened face of his own youth, eroded by time to match his forty-six-year-old body. Even now, his fear of this country crawled down his neck like the warm breath of a predatory animal.

The deep cut through his nose was only a shadowy scar and his right cheek had healed from the gouging until it was only slightly more sunken than the left. Laura often told him he was good-looking. But his wide, questioning eyes and raised brows made the mirror's product intolerable to him. He understood the look too well, knew exactly what it said about him. Slaughter was sure of himself where fear was concerned.

Lu Kham Phong had been insistent, demanding, for such a quiet little man. Wait there, he had said. Stay off the streets of Hanoi. Anything could happen here, even now, and the trade agreement between their two governments was much too important to risk an unnecessary setback.

So Slaughter waited in Hanoi's best hotel, taking inventory of all the differences between this room and the last one Vietnam had provided him. And he worried, too, because he knew Secretary of State Walter Mills was worried about his skills as a foreign service officer, and concerned about how much those abilities would be encumbered by his past – reasons Slaughter understood completely. But the Vietnamese Foreign Minister had personally insisted on Slaughter, giving Secretary Mills no option but to send him.

Slaughter stepped to the open window and took in the smells and noises of Hanoi from three stories up. They were less threatening now, more innocent than when he'd been here as a pimpled teenager, a bottle of Clearasil as necessary as his M16A1. He closed his eyes and breathed deep, concentrated on the sounds, discovered that most of them were the noises of any big city. But the rattle of broken-down bicycles set Hanoi apart. Always had, and probably always would.

He stayed at the window with his eyes closed, the vivid memories terrorizing him until they were spooked off by someone pounding on his door. He jumped straight up, then bent, midair, into a crouch. He realized in that same piece of a second exactly how hard this would be for him. Maybe impossible. But he forced himself to the door and opened it. Saw the small men.

The one who'd pummeled the door was stepping back into line with a bitter twist on his little face. Slaughter's stomach knotted and his vision sharpened. He curled his mouth into a smile and stiffened himself against the fear the uniforms unleashed.

He forced his attention from the uniforms to the three men wearing suits. The negotiators. Lu Kham Phong, who had

picked him up at Noi Bai Airport, stood in front of the other two like the tip of the spear. He was an intelligent man, American-educated, about thirty-five years old. He was pleasant looking, with tight, smooth skin. Handsome in that dark, precise, Asian way. Slaughter liked him.

Spread along a line behind the negotiators were six armed men wearing the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's current military uniform, along with odd bits and pieces of the old wartime one. Like military men everywhere, they hardened their faces to match the severity of their clothes. As a group, and individually, they looked unpleasant. Some managed the look better than others. Slaughter's smile began to feel stupid, and he wanted to let it fade away. But he didn't. He kept smiling and stepped into the hallway, passed each soldier in slow review, inspected them very closely. Then he stopped in front of Lu Kham Phong. He did not bow.

"Mr. Phong, are these soldiers here to protect me or suppress me?"

Phong did not bow either. He took one step forward and extended his hand. "Hello, Mr. Slaughter," he said in exact English. "They are for your protection, of course. Are you ready?"

Slaughter returned the handshake, watched the soldiers carefully. The oldest, a scarred warrior about Slaughter's own age, stared back, his pistol worn high at the waist in an odd, cross-draw fashion. Several small war decorations hung from his brown uniform.

The five other soldiers were much younger and carried automatic weapons. Chinese AK-47s. They carelessly poked their gun barrels around the hall and into Slaughter's room, their eyes watching for trouble.

Slaughter pulled his focus away from the guns and looked back at Phong. "Yes, I suppose I am, although I still don't understand what this is about. Let me grab my attaché; I'll be right with you."

Slaughter turned into his room and headed toward the small desk where his briefcase had sat for a week. He barely heard the noise behind him, but it was enough to spin him around and put him on defense.

The lead soldier, the one with the cross-draw pistol, had shoved his way past the negotiators and rushed into the room. He was five feet away, the weapon already pulled part way out of the holster, almost ready if Slaughter drew a gun from some hidden place.

Deafening panic alarms went off in Slaughter's head, as if the last twenty-five years of freedom had never happened. He was cornered, but not yet trapped. He rushed at the soldier, ready to explode as he raced against the man's reflexes.

But Lu Kham Phong beat Slaughter to the soldier, jammed himself between them, wedged his face into the soldier's and hurled urgent Vietnamese at him. Phong ordered the man to back down, then shouted the order again. Finally, the soldier moved out of the room with four quick, military, backsteps. Phong followed him out, then turned back to Slaughter.

"Mr. Slaughter, I am very, very sorry. Even though a soldier always needs to be on guard for an attack, this officer's actions are unpardonable. I cannot possibly offer enough apologies for them. If you wish, I will see to it that he is severely disciplined."

Slaughter stared at the soldiers in the hall, hands on their weapons, fingers pulsing the triggers. The lead soldier was staring back, looking wholly unrepentant. "No, Mr. Phong, don't bother. Let's just get on with our business."

Phong turned and looked at the soldier again, then spun back around with a narrow smile on his thin lips. "As you wish, Mr. Slaughter. Now, if you are ready, we should go. The others will be waiting, and nothing can be gained by our delay."

Slaughter picked up his attaché and walked into the hallway, stared down into the lead soldier's eyes as he passed. The soldier broke out of the eye-lock and charged down the hall, shoving other guests violently and forcing them back into their

rooms at gunpoint. Slaughter and Phong raced after him, stomping through the lobby and into the sunny street where three vehicles waited. Slaughter and the three negotiators rode together. The soldiers split up and took the front and rear cars.

After almost an hour, the cars slowed in front of a rotting building several kilometers from the other government offices. Slaughter did not know the building, had never been here before. It was big and very old, certainly pre-dating the war. There were few windows in the thick exterior walls. Civilians, crowding along the opposite side of the street, did not look at the building nor venture near it. It seemed to be isolated, quarantined. Although Slaughter had no idea where he was, he felt a scary sense of familiarity. He looked at Phong, who turned away.

Their car stopped and the soldiers jerked the doors open. The older soldier took a position about four meters from the curb, facing the building, waiting for everyone to line up behind him. They did.

Slaughter marched with them through a gate guarded by Army regulars, then continued without slowing, deeper and deeper into the disquieting old structure. Finally, they stopped at a large wooden door. It must have weighed thousands of pounds and hung from four, heavy, wrought iron hinges. The wood was blotched by decades of ugly stains. Lu Kham Phong opened it with a clunky antique key, then led all of them into a dark room. The echoes of their footsteps bounced off far-away walls.

There were no windows. The air tasted like it had been used and reused until it was hardly worth breathing. Four bare bulbs dangled, like ghosts, from the twenty-foot ceiling. Slaughter's eyes had trouble adjusting. When they did, he saw that an eight-foot table had been set up near the center of the room, with four folding chairs on his side. Directly across the room, maybe thirty feet from the table, was another door exactly like the one they had passed through. There was nothing else in the room except filth.

Again, Slaughter looked at Phong. But the handsome young negotiator turned and led his team to the chairs, where they waited, silently, for Slaughter to join them. The soldiers stayed back, all of them waiting for Slaughter. Once he'd taken a seat, they spread out in a line behind him. He set his attaché on the dusty table, then folded his hands into his lap.

And then they waited. Minutes passed in silence, and the silence bred questions. Slaughter's question was, Why? Why were they here? What did this place have to do with America's trade status with Vietnam? He thought about standing and demanding some answers. After all, this matter was supposed to be urgent. He had a right to know why they were wasting precious time.

But he held back, not really sure why. The time would pass. It always had. He could be patient, too.

But the longer he sat there, the harder it was to push back the jangle of panic that had rattled around in him since February 6, 1969 – the day of his last battle in the long-ago war that had spawned today's meeting. He had just made corporal, humping along on a Zippo squad with the 3d Battalion, 3d Marine Division. Although he'd forgotten much of what had happened on that day, the years that followed were burned into his mind with a hot, steel rod.

He shifted in his chair and closed his eyes. The dungeon was getting to him, hitting his senses harder now, throwing his mind back into the dirty concrete cell he'd called home for four years, one month, and one day. Was it the smell? The stench of urine puddles and rotting cabbage – the putrid, signature scents of Far East Prison? His mouth began to taste the stale rice, and his closed eyes replayed the images of fearless rats gnawing at his wounds during his last five hours in the Nam. Those final few hours of captivity had almost destroyed him. Three hundred minutes that had ruined much of his life.

Slaughter's head was banging. His hands were sweating and his guts were trembling. He glanced at the negotiators sitting beside him, looked at their nice suits and carefully combed hair.

Did they hear his brain screaming? Had they noticed how heavily he'd begun to sweat?

Suddenly, the heavy door across the room banged, then creaked, then swung open. An emaciated prisoner – a black man wearing pajama pants – shuffled into the huge room under soldiers' guard, his American eyes staring at the distant wall and giving Slaughter nothing of his thoughts. His ancient body baby-stepped slowly, as though his bones and muscles were tangled, the essence of motion forgotten altogether. He had big hands – heavy weights that belonged on the arms of a much taller person. Years in squatty, bamboo tiger cages had hunched his back into an ellipse.

But the man's head stayed level. Proud. Belligerent. Slaughter's eyes swelled with water. He could not take them off the prisoner. He felt his legs moving as the dying specter shuffled toward him. And then, without quite realizing it, he was standing, trying to keep his mouth closed as he lifted a salute to the ragged man.

Slaughter stood there, erect, respectful, waiting for whatever would happen next, unable to hide his shock at the sight of an American prisoner of war. Then, more soldiers began to file in behind the prisoner. And that's when he heard the laughter.

Slaughter's spine squeezed tight underneath his suit coat, and he wanted, more than ever before, to run. Run without thinking. Grab the shabby prisoner and run hard and fast. Carry the man, drag him, whatever. But run until they made it out or were killed trying.

But he stood like a board, didn't flinch an eyebrow, fought to keep his trembling locked inside. Slowly, he lowered his salute and stood firm, clenching himself against the sound of his old enemy. He was back now, the cover of his business suit and diplomatic status lost in the indiscriminate landscape of terror.

Vu Van Vinh slid out from behind his soldiers and took in the room like a toastmaster. He squinted queerly at Slaughter for a few seconds, then threw his head back and gave a wicked laugh of noisy recognition. His flat, stumpy face and jug ears

had changed little since he'd been Slaughter's captor, back when Vinh had first imprisoned himself in order to enjoy power over Americans.

Slaughter caught the light in Vinh's eyes, knew he was going to show that power again. Vinh smiled, waited until he had the attention of everyone in the room. Then quickly, in the room's thick silence, he whipped his baton through the air. It buzzed with the warning of pain, then struck the American prisoner across the back of the legs. The old man crumbled onto the concrete floor, his knobby knees breaking the fall with an unsettling snap. But his head stayed erect, and his mouth stayed closed. He gave no sign of pain. Long ago, Slaughter figured, he'd forgotten that it was possible to live without it.

The blow had come too quickly; Slaughter'd had no time to interfere. But he watched Vinh now, leaned in his old guard's direction, his hands on the table and ready to fly over it, dive into the impact zone if more was coming. He was not trembling anymore.

Vinh straightened his simple uniform and grinned as he made polite introductions. "This is your American Captain Charles Wooten. He is guilty of crimes against our people, having used the weapons of your nation to attack civilians in the Phuol Long Province. He is the senior officer of the twenty-three men we still have here."

Slaughter snapped his eyes to the prisoner, tightened him into the sharpest possible focus. My God, could it really be Chuck Wooten? He looked harder at the man, at the pale brown skin and broken teeth. Long, gangly arms with huge, bony hands hanging helpless at the ends.

"Chuck? Captain Wooten? It's me, Jacob Slaughter."

Wooten did not look at him. Instead, he wobbled his head around toward Vinh, who slowly nodded his approval to speak. Wooten's mouth began to move, very slowly, as if he couldn't quite remember how to use it. Everyone in the room waited. And waited. Slaughter leaned closer.

Finally a noise came out. Almost a word, but not quite. And then Wooten quit, lowered his head and watched his own hand scratch a crude letter K in the dust. A tear formed, then dropped, from the blind left eye that wandered.

Vinh started laughing, and kept laughing as he rested the cauliflower stump of his left hand on Wooten's shoulder. Then, quickly, he struck Wooten across his back, hard enough to knock Wooten face down onto the dirty floor. Slaughter lunged, going over the table to protect Wooten. The negotiators scattered at his explosion of power, their briefcases spilling secret contents onto the floor. Metal chairs banged against the concrete floor as Slaughter blasted out of his little piece of the room and headed toward Vinh like a missile.

But it was pointless. The old soldier who'd escorted Slaughter had kept his men close. They grabbed Slaughter's legs and shoulders, dragged him out of the air. Vu Van Vinh's soldiers moved, too, and quickly closed ranks around their prized prisoner.

Slaughter struggled with the restraining hands, shouted at Vinh for the first time, an experience he'd never even considered possible. It would have meant torture, or death, at any of their previous meetings. But he was shouting now and getting louder with each word. "All right, damn you, forget it! I don't need to hear him, I believe it's Captain Wooten. You don't have to beat the poor man, you son-of-a-bitch."

Vinh stopped laughing and charged toward Slaughter. But he stopped just as quickly, distracted by what the prisoner was doing. Wooten was struggling to rise. They all watched as he scraped his crippled hands along the concrete, tucked them underneath his chest, then pushed against the floor with useless determination.

Slaughter gagged and bent over. The bitter contents of his stomach exploded into his mouth. His nightmare and his vision had finally met each other. This quiet pile of noble American flesh proved that Wooten had not died, and his imprisonment

had not ended. He stared at Wooten, then at Vinh, then at Phong.

This time Phong did not look away. His face seemed apologetic, and he started to speak. But Vinh's voice burst out, stopping everyone as the short, terse command echoed off the black, stone walls. Slaughter stared hard as Vinh came stiffly toward him, hate pouring from his eyes, his nostrils flaring. He came all the way to the edge of Slaughter's table, watching Slaughter's eyes as if looking for the old signs.

Slaughter knew Vinh wanted his fear. He wanted to see it up close, just like when they'd first met. Slaughter would never forget the terror he'd known that day. He knew Vinh still wanted to see it.

Slaughter shoved himself across the table until his breath collided with Vinh's. And he waited, keeping an eye on Vinh's right hand, which revolved the baton by squeezing it, then relaxing, then squeezing again. Keeping his muscles loose and fluid. Ready. It had only taken a few minutes, but Vinh had him back now. Back in a place of torture and tap codes, silence and pain. And Slaughter was standing firm and scared to death. Again.

Vinh glanced over his shoulder, ordered his soldiers to pick Wooten off the floor. Then he grinned at Slaughter and ordered Wooten's food withheld for three full days – almost a death sentence.

Slaughter struck out, grabbed Vinh's neck and plunged his thumb and forefinger far behind Vinh's Adam's apple. Instantly, soldiers began beating Slaughter's back, hammering his skull. But he endured, would not let go. He was finally killing Vinh, his fingers closing down on the windpipe like it was a handle. Slaughter knew he was smiling, rapt with the exhilaration of vengeance. He was racing his conscience, trying to kill Vinh before his personal vow ticker-taped across his eyes, his solemn promise never to kill anyone again. If he hurried, he would make it. Vinh would die here.

But in the silence of this dream-come-true, where Vinh's gurgling was soundless and the soldier's attacks carried no pain, he suddenly heard Captain Wooten's voice, strange and weak like a death cry. He had to stop. He had to hear it.

Wooten sputtered again, much louder than before. "Khong! Khong!" And then he found his English. "No. Jacob, please, no!"

Slaughter held Vinh's throat for a few more seconds, understanding the plea, realizing that it would fall upon Wooten to pay for Vinh's death, damning himself for his temper. He loosened his grip and pushed Vinh away. Vinh dropped to the floor, his head up and returning Slaughter's hateful stare while his body folded over double. He tried to straighten, but failed – finally staggered out of the room behind the men who had dragged Wooten away.

Slaughter shook off Phong's soldiers, shoved them away from him. His head was leaking blood into his eyes, but he smeared it away and watched the door close behind Wooten. Then Phong touched his shoulder, gently, bringing him back to their business.

"I am very sorry for that, Mr. Slaughter. Although I remember the war from my youth, I am too young to really understand this hatred. Vu Van Vinh is . . . how shall I say it . . . still at war with your nation."

Slaughter stared at the door, listening with very little interest. Once the door was shut and locked, he straightened his clothes, pushed back the bloody mats of his hair and struggled for diplomacy. "You people are bastards, Phong. And Vinh isn't doing this alone."

Phong spoke carefully. "No. There are others like Vinh."

"I'll just bet there are. And you know what, Phong? There are some Americans that haven't stopped hating either. You think they should start torturing Vietnamese? Maybe cruise the streets of Hometown, U.S.A. with baseball bats and Vinh's sense of humor?"

"No, Mr. Slaughter. Of course not. But –"