

Prologue

Maruška Pavkovic was slowly lowering herself to the floor after her ninety third push-up when she felt the familiar pain between her shoulders. She collapsed onto the marble and screamed. She waited for the next pulse. It didn't come. She opened a bottle of water and speed dialled Wan Chuntao on the new phone, after it confirmed her fingerprint and retina pattern.

Under the Guoanbu building in Hainan, it was early morning. Six floors above, there was snow on the ground and the temperature was well below zero. In Room 5, Wan Chuntao had lost track of night and day. The work had been frantic, unceasing and had produced little in the way of results until now.

The message from Wan Chuntao was detailed – the target had been identified and speed of action was essential. Then there was an unequivocal: 'Move Now!'

The line dropped and Maruška was packing her bag when she heard someone shout *Hariq! Hariq!* from the street below. She didn't understand the word and looked out of the window. She saw and recognised Jacob just as the pension's fire alarm went off. He saw her at the window, and she reacted.

She rummaged in her bag and withdrew the small device, then peeled the back off the sticky pad on the back of the charge. She stuck it to the wall behind the door and tested the adhesion gently. Then she carefully pulled out the trigger cord and tied it to the door handle, then pressed the arm button. She threw her sports bag out on to the landing and started to close the door taking once quick glance around the room. Shit, her phone! There on the bedside table. Four seconds of ten. She crossed the room and picked up her phone, six seconds. Back to the door, eight seconds. She held her breath as she closed the door gently. Nine, ten seconds. Armed. She let out her breath gently and picked up her bag. Once the tension changed on the cord then the 500 grams of high explosive would do their work.

Moving towards the stairway to the roof solarium, she heard footsteps on the stairs below, but was not seen as she moved up to the roof. Moving across to the parapet she prepared for the leap across the alley to the next roof.

She climbed up and looked across. In her peripheral vision she could see a couple in a clinch below. She jumped, just as the man raised a Browning Hi-Power towards her, too late. No shot, just a shout as she landed awkwardly, sprawling across the other parapet. Her mind had not been focused on the landing, it had been drawn to the face, trying to place it.

Behind her, in the *pension*, Aaron Rainsford and Elias Stone approached her room. She could hear the two-tone siren of the local *pompieri* approaching - they would certainly have a fire to deal with.

Rainsford tried the door handle, slowly and gently. He turned to Stone and shook his head, then stood back and balanced as he raised his right foot and kicked the door beneath the lock.

Then she had it, the face clicked. Baldwin! How the hell had he found her? She sprinted for the next parapet, following her prepared escape route.

The sound of the explosion did not cause a change in her stride as she reached the street and crossed it, heading for the steps down to the marina. She heard a shout behind her and pushed some German tourists aside, taking the steps three at a time.

The charge inside her room had taken out a section of the thin wall – and the door. Aaron Rainsford had been flattened against the solid stone wall across the narrow corridor. He was beyond help – the door handle and lock assembly together with his sternum, was embedded in his heart. Elias Stone was completely untouched physically, apart from a temporary loss of hearing. He quickly checked Rainsford for vital signs – there were none then looked inside the wrecked room. It was clear that there was no other body and the bathroom was empty. He ran for the stairs.

Halfway down the steps to the marina, Maruška turned and snapped off a shot. There was a scream from the tourists but Baldwin kept on coming – and behind him another two faces she recognised from her captivity in Malta.