

Snow on the Sea

Michael Oldham

extract

Chapter 1

Prologue

In the grey half-light of dawn, that no-man's land between night and day, the first of the crew unexpectedly met his death. Of all the crew, he had least anticipated this brutal act of betrayal, despite his being well accustomed to treachery.

In his terrifying, dying moments, as he was bleeding to death and flying through the air towards a cold, watery grave, he realised rather too late his fatal mistake; his stupidity in trusting his new partners in crime. Seduced by quick, rich gains, he had gambled on the success of this, his latest and last criminal association. Gambling, knowing neither the pedigree, nor the form, is a tricky business; something professional gamblers might agree is doomed to failure, except perhaps in the most rare of cases. This was anything but a rare case. Of its type, it was wholly unremarkable. A more cautious man might have seriously considered the dangers long before they had arrived and would have been more circumspect. But, Abdul Rahman hadn't appreciated how terribly wrong his association might turn out, he had never considered the potential pitfalls, he had gravely omitted to evaluate the risks and had dreamed only of riches. And, he had been absolutely seduced by his exotic dream.

Abdul Rahman had never been a solicitous man he was simply an opportunist. He had reached a stage in his life where he threw caution to the wind in a final attempt to break out of the relative poverty and drudgery in which he had lived for forty years. His dreams of a new life and a new beginning were of course never realised, unless the next life, whether reincarnation, or paradise, count for something. Unusually perhaps, for Rahman they were both possibilities.

He had been born a Hindu before he was attracted to another religion. He had changed his name and converted to Islam. Maybe, he had thought, his luck would also improve: but, true to his mean character, neither of these two great religions had anything other than a fleeting ritualistic hold on him. Although he had generally worked, his near illiterate life had consisted largely of petty crime, laziness, and periodic drunkenness. Now that he had been offered the opportunity of riches, a largess that would enable him to open a club in Manila and keep a few girls for himself and his customers, he was content to carry out, unquestioning, the orders that he'd been given. He had already planned his future and he was looking forward to it. The anticipation was almost too much and he could hardly wait until that that fateful morning arrived.

Rahman was a deckhand on the *MS Taramaca*, a medium sized container ship that plied its trade regularly between Manila and Rotterdam. The crew originated mostly from the Philippines, or Indonesia, although the cook and his mate and the steward, were of Chinese origin. The officers however, that is, the Captain, the Chief Navigation Officer, the Chief Engineer and the Radio Officer were all Dutch.

Rahman's days on the ship were numbered in any event. He was not the most valued member of the ship's crew and the captain had already determined that at the end of the return voyage from Rotterdam he would give Rahman his papers. In fact, Captain Van Grogen had intended that he should leave the ship at the end of their last voyage and then, because of some minor, but time-consuming problem with the Harbour Authority in Manila, the matter had rather unfortunately become overlooked. It was a grave mistake and the captain regretted immediately when they left port that he had not dealt with the problem of Rahman. As it transpired, it also proved to be a very costly mistake.

The rest of the crew disliked Rahman intensely. He was a mean-minded, miserable person with an evil mouth and a permanent grudge. Often, he would be at the centre of some acrimonious dispute that he had fermented and it was precisely for that reason that the captain had decided that Rahman should have the early morning watch. There were few of the crew around at that time and he was much less likely to cause trouble being somewhat isolated. Unknown to the captain however, the duty suited Rahman. It provided him with the ideal opportunity to fulfil his part of the deal that he so willingly and foolishly agreed to.

Strangely, a chance meeting that happened in the Golden Mosque, the *Masjid Al-Dahab*, in the Quaipo District of Manila, signalled the beginning of the end of his life. The mosque, which was situated near to the port and in the Muslim quarter of the city, was only a short walk from where the *SS Taramaca* was docked. The meeting, however, was unpredicted for two reasons. First, because Rahman had not set out with the intention of visiting the Mosque, although it was Friday. That had never been his main purpose in visiting the Muslim quarter of the city; he was simply stretching his legs. However, on hearing the sound of the call to prayers, quite uncharacteristically, Rahman was suddenly overcome by emotion. A strange uneasiness driven by suspicion, fear, and doubt, quickly developed into a mild panic attack and, unable to prevail over his momentary but impermanent misgivings, he decided to enter.

And it was unexpected secondly because, once inside, he met someone whom he had not set eyes on for many years. Suleiman Abu Shihab and he had been close friends for a relatively brief period, when they were shipmates on a container ship. Had Rahman cared to admit it, although self-analysis was not something he normally practised, Suleiman was one of the few friends that he remembered. Suleiman's view on their friendship was somewhat different. Rahman's persistent depressing presence was one reason for his leaving the ship, but

it was not before he had introduced Rahman to Islam in the hope that it might improve him. Regrettably, it didn't.

After leaving the mosque together, Suleiman invited Rahman to a teashop where they talked at length, catching up on what they had been doing. For Rahman, it had been much the same thing, his itinerant life as a seaman had taken him all over the world, but he had seen little other than the deck of a ship. For his friend Suleiman Abu Shihab his experiences had changed his view on life. He confessed to having been outraged by the way Islam appeared to be persecuted in the world and was attracted by the idea of Fundamentalism. It seemed so simple to him, either you are with us, or you are against us, he had told Rahman. There was no need to know who are your friends, even less, the need to identify your enemies. Those who weren't your friends were your enemies - it was so obvious. Life was much less complicated for him now and so, he confided in Rahman that he had found, for the first time in his life, a true sense of direction. Now, he explained that he had a mission, a true purpose in life. Suleiman told Rahman that the Prophet, Holy be his Name, had called him into his service. Suleiman was cautious however; what he disclosed to Rahman was meagre in detail.

Nevertheless, Rahman appeared interested and it quickly became apparent to Suleiman during his long conversation with Rahman, that he could well persuade his friend to help him and his associates in a venture that would aid the Jihad, the Holy War in the Far East. Suleiman Abu Shihab did not try to persuade his former friend to join their organisation. He knew that it would be wiser keeping Rahman on the outside. Suleiman Abu Shihab knew his man, and he knew Rahman's weaknesses. The promise of money was all that would be necessary to secure his allegiance. Involving him further in his planning would, in all probability, be a something of a security risk. Rahman could be easily motivated by greed. A higher, philosophical, or spiritual ideal would be less appealing to him and rather more difficult for him to sustain. The less that Rahman knew therefore, the better.

Suleiman Abu Shihab was content with his chance meeting and the prospects that it offered both of them. He thanked Rahman and agreed to meet him again after he had spoken to his leader about their possible collaboration. Rahman left the teashop already dreaming of a better future.

As it happened, all their plans seemed to fall into place easily; it was as if Allah had willed it. Moreover, who were they to interfere in such a grand and audacious plan if they had been destined to meet in such a holy place? It was their duty to take the opportunity that was offered to them, to be courageous, and to make sacrifices if necessary. The outline of a plan was thus agreed by the organisation that Suleiman worked for, and Rahman was recruited to assist them in their objectives. Rahman understood that his role in the enterprise would be crucial, and Suleiman confirmed that he would be paid handsomely, both on earth and later in paradise, for his courageous contribution to the operation. A down payment was made to show their commitment and the deal was clinched.

Rahman was a happy man and for him at least, paradise would soon exist on earth.

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In the convoluted geography of the highlands near the source of the River Mekong, in a place where the countries of Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam meet in the so-called Golden Triangle, a special kind of crop was grown that contributed substantially to the world's black economy. After Afghanistan, where the poppy fields were even more extensive, this area was second in the world in the production of opium, and its transformation into heroin. Some of it was transported to Myanmar, but large quantities also went south through Thailand and Malaya to the seaports and then on to the rest of the world. There was a well-established market and it was a very lucrative business. It was a business that was run by experienced operators who were well practised in the production of the drug and its distribution.

Nevertheless, there were always problems to overcome, especially in transporting their goods to the West where the most lucrative markets were to be found. Not the least of these problems were associated with getting the shipments to the major ports, avoiding at the same time the police, customs officials. It inevitably involved obtaining false papers and people needed to be bribed, or in extremis, otherwise dealt with, but the risk was always the same. The more people, who were bribed, blackmailed, mutilated, or killed, tended to advertise the fact that a big shipment was being made.

Such a shipment came to the attention of a certain Hari Patel. Patel worked as a shipping clerk in the Singapore office of the Dutch Indonesian Shipping Company, DISCO BV. Patel was suspicious of the client. Although the client purported to have a registered office in Singapore, it appeared to be no more than a front. He suspected that the company was being used as a vehicle to export drugs or something equally profitable but highly illegal. The papers that arrived with the proposed shipping order were good but definitely false. Patel phoned the contact number right away with a number of queries. His call had been predicted and immediately he was offered a bribe. He had accepted bribes concerning false papers before, and the opportunity to make a little more money fell at a most propitious time for him. His interest was therefore immediately aroused.

After concluding the deal, however, Patel had second thoughts about it as it occurred to him that there was perhaps more money to be made. The size of the shipment especially interested him as well as the size of his bribe. He might have considered alerting the police, or customs officials, but he had already compromised himself and judged it potentially hazardous. Involving the forces of law and order was certainly not in his best interests. Instead, very unwisely, he decided to sell his information elsewhere, where he could make profit on profit, and where he erroneously considered it would be rather less dangerous.

For this little transaction, his employment paid him three times over - by the criminal organisation that bribed him to accept the false documentation, by the terrorist organisation to which he sold the information about the illicit cargo, and by his employer who paid his salary.

Overall, Patel felt pleased with his initiative and considered his enterprise and ingenuity to have been astute, successful, and above all, extremely profitable.

Chapter 2

Strait of Malacca – June 12th, 2006, dawn

The *MS Taramaca* was a medium sized container ship. It was dawn, and the ship was making a steady twelve knots heading slightly north of west, travelling away from the rising sun. Its next port of call on its voyage to Rotterdam was scheduled to be in the Arabian Gulf. Most of the ships cargo had been taken on board whilst it was moored against the quay in the International Container Port in Manila. After slipping it's mooring, the *Taramaca* had steamed west to Singapore, where it entered the commercial harbour and moored briefly. After a few containers were unloaded, several others were hoisted from the dock and placed on top of those already stacked onboard. They were placed according to a well-mapped plan and tightly secured. The position of each container on the ship was precisely pre-determined and well documented.

As container ships go, the *Taramaca* was not at all unusual. The bridge and crew quarters were housed in a tall five storey rectangular block placed forward of the stern of the vessel. On the top floor of the accommodation block facing mostly forward was the bridge. This was the highest part of the ship, other than its cranes, and it had an unobstructed, commanding view both fore and aft. Containers were stored on forward and aft of the block and, once fully loaded, the ship took on the rather ugly appearance of a large floating multi-coloured box.

Almost imperceptibly, on the horizon in the wake of the ship, it was beginning to get lighter, but there was still only a hint of colour in the sky. Abdul Rahman leaned on the guardrail. He was still dreaming of riches as he surveyed the sea to the southeast of the ship. He was looking forward to leaving the *Taramaca* with his new companions and he felt excited and impatient, ready for the exotic new life that was soon to be his.

Rahman looked south towards Sumatra and the island of Rupa. In the cool grey light, he could see little. His eyes strained as he searched for the boat, but it was impossible in the half-light between day and night to distinguish anything. He turned to look towards the stern of the ship where the sky was lighter and looked at the wake spreading out behind. Then he saw the boat, just to the right of the wake approaching the ship at speed. Rahman unconsciously tried to estimate its speed; it was moving fast. It must have been doing at least fifty, or even sixty knots. Quickly he removed the torch from his pocket and flashed it three times in the direction of the boat. He waited only an instant to see an identical response; three brief flashes

from the black obscurity of the ocean. Now the time had arrived for him to work for his passport to paradise.

Leaving the guardrail, he walked aft towards the accommodation block to check that there was no other member of the crew around to disturb him. His heart began to race and he felt the cold sweat trickling down his neck to collect between his shoulder blades. He knew that it wasn't caused by the heat, it was fear that he felt, but there was no turning back now. He swallowed, his mouth felt dry, but he reconciled his trepidation with the thought that soon it would be all over, and he would be rich.

Back at the guardrail, he clipped his walkie-talkie onto his belt, removed the fabric waterproof cover from the winch, and then focused on the access panel on the side of the winch motor housing. He had already loosened the retaining screws and the operation to remove the panel did not take long. Placing the torch in his mouth, he illuminated the interior of the metal box and carefully disconnected the lighting cable that went to the bridge. It was a prudent measure. Normally, when the winch was operated, a warning light showed on a control panel on the bridge. After replacing the access panel, he turned on the power supply to the winch. Moving the lever to the descend position, the winch drum slowly started to turn and the oiled steel cable jerked as it began to slacken. For a moment nothing happened, then the gangway, which had been lying nearly horizontal, groaned before it suddenly dropped, taking up the slack in the cable. The groan was transformed instantly into a high-pitched squeak abruptly terminating with a loud bang as the downward movement of the gangway was arrested by the tensioned cable. The noise startled Rahman and his heart missed a beat. Furtively, he looked around. He had no need to worry; in the quiet interior of the bridge, neither the movement, nor the sound had been registered. On duty together on the bridge, the captain and navigation officer had other matters on their minds. They were concentrating on observing the busy shipping lanes ahead of them. The Strait of Malacca was not a place to make elementary mistakes of navigation.

As the gangway lowered and began to near the water, Rahman slowed its descent and then, pushing the winch lever into the neutral position, he locked it in place. As if choreographed, the boat that had been trailing the container ship quickly came alongside, adjusting its speed to that of the ship. Immediately, four men took it in turns to leap from its rising foredeck onto the gangway. Seconds later, in quick succession, they followed each other up the gangway as their boat decreased speed again to fall backwards and sideways away from the ship.

Rahman greeted the first of the men as he arrived on deck. A sense of relief was now mixed with his excitement. He was no longer alone and felt better able to face his fears. Whatever guilty sentiments might have slightly perturbed his spirit, fell away as the second man arrived. He was no longer a member of the crew. His allegiance was now elsewhere. The third man arrived and Rahman noticed that they were all heavily armed. They waited, clustered around him, for the last man to

arrive. Rahman tried a smile, but as the fourth man climbed the last few steps, Rahman noticed that the man was looking down towards his waist. The glint of the blade of a long knife glimmered briefly in the cold light of morning as it was withdrawn. Suddenly, Rahman's arms were grabbed. For a short instant, he felt confused and tried to struggle free, but he was held tight in vice like grips. There was no escape. The man below had now reached the last step and looking up into Rahman's staring eyes, he lunged forward and upward forcing the knife up under the terrified man's rib cage. Rahman gasped in shock as the cold steel penetrated deep inside him before being twisted as it was withdrawn. There was an instance of disbelief before his feet were snatched and he was quickly manhandled over the guardrail to be jettisoned overboard.

He was still trying to comprehend what had happened to him as he hit the water, but the shock of the impact knocked the air out of him and he struggled to breath. Darkness overcame him as he sank below the waves. In a sense, he was lucky, it had all happened so quickly. He had little time to contemplate his death, nor the further terror that would have attended him had he survived even a little longer, for moments later, a shark, attracted by the blood that was diffusing into the sea from the gash below his ribs, closed in and in one violent twisting movement efficiently removed his lifeless left arm. Only a few moments later, other sharks joined the feeding frenzy and within a relatively short space of time, nothing remained of what had been all the hopes, desires, mischief, treachery, or mortal remains of Abdul Rahman.

Not one of the four men bothered to watch their victim splash into the sea below. There was no need. As far as they were concerned, he was already dead. Immediately, without speaking, they split into two groups, the first pair entering the accommodation block, whilst the others went to locate the container that they had come to rob. From the information that they had been given, it was in column sixteen, forward of the accommodation block, and five containers up. It had been stacked end on to the side of the ship and set back a little from the others. One of the men climbed up between the containers.

Technically, it wasn't a difficult climb but, in the dark, with the slight motion of the ship, it needed care. It was a vertical climb of nearly twelve metres to arrive at the fifth level and the pack on the man's back seemed unusually heavy and wanting to pull him back into the void below. He resisted and persevered, his hands sweating, looking for hinges and other metal protuberances in the semi-darkness to act as hand and footholds. Once on the top of the fourth container he removed his backpack, took out a small packet of semtex plastic explosive, and moulded it in his hand before placing it around the lock on the container door. Then, from his sack he withdrew a detonation cap and pushed it into the mound. Satisfied, he withdrew to the gap between the containers unwinding the wire from the cap as he shuffled round the corner. Then, holding one of the wires onto the contact of a small battery, he touched the other contact with the free wire. It

was all that was required to detonate the charge. The doors of the container juddered and swung slightly ajar.

Although the explosion was small and was over in an instant, it was enough to draw the attention of the captain on the bridge. At that precise moment, the he happened to be looking forward through binoculars.

‘*Godverdomme!* What the hell was that?’ Captain Van Grogen stared in disbelief towards where he had seen the sudden flash of light. ‘Did you see that, Hans?’

‘No, sir, what was it?’

‘It was a flash. Like a big firework,’ he added, raising the binoculars hanging round his neck to his eyes again, looking forward along the line of containers, and peering into the semi-darkness: but there was no longer anything to see. ‘Can you make anything out?’

‘I’m not sure where I’m looking, sir,’ the navigation officer replied.

‘There, on the starboard side, about a quarter of the way forward on the top row of containers.’ The captain gesticulated wildly, pointing in the direction of the starboard side of the ship.

The navigation officer took his time, methodically looking at each of the containers in turn, staring into the gloom, but there was nothing. Hans Schuyler was by nature very thorough; it was what made him such a good navigation officer. He didn’t rush and he repeated his observation.

‘No,’ he said finally, lowering the binoculars. ‘I can’t see anything.’

‘Give Rahman a call, he’s on deck watch. Ask him if he’s seen anything.’

The navigation officer did as he was ordered and tried several times without success to contact Rahman on his walkie-talkie.

‘He’s not responding, sir,’ Schuyler said.

Captain Van Grogen was not surprised. He had already regretted not having given Rahman his papers in Manila. He was a most unreliable and disagreeable man, he thought, and he was probably asleep somewhere. Still, that didn’t resolve the problem. In his mind, he could still see the flash. He knew that something had happened, what exactly, he had no idea, but it was essential, rather than simply prudent, to investigate.

‘Better get Pieter up and see if he can find Rahman. Perhaps the two of them can investigate. I’m sure I saw something and I won’t be satisfied until I know what it was.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Schuyler telephoned the radio officer, who awoke drowsily from his sleep. Pieter Rutgens was unused to being woken off-watch. His job was one that rarely required him to be disturbed. He yawned, rubbed his hands in his eyes, and said that he would come up to the bridge as soon as he was dressed. Yawning again, he got out of his bunk and took his uniform of the hanger. It was not much of a uniform, white shorts and a shirt with blue epaulets indicating his rank. He dressed quickly. He knew his captain well; he was not someone to keep waiting. Minutes later he was ready. Closing the door to his quarters he

headed along the corridor towards the companionway leading up to the bridge. His timing however was unfortunate because, as he opened the door to the landing, he saw two armed men cautiously arriving on the accommodation deck. For an instant, they looked at one another, each wondering what the next move might be.

Rutgens moved first. Suddenly projected into a more alert mental state, his instinct was to flee. Reversing through the door, he turned and ran. He ran for his life but he was not quite quick enough. Rutgens heard the door open behind him and he heard the shots, but he was already being propelled forward by the impact of the bullets entering his back. As his knees buckled, he lurched forward and downward hitting the deck awkwardly, expecting his fall to hurt but already numb with the damage that the bullets had done when they tore into his spine. He was aware only for a short instant of the feet standing near his head as his vision faded and he breathed his last.

One of his assailants moved his foot and applying a little pressure rolled the body over. The radio officer's blue, now vacant eyes stared blindly into space. There was not even a flicker of reproach in them. There was nothing. Satisfied, they left and made their way to the radio room. They had equipment to disable and then a safe to find.

Outside, the doors of the container were now wide open and tied back to avoid them closing. Inside, a man was removing the first layer of cargo to find the boxes that contained the treasure that he was seeking. Now that the sky was a little lighter, his job was becoming progressively easier. He moved two more boxes before he found what he was looking for. The boxes were marked 'Dried Milk Products' and the shrink-wrapped packets inside looked as if dried milk could well be the cargo but, who would kill for dried milk? This cargo was much more valuable, and the urgency was to convey it off the ship as quickly as possible.

From his pack, he pulled out a fabric tube with a line attached to it. Then he fixed two clamps to the top of the doorframe and clipped the tube to them. Looking over the side, down to where his companion was waiting, he shone his torch once to alert him. Then he launched the weighted line into space. Moments later, the line was being pulled in and the tube descended quickly to the deck below where it was quickly attached to the guardrail. A similar tube had already been fastened to the guardrail and was ready to be dropped down to the boat, which had come alongside again. At the bottom of both tubes, there was a bamboo ring and the material was drawn in to leave a hole that was kept tight with an elastic cord.

The man by the container looked down again and saw the signal that told him that he could begin. He knew that what he was about to do would need to be carried out in a measured way, steadily and not too hurriedly. The man inserted the first of the sealed packages and let it go to slide down the tube to the deck below. His colleague below heard the package arrive and inserted his hand into the tube and through the hole to extract the package and in one continuous movement to insert it into

the second tube that descended to the boat. Thus, the container was slowly and very methodically emptied. The cargo, which was once the property of one criminal organisation, was in the process of being transferred very efficiently into the hands of another.

Captain Van Grogen, still concerned by what he had seen was becoming irritated. The radio officer had not yet arrived and he was annoyed that it was taking so long.

‘Where’s Pieter, what’s happened to him, what’s he playing at? You better call him again Hans.’

‘Yes, sir.’ Hans Schuyler picked up the telephone and rang down to the Radio Officer’s quarters. There was no reply. ‘He’s not answering, sir. He’s probably on his way up.’

‘Go and look in the radio cabin and see if he has popped in there on the way and bring him up here right away if you find him.’

‘Yes, sir.’

As he left, the captain checked the radar screen again, and then taking a final glance at their course and feeling satisfied that the way ahead was clear, walked out onto the flying bridge from where he would have a better view of the containers. He brought the binoculars up to his eyes again and focused in the direction where he had seen the flash of light.

‘What the...’ The Captain focused the binoculars again trying to distinguish more clearly, what it was that he could see. It looked like a giant sausage hanging over the side of the containers and going down to the cargo deck. On the cargo deck, he could see a man loading packets into another sausage that went over the side of the ship. Van Grogen moved to the edge of the flying bridge and looked over the side. In the sea below he saw the boat lying alongside and the activity on board as packages were being passed from one man to another to be stacked in crates.

‘Bloody pirates!’ he exclaimed, and turned to go back inside and sound the ship’s alarm.

His intention was never realised; his way was blocked by two men, neither of whom he recognised. He tried to back away but there was nowhere to go. The two heavily armed pirates quickly grabbed him and dragged him inside. After a short and futile struggle, which the captain lost decisively, they tied him sitting in the pivoting pedestal armchair that he normally occupied as his command post. His wrists were secured to the arms of the chair and his legs to the pedestal. One of them, an evil looking man with elaborately tattooed arms was already covered in blood and the captain winced as the man withdrew a large, heavy handled, double-edged, curved knife and played with it menacingly in front of him. Van Grogen had seen one like it before in an antique shop in Manila. The knife was a Sumatran Kris with a bone handle and a highly decorated blade. This however, was not a knife meant for display. This knife was long, finely pointed, razor sharp and designed for killing.

‘You give me the code for the safe?’ the other man demanded, his nose twitching slightly as if he had a cold or had smelt something that disgusted him. Van Grogen looked at him

openly expressing his distaste and loathing. He said nothing. His questioner looked at his companion and nodded to him, the twitching was more pronounced. The other knew exactly what it was that was expected of him and smiled. He approached the Captain slowly and then he suddenly grabbed Van Grogen's face by the jaw and the cheek with his left hand and pushed his head backwards. The Captain struggled as he felt the narrow bladed knife being inserted into one of his nostrils and winced again as the point of the knife dug in. Then, as his assailant let him go, he felt the knife being withdrawn quickly sideways, slicing through the soft tissue, opening his nose, and grazing his cheek. The Captain yelled in pain and alarm as blood flowed freely down into his mouth and onto his chin before spilling onto his white shorts. Van Grogen dropped his head in pain as his attacker withdrew.

'You give me the code for the safe now?' The man with the twitch demanded again. This time the captain looked fearful. Questions were pouring into his mind. Where was the rest of the crew? Were they safe? Would someone rescue him? Could he play for time? Would they kill him if he resisted them? Would they kill him if he told them the number? He knew that normally pirates did not kill, but occasions had been reported when killing had been widespread. None of his questions could be answered and his interrogator quickly became impatient and nodded twitching at the man with the knife again. The captain tried to move away from him but couldn't. This time the man grabbed the thumb of his left hand and pulled it towards him advancing his knife towards the flesh, which attached the thumb to the hand.

'No!' the Captain shouted, but his thumb was held securely.

'We can dismember you slowly if you like, or you can give me the code.' The man looked intently at the Captain. 'We can start with your fingers and toes, then take your ears and nose, then if you are still uncooperative, your manhood. Bigger parts take longer and are more painful, but it's up to you.' He said it in such an offhand way that the Captain knew that he would mutilate him without compassion. His head lowered in defeat and submission.

'Twenty-three right, forty-five left, twenty-six right,' he said sighing heavily, licking his lips and tasting the salty blood in his mouth.

After the two men had left the bridge, Van Grogen became aware that he was trembling, and tried unsuccessfully to control his fear. He hoped that would be the end of his torture and looked down around the seat at the copious amount of blood that had apparently flowed from a relatively small wound. Meanwhile the pirates had made their way to the captain's cabin on the deck below where the safe was kept. The tattooed man put his knife back in its sheath as the other tried the code. Opening the door to the safe, he nodded to his companion who quietly left the room. He had a job to complete.

Inside the safe were the crew's wages, expenses for the voyage and a float of money for emergency repairs in places where other forms of payment might be difficult. It was by no

means a fortune. Indeed, in comparison to the value of the other goods that were being stolen, it was pocket money; nevertheless, it supplemented the act of piracy that they were currently so successfully engaged in.

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Hans Schuyler had been on his way to the radio cabin when he heard the gunshot. His instinct had been to rush down the companionway to investigate but his training in the Dutch Marines had taught him to be more cautious. He waited a moment to see if there were further shots. There weren't. He remained quiet, listening intently for other noises. Then the door to the officer's quarters opened and two armed men emerged. Schuyler didn't recognise either of them as members of the crew. He noted that one of them was very heavily tattooed and was armed with a long knife. The other was carrying a gun. Hoping not to have been seen, Schuyler backed quickly into the open door to the corridor that lead to the radio cabin, the captain's quarters, and the wardroom. Briefly, he considered whether he should try to ambush the men and attempt to disable them, but without weapons, he knew that it would be a suicide mission.

Hastily, he looked into the radio room hoping to find Pieter there. He was quickly disappointed, as the room appeared empty. Schuyler looked around. The room was small with no obvious place to hide. The captain's quarters might be better, but Schuyler knew that the safe was located there, and if that was what the men were looking for, it was not worth dying for such a small an amount of money. He closed the door, continued along the corridor to the end, to the wardroom, and slipped inside. Again, the options appeared uninspiring; Schuyler felt trapped. Finally, in desperation, his mind suddenly focused on the dumb waiter. The apparatus descended two decks to the galley and then on further to the stores below. Sliding the door in the wall upwards, he looked inside. It was empty. Quickly, he climbed into the shaft, bracing his feet against the opposite wall while he grabbed hold of the cable. It was not easy; it was a tight fit; he was a Dutchman and not built for small spaces. Once wedged inside, he twisted carefully and closed the sliding door behind him. Then, as quietly as he could, he slid down the cable to the galley below.

After extracting himself awkwardly out of the shaft and into the galley, he pulled the dumb waiter up from the stores and sent it upwards towards the wardroom. Anyone looking down the shaft from above would see only the dumb waiter blocking the view. Then, Schuyler climbed into the shaft again and slid carefully down to the stores that were located at the cargo deck level. After he had extracted himself for a last time, he made his way out through the stores onto the deck, involuntarily exhaling a sign of relief as he closed the door behind him.

Once outside, Schuyler felt safer. He had less chance of being trapped and many more possibilities in terms of finding a place to hide. He looked at his watch; it would be another forty

minutes before the watch changed. Some of the crew would soon be beginning to stir. There was a pink tinge to the sky and within less than half-an-hour the sun would be up. Then he cursed himself; he was so stupid! He should at least have picked up a long bladed kitchen knife whilst he had been in the galley, but he had been so intent on escaping that he hadn't even thought about it. He speculated whether he should go back but, before he had time to evaluate the proposition further, he heard the sound of the door from the companionway opening onto the deck. Schuyler quickly stepped backwards into the shadow of the containers stacked high on the aft deck. He waited until he had heard the door close before attempting to see who had emerged.

His heart in his mouth, he put his back against the wall of the accommodation block and slowly edged his head forward towards the corner of the building. There were four men on the deck near the gangway and one of them was already beginning to descend. Within moments they had all gone. Gingerly, he ventured forward to the guardrail and looked over to the sea below. The first of the men had just stepped aboard a boat, which was being held against the gangway. The others quickly followed him aboard. Immediately the boat moved away from the side of the ship and accelerated and turning to head away in the direction of the red glow in the sky and the rising sun.

Schuyler looked at his watch again. It was nearly seven o'clock. He made a quick calculation and reckoned that whoever their visitors were, they had been on board for less than half-an-hour. He puffed out his cheeks and blew hard; luck had been on his side, but what of his colleagues? Was Pieter still alive? Was the captain OK? What had they stolen? None of the questions produced a satisfactory response and the toll was much worse than he had imagined.

His friend Pieter, the radio officer, he found lying face down in a pool of blood outside in the corridor outside his cabin. The captain was still tied to his chair, slumped forwards, covered in blood, and not moving. There was a single wound to his chest and a relatively insignificant cut to his face. He was dead though. Apart from the safe, which had been emptied, it appeared that only one container had been targeted and robbed. In the radio cabin, all the equipment had been vandalised and he was unable to send any immediate radio communications. Even the hand held short wave radios had been trashed.

So, after calling the crew to general quarters, he turned the ship round to head back to Singapore. Once underway, Schuyler tried unsuccessfully to find the captain's satellite phone, his own required charging. It was a disaster. Schuyler ordered two flags to be raised - N and C. It was an internationally recognised call for help – *I am in distress and require immediate assistance*.

Chapter 3

Strait of Malacca – June 12th, 2006, 0730

The yacht, a rather splendid, luxurious, twenty-two metre sloop built by Wally in Monaco, was sailing southeast on the auto-helm, whilst the owners were down below. In the early morning light wind, the sloop was running on its main sail and a standard jib, that is, if anything on a Wally is standard. The alarm from the radar woke them both up with a start. They had set the system to give a warning if any vessel approached within three nautical miles of their position. Normally that would give them plenty of time to check the radar screen and make a visual sighting. Once they knew the position of the vessel, they could analyse its speed and course and, if necessary, alter their course accordingly.

Marcus rolled over and looked at Sophie. He knew that she was pretending to be asleep so he moved his hands under the light sheet that was covering them both, slipped them both round her slender waist and slid them up towards her rib cage. Then he tickled her. She screamed.

‘You bastard,’ she said. Her English accent near perfect, although in normal conversation he could still hear the influence of her Swiss-French. ‘You bastard,’ she said again climbing on top of him. ‘I suppose you want me to go and look.’

‘You’re half-up already,’ he said, covering his head, as she took a swing at him with a pillow.

‘You’ll have to pay for this,’ she said, her large, dark brown eyes sparkling and her short spiky hair looking as if it needed a brush to it. She had a wicked smile on her face; Marcus knew the expression, and knew exactly what it meant.

‘Not again,’ he said, ‘you’re insatiable!’

‘I know,’ she said dragging the sheet with her as she left their cabin in the bow of the yacht. ‘It’s nice!’

In the specification, the cabin had been described as the *owner’s stateroom with en-suite head and shower*. Many yachts of a similar genre would have a permanent crew with their own quarters in the aft section. However, for Marcus and Sophie, this was a yacht that they sailed themselves and mostly two-handed. They were both experienced sailors and this was their dream. There were three other double cabins on board to accommodate visitors plus another mid-ships on the starboard side that they normally used as an office.

After the last contract that their company had initially reluctantly, but then so successfully undertaken for the CIA, they both felt that it was time to take a long break. A sort of sabbatical they called it, although they were really in the process of trying to decide what to do with their lives. Sophie

would soon be forty years old and Marcus could not believe that he was approaching fifty.

Their business, which was based in Geneva specialised in security services. It had expanded rapidly. Now they had a couple of good managers who were capable of running the business on their own and, in order to free themselves for a year, they had offered them a significant share of the profits, as a preliminary move to possibly selling the business. Sophie's mother had died soon after they had returned from their adventure in the Ukraine. Her death was unexpected and sad. Marcus was only just beginning to get to know her and found her eccentricities amusing and enchanting, quite unlike Sophie, who found them deeply irritating. However, her death had made their decision making rather easier. There was nothing now to hold Sophie at home any more and her mother's legacy was enough to pay for the yacht, although insignificant in relation to the fortune that they had already amassed between them in a relatively short time.

Sophie trailed the sheet that was half wrapped round her slim athletic body, as she slid past the office and the mid-ship cabin, into the salon and over to the communication and navigation centre. The radar screen identified the vessel that had caused the alarm to go off. It appeared to be northwest of their position and travelling on a similar course. She went to the companionway and poked her head out looking in the direction of the stern. There was no problem with visibility, it was already light and the sun was climbing quickly into the sky. Even with the naked eye, Sophie could see the waves flicking off the bow of the boat as it skimmed across the sea. It appeared to be travelling very fast. It would be difficult to imagine that they would not be able to see the yacht; the mast was thirty metres tall and would be all the more obvious with the sails hoisted.

Nevertheless, Sophie decided that it might be prudent to go on deck and so she looked in the locker in the crew quarters where she kept some spare clothes and slipped on a tee shirt and shorts. Picking up a pair of binoculars, she went up the companionway into the cockpit and then walked back towards the stern of the yacht to take a detailed look at the boat that was still fast approaching them. As she did so, it veered away slightly and looked as if it would pass them well on the port bow. Suspicious of a boat travelling at such a speed, she trained the binoculars on it, looking carefully to see if she could distinguish anyone on board but, as she was well aware, looking through binoculars on an unstable platform like a boat at another boat which is moving up and down in the sea is never very easy.

In the time that she spent observing the boat, it halved the distance between them and then it was only about a nautical mile away. Within a few minutes, it would be flying past them. Sophie hung the binoculars on the starboard wheel pedestal walked through the cockpit and put her head down the companionway.

'Marcus,' she shouted, there was no sense of urgency in her voice.

‘What?’ He rolled over in the large bed and looked through the open door.

‘I think it would be a good idea if you came up here.’

‘OK,’ he said and rolled out of the bed.

When Sophie turned round to go back through the open cockpit, to the where she had left the binoculars, she saw that the boat had suddenly changed course again. This time it was heading directly for them and closing fast. She ran back to the hatch and shouted again.

‘Marcus!’ This time there was a sense of panic in her voice. Marcus recognised it immediately.

‘I’m coming,’ he shouted and ran down the short corridor into the salon towards the companionway. He never got there. The sheet that Sophie had discarded was still lying on the deck and he tripped over it and stumbled forwards banging his head heavily on the rounded edge of the teak dining table. He fell stunned and dazed.

As the boat got closer, Sophie instinctively knew that they were pirates. They couldn’t be anything else. She and Marcus had discussed the possibility of such an encounter and they were well aware that the South China Seas and especially the Straits of Malacca was one of those places in the world where piracy was most common. In fact, in preparation for such an event they had ensured that they themselves were very well armed and if needs be, they could probably fight them off. When it came to a fight, Marcus was very resourceful. Pirates wouldn’t persist if they thought that their venture was going to be too dangerous. Nevertheless, she was surprised by the speed that the motor launch was catching up with the yacht and began to panic. What was Marcus doing? She hurried below deck to look for him. He was lying, stretched out in the salon.

‘Marcus!’ she cried in horror, shaking him. With Marcus lying unconscious, she knew immediately she would have to face the pirates on her own and she knew what that meant. There would be no chance of fighting them off and every chance of being boarded and worse. Quickly, she went across to the galley and poured some cold water onto a towel. Then she returned to Marcus, who was beginning to groan and move. She started to mop his head with the water and he moved suddenly as he came round.

‘Marcus, wake up! Wake up!’ She mopped his brow again, wiping the blood out of his sun bleached hair. ‘Come on, come on!’ He groaned again and tried to move. His head was throbbing painfully and he was having difficulty focussing. ‘Marcus, come on, wake up. I think they’re pirates. Come on my darling, don’t go to sleep on me now!’ She mopped his head again, squeezed out the towel on his head, and went to soak it again. This time she opened the fridge, took out a bag of ice, and wrapped it in the towel. Marcus was sitting up when she got back and she knelt beside him and put the towel on his head where a large bump had already appeared.

‘Jesus!’ he said, ‘that’s cold!’

‘Marcus you’ve got to get up,’ she said putting her arm round him. ‘I need you to do that commando stuff that you’re

so good at, we're going to have some very unpleasant company any minute.'

The noise of the boat closing on them was now audible in the salon. At least Sophie could hear it. Marcus, however, still had a noisy, disturbing buzzing in his head and was having some difficulty getting up. Then the noise of the boat's engines reduced as it came close alongside. Marcus and Sophie were still down below when they heard the outboard motor start up. They had launched a dingy and they were clearly intending to board the yacht.

'Try to delay them,' Marcus said staggering to his feet, 'I need to get my head together and get some weapons out. I expect there will be several of them.'

'What shall I do?' Sophie asked, looking into his dazed blue eyes. She knew it was a ridiculous question and one that he could not sensibly answer.

'Use your imagination,' Marcus replied, knowing that it was an equally ridiculous answer. 'Go on, get to it, I'll be OK in a minute.'

Sophie left him to stagger back to their cabin where the weapons were and rather reluctantly began to go up the companionway to the deck. She turned and took one last glance at him wondering if it might even be her last. He bumped into the wall of the office. He was still naked.

When Sophie appeared on deck, the Zodiac was only metres away from the stern of the yacht. There were four men in it and on seeing her one of them raised an automatic weapon and fired several shots in the air. Automatically, she ducked as the bullets passed over her head, knowing that they had been meant to intimidate rather than to kill her.

'Let the sails out,' one of the men shouted. Sophie quickly obeyed, going over the mainsail winch and releasing the sail; then she released the jib. Immediately, the boat speed reduced and, with the sails flapping, the yacht rolled lazily in the swell as the dingy came alongside.

Aft of the two steering wheels in the cockpit was a wide sun deck. It was at a lower level to the cockpit and was equipped with a ladder that could be rotated and dropped into the sea. Whilst the Zodiac lay at right angles to the stern of the yacht, one of the men climbed aboard carrying a mooring rope in one hand.

'What do you want?' Sophie asked, trying not to show that she was afraid.

'You, pretty lady,' the man replied as he attached the rope to a fairlead on the sun deck. His comrades in the dingy laughed loudly, and feeling more confident, he played to his audience. 'And whatever else you have. If you're good we may let you sail away after.'

Sophie did not believe him for one minute. Not only was his appearance menacing, he was an short, ugly, heavily tattooed man who carried a long dagger in a sheath on his belt, but he also gave the impression that he could kill easily, without compunction. Stuffed awkwardly in his belt Sophie noted that he also carried an automatic pistol. She looked at it with

professional interest and made a mental note; it was a Chinese copy of a Russian Tokarev.

As soon as the Zodiac was secured, two other men boarded the yacht. The fourth man, who looked nervous and continually licked his lips, stayed in the Zodiac keeping the engine running, breathing noxious exhaust fumes. He was ready to make a rapid escape.

‘Cut the engine, Ramelan,’ the first man shouted. Ramelan started to complain. ‘I said, cut the engine!’

Ramelan glared, reluctantly complying with the repeated instruction.

‘Who else is aboard?’ The tallest of the three men asked Sophie as he approached her menacingly. He, it appeared was in charge of the group.

‘My husband,’ Sophie replied, realising that she had begun to tremble with fear.

‘Where is he?’

‘He’s ill. He has a fever; he has bouts of malaria from time to time. He’s resting in bed.’ She lied. She didn’t know why, maybe it was instinct; maybe the lie would give them a slight advantage when the odds seemed so heavily stacked against them.

‘Where’s that?’ Sophie didn’t answer. The tall man nodded and the tattooed man with the Tokarev withdrew the long dagger from the sheath and grabbed Sophie roughly by the arm. Instinctively, she tried to pull away, but his grip was too strong.

‘In the forward cabin,’ she said, in hope of avoiding the confrontation. The man slackened his grip slightly.

‘Go and take a look, Bahar,’ the one in charge said to the youngest of the three.

‘OK, Pak,’ he said, addressing him as *father*, although the man wasn’t his father. It was his nickname. It was what everyone called him because he was the oldest and most experienced.

Bahar removed the automatic from his waistband and was about to descend when the other man spoke again.

‘Use the knife, boy, we don’t want any holes in this nice yacht.’

Sophie gasped, and moved trying to intercept the boy. The grip on her arm was tightened as she was pulled out of the way.

‘No,’ she screamed in terror, ‘don’t kill my husband!’ The tall man spun round and hit her hard with the back of his hand.

‘Shut up, woman!’ he shouted angrily, hitting her again across the face, this time with the palm of his hand. Sophie held her breath, as the sting of the blow made her eyes water. She felt the tears running down her cheek.

Below deck, Marcus heard the scream and the blows. It angered him, but it was a useful warning and he resisted risking an immediate confrontation. The door between the salon and the corridor that led to their cabin was now closed. Marcus had little time to prepare himself and was still feeling groggy, but at least he considered that he might still have the advantage of

surprise. Having installed himself in the office to the right of the corridor, he waited patiently, slowing down his breathing, relaxing his muscles, making himself ready for action. He had cleared his mind of all superfluous thoughts and concentrated solely on listening. He didn't have to wait long.

The door to the corridor burst open with a crash and he heard someone advancing quickly without any caution towards the closed door of the forward cabin. Marcus held his breath. As the man advanced, he came into view. He was young; he was carrying a long, wide bladed knife in his right hand and was stretching out with his left hand to open the door. He looked inexperienced. Marcus turned towards him and stood in the opening of the door to the office. For an instant, the youth was startled by the appearance of the bleeding, tall naked figure standing in front of him, and then, gathering his senses together, as well as the purpose of his mission, he lunged wildly at Marcus with his knife trying to find his naked flesh. His eyes were filled with a murderous intent. It was much as Marcus had anticipated.

As the youth's right arm came forwards towards him, he stepped sideways and, grabbing the arm near the wrist with one hand and the forearm with the other, he swung the youth sideways against the doorframe. The youth's shoulder and head hit the frame with a resounding crash. Marcus pulled at him again, this time dragging him further into the cabin. Having failed in his first attempt to stab Marcus and now concerned that he himself might be in danger, Bahar began to resist, pulling backwards with the same amount of effort, trying to release his arm from Marcus's unrelenting, steely grip. Marcus obliged him immediately, reversing his effort, moving with him, and deftly using the youth's strength and inertia to execute the manoeuvre. As Marcus came back towards him, allowing the youth to draw his arm backwards, he suddenly increased his speed and crashed into his would be assailant with all his force, reversing the hand holding the knife at the same time, pushing the blade easily into the youth's unprotected side. Bahar gasped as the broad, razor sharp blade pierced his abdomen. In the same fluid movement, Marcus head-butted him on the bridge of the nose. He had almost dived at him, hitting him so hard that the back of his head was embedded on the corner of the doorframe. Stunned, Bahar's knees gave way and he began to slide down the wall. Marcus maintained his grip on the hand clutching the knife helping it cut through flesh and guts as he descended, collapsing on his knees. Then he released his grip, stood up, and backed away.

The youth looked down at the rip in his side where his hand was still clutching the bloody knife and where some of his guts were beginning to emerge. There were tears in his eyes. Marcus knelt down beside him and gently moved the youth's hand from the knife and looked at the wound. It was fast pumping blood and Marcus quickly concluded that the youth was unlikely to survive. In other circumstances perhaps, near to a hospital, he might have had a chance, here in the open sea however, miles away from land, there was no chance. He would die.

The youth looked up at him, his eyes searching for some encouragement that he might live, but he could see from the expression in Marcus's eyes that it was hopeless and he knew that his stupidity had cost him his life. Marcus shook his head and gently removed the knife from his side. There was a sudden rush of blood; the wound was even worse than Marcus had originally thought and the youth gently slumped to one side as he lost consciousness. Marcus rolled him out of the way and covered him with the sheet.

Still clutching the knife, blood dripping from the end of the blade, Marcus stepped out of the cabin and opened the door to their bedroom. Stepping inside, he closed the door. From the porthole in the heads on the port side, he could see the motorboat lying off the port bow. It was stationed about twenty metres away.

It wasn't a large boat, ten, or maybe twelve metres in length. Fixed to the stern were four high-powered outboard motors. No wonder it went so fast. Marcus imagined that it could outrun most speedboats, especially customs and police. He could see two people onboard. One, on the aft deck, was wearing a baseball cap and carrying an AK47. He was talking to the other man who was steering the boat from the inside, keeping it on station, just off the yacht's port bow. Marcus stepped back into the bedroom and bent down to open the long drawer under the bed. He removed a shallow tray containing clothes. Underneath was an array of weapons. He looked at them, thoughts racing through his mind trying to decide what his best option might be and which weapon to choose.

Armaments and security was essentially their business and although they were still involved in running the firm, their decision to take a sabbatical was partly to distance themselves from their work, and now this! At least, Marcus reflected sadly, they had the foresight to ensure that they were well equipped for most eventualities. He pulled the drawer out further, still considering the choice. He had wondered why they had decided to pack the two disposable rocket launchers. Now he knew. He withdrew one from the rack. It was an American light anti-tank weapon and alongside the weapon, was a rocket, with a high-explosive warhead.

Although the weapon could be fired from an enclosed space, the idea of firing it from within the boat worried him considerably. The back blast from the launcher was not as fierce as some other similar weapons; even so! Marcus stood on the bed and peered out of the forward hatch. He could see the motorboat still maintaining its position but he would need to fully open the hatch to get the weapon out and use it. He waited a moment until the man with the AK47 was looking in the other direction, then he gently pushed the hatch fully open, hoping also that the intruders in the stern of the yacht would not spot the movement. Then, he glanced in their direction.

Sophie was sitting in the cockpit. Next to her, standing up, were two men; they both had their backs to him. They were both wearing brightly coloured flowery shirts, one of them was talking to the man in the dingy that was tied to the stern of the yacht. The other was stroking Sophie's face, something that she

appeared to dislike intently as she squirmed away from him. He laughed.

‘What’s Bahar up to?’ the tattooed man said impatiently. ‘He’s taking his time.’

‘Perhaps there are more women down there?’ The other replied, laughing ‘One for each of us maybe.’

‘Yea!’ Ramelan said enthusiastically.

‘I’ll go and look. His father won’t be too pleased if gets injured, or does something stupid.’

Sophie went to make a move to prevent the tall man from going down the companionway. The tattooed man pulled her back again.

‘No!’ he said smiling, showing his gold and betel nut black-stained teeth. ‘You can stay here and be friendly to me!’ Sophie squirmed again as the other man went over to descend the companionway into the salon.

‘Bahar, where the hell are you – what the fuck are you doing?’

There was no answer. The man sensed immediately that something was wrong and removed the automatic pistol from his belt. Cautiously, unlike the younger man, he crossed the salon towards the door on the other side.

He called again. ‘Bahar!’

There was still no answer.

Marcus groaned as if he was in pain. The man burst through the door into the corridor. Marcus heard him and groaned again. The man moved along the corridor and then slipped slightly as he put his foot in a pool of blood. He looked down to see the patches of blood left on the deck by bare feet and peered into the office where there was a body partially wrapped in a bloody sheet. Quickly, his heart in his mouth, he bent and pulled the sheet away. The lifeless eyes of Bahar looked back at him. He gasped and swallowed hard as he knew his days were already numbered. Bahar’s father had made him personally responsible for the safety of his son and he had failed. He knew the likely consequences of his failure; such an error would never be tolerated.

His thoughts were still focused on this gloomy outlook when a large hairy hand covered his mouth and yanked his head back. He dropped the gun and tried to release the hand covering his face with both hands, unaware that a broad bladed knife was about to be forced upwards into his throat and twisted remorselessly. He tried to scream in terror, but only gurgled horribly as Marcus held him for a moment before allowing him to pitch forwards and collapse over the corpse that was already lying on the floor of the cabin.

Satisfied that the man was not going to be any more trouble, Marcus returned to the bedroom and picked up the rocket launcher. Warily, he peered out of the forward hatch again. The motorboat was still only about twenty or thirty metres away. It was a little too close, he thought. It would take the missile at least ten metres to arm itself once it had been fired, and then, if the structure of the boat was very light it might even pass through it before it exploded. On the other hand, he thought, he would hardly have to aim; the target was

so close. Marcus bent down to pick up the missile and loaded the weapon. It was light. Loaded, it weighed less than three kilograms and it was only fifty centimetres in length. He poked it out of the hatch keeping his finger away from the trigger mechanism. Then he stood up on the bed, aimed the weapon in the direction of the motorboat, and gently pulled the trigger.

The sound of the discharge was followed milliseconds later by a much greater explosion. The missile instantly and dramatically destroyed the motorboat. One second the boat was keeping station with the yacht, the next, it had completely disintegrated in deafening ball of fire. The sound of the discharge of the rocket and the blast was devastating. The man next to Sophie, shocked by the noise instinctively tried to get on his feet and twist round to see what was happening. The blast knocked him over backwards onto Sophie. She didn't hesitate, she felt for the automatic pistol in his belt. Her hands round the hilt she twisted it, pulling the pistol grip towards her, and pulled the trigger. The man screamed as the muzzle blast seared his lower abdomen and bullet made its devastating passage through his bladder, groin, and thigh, splintering his femur and rupturing nerves and blood vessels. Sophie pushed him off still holding the gun. She had no need to be concerned anymore about him. He was crawling in agony across the deck of the cockpit spilling blood in a messy trail, completely unaware of the white dusty fallout from the sky that was settling like snow on the sea.

Moments later, Marcus appeared at the top of the companionway. The man in the dingy, already shocked by the explosion, took one look at the naked, blood smeared figure that had just emerged from the inside of the yacht and decided that it was a good time to leave. Frantically, he tried to get the outboard motor started. The sense of relief for him was enormous when finally it burst into life. Removing the knife from his belt, he quickly severed the painter, and then gunned the outboard motor, heading away from the yacht as fast as he could, hardly daring to look back.

Marcus looked at Sophie. She was clearly in a state of shock and stared at him blankly.

'I think it's time you got washed and dressed.' She couldn't think of anything else to say. Her voice was toneless, lacking in any emotion.

Marcus looked at her and then at the injured man on the deck still trying to crawl and spilling blood as he writhed.

'It was a Chinese copy of a Russian Tokarev,' she said unemotionally. 'They don't have a safety catch.'

Chapter 4

Island of Pulau Bengkalis, Sumatra – June 12th 2006

Abdul Bahar Hamid sat eating breakfast on the teak boarded terrace of his exquisitely constructed longhouse. The wooden terrace stretched out over the water. A flight of wide timber steps descended from the terrace to a jetty that ran alongside it. Two small, hand decorated boats of traditional Indonesian construction were moored to the jetty, as well as a large, powerful motor cruiser that appeared somewhat out of place.

The longhouse, which had originally stood well inland, had been carefully dismantled some years earlier and rebuilt on its present site. It was then very carefully modified and added to. The complex of buildings, for that is what it now was, had been constructed on heavy timber stilts. The wide terrace outside the house formed a kind of open courtyard around which the other buildings were clustered. All the buildings followed the same traditional design. The roofs, which looked like boats from the distance, rose sharply into the sky at the gable ends. Highly decorated timber panels covered the upper sections of the gable ends whilst the lower open part faced out onto the terrace.

Hamid was proud of the complex that he had built. He had managed to preserve much of the heritage and tradition of the style of building, whilst avoiding the rustic lifestyle, which was more normally associated with that form of building. Inside, as he had planned, the house was anything but rustic. It was luxurious; it was airy, spacious, and exquisitely finished in oiled tropical hardwoods.

From where he was sitting on the boarded terrace, Hamid could see the mainland of Sumatra across a narrow stretch of sea. Hamid felt unusually uncomfortable. He was aware that he was beginning to feel anxious that his men had not yet returned with the boat. What concerned him most however was that his son Bahar was with them; it had been the first time that he had joined them on such a venture. That they were late was worrying. Hamid tried the satellite phone again. The answer service cut in once more. Abruptly terminating the call, Hamid threw the telephone onto the table in anger and frustration.

‘Ahmed!’ he called out irritably. ‘Bring me the binoculars.’

Ahmed Akbar, who had been standing patiently near to his side, ready to undertake his employer’s slightest whim, turned and disappeared into the shaded interior, returning a few moments later with a pair of high-powered binoculars. Ahmed held them out at arms length and Hamid, who having already

got out of his seat in anticipation ignored his servant as he adjusted his clothes.

Hamid was a small brown man of Malay origin; he was remarkably solid and still quite muscular for his age. Whilst it might have been unjust to describe Hamid as portly, he now had a distinct roundness that many of his compatriots, less well off, might well have envied. He looked comfortable. His paunch, he regarded as an outward display of his wealth, and evidence of the obvious luxury in which he lived. Hamid adjusted his deep blue silk sarong, which he tied over his bulging abdomen rather than round his waist. His long white silk embroidered shirt he wore like a jacket and on his head the embroidered elegant black silk *kufi* served to reinforce this image of wealth.

His servant still waited patiently, bowing slightly at the waist as he held the binoculars ready for his employer to take. Hamid, now ready, snatched them, ignoring once more his employee. After putting the strap over his head and around his neck, he descended the steps to the floating jetty and walked to the far end. From there, he could see just a little further downstream. Hamid raised the binoculars and scanned the horizon to the west. He saw nothing to suggest that his men were on their way back and the pangs of worry gnawed once more at his already upset stomach.

Hamid felt anxious and frustrated. Perhaps they'd had a problem with the engines, he tried to reassure himself. Perhaps it was something more serious. Hamid tried unsuccessfully to push the latter thought from his mind, but it preyed on him, it insisted its sinister implications, and it disturbed him.

Bahar was his only son and he loved him deeply. In time, Bahar would inherit all that he worked for and accumulated in his life. Hamid looked up at the house. For Hamid it was much more than just a splendid manifestation of the riches he had amassed, it was Bahar's heritage, a continuation of his family, and a bloodline that he could trace back generations. That they were, and had always been, crooks and bandits, was of no consequence; that was what they were and was what he was. But why had he not had more sons? He looked at the sky in frustration knowing that his wives were the problem. He had plenty of daughters, nine of them; but what use were daughters, except to marry off? Hamid looked towards the horizon again. Where was Bahar? Why hadn't they arrived?

Like many of his compatriots in northwest Sumatra, Hamid's ancestors were not only Malaysian by origin, but they were also Muslims. Many had come and settled as fishermen and some still subsisted on the fishing industry. Others had diversified their activities to include growing sago, even planting and exploiting rubber. Some had been fortunate enough to extract oil reserves and a few, of whom Hamid was one, had interests in all four activities. Piracy was endemic in the area and periodically, he indulged himself accordingly, sometimes even with the encouragement of the local ruler who used it as a means of exercising control and gathering taxes.

As a younger man, he had crossed the Strait of Malacca to the coast of Malaya to rob other fishermen, to steal their fish,

their boats, and their nets. They had even raided villages, killed the men, and dragged the women and children into slavery having raped the youngest and ripest first. It was traditional. In addition, piracy also had another purpose. It had been legitimised by the local leaders and had been employed as an anti-colonial activity when the Dutch, the Portuguese, and the English, established themselves in the South China Seas. For the most part, however, piracy had generally been small scale, local, and occasional. Moreover, as it was also a tradition and Hamid considered himself not so much as a criminal, but more as a traditionalist. Piracy was part of the culture, his culture. It was a means of enrichment, albeit at the expense of others, and in any case, he rationalised, many of his victims were infidels and, as such, they counted for nothing anyway.

Modern weapons, fast boats, and radio communications had changed the game however, and he had successfully raided more important and more valuable targets. Hamid was fortunate. Running parallel with his island was one of the most heavily trafficked shipping lanes in the world. He and his men had robbed ships of their valuables, they had taken hostages and ransomed them, they had stolen certain cargoes, and they had gained a reputation for their expertise. Most importantly however, they had always avoided being caught. It had cost him heavily in bribes, and others their lives, but there were still many that sympathised with his activities and profited from them. The activity, as he saw it, was simply enterprise. There was no political or religious motivation in what Hamid did. The object was simply to acquire wealth, and acquire it he did. Hamid had used his position and his money to develop his other legitimate commercial activities, and he had thus profited significantly from his diverse activities. He used his money wisely, investing well in a variety of ventures, as well as trading increasingly with Singapore where he was able to develop further markets as well as recycling his ill-gotten gains for hard cash.

Nevertheless, such fortune is not won without running certain unforeseen risks. Hamid had been noticed in the Muslim community and in particular, by the Fundamentalists who wanted to see change not only in Indonesia, but also in the world. They needed money to finance their operations, to buy weapons, to make bombs, to offer bribes and influence politicians, and so forth. When their minds turned to piracy, they naturally began to think of Hamid as a potential ally.

Hamid was ideal for their purposes, and he was leaned on heavily. Influence was brought to bear. The Imam had spoken to him and explained how he could help his brothers. Hamid knew immediately that he would find it difficult to resist. To refuse to help would have placed him in an awkward position within his community. Whilst he hesitated, pressure of a different manner was quickly applied - that of blackmail. It was suggested that knowledge about his illegal activities might be passed on to the authorities. His notoriety might be played up to the extent that it was even possible that he could be arrested for his crimes.

Then of course, what followed was the sweetener. If he helped the Jihad, there would be some financial recognition of the service that he had provided. Thus, a combination of moral blackmail, coercion, threats, and financial inducement finally persuaded Hamid that he could do little other than collaborate with the Fundamentalists. It wasn't that he was wholly unhappy about the situation, supporting a just cause might even have its benefits, possibly even in paradise, but he preferred to be his own master and, he was not at all convinced that a Jihad was either justified, or necessary. Nevertheless, it was accordingly that his expertise was engaged for the benefit of the Jihad, and the raid on the container ship was organised.

Life was complicated and now he was worried; his only son was late and he was beginning to think the worst. He was convinced that something had gone wrong. Indeed, there could be no other sensible explanation: but how wrong, and in what way?

* * *

Bahar, along with the other man who had died on the yacht, had been wrapped sheets and laid out on the aft deck. The injured survivor was still lying in the cockpit bleeding, moaning from time to time, and shivering uncontrollably. Marcus examined his wounds, and then washed and dressed them, but even the slightest touch caused the man to cry out in pain. It was likely that there would be a lot of internal bleeding; expert medical attention would be necessary to save the man. The man needed to be transferred as quickly as possible to a hospital.

Despite the threat he had previously represented, Marcus and Sophie decided to try to make him comfortable. The thought of simply putting him out of his misery, or feeding him to the sharks, never entered their minds. Sophie went down below and brought up the medical kit. Fortunately, they had taken great care in putting the kit together and had a sufficient quantity of morphine to reduce the man's pain for at least eight hours. Without professional medical attention, the man would bleed to death. So having treated him as well as they could, and rigged a shade to keep the sun off him, they contacted the coastguard in Singapore to advise them of the events, their condition, and the assistance they required.

Afterwards, they searched the wreckage of the motorboat for something that might help to identify it and amongst the flotsam; they found a lifebuoy with the name of the boat – *Parang*. After retrieving it from the sea, they collected all of the intact packages that had survived the explosion and with the rest of the debris and stored them in one of the lockers in the cockpit. Then, they cleaned the boat.

It was unpleasant work and they spoke little as they undertook the work. They were both shocked by the events that had overtaken them with such rapidity, so unexpectedly. Their plans to escape from a world, in which violence seemed to figure prominently, had apparently already gone aground and unwillingly, contrary to everything that they had hoped for,

once again they had been projected into making decisions where self-preservation played a primordial role.

For Marcus, who had served in the Special Boat Service section of the British Royal Marines, where his skills had been sharpened before being employed on active service, the event only served to remind him of how ruthless he was able to be when it was required. It left him feeling angry, cold, and empty. For Sophie, it was worse, much worse. She had been with him on other occasions when they'd had to fight for their lives, but this time, she had pulled the trigger that caused the bullet to rip through the body of the third pirate. His incessant groaning in the well of the cockpit served only to remind her of what she'd done. She felt infuriated that she should feel guilty. If they hadn't have acted as they had, they might now both be dead, with her having been raped in the interim.

Once they had cleaned the yacht and changed the jib for a gennacker, a larger more efficient sail that would give them another few knots of boat speed, they settled down silently to sail the yacht on a course towards Singapore. From time to time Sophie looked at the bloodstained bundles lined along the aft deck and shook her head. She could not believe what had happened to them that morning. It had all been so quick. Already several people had died and there was a man lying at her feet groaning each time the motion of the boat caused his injuries to remind him of the seriousness of his injuries.

When they had decided to sail around the world, this was not what they had imagined, although they did understand the risks. This voyage was supposed to be a complete change from the trail of death and destruction that seemed to follow Marcus wherever he was.

Unfortunately, in many respects the affair had only just started. What ensued was as equally unexpected as the pirate attack as matters began to become increasing more complicated. It never occurred to Sophie, that before their holiday plans might get somewhere back on track, the affair would deteriorate horribly, becoming much worse than either of them could ever have imagined.

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