

One

BEIJING

It began with an electronic chirrup and a vibration in his fingertips. He surfaced only briefly, and sank back towards sleep. Then he reached out, fumbling for the mobile where it had slipped out of his hand in the night. He opened one eye to peer at the message on the screen.

the world will witness my despair

Song closed his eyes but it was too late. He recognized the number. He flung the sheet away and tried to get comfortable, turning first onto his side, then onto his stomach. The man had rung a dozen times after Song had thrown him out. The sun was seeping between the curtains, and already the room was oppressively hot. He reached for the bottle of water by the bed, took a mouthful, then splashed some over his face and head – he'd had his scalp shorn almost bald to combat the summer heat.

Another chirrup heralded the arrival of a second message. Again Song tried to ignore it and failed.

the roof international trade tower 0800

He groaned, rolled over, tucking his mobile phone under the pillow. Why couldn't the man leave him alone? A scrap of humanity who couldn't afford a bowl of soup, let alone Song's fees. There was still time for a lie-in. His mind spiralled down towards sleep . . . he was about to dive into a cool pool of water. A woman was waiting for him, blue water lapping around her pale breasts. She was looking up at him expectantly, but he couldn't see her face. He dived.

the world will witness my despair . . . the roof . . .

All at once he was wide awake.

Office workers arrived in waves, disgorged by buses and subway. They headed through revolving glass doors and into the marble-lined lobby to crowd into the lifts that would carry them up into the air-conditioned offices above. His job required that he be able to blend in to almost any environment, but this morning urgency had put paid to that. Dressing quickly, Song had pulled on jeans and a T-shirt, the first clothes that came to hand, and he didn't belong in this brisk,

polished world. The security guard was watching him.

Song's eyes skimmed over the women's legs flashing past beneath pastel skirts. He liked the summer. He liked the way women shed their layers of padding and looked the shape they really were. Foreign men and women passed in suits, chattering into their mobile phones. He was looking for a small skinny peasant. A man who, when he opened his mouth, spoke so fast you couldn't stop him. He remembered the man's desperation, how he'd reached the threshold of Song's office and then fallen to his knees, pressing his hands together in entreaty.

'I was told you could help . . . I'll give you everything I have, I'll sign over my house to you, you're my last hope, please help . . .'

A pretty woman stopped in front of him, distracting him. She had a wide mouth, and a curtain of silky hair swung across her face.

'I'm lost,' she said, smiling up at him. 'I'm looking for Starbucks?'

He couldn't help himself. He smiled back at her and started to reply. Then all of a sudden he caught a strange movement out of the corner of his eye and swung around. There was a commotion over by the revolving glass doors. Song couldn't see what was happening because of the numbers of people entering the building, but he could hear a raised voice.

'Move on! You can't go in there!'

Song ran towards the disturbance. He grabbed a woman by her shoulder. She wheeled around.

'Which way did he go?'

She pointed wordlessly towards the entrance. The revolving door slowed him down and then he found himself inside, bathed in cool air. A young security guard was speaking urgently on his walkie-talkie.

'Did he go up?' Song shouted, heading for the lifts, and the security guard gave a distracted jerk of the head in confirmation. He had to wait again, and then the lift doors opened in front of him. There was a large foreign woman already in there, white shirt straining over her bust, grey skirt, a laminated security pass hanging on a chain around her plump neck.

Song hit the button for the top floor.

The lift moved swiftly upwards. He saw the woman's eyes upon him, reflected in the mirrored walls. He could see his agitation was making her nervous. He glanced up, spotting the CCTV-camera in the corner of the lift. Silently he cursed himself for getting involved and he cursed the peasant for involving him.

'Do you have business in this building?' the woman challenged him in Chinese.

'I'm going to stop a man throwing himself off the roof,' he

replied. When her mouth fell open her shock was reflected all around them.

The lift doors opened on the top floor – the thirty-sixth – and Song burst out into the corridor then hesitated, turning on his heel, searching for the fire exit and the staircase which would lead to the roof.

A heavy metal door at the top yielded under his pressure, opening onto a heat-baked roof, the cement blinding under the hazy white sky. Song stepped outside, shading his eyes.

The roof of the tower block was as big as a park. The construction noise of the entire city rose up to deafen him with its drilling and pounding. He let his eyes run over satellite dishes and huts that housed electrical facilities. From the edge of the roof rose a gigantic advertising hoarding as high as a two-storey building. From where he stood this hoarding was all scaffolding, a black silhouette against the glare of the sky. A man was clinging precariously to this structure, inching his way up the metal strut which extended from the roof. His clutching, faltering progress was hampered by the fact that he had a child on his back, the smaller body supported in a papoose strapped around the climber's waist and shoulders and tied in a knot in front. The child was not a baby although he carried it like one.

Song's palms were sweating and his heart was pounding. He started to walk towards the scaffolding. If he ran he would alarm the man.

'Hey, Li,' he shouted, finding his voice unreliable, trying again. 'Li, that's not a good idea. Come back down.'

The man peered down at the rooftop, searching for the source of the sound. He saw Song standing there, face raised towards him. For a moment the man didn't move. He continued to cling, like an insect on a stalk. Then his hand reached up and he hauled himself higher.

'Don't take the child up there,' Song yelled. 'I'll help you work things out, come on down.'

Balancing himself in the right angles of the frame where he was more secure, Li began to undo the cloth that held the child to him.

'Don't worry,' he shouted down. Even his voice was thin. 'There's no other way. This way everybody will know.'

Song moved towards the scaffolding and swung himself upwards. Li appeared to be talking to the child. Carefully he tied the papoose to the structure, winding the cloth in and out of the metal struts and securing it with a series of knots until the tiny figure was hanging, suspended, over the side of the building. The child must be asleep, Song thought, or immobilized with terror, because it didn't move.

Below Song the sound of feet exploded onto the roof. There were shouts of surprise, and half a dozen security guards

launched themselves towards the hoarding.

‘Hold back,’ Song yelled down. ‘Wait, don’t scare him.’

One of the youngest leaped onto the scaffolding and pulled himself up, shouting, ‘Come down! You’re not allowed up there, come down!’

Li bent his head over the child for a moment and then moved slowly away. He edged along the scaffolding, holding on with both hands, looking down at the guard who was climbing nearer, and now Song could see his fear.

Song pulled himself along the scaffolding towards the child, who was safe only as long as the cloth binding held. The wind was strong. Song felt it buffeting him. He heard a shout and turned to see the young guard swiping at Li, trying to grab him. Li slipped, losing his footing. For a moment he clung to the steel girder, his legs scissoring wildly in mid-air. Slowly his grip loosened. Screaming, he fell.

Far below, traffic came to a juddering halt. Pedestrians stopped in their stride and recoiled. A crowd began to gather.

Song shifted awkwardly on the scaffolding. If he lost his grip he too would die. He anchored himself as well as he could and then, with one hand, he reached for the child’s papoose. Seizing the fabric he pulled it towards himself, fighting gravity to haul the child over the parapet. He clasped the bundle to him and at once felt its stillness. He pushed a fold of cloth away from the face. It was a girl, perhaps five or six years old. Her eyes were closed, eyelashes resting on puckered skin. Her mouth was straight and still. For this child the danger was long past. Sapped of life, her complexion was like meat that had been drained of blood. He touched her cheek and sensed deep, deep cold beneath the sun-thawed skin.