

## Prologue

### Tokyo-Night

The Maserati GT was making straight for Max at top speed, tyres screeching. The headlamps pierced the dark like dazzling spears of light, blinding him. The isolated back street was too narrow for him to get out of the way. Rows of houses on both sides. No pavement. Running away was similarly not an option; the Maserati would catch up in seconds and run him over.

‘Sometimes your only chance of escape is by running towards the danger, Max!’ The words were those of his former instructor Chao Wong, but until this moment Max had never understood what he meant. Now, suddenly, he knew. Just like he knew his life depended on his total concentration. There was no room for mistakes. Not the slightest.

This was not the way Max had imagined his sixteenth birthday. But he had learned very early on that you don’t always get what you wish for.

He sprinted as fast as he could from a standing start. Towards the oncoming sports car!

His leg muscles, trained long and hard, were pumping. Max was deliberately taking fast, deep but even breaths so as to send the adrenalin rushing into his veins. He was going to need it.

He looked past the glaring beam of the headlights, fixing his eyes on the Maserati drawing ever closer at lightning speed.

Max’s senses were by now so alert that for a moment he saw everything as if in slow motion. The familiar ruthless face of the man behind the steering wheel. The dragon tattooed on the right hand side of his face.

Harutaka Ishido! The man who wanted to kill him.

And the smell of the air around him – it was scented, as if it was about to rain. Up in the sky, which Max could see only out of the corner of his eye, the first lightning flashes zigzagged through clouds as black as night.

Max clenched his fists in order to tense not only his arm muscles but those of his shoulders and chest as well. For what he had in mind, every single fibre in his body had to be taut.

Almost without realising it, he calculated the speed of the car and his own speed, the ever-narrowing gap between them, the length and number of his strides – and then it came, the moment which would decide everything.

The perfect moment.

The only moment.

Now! The car had almost reached him. Right at the last second, Max took off from his left foot, and using the momentum of his right leg threw himself as hard as he could into the air.

The daring manoeuvre worked: the Maserati roared past beneath him at over 100 k per hour, missing him by a whisker. All that Max felt was the enormous rush of air caused by the high speed of the sports car in the narrow street. It tugged at him, throwing the high, wide leap so much off balance that he was briefly tipped over in mid-air.

Immediately Max prepared himself for a hard landing. Very much harder than planned.

Even as he fell he threw himself round, bringing his right arm and shoulder forward, and tucked his chin into his chest to prevent himself landing with his face on the asphalt. Knees and upper body together, and the next instant he crashed down on to the street.

Although he rolled over, the force of the impact winded him and his own momentum sent him tumbling over like a ball a few times: he had stars in front of his eyes and felt dizzy.

But Max had to fight against that because he knew he was nowhere near safe yet.

He jumped up and heard behind him the Maserati's brakes howling long and loud like a raging wolf. Max turned round.

The street was too narrow for the car to turn in. If Max had hoped, however, that his pursuer would have to drive round the block before resuming the chase, he was mistaken, for the very next moment he saw the reversing lights flare, before the tyres of the sports car span round in puffs of smoke and the car set off again. Backwards! Towards Max!

Max whirled round and ran off in the opposite direction. Of course the Maserati was not nearly as fast in reverse as it was going forwards but it was still damn fast.

Another flash of lightning from the sky, immediately followed by an ear-splitting thunderclap, so powerful it made the street tremble beneath Max's feet.

The storm was directly overhead and the very next moment huge raindrops began beating down on Max. He had never experienced such violent storms in Europe but here in Japan they were not at all unusual. After only a few steps his hoodie, jeans, trainers – even his socks – were soaked through. But the possibility of pneumonia was the least of his problems just now.

The Maserati was gaining on him. The exertion of running, coupled with his recent fall, gave Max a sharp stitch in his side.

‘In combat as in life it’s a case of ‘Always concentrate on what’s essential!’

Chao Wong’s words were only a memory, a voice in his head, but Max could hear them as clearly as if his instructor were running alongside him. ‘Free yourself from anything that risks distracting you!’ Max ignored the stitch in his side and ran faster, through the pain in his ribs and diaphragm.

Not only did his own life depend on escaping his pursuer. No, the lives of hundreds, if not thousands and tens of thousands! It was not impossible that the attack would lead to international discord, probably even to war.

Max absolutely had to pass on the information he had about the terrorist’s plot – for the not improbable eventuality that he would not survive.

Without slowing down even for a moment, he reached quickly into his hoodie pocket and pulled out his smartphone. But no sooner had he picked up the phone to dial than he swore loudly. The stupid thing was broken, presumably from the hard landing after his leap over the car. Nonetheless he tried desperately to switch it on. In vain, however. Cracked all the way across, the screen remained dark. Furiously he flung the phone away.

Max reached the end of the street just a few metres ahead of the Maserati.

His dark blond hair was plastered to his forehead by a mixture of rain and salty sweat, which then ran down into his eyes. He wiped it away quickly with his wet sleeve in order to see better and decide which way to go from here.

The street running across his path was larger than the one he had just come from. To the left it led back into the city centre. Busy with traffic. Because of the other cars, running in that direction was even more dangerous than with only his pursuer on his heels.

To the right, after about a hundred metres the street opened out into a market covered with metal roofs. Neon signs in every colour of the rainbow. More garish than the light show in a Berlin nightclub. In spite of the late hour and the bad weather it was full of people. A giant city like Tokyo never really sleeps, and a Japanese won’t be put off shopping by rain.

Max decided in favour of the market. Hopefully he would shake off his pursuer in the busy throng of tightly packed stalls and people.

Once again he put all his energy into a burst of speed. Behind him he could hear the Maserati as it shot backwards out of the street. Brakes squealed, cars hooted and metal crashed against metal.

People swore loudly in Japanese but the next instant Max heard again the howling of the Maserati’s tyres.

‘If you have to flee, don’t slow yourself down by looking round,’ said Chao Wong’s voice in his head. That was the first lesson he had learned from the old man. ‘Every second you lose could cost you your life.’ So Max didn’t turn round. Every single metre counted.

He heard the high-performance car coming closer and closer. He considered whether he should change direction but decided against it. With a simple turn of the steering wheel, his pursuer could easily make up for any such manoeuvre on Max’s part. The only one who would lose speed was Max himself.

Just a few more metres! Max’s heart was in his mouth, his vision restricted by the effort and he was gasping for breath.

The beam of light behind him captured the crowd of people up ahead. He recognised horrified faces, heard cries and saw the people at the edge of the market scatter in all directions in wild panic – like a shoal of herring as a shark attacks.

Max hoped with all his heart that the Maserati would brake and no innocent person would be injured. The decision to choose this direction weighed heavily on him but there was no going back now.

Max ran into the market. It was crowded here. Packed with people, packed with stalls. Live chickens in bamboo cages, sheaves of rice noodles hanging over rods to dry, baskets full of fruit and vegetables, counters bending under the weight of pirated DVDs and flash drives with music downloads, fake iPhones and Samsung tablets.

Max cursed himself for having thrown his smartphone away in anger, although he doubted whether he would have had time to grab one of the imitations from the tables, and manage the tricky job of getting his own SIM card out of his broken phone and into the new one, not to mention the fact that the fakes’ batteries certainly weren’t charged.

Ahead of him on the right, Max saw a stand with imitation designer gear. Beside it, a large mirror. Max looked in it: the man from the Maserati was hot on his heels. On foot. Four metres more, five perhaps, and he would catch up. Whenever anyone got in his way the killer struck without mercy. He even pushed an old man into a food stall, right into the hot oil of a wok, which immediately caught fire.

Max decided he must on no account endanger more innocent people by his escape. He had to get out of the market.

Behind the rail with the clothes was a narrow, dark passage between two houses. More of a crack, not even one metre wide. Sacks of rubbish left and right. Max dodged to one side and ran into the gap between the houses, snatching up the metal bar from a clothes rail as he passed by.

‘In an emergency your weapon has to be whatever comes to hand!’ Chao Wong had repeated tirelessly during the past four months of Krav-Maga lessons. ‘Use whatever’s available!’

Here in the passage way there was no longer any metal roof, and, although the houses on both sides were at least five storeys high, the cold rain lashed Max in the face. Filthy water from the torn sacks of rubbish splashed from deep puddles under his running feet. There was a smell of rotting fish and rancid meat, fermented rice, and excrement. Rats darted squealing through the shadows. The heavy but swift steps of his pursuer were coming ever closer.

Yes, Max really had imagined his sixteenth birthday quite differently, and suddenly, in spite of the danger he was in, he had to think of Vicky and that maybe he would never see her again.

Beautiful, mysterious, cheeky, joyous Vicky!

The sweetest girl on the whole planet!

Well, sweet wasn't really the right word. She was wild and noble (sometime horribly noble, so noble it almost made you feel sick), sharp-tongued and bold, one minute excitable and the next calm personified, so flirtatious that Max sometimes didn't know which way was up, and then again so cool and distant that he was sure she didn't even know he existed. But when she smiled at him with the most radiant smile in the world, then the seat opposite her was the loveliest place in the entire universe. She had the hottest body you could imagine, but also the hardest right hook Max had ever felt.

It was not impossible he would never see her again. But far worse yet was the idea of what would happen to her if Max didn't succeed in thwarting the terrorist's plan! This notion gave him renewed energy and he ran faster.

Another flash of lightning crossed the sky and at the same instant something flew past him from behind, swift as an arrow, a hair's breadth from his face; something metallic that reflected the blue-white glint of the lightning. Some two metres in front of him the throwing knife was stuck quivering in the rotting wood of a balcony.

Max's eyes darted here and there in search of a way out. Then he saw a half open door on the right. He ran through it and straight up the stairs, three at a time with huge strides. Years of doing parkour with his friends in his former home, Berlin, paid off now. Climbing stairs was one of his specialities. He moved like a speed skater, pushing himself off to the side with one foot and jumping forward with the other. Always alternating. One floor after the other. The higher he went the more he could hear the gap with his pursuer increasing.

After just a short time he reached the top of the staircase, the door to the roof. He pushed it open and ran out.

Once again the rain, heavier now, lashed him in the face. He switched direction, and took a running jump over the chasm on to the roof of the neighbouring house, then the next, and the one after that. He ignored his fear of slipping on the wet concrete and plummeting into the depths, and used the lightning to find his way.

He was already sure he would succeed in escaping when suddenly a wild sharp pain tore through his right thigh. He stumbled and fell forwards. Sticking out of the side of his leg was a slim throwing knife. The pain was hellish.

Max grasped the hilt and pulled it out, picked himself up and realised he couldn't really put his weight on that leg.

Fleeing was out of the question now. His only hope lay in confronting his pursuer. Up here on the rooftops of Tokyo.

Max turned in the direction from which the knife had come. His pursuer was already standing on the same roof. He was just drawing two Wakizashi short swords from a back holster hidden under his big leather jacket and getting into attack position.

The blades flashed in the raging storm as if they had a life of their own.

'Every combat is the combat of your life!' he heard Chao Wong's voice in his head. 'Never fight for the sake of fighting - always fight to win!'

With a clothes rail against two razor- sharp Samurai swords. A boy who'd just turned sixteen against a professional killer twice as old and without scruples.

Max knew that his chances of surviving the fight were similar to those of a snowball in hell....

He cursed the day on which all this had begun.

Four months earlier in Berlin.