

The Longest Winter

Kevin Sullivan covered the siege of Dubrovnik in 1991 and the war in Bosnia in 1992/93. He was seriously wounded in a land-mine explosion in early 1993. While recovering, he wrote an early draft of *The Longest Winter*. He now lives in Sarajevo with his wife and daughter.

Kevin Sullivan

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twenty7

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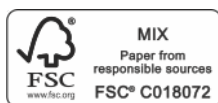
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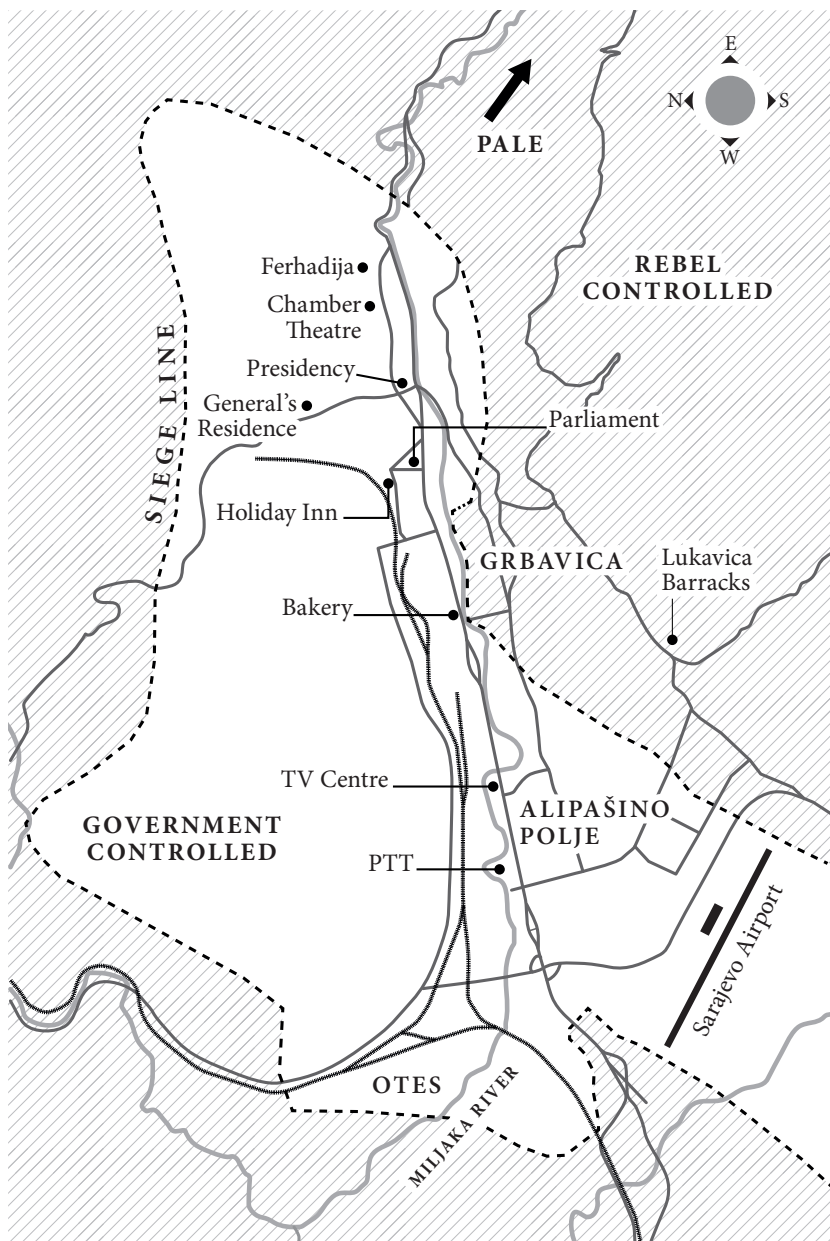
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For Marija and Katarina with all my love



SARAJEVO, 1992-1993

HISTORICAL NOTE

When the socialist system in Yugoslavia collapsed at the end of the Cold War, the country's constituent republics broke away from the central government in Belgrade. Serbs and Croats formed substantial majorities in Serbia and Croatia respectively, but in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which had a centuries-old tradition of diversity and multicultural tolerance, no single community enjoyed an absolute majority. Citizens of Bosnian Muslim heritage, or Bosniacs, formed the largest group, after which there were substantial numbers of Serbs and Croats, as well as Bosnians of mixed origin and other backgrounds. Family names are routinely used to attribute 'ethnic identity' in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and 'ethnicity' is used interchangeably with religious affiliation – Bosniacs are assumed to be Muslim, Croats to be Catholic and Serbs to be Orthodox. In reality there are no ethnic differences among the communities – they are all Slav – and the presumption of religious affiliation does a disservice to those who have no religious affiliation or who believe their religious practice should have nothing to do with politics.

At the start of the conflict, the government in the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo, formally adopted a policy of equal rights for

all citizens regardless of which community they belonged to, while a Rebel movement with its headquarters in the ski resort of Pale, just outside Sarajevo, advocated separating the communities into homogeneous statelets. The violent creation of such statelets, with neighbours turning on neighbours, generated the 'ethnic cleansing' that characterised much of the conflict. The better-armed Rebels besieged Sarajevo from April 1992 until February 1996. During this siege, the longest in modern history, thousands of civilians died, including more than 1,000 children, as a result of artillery and sniper fire, and shortages of medicine and food. The United Nations deployed a force comprising troops from France and the United Kingdom as well as other countries, which was tasked with escorting humanitarian aid to vulnerable enclaves, including Sarajevo. With its limited mandate, the UN Protection Force was widely viewed as an ineffectual bystander.

This novel is set in Sarajevo during the first winter of the siege and is based on true events. For narrative purposes two of these events, the battle for control of the western suburbs and the assassination of a government minister while crossing the front-line under UN protection, are described as happening at the same time. In real life they were separated by a period of weeks.



1

The Luftwaffe Transall C-160 made a huge amount of noise; bits of steel and canvas webbing protruded from the metal surface of the interior amid a profusion of buttons and lights.

The three passengers were invited, one at a time, for a spell in the cockpit. Terry climbed awkwardly into a bright space that was airy and cold. The seats were upholstered with shabby and torn leather. Green webbing covered the steel partition that separated the cockpit from the main cabin, with dog-eared maps stuffed behind a matrix of elastic cord.

She looked out of the narrow windows at white clouds as the plane skirted fluffy edges of mist.

The air smelled of tobacco, steel and engine oil.

‘What’s he doing?’ Terry asked the navigator. A crew member dressed in a khaki flying suit and a yellow lifejacket stood on the other side of the cockpit peering through a side window. He held a squat pistol in his hand.

‘Missiles,’ the navigator shouted over the engine din. The navigator had a huge handlebar moustache, bulging eyes and very red cheeks. He looked like an affable drunk in a state of permanent surprise.





'If we are targeted, he'll fire a flare. Then we get the hell out. The missile follows the flare.' He grinned a round beefy grin. 'At least, that's the theory!'

Firing flares to bamboozle missiles didn't strike Terry as reassuringly high-tech.

There was a burst of turbulence. Terry reached out instinctively and clung to the webbing. After several seconds she felt a crewman take her arm and she allowed him to steer her back into the heaving interior where she was strapped into her seat facing a row of crates covered in heavy tarpaulin.

The other two passengers were UN logistics personnel, a man and a woman. The man, about the same age as Terry, early thirties, had introduced himself as they waited to board the plane. It had been early and cold, and his voice was rather sharp.

'You're a reporter?' he asked.

'A doctor.'

'With which agency?'

'The Medical Action Group, in London.'

'I don't know it,' he said, in a dismissive tone of voice.

Terry would have been reassured if the man had heard of the Medical Action Group. Her own connection with the organisation was tenuous, through a friend of a friend. Yet she had agreed to take on a challenging mission on their behalf. It was a mission for which she knew she was not well prepared. The very fact that the Medical Action Group were willing to send her seemed to Terry now to count against them. Their long-standing associate, a cardiologist with extensive experience of combat medicine, had had to drop out, and they had needed





a last-minute replacement. With no conflict training and no military experience, Terry was becoming increasingly conscious of being out of her depth. The bungled exchange with the UN logistics man bothered her unduly.

The man's colleague arrived at the rendezvous breathless. She smiled a short, friendly smile and waited to be introduced to Terry, but no introductions were made. Soon after that it was time to board.

The plane flew in a giant arc, out to the coast and then south for a hundred miles before turning inward and overland again, cruising at 19,000 feet, beyond the range of anti-aircraft fire.

The noise of the engine discouraged conversation. Terry and her travelling companions sat amid the racket like bits of cargo.

When the Transall suddenly banked, the four cockpit crew leaned forward and gesticulated tentatively through the narrow windows as though they were trying to find a parking spot. The navigator pointed to the left and the others nodded vigorously. The plane began to dive.

The passengers sat in their flak jackets and stared at the boxes in front of them. Terry thought about trying to make amends for the abortive conversation with which they had begun the day. She considered a remark about the precipitate descent and the possibility of anti-aircraft fire. But, amid the scream of the plane's fall to earth, she decided to remain silent.

* * *

'Follow me,' the Luftwaffe escort shouted, as the aircraft pulled up on the runway. The rear door opened and Terry saw a snaking line of white forklifts race across the tarmac towards them.





‘Let’s go!’ the escort barked. The passengers filed out obediently behind him.

The terminal was surrounded by armoured personnel carriers, forklifts and jeeps, all painted white with blue UN markings on the side. Blue-helmeted soldiers scurried in front of the long, low building. The terminal had been shelled and burned and was encased in sandbags.

Before they reached the main building the two logistics people nodded perfunctorily to Terry and the Luftwaffe officer and walked away from them towards a sandbagged hangar where the cargo from the Transall was being ferried.

‘Someone meeting you?’ the escort asked.

‘I think so.’

She wondered for the hundredth time if the absence of organisation was normal for the Medical Action Group, or if it was a reflection of the disorder in her own life. The first choice for the mission, someone who had made a name for himself when he rescued members of a vulnerable ethnic group from a hospital in Nouakchott at the height of the Senegal-Mauritania conflict, had withdrawn because of a debilitating toothache. He’d kept quiet about the problem as he was determined to come, but two days before the flight he’d acknowledged that he wasn’t fit to travel. When the Medical Action Group put out a last-minute call for a volunteer Terry had agreed to come. Her lack of preparation preoccupied her now. She had no idea where her lift was coming from.

‘Go to Movement Control.’ The escort pointed to a door behind a long line of sandbags. Then he saluted and began





walking back to the Transall. The plane would unload and turn around inside fifteen minutes.

Terry had imagined the bond of flying through dangerous skies might endure beyond the short walk to the terminal, but found herself alone.

‘What do you want?’ a blue-helmeted soldier asked when she entered the Movement Control Office. The man stood behind a low table looking through a sheaf of photocopied forms.

‘I’m going into the city.’

‘Yes?’

‘Someone is to meet me here.’

He looked up slowly, his expression unfriendly. She saw from his epaulettes that he was from Argentina.

‘You can wait half an hour. If no one comes to collect you we’ll ship you back. Wait outside please. This office is for UN personnel.’

Terry experienced a moment of panic. She had anticipated difficulty and danger, but not the possibility of being thrown out of the country before she’d even made it into the city.

He looked at his notes again. ‘Is there a telephone I can use?’ she asked.

‘The phones are down.’ He concentrated on his forms.

‘Your transport not here?’ said a man standing nearby. He had an intelligent face and a crewcut that made him look like a soldier or a monk.

‘I’m not sure. Where would they wait for me?’

‘Here, I guess. You made arrangements?’ His accent was American.

‘Sort of.’





‘We’re going into town,’ he said. ‘If you want a ride, you can come with us. We’re leaving now.’

Someone might be on their way to pick her up. What if they came and she’d already gone?

On the other hand she didn’t want to be sent back on the next plane.

‘Suit yourself,’ the man said, and he began to move away.

‘OK, I’ll come.’ She spoke to the back of his closely shaven head. He didn’t look round as he walked out. Terry glanced at the Argentinian, but he was pretending she wasn’t there.

Outside she hurried past the sandbags.

‘The truck’s round here,’ he said, taking a sharp right when they left the Movement Control Office. ‘You got any luggage?’

She showed him her holdall.

‘Good,’ he said. ‘We have to run.’

As they left the shelter of the terminal he began to sprint across a muddy piece of ground towards a sandbagged position fifty yards away. He didn’t stop running until he’d reached the emplacement. Terry kept as close behind him as she could. In the distance she heard the sound of machinery. She didn’t know which direction she should expect bullets to come from. Her chest tightened – from the exertion of running or from a sudden overwhelming adrenalin spike she couldn’t tell. Her holdall swung clumsily in the cold air.

They passed the sandbags, built into a small hut with blue-helmeted soldiers peering at them from inside through slits that served as windows. Then Terry’s companion began to run again. She could see a blue Land Rover twenty yards away. It stood by itself behind a long, low warehouse.





‘This is it,’ he said affably when they reached the van.

The door opened from the inside.

A girl looked down at Terry. ‘Jump in,’ she said.

Terry squeezed onto the edge of the high seat, swung the heavy door closed and introduced herself.

‘I’m Anna,’ the girl said. Her face, framed by an effusion of black ringlets, was preoccupied.

Three people were crushed into a driving cabin designed for two. Terry clutched her holdall in front of her against the dashboard as Anna wriggled beside her to find a more comfortable position.

‘I’m Brad,’ the driver added absently. He switched the key in the ignition.

‘Have you got your card?’ Brad asked Terry.

‘My card?’

‘Your press accreditation.’

‘I’m not a reporter. I’m a doctor.’

‘Shit,’ he said. He switched off the engine. ‘Do you have a UN card?’

With difficulty she fished her wallet out from the holdall. Inside was a collection of identity cards. She took out the one from the Medical Action Group, with her smiling photo emblazoned across the laminated top.

‘How did you get on a plane?’ Anna asked.

‘I had this.’ Terry showed them a letter from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Geneva authorising her to take a UN flight.

Brad started the engine again. ‘Let’s hope they’re not being thorough this morning,’ he muttered.





The Land Rover moved onto a track leading to a tarmac road. A white armoured personnel carrier blocked the entrance to the road.

‘Hold it up,’ Brad told Terry, nodding towards her card. ‘They might not notice that it isn’t from the UN.’ She followed their example and raised her card in front of the windscreen. She could make out the head and shoulders of a soldier inside the APC leaning forward to see them better.

‘If he comes out, I hope you can speak French,’ Brad told Terry.

‘He won’t come out,’ Anna said. ‘There’s been shooting today. They never come out when there’s been shooting.’

She was right. No one emerged to inspect their credentials. The APC slid back and let them pass.

The Land Rover climbed onto the road, Brad crouching over the wheel.

‘When we reach the bridge we enter government territory,’ Anna said. ‘There won’t be any shooting till the second checkpoint.’ She glanced at Terry.

Ahead, Terry saw another white APC across the road. ‘French,’ Anna explained nodding towards the APC. ‘Foreign Legion.’

Terry started getting to grips with her fear, and her thoughts, careering wildly, reverted to her boorish behaviour with the logistics officers.

‘Is it far to the centre of town?’ she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

‘If we get to Sniper Alley with no problems it’s fifteen minutes to the Holiday Inn,’ Brad said. He glanced at Terry. ‘That’s our base. It’s in the middle of town.’

‘Why are you here?’ Anna asked.





‘I’ve come to evacuate a little boy. He needs urgent treatment in London.’

The Land Rover stopped in front of the French APC and they waved their cards at the window again. The APC reversed, leaving just enough room for them to pass.

A kingdom of laminated cards.

‘This is the scary bit,’ Anna said. ‘There may be small-arms fire from the other side of the airstrip.’

Terry kept her eyes fixed forward. Ahead there was a fork in the road. Brad drove the Land Rover round a flimsy plywood barricade and onto the left fork. They moved out of the cover of some trees past a disabled tank stuck in a ditch, its cannon pointing towards the sky, and began to move between burned, roofless buildings. There was a small cemetery on one side, gravestones higgledy-piggledy. As they passed the cemetery, approaching a flyover, two bullets hit the side of the Land Rover. A pair of loud cracks.

Anna grabbed a helmet from the floor and put it on top of her ringlets. Brad accelerated. Anna bent down again and produced two more helmets. She thrust one at Terry and placed the other on Brad’s head. The Land Rover raced onto the flyover.

Terry began to shake. She was embarrassed by this. She didn’t normally respond to pressure in this way. She was normally calm. But everything that was happening to her now was new and strange. She could not know how she would react. All she could process in her untidy thoughts was that she was frightened and she was ashamed because of that.

Once on the flyover they were exposed. She looked ahead. The road led into a depressingly similar district: burned, roofless buildings.





Brad slowed the Land Rover at the bottom of the bridge and turned around sharply, doubling back the way they had come and moving onto the main road.

‘Keep your head down,’ Anna said gently, fear inducing a sort of intimacy. ‘Now we have snipers on both sides.’

‘Remind me –’ Terry could hear embarrassment in Brad’s voice, as though he had forgotten someone’s name at a dinner party. ‘Which side? Left or right?’

‘On the left as far as the barricade and then onto the right! Go fast here!’ Anna’s voice was hard-edged again.

Brad accelerated. Terry felt the forward momentum. She ventured a sideways glance. On her right was the skeleton of what had once been an office block. It was partially entombed in a vast mountain of shattered concrete, with strips of steel, like congealing spaghetti, hanging from the edges.

‘That’s the newspaper building,’ Brad said, as if pointing out a popular landmark on the road to a resort hotel. ‘They’re still working in the basement.’

Terry looked at the building again. Then she looked ahead. Two buses were parked across the main road, blocking their path.

‘Do I go right here?’ Brad asked.

‘Right!’

‘Just kidding!’ Brad said, but Anna didn’t laugh.

He swung the Land Rover off the road and onto a cobbled tramway that ran down the centre of the avenue. Then he turned left again, round the barricade. Ahead was a vast white thoroughfare – frozen and completely empty.



2

Milena watched from the bar as the two men who had been arguing suddenly got to their feet. A chair fell over, but it wasn't the clatter that drew the room's attention, it was the sound of safety catches being released. The men stood face to face, lifting their weapons. Milena watched along with the others, transfixed by a scene that unfolded as though in slow motion.

Jusuf stood up and walked almost casually towards the altercation. The slow motion movement of weapons halted. People in the packed room made way for him. When he reached the confrontation he stood, very close and calm, between the two men. He could have reached out and stopped the upward arc of the weapons. Perhaps the fact that he *could* have done this made the action itself unnecessary. Jusuf said nothing, but simply placed himself between the two drunk men. They lowered their weapons. Friends stepped forward, gingerly at first and then with decision, and the weapons were taken away. There was a murmur of conciliation. The standoff ended and the anger seemed to vanish.



When the room had returned to normal, Jusuf came over to the bar and threw a packet of Marlboro on the counter. He put a cigarette in his mouth and Milena held up a match.

They left soon afterwards and began to trudge through the freezing air and the newly fallen snow. It was so cold. Milena wore five layers of clothing. Her best winter clothes she'd left behind in Foča.

She held onto Jusuf's arm tightly. Every step they took was another step from Milena's town. He made her feel the memory of warmth in the deep dark.

'That was crazy ... to get in the middle like that,' she said, an oddly gentle indignation in her voice.

They skirted a shell hole, filled with black water and ice.

Two blocks from the presidency they climbed through an ancient stairway, black as pitch. Jusuf struck a match. He led and Milena followed, holding onto his coat. On the first floor he turned the key of a heavy door that opened easily on well-oiled hinges. They stepped inside and Jusuf lit a candle.

This was not Milena's home. The flat where she lived in Alipašino Polje was not her home either. Milena came from a town far away in the east. She would never go back there.

'The guy with the pistol, the one with the glasses, he's caused trouble before,' she said. 'Haris or Hamza, something like that. He started a fight last week, nearly ended the same way.'

'He was a schoolteacher before the war,' Jusuf said, puzzled.

They took off their shoes, fumbling in the candlelight. There were two pairs of leather slippers beside the door. Jusuf lit





another candle and set it on a low wooden table between two armchairs in the sitting room. A long sofa filled the end of the room, next to a grand piano.

The owner of the apartment was a colonel who had joined the Rebels at the start of the conflict and decamped to the other side with his family just a few days before the fighting began. Jusuf moved in when the place was commandeered for military accommodation. Milena stayed sometimes.

Jusuf lit an oil lamp and placed it near the door to the kitchen.

The room was filled with an eerie light, the straight lines of heavy dark furniture made soft by shadows and flame.

In the kitchen he began making coffee while Milena opened the piano.

She loved this instrument. On such a cold night every note was clear as crystal, and it was as if the snow and the darkness outside pressed against the walls and sealed the room so that nothing but music could be heard. This piano sounded to her more beautiful than any she had ever played.

She struck one high note and then another, with a soft sure touch.

Jusuf watched. She sat with her back very straight, looking across the room at the dull light from the kitchen where Jusuf, grinding coffee, cast a shadow. The music cut grooves of sound in the snow-cased silence of the big shadowy apartment.

It was necessary to hold the bottom cylinder very firmly where the ground coffee collected and the top cylinder where the beans were crushed. Jusuf's hand hurt. The metal became





hot with the friction of the grinder. He watched Milena and listened to the melody she played.

The apartment was filled with paintings. Once, Jusuf would have retreated from the expensive art on the walls, conscious that he lacked the education to admire another man's paintings. But now he lived in the other man's home. His woman played the other man's piano. He found himself assessing the other man's art. Among the figurative scenes was a picture of the city market eighty years before, the men in puttees and red fezzes, the women in shawls and veils. Jusuf liked this picture. It hung between the two large windows overlooking the street. Now it framed Milena's head as she played.

He listened to her play and watched as she bent forward, concentrating on the keys. If he'd spoken she would have looked up and listened. She didn't become so absorbed in the music that she was lost to her surroundings. She was like that in everything. She never seemed to go below the surface. Jusuf had never tried to go further. He didn't know about her past. He never asked her about her family. He only knew *now*. And now Milena was in his sitting room playing music that was beautiful. Perhaps she was a dream. He was aroused by her beauty and by the fact that this beauty was close enough to touch. Yet he did not believe that her soul could ever be possessed.

By the tall windows there were hundreds of books, a handful picked out on the thick shelves by the flame of the lamp and candles.

He had placed two pieces of wood in a small stove and lit a fire with shards of cardboard. When the water on top of the





stove began to boil he sprinkled it with ground coffee and stirred it gently. Then he took the coffee into the room and placed one cup on top of the piano in front of Milena. She gave a little nod of thanks and he reciprocated. He liked waiting on her.

He took his own cup to the low table by the sofa and sat down.

She watched, wondering if he wanted her to continue. But who wouldn't want to hear this piano played?

Usually she liked Jusuf's reticence. At the bar, words were even more pervasive than alcohol, a babble lurching between aggression and maudlin good humour.

She wouldn't have chosen to work in a place like that. It was dirty and dishonest and there were killers among the men who came to drink there. Not soldiers doing their duty, but men who liked killing.

She made herself play more slowly, more gently. She listened to the clusters of chords, and then started a different melody, one that reminded her of summer days.

Milena had found a job in a bar because she knew that kind of work. She could maintain a conversation at any level, and she could juggle marks and dollars and dinars, calculating bills for half a dozen tables.

Jusuf wished she would play a particular song, but he couldn't remember the name. She had played it before. It might have been from Eurovision. He could remember the tune, but not the name.

The melody she played now was wistful. Jusuf began to follow the long, lyrical phrases. He knew that in Milena's hands this music would move at its own pace, at the *right* pace. It





would set itself down in the candlelight as though it were the sound created at the very beginning of time to accompany their thoughts and feelings in this particular moment. And because she played this assured and beautiful music his thoughts began to rearrange themselves and he considered people and places and faces that had until then been kept from the forefront of his consciousness.

As he listened to Milena play, Jusuf thought about Bakir Mehmedbasić. In peacetime Mehmedbasić would have spent his army days in detention: he was not bright but he was very aggressive – a common combination. At the beginning of the war, he had enlisted with a government militia group put together by a gangster. It was ill-equipped and ill-disciplined, but the boys in Mehmedbasić's outfit were keen to fight. Jusuf had been a major in the pre-war army. Within weeks of the start of the conflict he was promoted to colonel. The designation didn't mean much. There were colonels with next to no experience whose claim to rank was based entirely on having friends in the right political circles. Jusuf's authority stemmed from competence and a natural ability to command – but even he was confounded by the ramshackle chaos of units like the one that had signed up Mehmedbasić. There was no shortage of aggression, no shortage of courage, but a dearth of judgment and an absolute absence of training.

Mehmedbasić was just twenty years old and he already had a criminal record when the war began. In the beginning, he wasn't allowed a gun, since he couldn't be trusted to fire it in the right direction. In wartime, some men discover they are cowards;





others discover they are not. Mehmedbasić discovered that he was *ethical*. The idea of what they were fighting for crystallised in his head and for the first time in his life he gave credence to the notion of right and wrong. He wanted to fight because he believed the cause was *just*.

He was given a job running messages between the lines. The lines stretched through apartment blocks and moved nightly. The fighting was bitter and bloody, street by familiar street.

The day Bakir Mehmedbasić was allowed to join the ranks as a fully-fledged, gun-toting militiaman he was shot dead. He went down to Vrbanja Bridge and stood with his rifle over his shoulder, arms spread wide, and shouted at someone he knew on the Rebel line across the river. Perhaps he was drunk.

‘Come and join us over here!’

This wasn’t a competition among fans at a football match. It wasn’t a day out where you recognised an acquaintance from school and started to trade jokes and insults. Perhaps Mehmedbasić had been seized by the absurdity of their predicament – because they *did* know people on the other side, and they *had* been friends, and they spoke the same language and knew the same streets and bars and rock groups and football teams. It was a family sort of war. There had been a time when being from a different community didn’t mean much, when friends were friends regardless. Mehmedbasić grasped that this had changed. Perhaps he simply couldn’t accept it.

So he stepped out into the open and like a madman he yelled. And then he was shot.

Jusuf didn’t know why he thought about that boy now.





Yet it was a brave thing Bakir Mehmedbasić did that day. He shouted with indignation, with *righteousness*.

Jusuf looked ahead through the spiralling cigarette smoke and listened to Milena play. He watched her expression, as if she were giving a public recital. He loved the way she pursed her lips in concentration. He wished he could remember the name of the song he wanted her to play.

The coffee had a bitter taste. He stood up, still thinking of Bakir Mehmedbasić's odd and pointless gesture.

When Jusuf had first met Milena in the bar she wore a dark woollen dress with buttons all the way up the front. She was prim and attractive at the same time. That's how he thought of it then. She behaved as if they were being introduced at the house of a mutual friend, and not in a black-market bar. She seemed somehow separate from her surroundings.

Outside now, it was unusually silent, not even the sound of tracer fire.

In the bedroom they undressed. Milena could see his breath in the freezing air. Little tails of cloud in the moonlight. The bed was icy.

Every kiss carried her another microscopic measurement of space from Foča, her town in the east, from the face there that she had loved, from the life there that she had abandoned.

Jusuf's honourable face, hands and body displaced that body, that voice, that look, that touch.

In the light of the guttering oil lamp, she stroked Jusuf's face, running her index finger over the contour of his lips.

Outside there was a detonation, near Gavril Princip Bridge.





They lay still. In the morning everything – the bed clothes, the curtains, the furniture, the ancient carpet – would be coated in a layer of grime from the oil lamp. Milena could already feel the residue of oil in her hair.

The banging at the door was more startling than the sound of the explosion. It was sharp and insistent.

Jusuf leapt from beneath the blankets, pulled on his trousers, slipped into his boots and donned his overcoat without shirt or jacket. He extracted his pistol from its holster, eased the safety catch back and walked out of the bedroom.

Milena got up, threw on clothes and followed him into the hall.

He stood away from the door, the pistol pointing to the floor, and signalled her to go back into the bedroom. But instead she stepped forward and stood beside him. He eased her gently against the wall, placing himself between her and the door.

‘Who’s there?’

‘Alija.’

Jusuf relaxed and opened the door.

A dapper-looking man with a bearded, bespectacled face came into the lobby, bringing a blast of cold air with him. Perhaps Milena registered the change in temperature more acutely because Alija’s arrival shattered the intimacy between her and Jusuf. When Alija looked at her he did nothing, she thought, to mask his suspicion. In the new scheme of things, her name counted against her. In Alija’s eyes it was a Rebel name. And this woman with a Rebel name was the lover of a key government commander.

‘You have to come back,’ he told Jusuf.

‘What’s up?’





Alija glanced at Milena and waited.

‘Go to the bedroom,’ Jusuf said, barely looking at her.

She did as she was told.

‘Otes,’ Alija whispered when Milena had retreated, closing the door behind her.

Jusuf returned to the bedroom to put on his shirt and jacket. Milena followed him out when he was dressed.

‘I’ll see you at the bar,’ he told her. ‘Don’t know when.’ He went out to the stairway behind Alija.

Rumour had it that Otes might fall to the Rebels within days, leaving the city open to a ground attack from the west.



3

‘Why not stay here?’ Brad said.

They stood in the lobby of the Holiday Inn, tiles broken on the muddy concrete floor, gusts of wind playing on the cracked glass. Terry was relieved to be inside a building, even a building like this. It was like a giant refrigerator, a science-fiction set, with the inside walls made of dark, peeling plaster, and huge windows smashed and covered with tarpaulin. There was a reception desk, though, which appeared more or less normal and there were people standing around looking relaxed.

She had blown her arrival, but at least she was in the city centre. They hadn’t sent her back on the next plane.

From the Land Rover she had peered through reinforced glass at wrecked buildings, some nearly buried in snow, black oblongs on the scarred facades where windows used to be; there were women and children in greatcoats and headscarves pulling water containers across ice on wooden sleds; there were sniper barricades at the road intersections, big steel containers; everywhere there was smashed glass and scorched concrete.

‘The phones are down, so you won’t be able to call your people,’ Brad told her when they reached the reception desk.



She looked lost. 'You'll need time to get hold of them,' he added more gently.

'Check in for the night,' Anna said. 'Someone here might be able to help you find your group.'

Terry looked from one to the other. She was grateful and she wanted to tell them that, but she couldn't find the words. She was generally reticent; expressing feelings didn't come easily to her. There was an awkward silence.

Brad shrugged and said, 'I have to work.' He began to walk away.

'I'm going to have lunch in ten minutes,' Anna said. 'The restaurant's up there.' She pointed to a door near the first of the grid-like balconies rising through the bleak atrium. 'Come and join me.'

Terry watched Anna leave. She noted the black trainers and tight blue jeans. Anna had removed her down anorak to reveal a blue flak jacket.

'Can I have a room for the night?' she asked the middle-aged woman who stood behind the reception desk. The woman had been listening to their conversation. Terry had watched her out of the corner of her eye while she was talking to Brad and Anna.

The receptionist's eyes were magnified by thick reading glasses attached to a fine chain round her neck. 'What is the name of your organisation?' she asked in slightly accented English, well modulated, like a language teacher.

Her grey hair was tied back in a bun.

'I work for a London charity called the Medical Action Group.'



The woman gave Terry a small, unimpressed smile and asked, 'You will pay in cash?'

'How much is it?'

'Eighty-two dollars, full pension.'

She had expected to be speaking to another physician about a patient's condition. Arrangements were supposed to have been made. Now she was asking about room rates. This annoyed her.

She nodded and signed the form that the receptionist placed in front of her. The woman selected a key and handed it to Terry. Then she said, 'Passport please.'

Terry surrendered her passport.

'I will return it to you after lunch.' The woman smiled.

It was just twenty minutes since the Transall had plummeted through winter clouds and landed between armies. Nothing was going according to plan.

'You will have to take the stairs,' the woman said. 'There is no electricity. The lift is not working.'

She walked across the cavernous lobby, climbed the back stairs to the third floor and found her room.

The window had been broken. Shards of glass still clung to the steel frame. The opening was covered by thick plastic tarpaulin. Much of the wall behind the two beds had been peppered by what she took to be shrapnel; there were shallow, elongated gashes in the plaster. The painting above the dressing table facing one of the twin beds was hanging upside down.

Otherwise, nothing was amiss. The two single beds were neatly made. The furniture was standard business-hotel issue.



She went into the bathroom and turned on the shower, but no water came out of the nozzle. She tried the taps at the end of the bath: dry. Nor did water come from either of the taps above the wash basin.

She went back into the bedroom and sat on the bed.

The airport business weighed on her thoughts. Perhaps she'd been wrong to accept a lift. She should have waited. What if someone had made that journey, past those barricades, to fetch her? What if the person who had come to collect her had driven over a mine, or had been shot by a sniper? It would be her fault – because she hadn't waited. She hadn't been where she was supposed to be. She experienced a wave of hopelessness, a huge breaker that hammered the tottering framework of doubt and insecurity. Perhaps the Medical Action Group had been negligent in sending her here, but they were hardly to blame. She'd put up her hand and volunteered and she didn't know why, except for the fact that her life was so difficult, even something as uncertain as this had promised a way out. She was angry with herself because she knew very well that this mission must succeed. A life was at stake. The little boy she'd come to collect needed every ounce of Terry's professional expertise. Self-doubt, she thought, is a weakness that people in her business could not indulge.

Terry was good at her job; she was less good at the other things in her life, like getting on with colleagues, or bonding with strangers on a plane, or making relationships work. This last thought made her chest tighten. She felt the muscles contract more suddenly and more unpleasantly than when



she'd made her unseemly dash from the Movement Control Office behind Brad. She was very afraid to dwell at any length on the failure of her marriage. The pain from that wound had not gone away.

She did something she hadn't done for years. She picked up a book of matches from an ashtray on the bedside table and opened it. About half of the paper stems had already been torn off. She'd been told to bring Marlboro, one or two cartons at least. Cigarettes were more valuable than cash here. She took one of the cartons from her holdall, tore it open, extracted a packet, unwrapped it and pulled out a cigarette.

She lit the cigarette and drew on it before she had time to change her mind. It made her feel dizzy and sick. She lay back on the pillows and puffed, gazing round the room, watching coils of thin smoke rise up to the beige ceiling.

The cigarette left an acrid taste in her mouth and she couldn't brush her teeth because there was no water. She put the packet in her trousers pocket along with the matches and went downstairs to the restaurant.

Terry walked past three long tables that stretched from one end of the restaurant to the other; there were several smaller tables in two corners. She felt self-conscious. There were forty or so people in the room, all dressed in a kind of uniform: army boots, jeans and warm sweaters, with arctic jackets over the backs of chairs. Terry noticed flak jackets leaning up against table legs. Her own outfit consisted of wool trousers, winter boots not designed to splash through mud, a sweater with a pattern on it and a silk scarf. She knew she didn't fit in.



The room reminded her of the refectory at her boarding school. She hadn't fitted in there either.

Anna stood up and smiled beneath her ringlets. 'Check in OK?' she asked. 'This is my colleague Sanela.' She raised a small hand and flicked it in the direction of a young woman sitting on the other side of the table.

Sanela gave Terry a weak smile, and then returned to her meal. 'And this is Michael Baring. Michael, this is Dr Barnes.'

Baring was in his fifties. He had a thick grey beard and a lined face. A smoker, Terry could see, or had been once. He was thin. Beneath his wool crewneck he wore a silk cravat.

Terry was generally shrewd. She could spot a phoney from a great distance; she was instantly on her guard with Baring.

'Why are you here, Dr Barnes?' he asked.

'I've come to evacuate a little boy. He will have emergency treatment in the UK.'

'Ah!' Baring chuckled. 'A mercy bid!'

'You're *that* doctor,' Sanela said, looking up from her plate, suddenly interested in the new arrival. Terry nodded. 'My friend was supposed to meet you, but it was impossible to reach the airport,' Sanela continued. 'How did you manage to get here?'

'We brought her,' Anna said.

Sanela looked at Anna and then at Terry.

'I can take you to the State Hospital after lunch if you like,' Sanela said. 'They were worried in case you had been sent back. They're anxious to meet you.'

Terry felt a moment of exquisite relief.

'Yes please!'



‘What room?’ the waiter asked Terry. He looked at her stony-faced, unblinking. She couldn’t immediately remember her room number. He asked again, impatiently.

She found her key and read the number. ‘Room 305.’

The waiter moved away without comment.

‘You’re next door to me!’ Baring said. There was triumph in his voice, as though he’d secured an advantage over everyone else at the table.