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# Sandstealers



Ben Brown

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**Sandstealers**

«HarperCollins»

## **Brown B.**

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Ever wondered what it is like to work in a war zone? 'We live more in one year than most people do in a lifetime,' is Danny Lowenstein's simple retort. Set in a world where life is cheap, vengeance is long and betrayals can be deadly, "Sandstealers" is a masterly thriller – infused with a deep knowledge of modern war and its witnesses. Danny Lowenstein is a big shot war correspondent with the world at his feet. But when an interview goes wrong and he's ambushed on a lonely road in Iraq, questions are asked. Was it a set-up? And was he deliberately sent to his death by one of his own – the tight-knit group of adrenalin-addicted journalists who are supposed to be his best friends? Rachel, Becky, Kaps and Edwin are 'The Junkies': together they've been through thick and thin and seen the horrors of war. Yet theirs is also a tangled web of intense relationships and dark rivalries. Could one of them have become Danny's killer? All's fair in love and war. Including the murder of a friend...

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**BEN BROWN**  
*Sandstealers*

 HarperCollins e-books

For Geraldine  
'We live more in a year than most people live in a lifetime.'  
DANIEL L. LOWENSTEIN, war correspondent

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### **PART ONE**

# 1

## Post-Liberation Iraq, August 2004

Danny Lowenstein had a premonition he would die that day. It wasn't unusual for him to foresee his own death: such thoughts went with the territory. The main thing was not to take them too seriously, otherwise he'd never get out of bed in the morning.

He cursed the sun, which had barely been born into Iraq's morning sky. Already a sapping heat was rising from the tarmac and soon the temperature would hit a grotesque 50 degrees Celsius. He dared not translate it into Fahrenheit. As he stood at the petrol station, the road to Iskandariya shimmered ahead of him. Danny wondered if the surface might evaporate before his eyes.

For now he was still fresh. He had sprayed himself with so much deodorant it almost choked him, but his skin felt good beneath the linen shirt he'd bought at Heathrow and his favourite pair of chinos. They were the pseudo-military sort, with extra pockets on the thighs which bulged with a notepad, assorted pens, a small Dictaphone—another terminal purchase—his US passport and press accreditation, some crunched-up dollar bills and chewing gum for when the day started to drag him under.

Danny knew that, before long, the same skin that was now so pleasantly clean and dry would be soaked in sweat. Little streams would crawl down the valley between his shoulder blades towards his waist, where they'd meet his tightly buckled belt and form an irritating reservoir. The fresh clothes would start to cling to him like cloying dishcloths. His rigorous dawn shower back at the hotel would be redundant and he'd wonder why he'd bothered to make the effort at all: he might as well have just put back on what he'd worn the day before. By dusk, he'd be drained of whatever energy he'd woken up with.

'God, sometimes I hate this country,' he told Mohammed, who was only half listening.

'Don't say bad things, Mr Daniel. I think you would miss us.'

'I'd miss *you*, Mohammed, of course I would, but not a whole lot else.'

'There is not another story like it, not anywhere in the world. You told me so yourself.'

'Yeah, I know, our Vietnam and all that. But Heaven help your country if that's all you've become—a story. The thing is, I'm just so...'

'Tired?'

'No, not tired. Exhausted. Sorry if I'm kind of grumpy.'

'Woman trouble?'

'You could say. And this heat, and this war and this... I mean, just take a look around us.'

He waved towards the sprawling strip of charmless shops just beyond them, many selling satellite dishes, fridges and all the other consumer electricals that had flooded in after liberation. Snapped power cables drooped down around them mockingly. On the road ahead, battered cars jostled one another amid a cacophony of horns, most of them unheeded. It seemed to Danny that the traffic, like everything else, was getting worse.

'You know, I remember the day I got my first visa for this place: 19th April 1990. I'd never wanted anything so much. Now? Two Gulf wars and a fucked-up occupation later, I don't think I'd care if I never came back.'

Mohammed stood next to him and surveyed the scene, not with Danny's weariness but the alert eyes of an intelligence officer: scrutinising faces, analysing cars, studying young policemen behind their sandbags—were they really police, or insurgents in impeccable disguise? Nothing was as it seemed.

A teenage pump attendant slid in the nozzle.

'Can't believe you forgot to fill up last night,' said Danny.

‘I told you, it was Farrah’s birthday.’

Danny felt bad. He should have sent her a present. He’d remembered with all Mohammed’s other kids.

‘But even so, I mean, for fuck’s sake.’

Danny hated it when things went wrong. It made him feel the whole story, the whole day, might be cursed. He glanced at his watch. They were already running late for the rendezvous with Abu Mukhtar, and he was uneasy.

‘How long till we get there?’

‘Twenty minutes, maybe twenty-five.’

‘I hope you can find this al-Talha, or whatever they call it. It’s not even on the map.’

‘No problem—we ask people.’

As a rule, Danny liked to have a ‘chase car’, a second vehicle following behind, which could rescue them if they broke down in the badlands. Today, Saad, who usually drove it, was sick with an upset stomach—or claimed he was. Either way, it meant they were travelling alone.

First the chase car, then the petrol. Bad omens, thought Danny.

Mohammed’s hawkish eyes continued their search for anything that was different or out of place. It was how he lived these days, even in his own street in Karada—always watching.

‘You are sure you want to go there?’ Mohammed asked Danny for at least the third time. ‘You’re risking your life, you know.’

‘Sure I’m sure. I risk it whenever I leave Baghdad—or the hotel, for that matter. Sometimes I feel so damned incarcerated.’

‘No, no! *Liberated!*’

Mohammed was a fervent supporter of the invasion and endearing in his optimism. Just look at it like this, he’d insist: we’re an abused child, and abused children can be ungrateful. They need time, and a little love from their foster parents. You Americans, you must stay however long you want! Danny would reply that he didn’t see them as ‘his’ Americans at all.

‘At least when the old man was in charge I could walk the streets, day or night, without being bundled into a car and decapitated on the Internet,’ said Danny.

‘So why have we come here?’

‘Because I guess it’s worth the risk. I have cast-iron guarantees.’

Now it was Mohammed’s turn to be cynical.

‘You know what they say about such guarantees in my country? The cast iron is always full of bullet holes. I don’t want to die.’

‘Me neither, you idiot.’

Danny put an affectionate arm around him.

‘You are a single man,’ said Mohammed. ‘Me, I have a wife and five children. Nothing can happen to me.’ Mohammed had got into the habit of kissing each member of his family whenever he left home, in case he never returned.

‘And nothing will, my friend, nothing will.’

‘Maybe you should have some children of your own, Mr Daniel.’

*Children!* Why was it people were always telling him to have them? Didn’t they realise a free-wheeling, fast-moving war correspondent like him couldn’t be weighed down by a family? And anyway, who the hell would want to be his son or daughter? What kind of burden would it be to have a father who might come home one day in a coffin? It didn’t mean Danny disliked kids—actually he rather enjoyed them. But other people’s, not his own.

Danny thought about the happy moments he’d shared at Mohammed’s home. His last visit there had been a journey to an Iraq that was desperate to retain the appearance of normality. In his garden, Mohammed had barbecued masgouf, the delicious fishy smoke of it wafting around him as his wife Sabeen sprinkled it with lemon juice. Soon she had the table sagging under a relentless supply of her

other favourite dishes: fasolada soup, baba ghanoush, eggplant salad, falafel, pitta and houmous, all washed down with a bottle of ferocious arak. Before they ate, Mohammed had sat on a red plastic garden chair while, one by one, his offspring piled on top of him until the legs buckled and they all toppled on to the grass in a hopeless, giggling heap.

Danny had entertained all five children, especially Farrah—six years old, the youngest and cutest. Under a lemon tree, he'd held her hands and swung her round so that she flew like a plane, horizontal and in dizzying circles. She'd screamed in ecstasy, and everyone applauded but now, in his anxiety about the trip to al-Talha, he had forgotten little Farrah's birthday. It was something else to trouble him. Danny liked to lavish gifts on Mohammed and his family. Every time he flew into Baghdad, he'd bring back copies of the *Lancet* and the *British Medical Journal*, which Mohammed devoured. He was a former paediatrician who'd trained at Great Ormond Street. He'd only given up medicine because the foreign press paid him ten times what he'd been earning in his hospital, and he needed the money. Another triumph for the occupation, Danny told anyone who'd listen.

The first thing people noticed about Mohammed was his unfortunate resemblance to the fallen dictator: fatter and older, but with the same darting eyes and the signature moustache. When a bounty was put on Saddam's head, strangers would come up to him and laugh: 'Americans, we've found him. We claim our reward! Death to the despot!' Mohammed would smile along with them, but the joke became tiresome and he felt he deserved more respect.

Now he wandered away from the petrol pump, his pot belly wobbling affably. He struck up casual conversations with a couple of shopkeepers and idle, jobless men who gossiped and fiddled with their worry beads. He was trying to get a feel for the area ahead and to pick up anything they might have heard about Abu Mukhtar and his boys. Of course it might only put them in more danger, tipping off hungry wolves that tasty meat was on its way. In Iraq, there were pros and cons to every move you made and death lurked around every corner. A couple of dirty street children hawked trayloads of cigarettes and fizzy drinks. Kids like these had been known to pass word that 'foreigners' were about, and Mohammed kept an eye on them.

Beside them a goat sniffed its way through a heap of rubbish. Lamp posts lay broken and some plastic bags were caught up in fencing, ensnared like fleeing prisoners. A burnt-out vehicle was nearby, charred and cannibalised, and a pool of stagnant water stretched across the street. It smelt as if, on closer inspection, it might well turn out to be an open sewer.

Danny climbed back into the Pajero and caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. He looked as worn out as he felt. Grey was advancing rapidly around his temples and wrinkles had multiplied around his eyes. He could almost hear the whispered questions from the twenty-somethings of the Baghdad press corps, people half his age, another generation: was Lowenstein really still the 'operator' that he had been, or just another 'veteran' past his sell-by date? Oh sure, he'd won a Pulitzer, but that was years ago, wasn't it? I mean, Bosnia—who even remembers what *that* war was all about? The doubts weighed down on him. He felt a rookie insecurity, the same draining need to prove himself as when he'd first hit the road a quarter of a century earlier.

He could have shared the Abu Mukhtar interview and all its dangers with his fellow Junkies, but in Danny's book you had to get away from the crowd to stand out from it, even if the 'crowd' included your oldest friends. Of course it could be a trap, and his general rule in Iraq was never to make appointments with people he didn't know. On the other hand, these days the concept of a clandestine rendezvous with any kind of insurgent leader—even a middle-ranking one—was intoxicating. Abu Mukhtar wasn't a celebrity terrorist like al Zarqawi; in fact, hardly anyone beyond the cognoscenti of US army intelligence would have heard of him. Even so, according to Asmat Mahmoud, Mukhtar had passionate opinions he wanted to pass on to the world. Danny could write it hard, with plenty of topspin to tickle the fancy of even the most blasé, battle-weary, war-numbed reader. My God, he thought, if I'm bored of it all, what must they be? Mukhtar's views, however mundane, would ultimately be processed into front-page news. In his head, he had already written the story's most

important line: ‘...told me in a secret and dangerous meeting, deep inside the bandit country of Iskandariya, south of Baghdad...’ It was just a case of filling in the rest. He would sell it easily to his old paper, the *New York Times*, or perhaps turn it into a wider, more rambling piece for *Rolling Stone* magazine or *Vanity Fair*. And it would make at least a couple of pages in the memoirs he was struggling to complete.

Still, the premonition returned. Mohammed had reawakened it.

‘So, Mr Daniel, we go on?’

Why did he have to keep asking? Danny was already queasy with uncertainty. Even now he could call it off, he only had to say the word. He remembered all the moments in his career when he had faced dilemmas such as this, and each time he had picked the harder road. He remembered the twenty-somethings too. He couldn’t afford to relax and he certainly couldn’t afford to put down roots or have children. Danny breathed in deeply.

‘Absolutely, we go on!’

‘No problem!’ Mohammed smiled unconvincingly, a chubby Saddam-smile.

‘You’re a good guy, the very best.’

A few hundred yards away, men in a rusting white-and-orange taxi studied them both through binoculars with a hatred that was entirely sure of itself, and open to nothing so frail as doubt.

It is another two miles before the turnoff on to a narrower road. Danny wonders if it is one of the insurgent ‘rat runs’, as the Americans like to call them: a phrase, he has noted in one recent piece, that implies the enemy will be destroyed—just as soon as someone can come up with the right kind of pest control.

The wheels blow up a dust cloud.

Quiet roads. Danny seems to have spent a career travelling along them, wondering what they have in store for him: the story of a lifetime, or the end of a lifetime.

A small, mangy dog emerges from nowhere and starts to cross in front of them. It is limping badly.

‘Watch out!’ Danny screams at Mohammed, who is driving hard and fast and doesn’t see it till the last minute. His attempt to avoid the wretched animal is too half-hearted. There is a thud and slight crunch, and they carry on.

‘Did you really have to do that?’ Danny can’t bring himself to look back at the body, yet another corpse in a country overflowing with them. Has life here got so cheap that it’s not even worth the casual movement of a wrist to save a life? It’s more bad karma, another jinx on his day. First the chase car, then the petrol, now the dog.

‘Fuck’s sake,’ he mutters to himself.

The undercarriage scrapes some chunks of rock and now it’s Mohammed’s turn to curse aloud, though with incomprehensible Arabic expletives.

Danny notices another car up ahead. It is a Toyota, red with a distinctive white roof. Shock smacks him hard around the face. He knows this car, he’d know it from a mile away. Two people: the journalist inside, someone else—the driver—kneeling on the ground, changing a tyre. There is very little time to think. Has Asmat Mahmoud flogged the same story twice? Is the enigmatic Abu Mukhtar actually just some media tart?

‘I don’t believe it—they’ve crashed our fucking interview!’

Danny’s first inclination is to drive straight on, but he can’t ignore them. He leans from his passenger window and talks to the other journalist. The words are venomous, the anger mutual. Danny’s foul mood has just got much, much worse, but after he has said his piece, he manages to calm himself.

‘Anyhow, I’m pushing on,’ he says, drawing a line under the argument. ‘How’s everything up there? Okay?’

The question is carefully calibrated. With this perfunctory request, Danny makes it clear he's not interested in striking some last-minute bargain on the story, he's merely seeking reassurance on what lies ahead.

His fellow Junkie says nothing, responding with...with what, exactly? Some vague movement of affirmation, or is it merely the *absence* of something—a prohibitive hand or a piercing cry that says: Jesus Christ no, Danny! We've just been shot at! Don't go up there, don't go another yard!

Whatever it is or isn't, the biggest mistake of Danny's distinguished career is to take it as a yes. Before any further complications can spoil his story, he turns to Mohammed: 'Jalah, jalah!' And obediently, Mohammed speeds away.

Still, Danny's head is dizzy with doubt. In his younger days, he was never afflicted by the curse of hesitation. The life he led then was charmed: bullet-proof, blast-proof, death-proof. Shit happens, but not to me. Friends died, fallen soldiers on the battlefield, until it seemed he'd attended more funerals than weddings, but somehow it was always *them* who fell, and always *him* at the lectern in the home-town church, delivering the Bible readings and moving eulogies, the well-judged words of comfort for the grieving parents or partner, the final tears as the coffin was eased into the earth. Danny seemed agreeably immune to death, as though it were a ritual for him to observe rather than take part in. Chechnya showed him that. Against all the odds, he had survived it, though not entirely unscathed. Death had touched him there, laid its chilly fingers upon his face as he stood by and watched a good friend's life drain away. He'd always expected that one day the gods would punish him. Perhaps part of him thought they should.

Yet now, as they regain speed, he feels the rush of the warm air on his face from the open window, the scent of eucalyptus trees, and there it is once more: the hit, the buzz, the drug. He might as well have rammed a needle in his vein. No, I'm not tired, he thinks, not exhausted, not settling down. And by the way, I'm not finished yet either.

Nearby, an Iraqi shepherd boy wanders aimlessly with his scrawny, filthy sheep. A few of them have broken away from the flock and are running around the road in panic. Like some reporters, it occurs to Danny: terrified of getting separated from the pack.

And then it is only them, on this the loneliest of roads. No more sheep or shepherd boys. The words of his Hostile Environments instructors at Walsingham, where the rolling Norfolk countryside had been transformed into a war-zone training ground, come back to him: 'Just ask yourself, where are all the people? If they've smelt danger, so should you. And if there's no oncoming traffic, you should wonder why.'

The story is sucking him in, though, as it always has. It's just a little further on, down the road and over the bridge. It's *always* just a little further on.

Only about half a mile now. Swallow hard, Danny boy, breathe deep. Relax! Enjoy!

As they come round the bend he sees, a few hundred yards on, the rusting oil drums spread across the narrow road. Clustered around them are the insurgents, six in all, different-coloured kafiyehs wrapped around their faces: orange, red and black. Fat sunglasses cover their eyes. They are armed with a menacing assortment of pistols and AK47s.

Mohammed stamps on the brakes.

'Who are *they*?'

'Don't worry; just a poxy roadblock.' Danny wants to make them both feel better. He's a connoisseur of roadblocks, from Sarajevo to Somalia to Sierra Leone—the well-organised, polite ones; the drunken, chaotic ones; the downright dangerous ones, manned, or rather boyed, by 11-year-old African kids, sky-high on weed, with manic eyes that say killing a white man can be quite fun when you're bored out of your mind.

'Roadblocks, I could write the book on them,' he sighs.

When the first shot is fired, he realises of course that he could not. The bullet blows out a front tyre and one side of the Pajero lurches down on to the road, like a horse gone lame. Danny's desperate hope is that the men in kafiyehs are just trying to scare them.

'Shit. Don't they understand we're only here because their own leader wants to talk to us?'

He sees another of the men raise his Kalashnikov, aiming higher now, straight at them. It's gone wrong so quickly, too quickly, and yet in slow motion too.

'Oh fuck! Reverse, Mohammed. Let's get out of here now. *Now*, I said!'

The driver's corpulent body will not move. Terror has paralysed him and for once he disobeys his master's voice.

'Reverse, Mohammed. Will you do as you're told and fucking well reverse?'

As Danny shouts, a burst of fire hits the windscreen. Instinctively, he ducks as he has done before—all those times when death has, arbitrarily, turned its attentions elsewhere.

He is about to bark more orders when he sees that Mohammed is thrust back against his headrest, blood spreading out evenly in two distinct patches on an otherwise spotless white dishdashah: one around the middle of his sternum and the other a little to the left. The eyes—Saddam's eyes, as everyone used to joke—are wider than Danny has ever seen on any man's face before, peeled back and accusing. The mouth is open, as if it meant to say one last thing.

'Oh shit no, sweet Lord, no! Fuck, no; oh fuck me, no!' Daniel L. Lowenstein, master of reportage, reduced to a rhythm of profanities.

He has slipped from his seat into the footwell, curling up there like a foetus clinging to the womb. Rationally, he knows this is no strategy. Part of the survival lore they'd drummed into him at Walsingham was the fact that bullets can cut through the chassis of a car almost as easily as they penetrate human skin. Between bursts of automatic fire he can hear the insurgents' bloodcurdling cries of 'Allahu Akhbar!'

If only there were some peace and quiet, thinks Danny. If only he had stopped to talk to the occupants of the Toyota rather than launch into an argument. If only he'd never come down this road. If only he'd been warned of what lay ahead. If only he'd listened to his premonition and Mohammed's unspoken fear. If only he'd taken no notice of the worthless assurances of Asmat Mahmoud in Baghdad. If only he'd 'settled down', as he'd been urged to, had children and stayed at home with them—a happy brood of little Daniels and Daniellas. If only he'd never become a war reporter. If only he'd never become any kind of reporter...

The shooting and shouting stop for a while—a minute, maybe only 30 seconds—but to Danny, it's an eternity. He can make no use of it, for now he's as crippled by fear and indecision as Mohammed was. Poor Mohammed. Five children without a father, a wife without a husband, a reporter without a friend. *Nothing can happen to me*. Farrah flies more rings around the lemon tree, Sabeen garnishes the masgouf. Danny cannot bring himself to look at him again.

Instead he stares at the scraped plastic and mud marks on the bottom of the passenger door. Mud from his lucky boots, bought from Silvermans on Mile End Road before the first Gulf War in 1991. He's survived that and every subsequent hellhole he's ever been in, so how could he ever trade them in for another pair, even when they've walked across mass graves, through refugee camps riven with disease, not to mention putrid, Third-World hospitals? God alone knew what dangerous microbes inhabited those worn-out rubber treads, but every time the cab delivered him safely back to his apartment, he would lovingly put the boots back in their box, ready for the next time, certain they had kept him alive. Some worship the cross, Danny worshipped his lucky boots. They'd still be on his feet when his body was discovered—even though, if he were dead, it would surely represent their catastrophic failure. *Not so lucky now*, his friends would chuckle callously, as they stood at the boot-end of his body to identify it.

The car door is opened so that Danny, pressed hard against it, tumbles out. There's a another gratuitous chorus of 'Allahu Akhbar', so familiar from al-Qaeda snuff videos just before they execute

the hostage. He cannot bear to look, but finally allows his eyes to meet those of the two gunmen screaming at him loudest. One has unwrapped his kafiyeh, careless now whether he shows himself, and this alone spreads an extra layer of dread over Danny.

The young man's face tells no special story. He is like so many Iraqis Danny has met down the years: bearded, brooding and with fingers welded to his weapon. He is unusually tall, and a scar across his forehead distinguishes him. It is a gruesome burn that makes him look as if he's been branded. He shoves the barrel of his Kalashnikov just below Danny's nostrils, the ring of grey metal hot upon his skin.

'Please, you don't understand—Abu Mukhtar, your leader, Mukhtar—I've come to see him. *Al sahaf*. Interview? Asmat Mahmoud arranged it—you know, big politician, Baghdad?'

Another 'if only'. If only he had learnt better Arabic. He's spent enough years of his life here, but lazily relied on Mohammed, and now his doctor-cum-driver-cum-translator-cum-friend is no good to him, staring manically at the shattered windscreen.

Then—a gift from the heavens. The one with the scar and the muzzle of his gun in Danny's face is muttering something in English.

'You people. So stupid. You come in one car and we shoot. You come in another car and we shoot again.'

'Great! You speak English. Oh, thank you, thank you so much. Now listen, I need to explain. You don't understand...'

'No talk.'

'But you see, I'm a journalist and...'

'We know who you are.'

'Good. That's really good to hear. So I'm a journalist and I'm here to see—'

'No talk!'

Danny decides his best hope is to co-operate. A surge of optimism. They know him. They know English. They must be reasonably intelligent. Shooting Mohammed was a blunder—some trigger-happy idiot who'll have to be disciplined. They won't make the same mistake again, or else there'll be hell to pay with Abu Mukhtar, not to mention Asmat Mahmoud, Danny's gold-plated, copper-bottomed contact.

Anyway, Danny has been this close before and every time it's been the prizes that have come his way rather than the wooden box and the grave that no one can ever quite find the time to visit. Near escapes run through his mind: the mock execution by Serbs on the road to Vukovar; the mob who wanted to set fire to him on a street corner in Kigali, as if he were some heretic to be burnt at the stake. And Chechnya, of course. Always Chechnya.

Now, as then, he is terrified, but it would show disrespect to death not to be: total, all-consuming fear is the price you pay if you want to claim the prize. Inevitably, hours or even days of captivity lie before him, but in due course will come the negotiated release. The mighty Abu Mukhtar, embarrassed by his overzealous foot soldiers, will apologise profusely and beg forgiveness.

The crack of a rifle butt on his head snaps him from these reveries. He mutters again about Abu Mukhtar, but now it's more of a low groan than a statement. Either they don't understand what he's saying or they're not interested.

The leader gestures with his Kalashnikov, jerking it upwards to show he wants the infidel up and away from the car. There is, thinks Danny, something alien about the clarity with which people like him see the world.

As he obeys, he looks again at the small mountain of Mohammed's slumped paunch, the patches of blood on his pristine white gown now merged into one. His progress is not quick enough for his captors; the tall one with the scar and another gunman grab his arms with such force he worries they'll rip them from their sockets. He should yell out in agony as they drag him away, but his fear leaves him silent, a quiet hero. They search the deep pockets of his chinos, and when they find the passport

they study it briefly before hurling it aside. It spins through the air and lands at an angle in the sand. It feels as though they have discarded his identity. In that moment, Daniel Leon Lowenstein, born 17th June 1955, has ceased to exist.

A hood is thrown over his head, the dazzling sunlight of the Iraqi day switched off. It is some sort of hessian sack, Danny guesses, rough and scratchy against his skin, and with a musty smell that pollutes his nostrils. It reminds him of a farmyard. The hessian brushes against his lower lip and then his tongue, so that he can taste it too.

His assailants frogmarch him, screaming at him all the while and lashing out with kicks when he fails to respond to their unfathomable commands. Like a drunk in the dark, Danny stumbles, his balance and bearings lost, guided by the shoving and poking of their guns.

The easy flat of the road beneath his feet is becoming more unpredictable, a landscape now of ragged rock. He's being taken further from the car, from the reassurance of everything he's ever known.

The hood has ramped up his fear. He is dizzy, one moment feverishly hot, the next perishingly cold. His chest is compressed, a dead weight pushing down on it, like a cardiac arrest. Lower down, there is only slush and mush, Edwin's curry from the night before. He has lost control of his bowels. Rewinding back to infancy, or spooling onwards to senility, his sphincter widens. He tries to clench his buttocks, but then surrenders. The first trickle of shit starts to ooze into his boxer shorts. He is beyond embarrassment. Nausea is rising up through him and he needs to vomit, but nothing emerges, merely the foretaste of it in his throat. He remembers the toilets when he's been embedded with the army, the ones marked 'D & V', set apart, as if for lepers, to accommodate troops afflicted with diarrhoea and vomiting.

Just as his body will no longer obey him, neither will his mind. The committed atheist who has spent a lifetime scorning religion is now praying with holy zeal: Please, oh Lord, I promise I will always worship you. I have sinned but am ready to repent. Oh merciful Lord, just get me out of here. Right now, and I mean right fucking now! I'll never set foot in a war zone again, or get on another plane, or write another story, so help me God. Amen.

But he knows that this time there'll be no last-minute reprieve, no scoop, no prize. Instead of the award ceremony, there'll be the funeral. He has pushed his luck one story too far, taken one chance too many, and he wishes more than anything he's ever wished for that he could step back into that refreshing, effervescent hotel shower and start this day again.

Deprived of sight, all Danny can see are his alternative futures. Will it be the one that lasts for just a few more seconds, with a cursory bullet to the back of his hooded, anonymous head; one more death among so many in the catastrophe of Iraq? Or will it drag on for weeks, with the perpetual terror of incarceration in a cage, broken only by video appearances, paraded bowed and broken, begging for his life? And will it end, as it has for so many others, with a screaming madman's knife hacking at his neck, captured in Technicolor? Images flash before him: Nick Berg being slaughtered by al-Zarqawi in person; the four American contractors, shot, burnt, mutilated, and their remains hung from a bridge in Fallujah.

This time he's not reporting the story, he *is* the story. Other journalists will circle over his carcass. He pictures it—cold, blue and flabby—lying on a slab in a mortuary full of flies. The morgue is familiar to him; he's been there countless times in Baghdad, Grozny, Gaza, Mogadishu—all the visits blend into one. He has counted more corpses than any man should have to—hundreds, probably thousands, of them, and now he can add one more. It's wearing the clothes he put on that morning, when he was getting dressed to die, including those lucky, lucky boots.

He sees the funeral too. Who will come? The Junkies, of course; his adopted family, addicted to their work, their drugs and each other. Rachel inconsolable, yet still so fuckable in her sleek black dress. Becky, for once not laughing. Edwin and Kaps, his brothers in arms. Others will be there too—the media glitterati, and some of the Great and the Good who have admired his work: politicians,

editors, novelists. There will be generous obituaries, mini hagiographies. Failures and excesses will be discreetly airbrushed out; there'll be no mention of his many sins. All in all, his death will be an ego trip. Too bad he won't be able to enjoy it.

Rough hands force him down on to his knees. A rifle butt smashes his mouth. The shock of it reminds him of his boyhood: Lukas hitting him, Camille watching. He tastes his own blood, sour and sickly. His tongue discovers a couple of uprooted teeth and briefly probes the holes they've left behind.

The final act. One more collective shout of 'Allahu Akhbar!' from his kidnappers, a kind of choral harmony to signal that the time has come. The hood is ripped from his head but he cannot look; his eyes are screwed shut.

The end of a gun is shoved into the nape of his neck. The trickle of faeces becomes a torrent now, running down his legs. Danny is shaking so hard it looks, perversely, as if he's laughing. There are no more memories or predictions, no more thoughts—rational or otherwise. No more hypocritical prayers. His kneeling, hooded body is heaving backwards and forwards with such convulsions that he barely hears the trigger.

## 2

Jamail, the avuncular hotel manager, had assigned them the 'Presidential Suite'. He said he'd persuaded the owner they could have it for nothing, though it was usually empty in any case. The suite, rather like the country itself, had seen far better days and no self-respecting president would go near it. It sat atop the taller of the Hamra Hotel's two towers with a sweeping view of the city, but the threadbare carpet was blighted by wine and coffee stains, and there were cigarette burns on both the sofas. Rachel and Becky sat on one of them, staring at a dreary painting on the wall—a waterfall surrounded by forest on some other continent. At first they had cried till their throats ached, but now they simply sat in shock. A pair of mosquitoes strafed their ears, taunting them in their grief.

Edwin and Kaps busied themselves at the kitchen table, studying a map of Fallujah, trying to pinpoint where it was that Danny had been ambushed. Edwin, tank commander turned war reporter, was in his element, applying with military precision the various coordinates the US Army had given them. He smoked a Marlboro right down to its butt as fingers, rulers and pencils roamed purposefully around the American map he'd stolen from the Green Zone.

'Look, it must have been here, around this bridge.' Edwin lit another cigarette from the old one, doing it without even looking.

'But why would he have been there?' argued Kaps. 'Where would that road go that would interest anyone, let alone Danny?'

'Oh, stop it!' Rachel shouted. 'What does it matter where the fuck it happened? It's not going to bring him back, is it? He's dead, isn't he? Even if they've kidnapped him, they'll put him in an orange jumpsuit, stick him in a cage and...'

The others knew she was right. Thoughts of death were consuming all of them; not just Danny's but potentially their own. It could so easily have been one of them and so there was a guilty, furtive exhilaration. *They were still alive.*

Becky had been first to hear the news. She'd just finished lunch when 'Dancing Queen' had rung out on her mobile. It was Adi, the diplomat. Ever since she'd met him at a drinks party in the embassy, he'd pestered her with calls in an effort to 'like...maybe get to know you better'. She remembered with mild disgust how the folds of fat rolled off him and fumes of halitosis wafted from his mouth. The ring on his chubby finger told her there was a loyal wife—poor, deluded dear—waiting for him back home in the Washington suburbs. However desperate Becky might become, however much she yearned for warm flesh to wake up with, she made herself promise she would never, ever sleep with him. Why couldn't one of his colleagues have propositioned her instead? One of those clean-cut diplomats with perfect partings and bright white teeth, the Paul Bremer clones who looked like the stars of commercials for hair restorer or denture cleanser.

'Hey, Becky—Adi here.' The sound of his voice made her heart sink. She began assembling implausible reasons why she would be busy every night for the next three weeks of her tour of duty.

'Oh, I...Adi, I was just...'

'Listen to me carefully. There's been a bad shooting on some road south of Baghdad. Near Iskandariya. I'll get straight to the point: it's Daniel Lowenstein. He's a friend of yours, I believe?'

'Yeah, course he is. Oh my God.'

'Look, I'm really sorry, but his car was ambushed a few hours ago. Shot up pretty bad according to our units up there. His driver's dead and Lowenstein's missing. No sign of his body yet, but it doesn't look good.'

Despite the humidity, Becky began to shiver. The flashback came to her as it always did, unexpectedly, like a mugging in a darkened alleyway: before her yet again, he was dying while she prevaricated. All these years later, she could still hear his pleas for help as the blood emptied out of him and soaked the snow, his ever-weaker voice calling out her name—calling, calling, calling—

and her legs running to him, going nowhere. Now, as then, there was only one logical conclusion: that she had killed him.

It took another four or five minutes until she calmed herself enough to ring the others, but her finger still trembled as she dialled their numbers: Rachel first, then Kaps, then Edwin.

Soon they were huddled in the Presidential Suite, its two landlines and their assorted mobiles in frantic, perpetual use till nightfall.

They talked to the *New York Times*. Even though Danny had gone freelance, the assistant managing editor said he would be on the next flight, bringing with him an ‘investigator’—a former Special Forces guy. He would work out of the bureau. Danny’s older sister was on her way in from Dubai, where she was a big shot at some investment bank. The company was pulling out all the stops to get her to Kuwait and from there she’d pick up a US Air Force C-130.

They talked to Danny’s elderly parents in Pittsburgh. Lukas and Eliza Lowenstein were originally from Germany, and the hint of an accent was still there as Eliza repeated, over and over, ‘My baby boy.’ They realised she would never remember him as they did, but as the infant she’d cradled in her arms.

They talked to Sabeen, Mohammed’s widow. What would become of the children, she demanded of Becky in English every bit as fluent as her late husband’s; how would she support them? Becky would have liked to assure her, ‘Don’t worry, you’ll be well looked after, you’ll want for nothing,’ but since Danny no longer worked for any organisation, she could make no promises.

They talked to the Iraqi police, the US military, diplomats and politicians, and—a novel experience for all of them—they talked to the press. The embassy Hostage Crisis Group had recommended a media blackout, so now it was down to the Junkies to persuade their colleagues to hide from the world the news that a fellow journalist had disappeared.

Much of the press corps was staying in the Hamra too; it had become famous for its raucous poolside parties, where reporters, aid workers and diplomats would talk and dance the night away while Danny held court. These gatherings ceased as a mark of respect for him, their missing warrior; the Baghdad party was on hold. No one used the pool at all now. It was as if it had suddenly become contaminated.

The journalists agreed to the blackout—after all, what if it were one of them? Still, they wanted answers for when they finally ran the story. What had he been doing down there? Why hadn’t he told anyone he was going? Did his friends think he was dead or kidnapped? And if the latter, how did they rate his chances? For once the Junkies knew what it was to try and fend off these ravenous birds of prey.

‘We really can’t say much at the moment,’ Edwin and Kaps kept repeating. They had decided a party line and were determined to stick to it. ‘The embassy and the military have told us it’s best not to get into any speculation.’ They were stonewalling, and the Danny they knew would have railed against it.

The sun he had cursed that morning was slowly dying, slipping away unmourned behind Baghdad’s higher buildings. Shadows of those still on the streets fell long and curfew beckoned. In the morning it would be one day exactly since he had disappeared. His friends wondered if, after that, it would be one week, one month, one year, until all the anniversaries began to flow into an ocean of time where Danny Lowenstein would exist only as a fading memory.

The moment Camille Lowenstein stepped nervously off the Hercules from Kuwait, a phalanx of embassy security guards swarmed around her, weighed down with M16s and 9mm Beretta pistols strapped to their thighs. They wore wraparound sunglasses and tight T-shirts showing off muscles that bulged and tattoos that boasted of lost loves or units. She had never been in the presence of so many big men and big guns. This was her brother’s world, she realised, where violence and fear were the norm, peace and tranquillity banished to a distant universe.

She was flanked by Tommy Harper, the lanky executive despatched by the *New York Times*, even though—strictly speaking—Danny was no longer on their payroll. Harper wore little round spectacles and clutched a briefcase. Camille’s first impression was that, if she was out of her depth here, so was he. Alongside Harper was Munro, a small, muscular Scot hired by the paper to find out more about what had happened to their distinguished former correspondent. Harper had told her, in reverential tones, that Munro was ex-SAS: ‘You know, Brit Special Forces.’ So what’s he going to do, Camille felt like asking, bring my brother back to life if he’s been shot, or rescue him single-handed if he’s been kidnapped?

Something about Munro made her feel uncomfortable. His body language implied he didn’t see what she could achieve. She didn’t even know herself. Baghdad, she supposed, was a dangerous city for those who weren’t sure what they were doing; it was a place for certainty, not for doubt.

It was the tremor in her mother’s voice that had convinced her to come. ‘Please, honey; we need you there for us, for the family,’ Eliza Lowenstein had begged. ‘He’s your brother, after all. Who knows, maybe you can help him.’ Help him like you didn’t do before, in other words—or was that just how Camille had chosen to interpret it, through the prism of her broken conscience? Besides, there was no excuse. Camille was in Dubai which—if you were looking at a map in Pittsburgh—seemed pretty much next door to Iraq.

Camille had been called out of a meeting to be told the news. She had stood there in the glass palace where she worked, staring out at its panoramic views of nothing. She had supposed she ought to cry, but no tears would flow. Perhaps it was the shock, she thought; perhaps they’d come later. She’d gone home, tossed some clothes into a suitcase and made sure her secretary cancelled everything in her diary, except the dinner date with the man she’d met two weeks earlier: Camille wanted to make that call herself. He hadn’t sounded particularly sympathetic nor very bothered that she wouldn’t be around. At 52, she couldn’t help thinking she was too old for dates anyway. As the bank’s limousine eased her past Dubai’s lavish skyscrapers, she wondered whether her brother would be dead or alive when she saw him again. Either way, she resolved she wouldn’t come back until she knew for sure. That much at least she owed him. She plugged in her iPod headphones and put on some Janis Joplin. It always reminded her of Danny. But she asked herself another question: was it bad taste to listen to music when the corpse of your only sibling could be lying in a ditch somewhere?

At Baghdad International Airport, a lone immigration officer in a slightly tatty uniform waved her through without even opening her passport. He gave her a look that said: Trust me, if you’re crazy enough to come to my country, I really have no plans to stop you. Then, as Harper and Munro shepherded her to the waiting motorcade, a plump diplomat in a white shirt and tie stepped forward to greet them.

‘Hi, I’m Adi—Adi Duval.’ Camille noticed with mild revulsion two dark ovals of sweat around his armpits. ‘You need to know we’re doing everything, and I mean *everything*, to find your brother.’ Adi assured her that army intelligence was on the case, with spy satellites and unmanned reconnaissance planes searching 24/7. They hadn’t yet established which group was responsible, but they had a list of suspects. CIA analysts had made it their top priority, and they’d crack it soon, he was sure they would. Danny was a ‘distinguished American citizen’ who deserved ‘our best and fullest resources’, he went on, his tone implying that the country’s less impressive passport holders might receive a slightly inferior level of service from their government.

He handed her a flak jacket and helmet.

‘You’ll need to wear these, Miss Lowenstein—just for the ride into town.’

Camille, Harper and Munro were driven at unfeasible speed to the Hamra Hotel, the gleaming white GMC Suburban—bulletproof, of course—swerving and screeching its way through the fiendish chicanes designed to slow traffic. At intermittent checkpoints ordinary mortals were having their papers checked and car boots searched, while Camille’s convoy sailed through as though she were the First Lady herself. If only her brother had enjoyed such protection.

An image returned to her—for no reason she could fathom—of Danny aged eight, playing hide-and-seek in the garden of their home in East Allegheny, Pittsburgh—‘Deuschtown’ as it was known. Camille, who was three years older, had kept on searching even when she’d seen his foot poking from behind the garden shed. He was enjoying the game so much, she didn’t want to spoil it. When she finally pounced and Danny screamed, she thought it was his silly mock surprise at being found at last, but then she saw it, curled up in the grass only a few feet from him: a Copperhead snake, watching him with sullen disapproval. All along, while she’d dragged out her search, poor Danny had been petrified. Head pounding, she’d grabbed a stick and flicked the snake away. As it scuttled off into the trees, Danny had looked at her in admiration, a look that came back to her now. She was his sister, bigger than him and so much braver. He’d been absolutely certain she would never let him down.

So why was it that she had? Not just once, but again and again.

Black curtains across the side windows hid away Baghdad, but the occasional glimpses were enough to make her swallow: so here it was, the place she had watched on countless television bulletins; where Saddam had strutted his stuff; where shock and awe had lit up the sky; where the liberating troops had marched in to such short-lived acclaim. She could never have imagined she would see it for herself.

‘At some stage we should be able to get you down to the spot where Danny disappeared.’ Adi sat beside her, the smell of his stale sweat wafting into her nostrils. ‘First Cavalry are still securing the area, but when they’re done, we could have an armed escort take you there. Only if you want to, of course.’

‘Absolutely,’ said Camille.

‘We appreciate what you and your family are going through and we understand you’re going to need some closure here.’ He chose the word carefully, to imply—very gently, but from the start—that they might well be looking for a body.

‘Thank you. I don’t intend to leave this country until I have my brother, whether he’s dead or alive.’

‘He’s really an extraordinary journalist. You must be so proud of him.’

‘Thank you, I am.’

‘I know a few of his friends; they’re over at the Hamra, too. Maybe you’d like to meet with them?’

Later, when it was all over, she would think about how different things would have been for her if she’d just said: ‘No thanks, Mr Duval.’

‘Yes please, that’d be good.’

Soft morning light fell upon the carnage of the night before: a fresh batch of mutilated corpses, dumped around Baghdad like garbage put out for collection. Some lay down alleyways, some amid the bulrushes in the Tigris. Danny’s friends knew they would be out there and couldn’t help thinking he might be among them.

The Junkies were prone to insomnia at the best of times and now sleep seemed a physical impossibility. Their wakefulness meant there was an eternity of time to fill but work was unthinkable: why head out to cover some new Iraqi tragedy when they had their very own?

‘Fried eggs and tomatoes, anyone?’ Edwin was buzzing around the suite’s kitchenette, pouring olive oil into a scratched old frying pan. ‘I’m making breakfast.’

‘You’re always *doing* something,’ said Becky.

He looked confused, so she let it pass.

‘Oh, all right then, why not. Two, please, sunny side up.’ She had no appetite, and neither had the others, but they would eat because it kept Edwin happy. He had loved to cook for them on the road—the more challenging the circumstances, the better: Bosnia, Africa, Chechnya, it didn’t matter where. It was one of the therapies that worked for him.

When the unnecessary business of breakfast was complete, the long silence began. Everyone slipped into memories of Danny until a knock at the door reverberated around the room and jolted them from their reveries. Becky jumped, as if it was a gunshot.

Adi stood there with three people they'd never seen.

'Guys, I'd like you all to meet Tommy Harper from the *Times*, Jim Munro, who's here as a security adviser, and this is Camille Lowenstein, Danny's sister.'

She was the only one they looked at. She was just like Danny; a little taller and older, but with his presence. For a moment it felt as though he were with them again, back from the dead. The same persuasive eyes peered out at them through Dolce & Gabbana glasses, black and oblong, giving her the stern, studious look of the tutor you admired at university and wouldn't want to cross.

Rachel leapt up from the sofa and hugged her, while the others were more circumspect, shaking her hand one by one and introducing themselves.

'You got here pretty fast,' said Rachel.

'My bank has been fabulous but I'm kind of dazed; one minute sitting in Dubai, the next here in Baghdad—which isn't exactly the sort of place you expect to find yourself at a moment's notice.'

Her educated East Coast cadences rolled easily over them in much the same way Danny's always had.

Kaps led her to the shabby armchair he'd just been sitting in and fixed her a coffee while she took in the faces around her, especially Rachel's and Becky's, with their puffed-up, reddened eyes.

'So how was the flight in?' Rachel, like an uneasy cocktail-party guest, was determined to clutch at small talk. Becky, slumped beside her, said nothing at all.

For half an hour, between more tears and drifting silences, the Junkies told them what they knew of the area where Danny had disappeared, the various insurgent groups who operated there and the extent to which the Americans were or were not in control. At the end of it, Harper and Munro thanked them and said they needed to make some calls.

'I should be going too,' said Camille.

Why, said the look on Rachel's face. What the hell else is there to do?

'Stay if you like. It's nice to talk about Danny.'

When Turner and Munro had gone, Camille asked them again if they knew what he'd been doing in al-Talha.

'That's the beauty of being freelance, and the curse,' said Kaps. 'You don't have to tell anyone your plans, but when it all goes wrong, no one knows what you've been up to. He could be pretty secretive.'

'Really?'

'It's the reason he left the *Times* in the first place—to be a free spirit. Said the bureau had become a fortress, with all the security consultants and armed guards you had to have there. Soldier boys like your friend Munro.'

'He took a lot of risks?'

Kaps chuckled.

'We all take risks. You're taking a risk just by being in this city, in this country. But Danny? Yeah, he took more than most.'

He handed Camille the coffee he'd just made. She grabbed it in the palms of both hands, defying its heat. You're a tough cookie, Kaps thought, and something told him to be a little wary about what he said.

'And what d'you think are his chances?' Camille asked. 'You guys know Iraq so well and I really don't have a clue.'

'Okay then, no bullshit,' said Kaps. 'If this had been down south with the Shia, I'd say good. But we could be talking about al-Qaeda—al-Zarqawi in particular. Not exactly renowned for the quality of his mercy.'

Camille nodded slowly. She was scared they'd think he was Jewish: people often assumed they were because of the family name, when in fact Lowenstein was the town in Germany her parents had originally come from.

'So are you and Danny close?' asked Kaps. He couldn't remember ever hearing Danny talk about his sister.

'Not especially, I'm afraid. Different worlds; me in Dubai, him in all these war zones.'

'When did you last see him?'

'This is going to sound crazy, but I guess it would have been a few years ago.'

She was too embarrassed to admit it was actually twelve: she didn't want to have to answer all the questions it would provoke. As it was, she could sense a frisson of surprise ripple around the room.

It had been 22nd June 1992, to be precise, and she remembered not only the date but his last words before he put the phone down on her: 'I just don't think we have a thing to say to each other any more. I know I'm supposed to love you, but the truth is I don't even like you very much. Maybe it'd be best if you didn't call again.'

For the rest of that week, Camille was busy at the embassy. Adi reported that First Cavalry had pulled in a bunch of local hoods around al-Talha and army intelligence was grilling them, so far without result. The news blackout had been lifted and he wanted her to record an appeal they could put on al-Arabiya television, but no one could agree on what she should say: was she asking for the return of a hostage or a body? And how should she sound? On a conference call with Washington, the FBI advised her to be tough, while the man from the State Department urged a more emollient approach. 'Remember, you may just have his life in your hands,' said the disembodied DC voice.

After the embassy meetings, Harper would go back to the bureau of the *New York Times*, where he was staying, while Munro was happy to hang out with old SAS chums now employed in Baghdad's burgeoning security industry. Camille would have dinner at the Hamra and spend time with Danny's friends. Getting to know them was as good a way as any of getting to know him. She found them fascinating, like rare species in a zoo, so unlike all the expats in her world who had done nothing and seen nothing. These people—she could tell it from their eyes—had seen so much. Too much perhaps.

'He's been in good hands since...well, whenever it was you last met with him,' Rachel told her one evening. 'He was...I mean he *is*... such a good friend to us.'

No one else said anything. Camille was becoming used to these gaping holes in the conversation.

'I do read his stuff from time to time,' she said after a minute or so. 'I mean, I can see what a good writer he is.'

'Unique,' said Rachel. 'And driven like you wouldn't believe.'

'I think I would. Driven is a Lowenstein family trait, and not always an entirely healthy one. But please, go on. It's good to be with the people who were closest to him. What was it that brought you guys together?'

'We were thrown together, I suppose,' said Rachel sadly, but smiling too. 'And I guess we shared a feeling, a spirit.'

'A "spirit"?''

'Well, I'll tell you how Danny once put it. I remember it so well, we were lying on a rooftop in Mogadishu. The al-Sahafi Hotel, starlit and tracer-lit as usual. He said, "We live more in a year than most people live in a lifetime." There was a kind of arrogance about that which I loved, like we were better than mere mortals.'

For a while the only sounds in the Presidential Suite were coughs and sniffles, and the distant din of the Baghdad traffic trying to seep in through the windows.

'And when Danny said that, it made me think about when I was about ten, on holiday with my parents on the west coast of Ireland. We were on a beach, by a loch. Local builders would come along with a big tractor and trailer, and dig up the sand. They wanted it for making concrete and didn't see why they shouldn't just help themselves. I remember going up to them and saying, "But you can't

just steal the beach; you can't steal the sand.” And they laughed their heads off at this silly girl from America then turned their backs on me. Well, I used to tell Danny we were no better than those guys; we were sandstealers too. I had this vision of an hourglass—you know, where you pour sand from one bit to another to measure time. The way I saw it, we were stealing sand and stealing time, because every day of our lives was so damned rich, and every year seemed to last so long. Danny loved that, absolutely adored it. From that day on he was always calling us the sandstealers.’

‘So when was it you first met up?’

Rachel’s eyes twinkled and the tears in them seemed to dry as she was carried back to the day that everything began.

‘It was 1994—in my case, anyway. Another century, another millennium. The truth is, your brother inspired me. I’m really not sure I’d have ever become a journalist without him. I think I was only about 16 when I started reading his stuff. There was nothing on earth I wanted more than to do what he was doing and see what he was seeing, so I went to where I knew he was, simple as that. I just got up one day and went to Bosnia.’

Her friends shifted uncomfortably, wondering if they should stop her reminiscing, but it was too late already.

### 3

## The Balkans, January 1994

Rachel Kelly was a tender 23 when she arrived, via Budapest, in Split. The Croatian port amounted to a backstage holding pen for all those war-zone wannabes who yearned to perform in Sarajevo, the theatre of their dreams, but she couldn't hide from herself a mild sense of disappointment: she'd come to watch a war and so far found only the humdrum routines of peace. In the bustling streets of Split, there were the sounds of bells and buskers, but where were the lightning cracks of gunfire and the thunderclaps of artillery? On a crisp morning, Rachel was breathing in clean, fresh air rather than the cordite of explosives, and it didn't smell good.

The citizens of Split could still scarcely believe their luck. They'd escaped the Balkan inferno, and every day they were glad to be alive. These were beautiful people in a beautiful city, and it gave Rachel an idea of what Sarajevo must once have been—a magnificent painting, now slashed apart by war. Outside her hotel, she watched a young couple canoodling without embarrassment. They kissed in a way that said they appreciated peace and were determined to make the most of it. After all, had they been born just a few miles to the east, they would be fighting now—either killing, maiming and raping, or being killed, maimed and raped. Street-side caresses in winter sunshine seemed endlessly preferable.

By lunchtime, Rachel was happy to be checking in for a UN aid flight into Sarajevo, heaving her bag and rucksack on to the scales.

'These weigh too much,' said the soldier from Norwegian Movement Control—NorMovCon, in UN-speak. Ultra-blond, with slightly feminine cheekbones, he belonged in a gleaming Scandinavian airport with polished floors and expensive shops and bars. 'Twenty kilograms, that's your limit. Sorry, but these are twenty-three.' Rachel decided he was the epitome of precise, European efficiency, no amount of which had been able to save this corner of the continent from sliding into civil war. 'You will have to lose three kilos, please. Thank you.'

She gave him a look to make him melt, as other soldiers would melt in the years of warfare that lay ahead for Rachel Kelly, Arlington's young warrior. Norwegians, she thought: nice, even when they're trying to be nasty.

'All right, just today,' he sighed, thumping one of the many clean pages of her passport with a big blue stamp that said, intriguingly: *Maybe Airlines, Sarajevo*. 'But there is no guarantee you get a seat. P3s are lowest priority.'

'P3s?'

'Journalists. People like you.' He said it with a certain relish, pleased to hint that reporters like her were not fit to wipe the boots of some of the other heroes on board today's flight—peacekeepers, doctors and aid workers. 'We call you if there's room.'

But Rachel *had* to get to Sarajevo. The war had been raging for two years and she was horribly late already. She couldn't afford to miss another day.

She found a broken plastic seat close to a gaggle of photographers who were chatting among themselves. Cameras hung like ripe fruit around their necks, with more around their ankles as if they'd fallen from the tree. They had weather-beaten, battle-hardened faces and the air of people who had seen all there was to see in the world. Rachel, who had seen nothing, was intimidated. The men were tall with stubble on their chins, exotic scarves and an earring here and there, but there was a woman too, which helped Rachel pluck up the courage to approach them.

'Hey there! Look, I'm sorry to bother you, but I just wondered if you guys are heading up to Boz?'

*Boz?* No one who'd ever been to Bosnia would dream of calling it that, and it sounded even worse in a happy-go-lucky American accent. *Boz*, for Christ's sake! They inspected her for a moment, this new girl, so breathlessly enthusiastic: she was pretty, with conventionally straight, shoulder-length brown hair parted on the left and a flurry of freckles that had fallen on the slopes of a ski-jump nose. No doubt they should have faded years ago, but they'd decided, stubbornly, to stick around.

'*Boz?*' said the lone female. She wore no make-up and was wearing a black woolly hat and a torn, blue Gore-Tex jacket. It tried to hide a body which was heavier than Rachel's and not flattered by comparison. 'Oh, I see. You mean *Bosnia?*'

Rachel had rather much too much going on in her head to detect the irony.

'Yeah, I'm hoping to get on the flight, only the UN guys said we're low priority.'

'Course we are!' The accent was wild Australian, honed somewhere in the outback. 'We're the parasites, scum of the earth. Then again, not too many people are mad enough to want a plane ride into Sarajevo—that's if the plane ever makes it. They don't call it Maybe Airlines for nothing.'

'That's what they stamped in my passport.'

'Maybe they give you a seat, maybe they don't. Maybe it takes off, maybe it gets shot down...'

'I'll take my chances,' Rachel said with a cool determination the Australian rather liked. She remembered her own first flight into Sarajevo two years earlier.

'I'm Becky. Becky Cooper. I was just heading over to that shitty little café. Can I get you something? Whatever they put in your cup, they'll add about half a sack of sugar. If that doesn't get you going, you're probably dead already.'

She let out the little laugh which, Rachel would discover, was the culmination of almost everything she said. She used laughter like bad punctuation—randomly, even when she wasn't happy or when what she said wasn't funny. Her face was round and lit up by a big white smile that never seemed to leave her. In time, Rachel would come to see the sadness that lay beneath it.

Becky stepped away from the others, who'd already lost interest in Rachel, or pretended they had, and the two women shook hands firmly, like men do.

That'd be great, thanks. Rachel Kelly, by the way. So who are you working for?

'Sigma. They sell my stuff on. Usually *Newsweek* in America, or *Stern* in Germany. Basically anyone who'll pay.'

Rachel was impressed. *Newsweek* had been her weekly bible for years. She'd curled up in bed with it when her friends were reading teenage magazines about pop and puppy love and first-time sex.

Becky handed over a stash of damp, dog-eared notes for two small coffees. As they found a table, she yanked the woolly hat off her head. Balkan sun, fighting its way through grubby airport windows, appeared to backlight her. A tangle of curls tumbled down, flame-red in unexpected contrast to pale white skin. Rachel's immediate thought was Queen Elizabeth the First, the Warrior Queen. A few days later, when she mentioned the comparison, Becky was unusually downcast. *Virgin* Queen more like, she said.

'Anyway, good to meet you, Rachel Kelly. So who are *you* with then?'

'No one, to be honest. It's my first foreign assignment. And when I say assignment, I guess the truth is I've assigned myself.'

'My God, that's brave.'

'It's just something I've wanted to do...'  
She paused, then mumbled, half hoping Becky wouldn't hear the rest, '...for so long.'

Becky was disarmed. She was warming to this young American. It was what she liked about the war: you could meet someone and be their friend within days, or even hours. Spinoza, one of the other photographers, called it fast-food friendship.

'Well, stick with me and I'll show you the ropes.'

Rachel felt the tension slip away from her. As she sipped the thick, syrupy Turkish coffee, she explained how she'd abandoned her local paper in Arlington ('a tedious little rag') and got a portfolio

of strings with some bigger ones, plus an obscure monthly magazine about foreign affairs. It would be just about enough.

‘So then, Sarajevo? Quite a place to do your apprenticeship.’

‘The truth is I’m lazy. I just can’t face crawling up the ladder—all those training courses and job applications and interviews, I’m just not cut out for it. I hate to sound pushy, but why wait ten or twenty years for your guys on *Newsweek* or the *Post* to make me a foreign correspondent when I can appoint myself one—right here, right now.’

‘Mmm. And you hate to sound pushy! Well, it all seems deliciously simple.’ Becky gave her coffee a sceptical stir but she recognised in Rachel’s eyes the same yearning to see Sarajevo that she’d once had. ‘As a matter of fact, I *do* think it’s pretty simple.’ Becky unleashed a gust of can-do Australian enthusiasm. ‘You make your own luck in this business. If you’ve got an ounce of talent, Sarajevo will help you shine. The whole world is watching, after all. Watching that city, but watching it through us.’

Rachel’s mouth widened into a grin. For so long people had doubted her. Now here was a pro, and a Bosnia pro at that, who seemed to believe in her. Perhaps her fantasies weren’t so crazy.

Becky noticed the wad of photocopied cuttings Rachel had stuffed into a transparent plastic folder. They were tatty from constant reading and re-reading, and when Becky started leafing through them, Rachel felt not only like the new girl but the swot, caught in possession of homework it was most uncool to have.

‘You’ve only got the collected works of Danny Lowenstein in here!’

‘I really like his stuff. I find it so...you know...emotional.’

‘Yeah, emotional. Fictional, too, sometimes.’

‘Really?’

‘No, not really. I’m just being a jealous bitch. It can get like that in Sarajevo.’

‘D’you know him then—Daniel Lowenstein, I mean?’

‘It’s *Danny*, not Daniel. And yes, of course I do. All the girls adore him.’

They both steeled themselves for a last sip. *All the girls adore him*. In the long years of pain and pleasure that lay before her, Rachel would find it to be a statement not of opinion but undisputed fact.

When the flight was called, Becky and Rachel were the only journalists allowed on—to the consternation of the other photographers. ‘Ladies first,’ Becky grinned at them.

Rachel crossed the runway to the plane like an old lady with curvature of the spine; she was bent double beneath her rucksack, which contained not only Danny’s epic, 423-page account of the break up of the Balkans but all the clothes she could cram in, including a bulk supply of underwear in case laundry was impossible. There were industrial quantities of soap, deodorant, make-up, perfume and tampons, and—for bribes—cigarettes and chocolate (even if the temptation to eat it herself might well prove overwhelming). There were half a dozen notebooks, a box of pens, her laptop with all its assorted cables, a torch and batteries and a short-wave radio—her lifeline to the world.

Becky put an arm round her as the loadmaster helped them squeeze through the plane’s narrow door. The engines were revving louder and louder, and Rachel could no longer make herself heard, but she beamed Becky one of her made-in-Heaven smiles, which said ‘thanks’ and ‘this is going to be fun’ at the same time.

‘Next stop Sarajevo!’ the loadmaster shouted as they taxied for take-off. Next stop your new life, Rachel Kelly. He gave her some squashy yellow earplugs and helped her snap together the complicated, four-pronged seat belt. The Hercules heaved itself off the runway, spectacular in its defiance of the laws of gravity, and Becky quickly fell asleep. The familiar motion of flight drugged her, like a weary commuter on her way to work.

The passengers were crammed together uncomfortably on narrow canvas seats arranged in a long line. Most were aid workers or officials from UNPROFOR, UNHCR and various other acronyms from the UN’s bewildering myriad of agencies. Most soon had their eyes shut, but from the moment

she first clambered aboard Rachel had never felt more wide awake. She tried to peer through the tiny porthole behind her, but only briefly could she glimpse the Balkan hills and valleys down below, wondering what they had in store for her. As the Hercules reached its cruising altitude, she shivered, coveting Becky's unglamorous woolly hat.

At the end of its journey, the Hercules plunged into a sudden, suicidal nosedive. Rachel's stomach flung itself from her body. She'd always suspected this plane was just too damned big for its own good.

Becky stirred slowly, and bellowed into Rachel's ear.

'Don't worry, it's just in case anyone wants to take a shot at us. Like I told you—Maybe Airlines.'

The plane levelled off at the last minute, and Rachel swung around once more, just in time to see a blur of blackened, roofless houses and the jagged ruins of mutilated tower blocks.

'Hello, war,' she mumbled to herself beneath the engines' roar.

Snow was falling steadily on Sarajevo, trying to hide its horrors from the world.

'Where now?' asked Rachel.

'Oh, I'm getting a ride into town,' said Becky. '*We're* getting a ride.'

There was a tedious, 25 minute wait before finally he strode in.

'And about time too.' Becky gave him a brief embrace. 'This is Rachel, one of your fellow countrymen. You have to be very nice to her, it's her first time—so to speak. Rachel, meet Daniel L. Lowenstein, award-winning reporter and our cabbie for the day.'

Rachel shook his hand, surprised Becky hadn't mentioned he'd be meeting them when they'd discussed him earlier. She couldn't help compare the face in front of her with the immaculately lit, carefully posed picture on the dust jacket. He looked rougher in the flesh, unshaven and uncombed, and the familiar dimple in his chin was largely buried beneath stubble. Now that she could see him in colour, she realised his eyes were a rich chocolate brown. They were good eyes, but they didn't look at her for very long; they didn't seem interested and flitted around elsewhere.

She was in awe of him but quite determined that wouldn't mean developing any kind of crush on him. It would be so adolescent, and above all she needed people to take her seriously. She hoped they'd become friends and close colleagues, though it was quite possible that, as an aristocrat of the press corps, he wouldn't waste his time on an apprentice like her.

'Hi,' he said casually.

From nowhere, a mortar exploded—not far away, though not close either by Sarajevo's stringent standards: perhaps 200 yards. Rachel flinched instinctively. No one else moved a muscle.

'They'll come at you a lot closer than that,' said Danny. 'People say it's the one you don't hear that kills you.'

'Yeah, don't worry,' said Becky. 'Just the Serbs' way of saying hello. Letting you know you're very welcome, Rachel. A few months and you'll be able to bore us with whether it's incoming or outgoing, a shell or a mortar, Russian made or Chinese.'

Rachel nodded. Even if it were only a stray round, here was her first snort on the drug of war and she was hooked already. She climbed eagerly into the passenger seat of Danny's armoured Land Rover.

'This is unbelievable,' she whispered as they eased their way through the butchered buildings of downtown Sarajevo: tower blocks reduced to blackened stumps; happy homes now useless, their walls pockmarked by an acne rash of bullet holes, charred rafters where roofs had been, children's bedroom curtains fluttering like flags of surrender in the snowy breeze. A cosmopolitan city that had once glowed with pride as host of the winter Olympics—demolished, almost at a stroke.

'It gets worse,' Danny promised, as he sat hunched over the wheel, the wipers working frantically to clear the windscreen of snow.

'Worse? It already looks like Berlin in 1945.'

‘Half a century on and *plus ça change*’ His voice was husky. It said to her New York, Yale, Democrat. ‘It’s like all the hatreds way back then went into deep freeze, and now they’ve thawed out and come back to life.’

As she looked around, she could see what he meant: everything flickered in the black and white of jerky, scratchy newsreel footage. The faces she saw were of the past yet catapulted into the modernity of late 20th-century Europe. What could these people possibly know of mobile phones or U2 or REM? They didn’t belong here.

‘This is a prison rather than a city,’ Danny went on, sounding like one of his articles or a chapter from his book. ‘Three hundred thousand inmates with no chance of escape—and who knows when their sentence will end? The best they can hope for is to survive here. Watch them: they’re just scavenging around. Existing, really.’

She studied the Sarajevans they drove past. Some were pushing wheelbarrows with the firewood they had collected from chopping down trees by the Miljacka River or smashing up furniture. Others dragged sledges loaded with bottles and plastic containers as they went in search of water. She had read stories of how people were surviving on snails and nettles and fir-tree juice. He was right: *I’m still alive*, they seemed to say to each other with silent shrugs, as if it were an achievement in itself.

‘You know the real difference between us and them, Rachel? We can come and go; we’ve got our UN accreditation and a ride pretty much any time we want on Maybe Airlines, but they can’t leave until the war is over.’

Rachel thought it best not to tell him what was running through her head: that she didn’t ever *want* to leave.

‘And here we are on Snipers’ Alley.’ Danny was playing the tour guide on the ultimate holiday-from-hell. ‘See those blocks of flats? There are Serbs up there who’ll shoot at anything that moves, faceless, nameless bastards that they are.’

She saw people walk nervously behind the cover of buildings, then gather in small clusters where they peered across the Miljacka as if they might be able to see the snipers who terrorised them every time they ventured out. Suddenly, they would take their chance and dart across exposed ground until they reached the next block and its temporary sanctuary. She watched an old man willing his weary legs to run as fast as they had when he was young, and a mother trying to zigzag across the open street, dragging her child behind her.

Becky started strapping on her helmet and Rachel wondered whether she should have brought one as well as her flak jacket. Still, Danny wasn’t wearing any body armour at all. Later Rachel would learn this was his moral stand: if the ordinary people of Sarajevo had to survive without Kevlar to cover their heads and hearts, then so would he.

‘So this is where I turn into the king of drag-racing.’

Like the good, law-abiding citizen that she was, Rachel fastened her seat belt, while Danny stabbed his boot down on to the accelerator and crashed up and down through the gears. Swerving and sometimes skidding, he dodged craters, fallen lampposts, wrecked buses and trams, and the burnt-out, bullet-ridden vehicles of all those racing drivers who hadn’t quite made it to the chequered flag. Black ice lay in wait beneath freshly fallen snow, ready to pick them off, just like the Serbs.

‘You know what?’ he shouted over the groaning gears. ‘My greatest fear is to die here stupidly.’

‘As opposed to what—heroically?’ said Becky from the back.

‘Yeah, heroically. A sniper’s bullet or a mortar. I want you guys to put up an epitaph for me that says what a brave reporter I’ve been, not what a goddamned awful driver.’

Rachel was beginning to wish he’d talk less and worry more about the road.

‘So, Rachel, why have you come?’

The question took her by surprise. She could have given him so many reasons but wasn’t sure where to start. After all, what could she possibly say about Yugoslavia that would be of any interest to someone who’d written 423 pages on the subject? It was easier to say nothing.

‘Oh, I...I don’t know really.’

‘Come on! I’m driving you down the most dangerous road in the fucking world and you don’t know?’

‘What I mean is, I could give you all the usual reasons. But in the end I guess...well, you’re gonna think this is really terrible, but I suppose I was just bored.’

Rachel looked at more blackened, roofless homes, but all she kept seeing was the small pink bedroom where she had been hidden for too many of her 23 years. Even as she had packed for Bosnia, she had peered down from their doll’s house on Lakeside Drive to the front lawn—manicured to death by her father, who would tiptoe around it with lengths of string, trying to measure the length and width of the hedge so that his shears could trim it with mathematical certainty. A world of meticulous perfection, where she was suffocated by a lonely father’s love. A world away from Sarajevo.

‘Don’t you think that’s unbelievable?’ said Danny. ‘For pretty much the first time this century we’re the generation that don’t have to fight a First World War or Second World War or Cold War, and yet we race out here in search of, well...war. We’ve got peace—millions died so we could have it—and all we say is: No thanks, that’s a bit tedious. You wouldn’t believe the desperadoes who turn up here. Peace is boring, they say, war is fun! I want what you guys had—in 1914, or 1939. I want a slice of the action too. I want to live my dreams living other people’s nightmares.’

It was the first of many speeches she would hear from Danny, and she felt chastened. Despite the cold, her face was turning red and hot. Was he calling her a desperado? On one level it was an attack on all the war correspondents in the city—including himself, presumably—but the way he said it sounded like he was accusing her.

The Holiday Inn loomed into view at last, one of the great war hotels. The Commodore in Beirut, the Colony in Jerusalem, the Intercon in Kabul, the al-Rashid in Baghdad—Rachel had read about them all, and now she could say she’d stayed in one.

The ugly yellow box was the one building in Sarajevo most people would have happily seen blasted off the map, an eyesore that belonged not in this ancient Ottoman city but on the dismal outskirts of Anywhere, America. Yet in the space of a couple of years it had achieved mythical status. Journalists flocked to stay in it. Just like them, the Holiday Inn was enjoying a war which was good for business. Hack or hotel, Sarajevo could make your name.

The rooms on the south side, facing the Serb suburb of Grbavica, no longer had windows, or in some cases even walls. Even so, they cost 90 bucks a night, and demand outstripped supply.

The tyres squealed as Danny plunged down a ramp into the hotel’s underground car park, a fortified sanctuary where the occasional reporter had been known to hide like a shell-shocked Tommy in the trenches. The car park was crammed with white armoured Land Rovers just like Danny’s, tightly packed together.

Becky got out of the car and Rachel noticed her touch a wall three times.

‘One of her little rituals,’ Danny explained. ‘Along with the blue underwear.’

Becky pushed him playfully.

‘So? And what about your lucky boots then? He wears the same ones every day, Rachel. Had them for years. They absolutely stink, of course. Anyway, superstition, religion: it’s all the same. All about making sure we stick around as long as possible.’

Rachel heaved her rucksack on to her back, picked up her bag, and staggered after the others through the echoing chasm of the car park and up into the hotel lobby. Perhaps Danny had a point: it *was* strange that a generation born in peace should want to come here. And having got here, to kneel at the altar of survival with sacrifices of walls and underwear and smelly boots, just to make sure it didn’t die.

The wreckage of her last conversation with her father came back to her; the two of them sitting in the chintzy sitting room, Billy Kelly pleading with his daughter as they waited for the cab that would take her to the airport.

‘It’s just that there’s only you, sweetheart,’ he had told her. ‘What else do I have in my life? Who else do I have?’

‘But I’m not leaving your life, Dad. I’m just going away for a while. Surely you don’t want me to stick around here forever?’

His silence had implied he did.

‘So when will you be back?’ he’d asked. When the war ends, she could have said—that is, unless another one has started up by then. But they both knew there was no certain answer to his question, and so Billy had cried more than at any time since creeping cancer had destroyed his wife a decade earlier, leaving behind a broken husband and a bewildered daughter. It was his fault: he had smothered her with his love, what father wouldn’t have? He hated it when she got a boyfriend or a car, or took a plane ride to another city. He wanted to lock her up, his princess in the tower.

Like many Americans, Billy—sales representative, golfer and Sunday Christian that he was—understood very little of Yugoslavia’s meltdown. He didn’t see what it had to do with him, apart from the fact that the only thing he cared for in his life wanted to run away there. Patiently, like a history teacher, Rachel sat with him and tried to explain how, since the Second World War, the communist dictator Marshal Tito had managed to keep a lid on all its squabbling parts, but his death in 1980 had blown it off. She described the rise of Slobodan Milosevic and Serb nationalism, and how the rival republics had started clamouring for independence, including Bosnia in 1992. She told him how, although Western nations had recognised that independence, the Serbs had not, attempting to crush it by surrounding Sarajevo with their big guns and laying siege to it. When Billy still looked confused, she talked to him with kindergarten simplicity: the Bosnian Muslims were the good guys in white hats, just trying to recreate their homeland in the post Cold War world. The baddies in black were the Serbs, trying to throttle an independent, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural Bosnia at birth. But when Rachel threw in the added complication of the Bosnian Croats, it was just too much for Billy Kelly.

‘How in the heck can you have two civil wars going on at once, between *three* sides? This stuff is making my head spin.’

‘Dad, it’s the story of my generation. It’s what I want to do.’

He had grabbed her by the shoulders.

‘I promised your mother I’d look after you, I promised her on her deathbed. What if she knew I’d let you go to war? What would she say if you wind up next to her in a grave?’

But as Rachel made her way through the bowels of the Holiday Inn, she was more convinced than ever she’d done the right thing. When Becky opened the doors for her into the hotel foyer, it was as though someone was pulling apart the curtains for the beginning of Act One. Finally, she was stepping on to the mighty stage of Sarajevo.

‘My, my, so this is where it begins,’ she said, primarily to herself. Danny was walking just ahead, and she wondered what he made of her. Despite his little tirade in the car, did he quite like her fresh-faced, ever-ready enthusiasm, or did he find it irritating? Did he really think she was a desperado? She supposed she shouldn’t care.

It was probably colder inside the hotel than outside, Rachel decided. In the cavernous atrium of the lobby, she could see her breath exhaling in white puffs. She heard the echo of a strange ripping noise and looked up to see another group of reporters pulling apart the Velcro fasteners of their flak jackets. TV crews were coming and going, speaking a multiplicity of languages, heaving silver boxes around, wielding cameras and fluffy microphones. Behind the reception desk sat a couple of greying women in scarves and overcoats. They could have been waiting at a bus-stop.

‘Room 331,’ said one, handing her the key.

‘Thanks, I’m sure it will be lovely.’ Rachel wasn’t sure of it at all. She pulled out the Maglite torch that would become her saviour, and negotiated her way through the blackness of the hotel stairwell. The hotel lifts looked encouragingly modern, but without electricity they sat lifeless and forlorn—like so much else in Sarajevo, a city slipping back in time. The place reeked of stale cigarette smoke

and her feet crunched on broken glass. Even with the Maglite, Rachel stumbled and tripped as she made her way up to 331, where she fumbled the key into the lock.

If the hotel were a fridge, Rachel's room was the icebox. Instead of glass in the window, there was UN polythene sheeting. Instinctively, stupidly, she checked the radiator, praying for a miracle of creeping warmth that never came. No power, no heat, and only sporadic water. A lot of nothing to pay good money for, thought Rachel, I might as well be sleeping in the street.

On the other hand, the room could boast at least some of the trappings of a real hotel. There was a flat yellow phone with a brown receiver. The sheets of her bed were white and clean, and in the bathroom there was even a small, but brand-new, bar of soap, and a toilet sealed with a strip of paper claiming it was sanitised. What was missing, Rachel realised, were the towels. Of course she hadn't brought any and perhaps because of this, or because she felt as though she was getting frostbite, or because Danny had made her feel so inadequate, or because she was alone for the first time since her arrival, she began quite unexpectedly to cry.

It was a raucous voice in the corridor outside that woke her. Rachel was groggily confused: at first she thought she was back in her bedroom on Lakeside Drive, but this was a different place altogether. She was surprised how long it took her to remember—four or five long, perplexing seconds. The voice got louder, until it was followed by a determined knock. Still disorientated, she swung her legs off the bed and staggered over to answer it.

It was Becky, who had just managed to wash her hair.

'There was only a bloody trickle, and so cold I thought it might freeze on my scalp!'

Rachel was unsure if it had been worth the ordeal: Becky hardly looked any different, except that now her curls were damp and limp.

'Just brought you a little present to say hello. You know, welcome to Sarajevo and all that.' She was carrying a bottle of Ballantine's whisky, a Vranac red wine and a Swiss Army knife. From the array of blades, she pulled out a miniature corkscrew: like a good girl guide she was prepared for anything. Rachel made a mental note to buy one next time she was at a duty-free.

Over the Vranac, they talked. Rachel told Becky about her soporific life in America and Becky described hers, on a sheep farm near a place called Piety, three hours from Perth, or as she put it, 'three hours from Earth'.

'Arse-end of the universe. Nothing and no one for a hundred miles, except sheep, of course. I spent months dreaming of going to the nearest town, let alone the nearest city, let alone the nearest country.'

Rachel felt bad for thinking Arlington was boring.

'Dad was an alcoholic and mum was on the way there and, to be honest, I couldn't blame them. I'd have been the same if I'd stayed. Look at me—probably am anyway.'

Piety was where she'd fallen in love with photography. An uncle had given her a camera for her fourteenth birthday.

'I remember the day I took my very first picture. It was just a sunset—the same one I'd seen a million times and never even noticed—and suddenly it was beautiful. And when I got the print, I was hooked forever. I took pictures of anything that moved, which wasn't very much in Piety'

Becky had left for England as soon as her parents would allow it, but even London hadn't been enough for her. After all those years in Piety, she needed a bigger buzz. She traipsed around a few war zones and then turned up in Bosnia.

'I wasn't bored any more, but lonely as I ever was.'

Becky moved on to the Ballantine's while Rachel, who was drinking almost nothing, started to feel uncomfortable. This woman she barely knew was opening her heart to her. She was an old hand in Sarajevo, brash and domineering, but she seemed to need a friend here. Almost as much as Rachel did.

'Really? But you're beautiful.'

‘Not the view of too many men, unfortunately. Reckon the job intimidates them—war-zone headbanger and all that. Maybe they think I’ll end up dying on them and they can’t be bothered with all the hassle of a funeral.’

They both laughed, but Becky was serious. For too long she had been unloved, unsexed, uncoupled. The only man who was in her life—or who she’d like to be—was here but out of reach.

‘Anyway, more mundanely: I forgot to mention there is one other thing you’ll be needing...’ With that she took off back to her room along the corridor, returning moments later with a Marks & Spencer carrier bag. ‘We call it the water baby. If you’re planning on having any hot baths here—or even lukewarm ones—you’ll be needing one of these—’

Like a magician, she delved into the bag and produced a large metal contraption that looked like some sort of engine part. It was the element of an immersion heater to warm up bath water, if and when the power came on.

‘Usually takes about two hours, but for best results, leave it in all day. Don’t get in when you’re pissed though, else you’ll end up electrocuting yourself. And that, as dear Danny would say, would be a very fucking stupid way to die.’

‘Thanks so much.’

‘Oh, I’m only lending it to you for tonight. After that you’ll have to trade stuff for it—like everyone else does.’

‘Trade?’

‘You know, medicine, make-up, batteries, coffee—any little goodies you’ve got stashed away in that great big rucksack of yours.’

‘And what happens when there’s no water to heat up?’

Becky took a last hefty swig of Ballantine’s. ‘Horde it. When it’s running—which is not too often—you make sure you fill the bath, and the toilet, and any other bowl or bucket you can lay your hands on. Mind you, it’s not drinking water here, not unless you’re desperate. It’s brownish yellow, a bit like pee.’

‘Yuk. Not cleaning my teeth in that.’

‘I’ve done mine with Coca Cola, even whisky. Oh, and one other thing...’

Rachel was growing weary of her endless list of tips, and feeling slightly patronised. She sensed they would be friends—maybe even good friends—but Becky was trying too hard.

‘Next time, bring your own plugs. This is the one hotel where they don’t exist. Big one for the bath, small one for the sink. Here you go, I’ve got a spare.’ Becky threw it to her as she left.

‘Good night, Rachel—nice to know you.’

Rachel supposed it was nice to know her too: she felt relieved to have met her, but daunted too.

Glad to be alone again, Rachel climbed into bed. She’d slept naked ever since she was a girl, but she quickly realised that in wintertime Sarajevo, nudity was not an option. The pile of discarded clothing was hastily reprieved and she dressed all over again, with the addition of a large woolly sweater. A bedspring dug hard into her back and she knew at once it would be an enemy.

In the narrow glow of her Maglite, Rachel opened up Daniel Lowenstein at page 108. It had been good to meet him, and yet—if she were honest with herself—slightly disappointing, too. He was not as she’d imagined. Like Becky, he seemed jovial enough, but she sensed a darkness in him. He hadn’t liked her, she was sure about that now.

She began a chapter about ethnic cleansing in Prijedor in 1992, and for the first time she could hear what he’d written in his voice, as though he were reading it aloud to her.

When the Chetniks came to the village, they had a wolf’s head stuck to the bonnet of one of their cars, and a refrigerated meat truck following on behind. Nermina, who was 12, had seen them coming and she was old enough to understand. She shouted out to her father Kemal, and he understood as well. He was the village doctor. He led Nermina and the rest of his family to the basement: his wife Reima, and their two sons Emir and Senad. Soon they could hear the screams and explosions outside:

the Chetniks were tossing hand grenades into houses, machine gunning those who stumbled out of them. Kemal didn't know whether to stay where they were, to come out and surrender, or to try and run. Then they heard men smashing down their front door and, in no time at all, the basement door as well. Nermina recognised the fat man who was with the Chetniks: he was the village policeman, Milan Krstic, and he lived only a few houses away. He was about 50 with a ruddy face, bad teeth and a big pot belly. She had sometimes caught him looking at her lustfully as she walked home from school.

Krstic had swapped his police uniform for that of the Serb irregulars. He took out a pistol and put it in the mouth of her baby brother Senad, who was only two years old. His little cheek was swollen by the barrel, like having a lollipop inside it. 'Hello, Nermina,' Krstic said. 'Would you like to help your family? Otherwise it will be bad for them.' Then he drew a knife and held it against her cheek and told her to take her clothes off. 'Are you a virgin?' he asked her. He said he liked virgins very much indeed.

Nermina was brave; she could do this thing, she had to do this thing. Once again, she understood. Her mother screamed and begged the policeman to rape her instead, but he ignored her. Krstic yanked down his trousers and the Chetniks cheered him on. Nermina was on the floor and weeping, and he was above her, with his unkempt beard and rotting teeth, and a half-smoked cigarette hanging from his mouth. This was what he had wanted, all those afternoons when he had watched her in her school uniform. But now, for all his desire, he could not make himself erect. The more he tried, the worse it got. His fellow Chetniks laughed and pushed him out of the way so that they could try.

Krstic was angry he had been humiliated. 'Turkish whore!' he screamed at her when the others had all finished. At first he said he was going to kill her, but then he thought of a crueller punishment: he would allow her to survive. One by one, he shot her family. Her baby brother first, then Emir who was eight. After that, and holding Nermina in his gaze, he shot her mother and finally the father she adored.

Krstic ordered the other Chetniks to leave her there, lying bruised and naked amid the corpses of her family. It was his punishment for her. The Chetniks were confused, but—as usual—Nermina was old enough to understand.

Rachel cried. She felt ridiculous and petty for having doubts about Danny: to unearth atrocities like these and recount them was journalism at its noblest. *She* wanted to meet survivors of ethnic cleansing like Nermina. *She* wanted to tell their stories to the world, so that it could know. Danny Lowenstein had not only been there and gathered this poor girl's harrowing testimony, he had retold it with compassion.

She read a few more pages until the day overwhelmed her. She turned off her torch, put her hands between her thighs for some extra warmth, and drifted off into a half-sleep in which she gave thanks that the Bosnia Danny Lowenstein was describing with such power was no longer an ocean away: it was all around her.

## 4

### Post-Liberation Baghdad, 2004

At the Hamra, a clunk announced the death for the day of the air-conditioning system. Baghdad had devoured its paltry quota of power. There was less electricity than in Saddam's time: for all their billion-dollar programmes, the occupiers couldn't keep the lights on. Soon, the last of the artificially cool air would be gone, chased out of the room by the high fever of an Iraqi summer's day, as overheated as Bosnia's winter had been frozen. The thermometer in the kitchenette said 122 degrees Fahrenheit and the Junkies wiped their fevered brows.

'Drink, anyone?' asked Edwin, his baldness reflecting the sunlight that cascaded through the window. He fetched a couple of large bottles of water from the fridge which, like the air conditioning, was lifeless, as if it had died in sympathy.

'You know what, talking about that Vranac makes me want a glass of wine.' Becky poured some red into a tumbler, even though it was still the middle of the morning. 'Rach, you want some?'

'No thanks. I'm giving it a rest.'

'Ciggy?'

Rachel shook her head again.

'God, that took me back.' Rachel was still smiling fondly. For a while it had seemed they were in Bosnia rather than Baghdad.

'Feels like a lifetime ago.' Becky, having barely said a word, was starting to talk. The wine was helping. 'We were babies really, you especially. I'd forgotten what a baptism of fire it was for you.'

'I'd forgotten quite a lot of things,' said Rachel.

'Oh yeah?'

'Like what a sweetheart you were to me. And what a pig Danny could sometimes be.'

She said it straight, without humour, eyes locked into a steely stare at nothing in particular. Camille recoiled and studied Rachel more carefully. Who was she, this girl who seemed so endearing with all her naive ambition back then in Sarajevo? And a decade on, who had she become?

Munro came in and announced that First Cavalry had secured the area round al-Talha. They were offering to take him to the scene of Danny's disappearance.

'I'd like to come too,' said Camille.

'Not sure you'd find it very useful, and it might be quite upsetting. His car's still there. Bit of a mess, apparently.'

Camille was irritated. Who was Munro to try and stop her? Danny was her brother, not his. She quietly insisted she would go and then, just to antagonise him a little more, she decided to invite Danny's friends as well.

'Maybe you guys want to tag along?'

Becky shivered again, the way she had when she first heard the news.

'I don't think so. Like he says, I'm not sure we would achieve much. Probably just get in the way.'

'Oh, I think we should,' said Kaps. 'There may not be another chance.'

'Look, I just don't *want* to, okay?' Becky snapped.

'Okay, Beck. It's okay' Rachel stroked her arm. 'No one's going to make you do anything you don't want to.'

First Cavalry were taking no chances. Half a dozen Humvees with Mark-19 grenade launchers and .50-calibre machine guns formed an inner and outer ring around Mohammed's car as if it were the Alamo. The vehicle still sat dead and useless where Abu Mukhtar's boys had killed it.

In the end, all the Junkies had agreed to join Camille, even Becky. It was a question of supporting each other, sticking together. In a huddle they studied the car through their sunglasses.

They were surrounded by a plain-clothes security detail from the embassy, requisite M16s on their hips, tight coils of plastic tubing sprouting from their ears and walkie-talkies glued to their mouths. Further away, nervy combat troops squatted on the road or lay face down in the dust and sand, pointing machine guns towards an enemy that could advance from any direction, at any time, in any form: a boy on a bicycle, a farmer pushing a wheelbarrow, a woman with flowers in her hands. The Holy Warriors of Iraq's insurgency came in all shapes and sizes, and often with a belt of death tied around their waist.

Outside in the sun, Becky looked more washed out than ever. She knew she shouldn't have come: her first instincts had been right; this would go badly for her. She'd held Rachel's hand tight throughout the journey, and then cried in her arms when she saw the shattered windscreen and the blood baked dry on Mohammed's seat.

A team of soldiers had started work, examining bullet casings, tyre marks and footprints, taking endless photographs and video footage of the scene. Munro was making his own measurements of the tyre treads on the road, and the distance between the bullet holes. He was in a world of his own, and making no attempt to involve Camille or any of the others.

The Junkies started wandering around, eyes fixed on the dusty ground. They seemed to be searching, too. Kaps, in particular, was preoccupied. He paced up and down imaginary channels, methodically retracing his steps from time to time. Eventually, Camille saw him pick something up; a card, she thought.

'Found anything?'

'Nah. Thought it might belong to Danny, but it's just rubbish.'

She saw him put it in his pocket anyway.

The Junkies stood together again, swaying a little, gently kicking up the sand, lost in thoughts and memories. Kaps wrapped a long, muscular arm round Becky while Edwin let his half-smoked cigarette fall to the ground and pulled Rachel to him, stroking her back with small circular motions of his hand. Not that she could feel it. They were all firmly encased in flak jackets and helmets and wet with sweat.

'What if we never know what happened to him?' asked Rachel. 'You know, sometimes they don't even find a body.'

'We have to stay positive.' Edwin, still holding her, had wrapped his kafiyyeh round his head to stop it burning in the sun and slapped some factor-50 over his face. There were white smears of it where he'd failed to rub it in. 'There may not *be* a body. My bet is he's a hostage somewhere, and absolutely fine.'

'Yeah, right,' said Kaps. 'A five-star hotel. The Iskandariya Hilton.'

'But they'll kill him, won't they?' said Rachel, ignoring both of them. 'When was the last time they let a hostage go?'

Camille was a few yards away, the other side of the car, scrutinising the little holes in it. She felt a wind whip up from nowhere; a summer dust storm was stirring. Grit and rubbish and clumps of vegetation started to swirl around in circles, and the palm trees bowed and bent. Camille lifted her head and saw a young shepherd approach. He looked about 16, dressed in grimy rags and disintegrating sandals; he'd been tending a small flock of sheep nearby. There was an untapped intelligence about him. On the assumption that he had come to murder rather than talk, he was being frisked at gunpoint by the soldiers but accepted the indignity. It was just how things were in the free Iraq.

One of the American officers, a major, agreed to hear what he had to say through an army translator. The shepherd boy talked for at least ten minutes, pointing and gesturing, intense, insistent. He spoke calmly but with determination: he had a story to tell. At the end of it, the major pulled out the Washington dollars he kept in a side pocket for rewards. He peeled away a couple of twenties and the boy took them without a smile. It was no more than he deserved.

'What did that kid have to say?' Camille asked the major.

‘That shepherd boy? Oh, nothing much.’

‘Come on, you were talking to him for ages.’

The major hesitated.

‘Okay, I’m not sure if I should be telling you this, but he says he was here when it happened, over on that hill back down the road. Kinda watched it, but only from a distance.’

‘And?’

‘Look, this may be garbage, but he says there was another car as well as Danny’s; two people inside it, he thought, one of them in a blue flak jacket—probably a Westerner. Pretty soon after the kid saw them go by, he heard gunfire from the bridge up here. He guessed they’d been shot up in some sort of ambush, except they managed to get the hell out. Drove back down the road to near where he was. Then he saw one of their tyres had been shot up.’

‘You’re kidding?’

‘That’s not all. Seems that it was *after* this that Mr Lowenstein came through on the same bit of road and slowed down to talk to these guys in the first car. But how about this? The kid says they didn’t try and stop him, just let him push on straight ahead—into the same damned ambush. How d’you like that? He couldn’t believe his eyes.’

‘That’s extraordinary,’ said Camille.

When Munro came over she told him the shepherd’s story.

‘Mmm. Strange,’ he said wrinkling up his face. ‘Could be useful. Not sure I’d believe everything he says, though. He’s just a peasant.’

‘That’s what I thought at first,’ said the major. ‘But he seemed pretty sure. Why would he make it up?’

Munro shrugged.

‘To collect some easy bucks? People can tell you a million different things in these villages.’

‘Maybe. Maybe not.’

‘So does he have descriptions?’ Munro asked the major.

‘He said he was too far away. He remembers the car was red and white though, some sort of saloon.’

Munro wrote it down as if he had to, but walked away again to finish off his measurements. Camille decided he was surly and unhelpful. When he’d gone, she asked the major quietly, ‘Could the boy take us back there, to where he saw the other car?’

It was only a couple of minutes away. The major drove Camille in a Humvee along with the shepherd and the interpreter.

There was nothing to see, but Camille inspected the tarmac and tried to conjure up the picture painted by the shepherd. Down the road the Junkies were still embracing each other, but an orangey-brown cloud had billowed up and was enveloping the landscape. Warily, because they’d had enough of desert days like this, the troops put on their sand goggles while the Junkies held hankies to their mouths and noses, and half-closed their eyes so the lashes could filter out flying dirt. Soon the wreck of Mohammed’s car was coated in sand. It seemed as though Iraq would like to bury it.

‘Okay, let’s get out of here now,’ the major said. ‘We can’t see shit and I hate being blind in a place like this.’

## 5

### Sarajevo, 1994

When morning arrived in Sarajevo like an unwelcome visitor, Rachel wondered where to start. She had made it here, but what now? Where to go, what to see, who to talk to? It wasn't as easy as it had seemed back in Arlington. She thought that breakfast might be the best place to begin so she went down to the dining room, a dingy ghost of what it once had been. The waiters were like apparitions too, in their white shirts and black bow ties. Their stoical demeanour insisted that, against all the available evidence, it was business as usual. They could have been restaurant staff on the *Titanic*.

The guests were dressed in fleeces, Puffa jackets and parkas. Rachel sat conspicuously alone, toying with a cold omelette, convinced everyone else was studying her solitude.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Danny approaching and her heart sank. She wondered if he was going to harangue her any more. He was carrying a helmet.

'Good morning. Thought I might find you here.'

'Oh. Hi there,' she pretended she hadn't noticed him coming over.

'A present for you. I never use it. Just let me have it back when you leave.'

'God, that's so...'

'I know, you're pathetically grateful.'

It had a strip of silver gaffer tape across it with *Lowenstein, A Rh+* scrawled in marker pen.

'Obviously you'll want to change the name tag.'

'Obviously,' she laughed, but he wound up the conversation before it had begun.

'Okay then, see you around.'

Rachel played with her omelette for a couple more minutes, and was relieved when Becky arrived. She was heading up to Pale, the Bosnian Serb headquarters. They had an interview with Karadzic—the crazy doctor, as she called him—and Rachel was welcome to come along if she felt like it.

'Course she feels like it,' said a deep voice just behind her. 'What else is she going to do here, hit the beach? Hello there, I'm Edwin Garland. *Daily Telegraph*. And you must be the young Rachel Kelly we've all been hearing so much about?'

She was getting used to shaking people's hands.

'Well, if you guys have got room...'

'Sure we've got room,' said Edwin. 'We've got Bessie.'

'Bessie?'

'My armoured car. One of my predecessors christened it Bessie. To be honest, I've never been quite sure why.'

He was English, with a naked scalp that Rachel couldn't take her eyes off. At first she thought it might be from some dreadful childhood alopecia, but then she detected a bluish haze of would-be stubble and decided he must shave it. In which case, how? Did he cover his head in foam every morning and scrape it with a blade, or use an electric razor? The thought of either made her wince, but the more she studied this brutal baldness, the more she realised it quite suited him, accentuating his heavy eyebrows and the dark brooding eyes beneath. It gave him an exotic look—of an eccentric adventurer, perhaps, or, less charitably, a convict.

In the car park, the underbelly of the hotel, Becky touched the same bit of wall she had when they arrived and banged her fist against Bessie's thick armour.

'She makes you feel...well, invulnerable. The only time you're ever really safe in this city is when you're deep inside her womb.'

Rachel struggled to open the passenger door: it was stiff and rusty and a dead weight she had to heave towards her.

‘Hope you don’t mind me hitching a lift. I feel a bit of a parasite.’

‘Well, we’re all parasites, I suppose, living off the blood of others. Spilt blood, usually. Anyway, glad to have you with us.’

At the last minute, someone from Reuters joined them too. He was called Kaps, apparently—Rachel was unclear if that was his Christian name or surname—and in stark contrast to Edwin, he had long, sandy brown hair down to his shoulders, gathered and tied up in a ponytail. He sat next to Becky in the back, closer than he needed to since the long bench seats that faced each other offered plenty of space. There was a wedding ring on his finger, but Rachel detected an air of possibility between them. Or impossibility.

They emerged on to Sarajevo streets buried beneath fresh falls of powdery snow.

‘He’s a bit of a nervous driver, aren’t you, Ed?’ shouted Becky from the back. He ignored her but she was determined to explain herself to Rachel: ‘You wouldn’t think he once drove tanks for the British Army. He wrote one of these off last year, you know; managed to skid it into the side wall of a little old lady’s home. The poor love thought the bang was a Serbian shell: just closed her eyes and prepared to die. And when she opened them, guess what? A handsome young Englishman stepping out from his Land Rover—in the middle of her fucking living room. She almost kissed him, she was so relieved.’

Edwin listened patiently but Rachel was embarrassed for him. The story was clearly Becky’s party piece, retold frequently and always at his expense.

‘Thanks for that recap, I’m sure Rachel’s absolutely fascinated.’

‘Of course she’s *absolutely fascinated*.’ Becky performed a caricature of his public school accent—Ampleforth: posh and very Catholic.

‘Okay, that’s enough. If you don’t want me to drive, I’ll turn round now.’

Edwin was serious. He’d had enough of being riled and Rachel saw for the first time how sensitive this former soldier could be. His scalp embodied the contradiction: it looked macho enough, but the delicate skin stretched across his skull spoke to her already of a dangerous vulnerability.

As they drove out of Sarajevo and over the hills into Radovan Karadzic’s lair, an empty Coke can rolled around irritatingly on Bessie’s floor. It was covered with the debris of assorted Junkie road-trips: Mars bar wrappers, half-eaten ration packs, film canisters and pages of ancient newspapers brought out from London long ago, now faded and mud spattered. Edwin rummaged through a stack of cassettes on the dashboard and picked out one labelled *Songs of Sarajevo*. To the sound of Seal performing ‘Crazy’—which Rachel would discover was their anthem—she gazed down on the crazy city they’d just left behind. From this height, it looked like easy pickings: a scrawny kid in the playground, smart but pitifully weak, beaten up by the bullies every day. The Serbs of the Yugoslav National Army—the third-biggest military machine in Europe—had their tanks and howitzers up in these hills. In their sights was brave, sophisticated Sarajevo, with its old Ottoman heart still beating, as bold a statement of multi-culturalism as you could find, a living example to the world. Mosques mingled with churches, Orthodox and Catholic. Now it was being blown apart, a foolish dream no one should ever have dared to entertain.

As they climbed higher towards Pale, there was an even thicker shroud of snow.

‘You know what’s really scary?’ Edwin said. ‘Just how easily Europe can turn her charms. It’s like the Nazis, plotting a holocaust in the forests of Bavaria. It looks so pretty, but behind the picture-postcard scenery, they’re busy coming up with clever plans to exterminate a people. There are no devils left in hell, they’re all up here in Pale. See these chalets, Rachel?’ Edwin was pointing as he drove. ‘It’s where the well-heeled of Sarajevo used to have their holiday homes. They’d pop up at weekends for a spot of skiing. And that’s the Panorama. Used to be one of the main resort hotels for visitors. Now it’s where the Serbs run the war.’

She took in its menace and held her breath. It was only a few miles south of Sarajevo, but it felt like another country.

Inside the Panorama, they shivered for more than 90 minutes. If it were possible, this was a place even more glacial than the Holiday Inn. The cold made their bones ache. Karadzic was in a meeting, they were told. He'd be with them when he could. Around them scurried sullen Chetniks, some with long hair and beards who hadn't washed for days and looked as though they'd just returned from another busy day of ethnic cleansing. One or two glared contemptuously at the visitors, as if to say: Who the fuck let you Muslim-loving, do-gooding Westerners in here? What would you know about us, the proud people of Serbia? What could you possibly understand about the endless centuries of our suffering?

Eventually, the man himself strode in, beaming at them from beneath the shocking mane of his wild grey-white hair.

Rachel had read so many profiles of him, seen him so often on the television, this self-proclaimed poet and psychiatrist, and now he was coming up to her, offering his hand in greeting. She took it and, after the briefest hesitation, shook it. At last she felt part of the war whose every twist and turn she'd followed. Day one, and she was meeting the man who had masterminded the entire conflict, its very architect. Already there was something to tell her children, and for them to tell theirs: that she'd had face time with one of the principal characters of late twentieth-century Europe.

'Hello, sir, Rachel Kelly. From the United States.'

The others introduced themselves, too, but Rachel noticed how they avoided shaking hands, nodding awkwardly instead with thin, noncommittal smiles.

'Shall we go through?' asked Karadzic in his flawless English, so familiar from the television bulletins. 'It's rather cold out here.' He didn't bother to apologise for being late; he didn't even mention it.

For the next half an hour the Führer of Pale explained, over a table laden with French cognac and fine cheese, how the loss of every life was to be regretted, but how the Muslims had made the war inevitable. We wanted to live in peace, he said, but you have to understand, they are trying to launch an Islamic Jihad right here, in the heart of Europe. For the good of Christianity, for the sake of world civilisation, they must be stopped. We *will* defeat them, even if the only friends we have left are God and the Greeks. Remember this, he said as he puffed on a Cuban cigar, soon they will not need to count the dead in Sarajevo, they will need to count the living.

Rachel wrote down every word, her hand soon stiff with cramp.

Towards the end, he offered them some coffee and it was then that Rachel made her cataclysmic error—a 'crime' Danny Lowenstein would call it when he heard. As Karadzic bade them all farewell, he managed to kiss her quickly on both cheeks. She felt his skin on hers, cold and slightly rough. She inhaled the smell of his aftershave and thought it curious he should bother with such vanities in a civil war. It all happened before she realised what he, or she, was doing.

That night it was supper in the dining room. Becky had pushed three tables together and about a dozen of the press corps were sitting round them. Rachel, exhausted but elated after her debut day in Pale, was ravenous. She didn't care what the menu offered, she'd have whatever there was and more.

As she walked in, he was at one end, presiding, the king at his banquet. Taking off her coat, Rachel wondered if she might contrive to sit close to him, but he was already sandwiched in by Edwin, Kaps and Spinoza, one of the photographers she'd seen in Split. The four of them were hunched up together and laughing raucously. Danny was the master raconteur, with an inexhaustible supply of anecdotes, the most trivial incident embellished to make it funnier. Fragments of a story drifted over to her, something about him hiding from the KGB in a hotel room before the fall of communism. Lithuania, she thought she heard him say.

'So I knew they were looking for me, and they were banging on my door going, "*Meester Lowenstein, can vee talk to you?*"' Danny's ridiculous Russian accent provoked more hilarity. 'And I'm

butt naked, but I jump out of bed and hide in a cupboard in the bathroom, and my heart's pumping. And I hear them unlock the door and then this big bear of a guy's opening the cupboard and I think I'm toast—and of course it's the fucking room service I forgot I'd ordered, and the waiter's looking at me in all my glory, saying, "*Do you vont some mayonnaise?*"

Then the stand-up comic turned shrewd political analyst—Rachel noticed how effortlessly he could change gear. He spoke quickly, oozing confidence. Even when he digressed down labyrinthine side alleys, his sentences were so crafted he might have written them beforehand. His voice rose above everyone else's, dazzling, demanding to be heard.

'You see, Milosevic's great trick is to demonise everybody else. The Slovenes? Secessionists. The Croats? Fascists. The Bosnians? Islamic fundamentalists. The Albanians? Terrorists. And d'you know what *he* is?'

A nationalist, of course,' said Edwin.

'No, not even that. An *opportunist*. He's just ridden to power on the back of this whole notion of a greater Serbia. What was he under Tito? Just another dreary apparatchik, going nowhere fast. What future would he have had in a free, democratic Yugoslavia? Absolutely none.'

Watching him in full flow, Rachel decided his age added to his aura. Most of the others were in their twenties, but he was more than a decade older. He'd been there from day one, living and breathing the battles of Bosnia Herzegovina and, before that, Croatia. UN spokesmen, NATO generals, EU diplomats—they all came and went, but Danny was a constant, rarely taking holidays or retreating into comfort zones. He had written the seminal book on the war even before it was over, and his reports were required reading in the White House and Downing Street. He was everything Rachel admired in a journalist: smart and funny, ethical and angry. She decided to forget his disparaging remark about desperadoes: she must have misinterpreted it.

'It's like all wars,' Danny thundered on, rampaging from one subject to another, 'it's about good and evil, and it's also about religion.'

Rachel would discover later he said things like this to provoke Edwin, knowing this loyal English Catholic resented the idea that his God should be blamed for all the troubles of the world.

Edwin came to His defence as always. 'Oh yeah, it's always God's fault, isn't it, never man's.'

'They're a lethal combination,' shrugged Danny.

'You know what I find strange, though, Danny; you think you're this great atheist—what is it you call yourself, an atheist *fundamentalist*?—but even you need someone watching over you.'

'Meaning?'

'All that superstition, those magic bloody boots. You seriously believe you'll die if you ever take them off. Okay, admittedly I sometimes hang out in churches with incense and relics, but I don't think it's too much weirder.'

Danny appeared to find this territory treacherous so he moved to firmer ground.

'The point is, history is littered with religious wars. Islamist expansion in the seventh century, the Crusades in the eleventh, the Thirty Years' War...the list goes on and on and on. And what the hell is Israel and the Palestinians, if it's not religious?'

Edwin gave up. There was no point in arguing with Danny when he was at full throttle. He represented not a soul on earth, except his paper and some of his readers, and yet he always had to be right. He'd only end an argument when he'd won it. He pummelled away at people, grinding them down.

As the debate petered out, Danny looked up and caught Rachel's eye. Perhaps she should get up and thank him again for the helmet, or make a joke about how big it was on her and kept slipping off. She tried to give him a half-smile of acknowledgement, yet if he saw it, he didn't reciprocate. In fact, was that a scowl that was spreading slowly across his face, the beginnings of a thunderstorm that destroys a perfect sky? She was probably mistaken; he was just tired and irritable.

At her end of the table, the conversation was less erudite. It ebbed and flowed before settling, for no discernible reason, around Woody Allen and whether or not he could be called a good director, and Madonna, and whether or not she could be called a good musician. Compare and contrast. Rachel, however, wanted to escape America and her flawed celebrities, not spend all night discussing them. She pretended to listen to the gossipy chatter around her, while filtering it out and concentrating on Danny's words instead.

After a while she slipped away to the toilet and, having peed, took a long look in the mirror and congratulated herself on a first day of achievement. Not bad, Miss Kelly. Not bad at all.

It was only as she was starting to make her way back towards the dining room that she heard Danny's voice rising above the hubbub, as impassioned as it had been when she first walked in. It hit her like a sudden gust of wind.

'But, Jesus, how *could* she? Does she have any idea, any fucking idea, how much pleasure she'll have given him? Even his wife doesn't do that. I mean, hell, she's not exactly a world statesman. She's a hack, and a pretty minor one at that, but he'll have loved it even so. She's an American, after all. He'll milk it, you can bet your life he will.'

*A pretty minor one at that.* The words were rushing around her head at horrible velocity, a fairground ride spinning out of control.

'Oh, don't be so hard on her,' someone said; a man's voice, she thought. Kaps, the guy from Reuters. Yes, it was definitely that distinctive Afrikaner accent. 'Look, it's her first day, eh? So what if she shook his hand and he gave her a kiss? He was trying it on, the old bull. You can't blame him, he doesn't get to see too many pretty girls up there in his lair. So she made a mistake, didn't get out of his way in time. Well, it's not exactly going to change the war. And anyway, she's a rookie. Wet behind the ears. Give her a break, will you, Dan?'

'And what if she'd kissed Hitler? Or Stalin? Would you still be giving her a break?'

'I doubt she's into necrophilia.'

'It's not funny.'

'Yes it is! Lighten up, you sanctimonious bastard.' It was Becky. Good old Becky, thought Rachel, paralysed in her hiding place. 'Loads of people shake his hand. I saw that guy from the BBC doing it the other day.'

'We don't,' said Danny, categorically. We, the Something Must Be Done Brigade, who despise the Serbs and demand that the world should act against them. We, the gang that Rachel wanted to be part of. Not now, though. Club rules broken. Membership denied. 'And we certainly don't kiss him.'

'Now *you* kissing Karadzic!' Kaps shouted out. 'What a pretty picture!'

It was another valiant attempt to puncture Danny's righteous indignation. Rachel heard the whole table laugh. She silently thanked Kaps for defending her, she thanked him from the bottom of her aching heart.

Still, she had made a mistake. Everyone conceded that much, her defenders as well as her detractors. Fuck, Rachel said, almost aloud. I've only just got here and already I've screwed up. Not an inaccurately reported fact, not a missed scoop, but an error of judgement that would offend and alienate those she most wanted to be close to. She should return to her meal, but all she wanted to do was to scurry back to the sanctuary of the toilet and lock the door. She did neither, staring at a curled-up, dried-out piece of wallpaper that seemed to resemble her career.

*A pretty minor one at that.*

Maybe that's all she would ever, could ever, be. Maybe Billy Kelly was right and she should have stayed with him, where she belonged. Maybe Maybe Airlines would have to fly her straight back to Arlington and that box bedroom she never should have left. Thoughts of home made her want to go upstairs, curl into a foetal ball and fall asleep, but somehow she had to carry on: it had been almost five minutes and she had to go back in. Later, she would think it took more guts to walk back to the table than on to any battlefield.

By the time she got there, the conversation had moved on. Only Becky saw the dewy glint of tears she was trying to hold back.

In her room that night, Rachel read more of Danny's book. She didn't much feel like it, but she needed to have her faith in him restored. It was towards the end of the chapter on Sarajevo.

The only reason I paid any attention at all to Ljubica was because she was a little girl with no front teeth and her hair in pigtails. I guessed she was six or seven, and when I walked past her, near the Unis towers, she was skipping in the snow and laughing hard. In Sarajevo, laughter had become something out of the ordinary, enough to get you noticed. I smiled at her and she smiled back.

I had just turned the corner when I heard the mortar's impact, and part of me knew who its victim had to be. I ran back the way I had come and she was already in the arms of a heavily bearded man—her father, I assumed, though I dared not ask. He was screaming at the sky, accusing it of this atrocity. He shook a fist at whatever gods up there he thought had done this. Ljubica's little body had been torn apart, her pigtails were wet with blood. Somewhere in her dying face, I thought I could see a trace of that same smile she had given me, that laughter that got her noticed.

It was the Lowenstein technique again. She doubted she'd ever have the confidence to write about laughter being 'enough to get you noticed', but whereas the day before, she'd have admired its audacity, now she thought it might just be corny. She asked herself if it was all entirely true. Had Ljubica really smiled at him, or was that just poetic licence? Had he embellished his story, as he embellished his well-worn anecdotes at the table? What was it Becky had called his writing? *Fictional*. For a moment she wondered whether Ljubica even existed, or Nermina either, for that matter.

Becky knocked on Rachel's door again, with more Vranac.

'I brought something to cheer you up.'

'But I'm absolutely...'

'I know you heard. That man's just so far up himself sometimes.'

Rachel gulped down the dry red wine and soon it was working its wicked magic. Becky drank in sympathy. Rachel was grateful for her company. She might have been suspicious why this perpetually cheerful stranger had latched on to her quite so fast, but on a night like tonight Rachel realised that if Becky needed a friend in Sarajevo, then so did she. Becky had stood up to Danny for her, and she couldn't ask for more than that.

'You need to learn to ignore him. And anyway, it was our fault. We should have held you back from snogging the crazy doctor.'

'It was a peck not a snog,' protested Rachel.

'Well anyway, I find him quite attractive in an older-man kind of way. Don't tell Danny.'

The drink helped turn Rachel's shame to anger. How dare Daniel Lowenstein—or Danny or whatever the fuck he called himself—who barely knew her, by the way—judge and condemn her, and on the very first story of her on-the-road career? Well, fuck him, the wine said; fuck him and his sanctimonious bullshit.

'He was my hero, you know.' Rachel might as well have been confessing to a sordid fantasy.

'Who, Karadzic or Lowenstein?'

'Lowenstein, you idiot.'

'We noticed. Listen, he still can be. He's a great guy and a fabulous journo. We love him to death. We go back a long way.'

Becky started talking about how they had all met three years earlier during the Serbs' other war, against the Croats. Edwin had just left the army in 1991, knowing plenty about war but nothing about journalism. Kaps was the opposite, an experienced wire reporter but new to the battlefield. Danny had taken both of them under his wing. Becky had been there at the same time, with another photographer called Frederique.

'Freddie, we called her. She was only 20, and way more talented than me. We were all driving in a convoy to Vukovar one day, the five of us. The Serbs had flattened it, as only they know how.'

We were in soft-skins and a round came through the window. Took off half of her face, that lovely, lovely face. The worst thing was her eyes, though. Her agency in Paris paid for the best eye surgeon in the world. She couldn't lose the gift of sight, the gift of taking pictures. She couldn't; but she did. The operation failed.'

'I'm so sorry. What happened to her?'

'Freddie? Oh she's alive and kicking, but her world's a darkroom otherwise she'd be out here with us now.'

Rachel wondered if she'd been lined up as a replacement and it sent a shiver through her, but Becky was moving on, so fast it was hard to keep up.

'Just take it as a warning. Anyway, d'you want to know how to really piss him off—Danny, I mean? When we were up there—in Pale—this really seedy guy offered me a kind of facility, to go and see some Serbs in action. I told him I didn't want just any soldier, I wanted a sniper. I want to know what it's like to be on the other end of that high-powered rifle. I want that picture of him looking down on his victims, to see his finger on the trigger, his eye gazing through the telescopic sights. Picture of the bloody year. Well guess what? The guy agreed.'

'You're kidding?'

'Nope. Said they're going to line up Sarajevo's kingpin sniper for us.'

'Us?'

'Of course. I do the pics, you do the words.'

Becky explained how they would cross over the front line into Grbavica. It was only a stone's throw from the Holiday Inn, but they would have to go the long way round, across the airport and back into the city from the Serb side, stopping off at Lukavica barracks for Republika Srpska paperwork and a minder.

'In peacetime, we'd be there in five minutes, but it could take us three hours. Still, I guarantee it'll be a story. They say he kills half a dozen Muslims every day. Most of them babies in their prams, probably.'

'So why would he want to talk about it to us?'

'Because he's a cocky little shit, I expect. Pleased as punch he's top of the league and wants the whole world to read all about it. It's the whole Serb propaganda thing.'

'And we're playing along with it? I'm not so sure I want to be part of that.'

'Oooh, so we've decided we're not covering the Serb side of this war, have we? Fresh into town, and we've already worked out who's in white and who's in black?'

'Ain't exactly rocket science.'

'Ain't exactly objective, either. I think you've been listening to Mr Lowenstein after all. Look, the point is, we crucify this sniper prick. Let him hang himself. Whatever he says, your readers end up hating him.'

The prospect of a good old-fashioned exclusive—her first in Sarajevo—started to appeal to her. She didn't want to let Becky down, not after she'd shown such solidarity, and if she lost more of Danny's respect—well, he didn't seem to have too much for her in the first place. Before she knew it, she could feel the moral high ground collapsing beneath her feet as if there'd been a landslide.

'Okay, deal'

They performed a drunken high-five in which their hands very nearly missed each other and set about planning their day out on the Serb side of town, a day that would haunt them both for the rest of their lives.

They find him on the fifteenth floor of a boarded-up apartment block, hiding out in a child's bedroom. A doll's house lies broken on the carpet, its roof smashed in. Little plastic people are scattered around it, dead or horribly wounded. Schoolbooks are littered everywhere, an empty satchel nearby. It is as if the child has had a tantrum, hurling her belongings from the shelves, but she has gone: it is the Serbs who have ransacked her room, of course, looking to loot money or jewellery,

but finding only dolls and toys and fairy stories. And in place of the pretty schoolgirl who used to live here, the room has a new occupant: a man with a bandana round his head and a tattoo on his left forearm depicting the symbol of Greater Serbian unity—four Cs back to back, ‘their version of the swastika’, as Danny called it. By his side there is a bottle of slivovitz—homemade brandy. It is full. Perhaps he does not drink until he has something to celebrate.

His name is Dragan and he lurks between the girl’s Disney curtains that show not emblems of Serbian nationhood but scenes from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. He is gazing out across the Miljacka River, looking for a kill. He is a god, dispensing life and death as he sees fit.

‘*Zdravo*,’ mutters the sniper when they come in: hello. He turns round briefly to check them out before hauling his eyes back to the streets below, the eagle in search of prey. He only has four hits that day, two of them kills for sure. So far the pickings have been slim. His masters in Pale will be disappointed. Productivity must be increased. The dream of Greater Serbia must come true.

‘*Zdravo*,’ say Becky and Rachel in reply. They have come with Alija, Edwin’s translator who is not long out of college but already, with his small spectacles and an impeccably groomed beard, bears the permanently quizzical look of a university professor. He’s half Serb—on his father’s side—and when he’s in this bit of town, he changes his name to Bosko. He enjoys his alter ego as though he’s creating one of the characters in the books he reads.

But what are they doing here, exchanging pleasantries with a man who is gratuitous Serbian cruelty personified? It seemed such a good idea when they were knocking back the Vranac, basking in their defiance of Danny Lowenstein, but now they have entered the sniper’s lair, they can scarcely believe they are in his presence: it’s a journalistic scoop but an ethical abomination. Kissing Karadzic—even having sex with him—could hardly compare. Rachel dares not even imagine what Danny would say if he could see them now.

A face at last for the anonymous marksman who is terrorising this part of Sarajevo. He turns to them briefly. He is young, probably no more than 25. Green eyes, electric green. Becky supposes he works with them in the same way she does: looking through the sights of a gun, looking through the lens of a camera—the sniper and the snapper are perhaps not so very different. Both have their victims.

Most of the time, he stays hunched over his gun and with his back to them. He is reluctant to leave his work, even for a minute. He has a stilted conversation with Alija, two such different products of the same crumbling country: trained killer and trained intellectual. A redness is spreading across Alija’s erudite face. His eyes are watering.

‘What is it? What did he say to you?’ asks Becky.

‘Nothing, just chit-chat.’

‘Come on—what? You look upset.’

‘No, really, I...’

‘You’re here to translate for us, not choose the bits we’re allowed to hear.’

‘All right, all right. I told him I’m half Serb and he asked me which half. I said from my father’s side. He said in that case, he’d like to fuck the cunt of my mother and after he’d finished, to slice it open with his sharpest hunting knife, and carry on cutting up through her body until he reached her throat, and then he’d put his cock in there as well. Satisfied?’

‘Shit, I’m sorry.’

The sniper talks some more and this time Alija translates simultaneously, lest anyone accuse him of holding back.

‘His name is Dragan. Don’t be afraid, he says. Come up and join him here. He says it’s his window on the world.’

Becky and Rachel creep forward nervously, worried a rival sniper from the Bosnian government might pick them off, and already trying to think through their potential complicity in the assassin’s

work. Still, it is why they have come, isn't it? To get Sarajevo's other story. And to get the picture. Picture of the bloody year.

They stand either side of him, peering down into the streets on the Muslim side of town, their side of town. Only a few hundred yards away is the nauseating yellow of the Holiday Inn itself. They can't help watching the city as the sniper does, scanning it, scouring it for signs of life, for potential targets. Every now and then matchstick figures dash from their cover, waiting for the crack and the whistle and—if their luck is out this chilly morning—the sudden, catastrophic explosion of pain.

The matchsticks need to make life-and-death decisions every minute of every day. Which route to take, whether to walk or run, whether to bear a fatalistic straight course down a street or to zigzag, duck and dive, in and out of alleyways. Anyone can be a target any time. The more vulnerable the victim, the keener the sniper is to select them for the kill, for it serves as proof to Bosnians that they can never expect even the most meagre drop of mercy from the Serbs, only ceaseless cruelty. An elderly pensioner here, queuing up for food, a mother and her baby there. Death has its eye on them, and death is a handsome young man called Dragan.

'He says conditions are perfect. A cold clear day is the best. It means people wrap up with lots of clothes.'

'Why's that good, then?' Rachel isn't sure she even wants to know the answer.

'He says because it makes them bigger targets. And if there's no fog or mist or rain to obscure his vision...well, so much the better.'

'Does he...enjoy it?' she asks.

A pause. The sniper squinting hard into his sights, dozens of tiny facial muscles stretched hard in concentration. Eyeing up a kill, or just thinking about an answer?

'He says it's a job, like any soldier's job. He's good at it, he says, so there's a certain satisfaction. But it's not so different from an artillery gunner or an infantryman. In this war, he says, every Serb must play his part. Unity is strength.'

The answers sound like he's been drilled in Serb propaganda slogans, taught them by rote just so they can be recited to Rachel and Becky.

'So how many kills?' Becky decides it's time to cut to the chase.

'He says today or altogether?'

'Both.'

'Two today, and maybe a couple of hundred altogether. He says he doesn't keep count. Anyway, he doesn't always go for the kill, he says. Sometimes you hit them in the knees, just to bring them down. It ties up enemy resources and manpower to look after a casualty, whereas if someone's dead, they just have to be buried. Nice and quick, he says. Too quick.'

Rachel writes it all down in her notebook, scribbling furiously, cursing the fact that she's never bothered to learn shorthand. While she scrawls away it is Becky who is thinking up the next question, reporting now rather than taking pictures. Her conviction is that to photograph people properly, you need to understand them.

'But sometimes he goes straight for the kill, right?'

'Yes.'

'So how does he decide—you know, when to maim and when to kill?'

The question is translated and when Dragan hears it, he puts down the long, ungainly rifle. His voice falls to a hush and Alija has to ask him to repeat what he has said.

'He says when the mood suits him.'

'And what sort of mood is he in today?'

A long pause before he answers.

'He says stick around and you'll find out.'

'Is he okay if I take his picture?'

‘Sure, but he wants to wear something over his face. And you mustn’t use his name. Not even just his first name.’

Why so jumpy, they wonder, when he’s so high up here, so invulnerable, doling out mercy or cruelty upon a whim, allowing life to carry on as normal or snatching it away in a fraction of a second?

Dragan pulls a purple handkerchief from his back pocket and ties it over his mouth and nose, cowboy style. He is hiding his face, just as he is hiding his body behind these Snow White curtains. As Rachel and Becky study him, it occurs to them this is a very personal style of soldiering: the crew who fire their shell or their mortar bomb have no idea who it is they kill, and neither does the humble infantryman who sprays machine-gun fire from the hip. The sniper, on the other hand, selects his victims with the coldest calculation. He knows what they cannot know, that they have been hand-picked for the kill, that they are about to die.

Bow down before the God of Sarajevo.

With the bandana round his head and the handkerchief covering the lower half of his face, there is little left to see now except the predator’s piercing green eyes. Becky, who’s been in a trance for a moment or two, starts to work at last. The long zoom hanging on her shoulder is unused; instead she selects the short zoom round her neck, for this is to be a close-up study of a killer. At first there is too much daylight streaming in, and his face ends up a silhouette. Then she gets it right: the perfect portrait. She’s even come up with a caption: ‘Eyes of a Sniper’. It will make cover for *Newsweek*, no question. She is so absorbed in her shot that she doesn’t realise he’s preparing for his.

An enormous crack, the window shaking.

The shutter clicks, again and again.

Another crack and then another in quick succession. A pure, clean sound, echoing slightly amid the boarded-up apartment blocks.

Before she knows it, Becky has burnt off a roll of Fujicolor film, and grabs another from the pouch around her waist.

Sniper and snapper at work together, in tandem.

She looks down on to the street. It’s empty. No one dead, no one dying, much to her relief. Must have been a few rounds for practise. Or was it just for show? Becky has had men all over the former Yugoslavia posing for her with their guns. Wankers. Silly little boys with toys. Probably got small pricks, she thinks. This is where people like him belong, in a kid’s bedroom, skulking around between Disney curtains.

Dragan points over to a darkened alleyway on the far right-hand corner of the street. He is matter-of-fact about it, not boasting. The expert’s finger helpfully pointing something out; not something, someone. Becky can see now, wondering quite how she has missed her. A middle-aged woman sprawled on the pavement in a pool of blood. From this distance it looks the colour of red wine. A bag of onions she was carrying has spilt out all over the pavement. Red wine and onions, red wine and...

Becky’s hands and fingers work quickly, instinctively, abandoning the short zoom for the long, focusing in on a distant shot of the victim down below: someone’s mother, wife, daughter. Another motionless statistic.

And then the wave of revulsion. And guilt. And panic. The killing of an innocent woman, and she has connived in it. No, not the ‘killing’, Becky corrects herself: that suggests a legitimate act of war. The cold-blooded murder.

There is no room for Rachel at the window. Just as well. She has been spared Becky’s trauma, but all the same she has heard the shots. And as they have rung around the city, all of Sarajevo has heard them too, everyone asking the same, stark question: who? For the sniper’s bullet is unlike any other in a war zone. It has one single name lovingly engraved upon it, nobody else’s will do. The simple sound of its crack and whistle haunts because of all that it implies: a bullet meant for just one human being, selected by another.

‘What’s happened, Beck? He hasn’t actually—’

‘Yes, he fucking has. He’s gone and killed a...’

‘Who?’ Like Sarajevo, she needs to know the answer.

‘A woman. Shit, I don’t believe it. Bag of onions in her hand. Poor bitch. Poor fucking bitch.’

Rachel thinks she can hear the sound of crying in Becky’s broken voice, but she isn’t sure.

Wisely perhaps, Alija translates none of this for the sniper.

There is a pause. Twenty seconds, maybe more. Becky cannot bear to look out of the window again, but she wants to know what’s happening—she needs to know. Is the woman really dead? Or maybe just badly hurt, with others already rescuing her, racing her up to Kosevo hospital and a miracle cure? She pops her head up again to take another look, convinced the woman will have a happy ending, just like Snow White and her dwarves. But the woman and the onions and the wine are still there. Alone. No one dares approach. They know too well the sniper’s game.

It is precisely what he wants, and Becky watches him now, finger at one with the trigger, in loving harmony. He is waiting for some hero or heroine to creep out—against their better judgement—to try and save a fellow Sarajevan.

This can’t be real, Becky is telling herself. She has broken out in a hot flush. Well what did she expect? That this pretty-boy sadist would put his killing on pause for a while, so he could pose for her? That he’d just let her walk out the door afterwards, morals intact, conscience all clean and tidy?

Rachel is pushing her way up into the window. Like a child who feels excluded, she wants to see what everyone else can.

‘You okay, Becky?’

‘Never fucking better.’

‘Mind if I take a look down there?’

‘Be my guest.’

Now Dragan has a new co-pilot in his cockpit, and he smiles at Rachel—a smile that disturbs her even before she spots the fruits of his labour in the alleyway below.

She knows she needs to elicit more quotes from him, or there will be no story to go with Becky’s pictures. Where is he from? What drives him to do it? Does he have a family, does he have a mother like the woman he’s just killed? Does he sleep well at night or is he tormented by bad dreams? But Rachel cannot bring herself to talk to him at all and, for a man who has just snuffed out a life, every question she half-frames in her mind sounds far too antiseptic. Instead it is Dragan who decides to interrogate her.

‘He wants to know why you hate the Serbs,’ Alija translates.

‘We don’t,’ says Rachel.

‘He says you’re liars. He wants to know why you’ve come here today.’

‘To hear his side of the story, his side of the war.’

‘Bullshit, he says. You could get that from any Serb soldier—any one of thousands. He says you’re voyeurs, both of you. Says you’re fascinated by someone like him, someone who kills like this. That you think he’ll make a...’ Alija hesitates.

‘Go on,’ says Rachel. ‘We think he’ll make a what?’

‘He says you think he’ll make a sexy story.’

Tell him he’s right, she wants to say, but he already knows it. They all do. And now Dragan is planning a way to make it even sexier.

‘He’s asking if you want to have a look through his rifle. To see Sarajevo the way he sees it.’

‘Um...no. No thanks very much.’ Rachel is tempted all the same.

‘He insists. He absolutely insists.’

It is more than bad taste, she knows that: it is morally reprehensible. Danny would have them expelled from the country, boycotted by the international press corps, cast out as lepers for the rest of their careers. But who is going to tell? Not her, and not Becky either, since they are both in this

together, for better or for much, much worse. In any case, Dragan doesn't look like he's giving her a choice. He stands aside from the gun and motions for her to put an eye to its sights. She obeys and, to her relief, it is at first a hazy, out-of-focus blur. Rachel moves away.

*'Hvala.'* Thank you.

'No, he wants you to look some more, he says. Until you see someone else.'

'Well, thank him again, but tell him I've seen enough. Really.'

'No, you don't understand. I'm afraid there is no option to refuse.'

Another shiver, and the dawning realisation that Dragan is playing a game with them. Bosnia mind-fuck for beginners. She returns reluctantly to the telescopic sights, and is horrified to discover that now she can see through them. A mother and her little daughter cowering behind a bus-stop, paralysed by indecision, wondering whether or not they might be spotted.

Hide and seek. Can he see us? Of course he can see you, idiots! Now move! Move while it's me looking down the barrel of this goddamned gun and not him! Please, in the name of whatever god you want to worship, just move away from that fucking bus-stop!

But they don't. The woman lies near them, red wine and onions proof enough of the dangers of venturing away from cover. No, they will stay put, convincing themselves they are safe even though they're sitting ducks.

'He's asking if you've seen anyone.'

'No.' But Rachel's throat is so dry she can hardly speak. 'No one at all'

'He says not even that mum and kid behind the bus-stop? Surely you can see them, he says.'

Alija's voice is trembling too. He has a sense of foreboding about the direction of this conversation, and he would give anything in the world for it to stop. Why did they ever bring him here, these silly girls who understand so little about the Serbs?

Rachel does not answer, but her silence is enough. The sniper can smell her fear, just as he can smell it from the people down in the street, hundreds of feet away. The scent wafts up to him. Unmistakable. Irresistible.

Then he is saying something else, pulling down the handkerchief from his mouth to make himself more clearly understood. Lest there be any doubt. Alija does not translate though: he will not, he cannot.

'What's he saying? Please tell me.'

She doesn't really want to hear it though, and neither does Becky, who is busying herself in the black pouches of her Domke camera belt, fiddling with her mini-flash, checking her supply of film, creating work, trying to lose herself in it the way she has done all her life.

'I...I don't think I know how to translate what...'

*'Tell her!'* Dragan is suddenly speaking English, surprising them all. It is a command, not a request, and Alija obeys.

'I'm afraid he says he wants you to choose. Which one he should kill. Of the two people behind the bus-stop. He says he will kill one and let one live, but he wants you...to decide.'

Rachel stares at Alija, but dares not even look at Dragan. Waves of panic engulf her. What should she do? Why didn't she just stay at home in Arlington, in her little girl's bedroom—not so very different from this one.

'Tell him to fuck right off.' Becky is out of her camera bag again, out of her reverie.

'I'm not sure I can. You see he says if Rachel doesn't pick one—the mother or the child—he will simply kill them both. It's up to her. He says she should look at it positively. He says she has the power to save a life today.'

'Oh no.' Rachel wants to weep.

'Ignore him, Rach,' says Becky, back on her feet, aware of her responsibilities, stronger, wiser, more experienced—handing out tips on everything from water heaters to ethical dilemmas. 'We're getting out of here right now. The guy is a freak. You can tell him we'll be complaining to the people

in Pale, the people we arranged this through. He's going to find himself in deep shit. We have a hotline to Karadzic himself.'

Alija translates laboriously and they wait with pounding heartbeats.

'Fuck the people in Pale, he says, and fuck Karadzic. They're all cunts; spineless, low-life cunts. You don't leave this room until you make the choice.'

In slow motion, they watch him pull a pistol from his belt. He waves it around vaguely in their direction. He is smirking with the timeless grin of a Serb who wants to prove a point, who feels a victim of history. Becky has seen it before, in countless leery Chetniks, but this one is different: he is handsome when he smiles. Again he addresses them in English:

'Now!'

He gestures for Rachel to get back to the window and look through his sights once more. To select her victim. Roll up, roll up, come and play God for a day! To her despair, they are still there, trembling by the bus-stop. Why the fuck didn't they run for it when they could, when she was keeping Dragan talking? Why didn't they take their chance to sprint across the street, or back to where they came from?

'Well?' Dragan is relentless.

'Tell him...I just can't...he knows I can't possibly...'

The sniper screams, and Alija struggles to keep up with the litany of derision.

'He says you're pathetic, just like all the Western governments who can't decide what to do and who to help. Just like all the bleeding hearts who come to a place where they don't belong. He says you should...well, fuck off back to America and leave Serbia to the Serbs. He says you're both dirty little whores, you deserve to be—I really don't want to translate this—gang raped up the arse by Arkan and his boys before they cut your tits off and stuff them in your mouths.'

Rachel's hands are shaking violently, volts of fear electrocuting her body.

'*Novinari!*' shouts Becky. 'We're fucking *novinari!*'

Journalists. As if that one word is an excuse and a reason and an alibi all wrapped up in one.

Dragan pushes Rachel aside, so hard she tumbles from the window and sprawls on to the floor. There is a shot, just like before. Five seconds later, another one.

Silence. No screams, just the hush of three people in shock and one who thinks he has proved a point.

'Oh my God,' says Alija eventually.

'I think we should leave now.' Becky is carefully closing up her pouches.

The sniper looks round at them again: another smile, this time of total contempt.

'He says he wants you to come back up here and take one last picture. For posterity, he says. For history'

'I...'

'Becky, please. It really is an order.'

What have we done, she asks herself. What has Rachel done? Why didn't she just choose? It was not nice, it was not fair, but why couldn't she have saved a life, the deal Dragan had offered? Becky braces herself to see a dead mother and child by the bus-stop and a black cloud of irrational anger overcomes her.

'Oh, Rachel, for pity's sake. Why couldn't...'

But as she looks out, there is only empty pavement around the bus-stop. No bodies. No dead hand reaching out tragically from parent to child. No more red wine.

Dragan is laughing, a raucous bellyache of a laugh. Bosnia mind-fuck. You disgust me, his laughter says, you and everyone else in the self-satisfied, Serb-hating world you come from.

And of course he disgusts *them*, except what troubles Becky is that his is a face that, in another time, another place, she could quite easily have fallen in love with. The devil's face. She catches a whiff of his slivovitz and yearns to take a slug of it.

As they prepare to leave, Rachel can barely feel her legs. She curses herself, she curses Becky and she curses Dragan. But most of all she curses Danny Lowenstein, without whose cruel jibes she never would have been here.

## 6

### Post-Liberation Baghdad, August 2004

When the convoy delivered them back to the walled sanctuary of the Hamra, Rachel, Edwin and Kaps agreed they should write about what they'd seen amid the dust and sand at al-Talha: the bullet-ridden car, the bloodstains, the nervy troops who'd only just managed to secure the area. It was the hardest story they'd ever had to file. Should they make it a heart-wrenching account of what had happened to their lost friend Danny, or a conventional report on the missing American citizen Daniel L. Lowenstein, couched as if they'd never met him? They had no doubt which Danny would have chosen: he'd have milked it dry.

They went to their offices and tapped away at battered laptops. Words that usually rolled off their fingertips were suddenly elusive. Even so, it felt good to be reporting again. Only Becky couldn't bring herself to return to work. She hadn't been able to take a single photograph in al-Talha—she hadn't even taken her cameras—and now she sat in the Presidential Suite, waiting for the phone to ring. For the first time she was alone there and she poured some whisky into a teacup. It was rough, like bad petrol, and it scalded her throat, but she drained it quickly.

She used to think somebody could just come along and mend her—a shrink, a counsellor, a lover—but now she doubted that anyone could help. She heard a voice she barely recognised emerge from deep inside her, cracked and hoarse:

'Oh sweet Jesus, how did it come to this?'

Tommy Harper and Munro had announced they were meeting some Sunni tribal 'contacts'; when Camille asked if she could join them, Munro said that in his experience the presence of a Western woman might make things harder. He was sure she'd understand. Camille was irritated: perhaps she was being oversensitive, but he seemed to regard her as unnecessary baggage to be dumped at the hotel.

She stood on the terrace where, she'd been told, Danny and the Junkies used to have their poolside parties. She could almost see him amid the creepers and the trellises, his languid body stretched out on a cheap patio chair, reflected in the rippling water. His spirit seemed to stalk the place. She wondered what she would do, what she would say, if she came face to face with him after so many years. For a guilty moment, she felt relieved he wasn't standing there in front of her.

She could recall the moment it began, or at least the moment she first noticed. He was 14, she was 17 and their school report cards had both arrived. Hers was average, his was scintillating: top of everything, star pupil of the year, head and shoulders above the rest. When Danny thrust it into his father's hands, full of expectation, Lukas Lowenstein gave it a glance before tossing it on to the kitchen table. 'Not bad,' he said. With Camille's, Lukas took twice as long, and pulled her to his chest. 'Well, this is fantastic, honey. I'm so proud of you.' She looked across the kitchen and Danny's face had crumpled, with a glistening in his eyes and a chin that quivered. As Danny's big sister, she was supposed to watch over him, but here she was, if not inflicting pain on him, then colluding in it. She told herself her father was just trying, in his own cackhanded way, to make her feel a little better, but over the years she came to see it as the start of Danny's punishment.

It was precocious intelligence that had been his downfall, Camille was sure of that. If only he hadn't been so damned smart. It was his own fault, in other words—not hers.

At first, she assumed he'd be their father's favourite: he was, after all, son and heir to Lowenstein Steel, the small but thriving family firm in Pittsburgh. The more he read and thought about the world, however, the more he challenged Lukas Lowenstein's politics (conservative Republican), his lifestyle (corporate America) and his religion (Lutheran Church). Danny was too interested for his own good in subversive literature: books that challenged capitalism and tore apart the Bible. He asked too many

questions, had too many doubts. She wondered why he couldn't just read detective stories like all his friends.

Camille, on the other hand, did everything her father asked of her—she went to church, read her Bible, sang in the choir—while Danny wanted to go to Washington to protest about Vietnam.

Slowly, inexorably, a wedge was being hammered between the siblings. Lukas spent less and less time with Danny: he couldn't find anything they had in common. It was Camille, he felt, who really needed his attention.

As usual, the lift had a sign in English saying 'out of action', because the power was out of action, because the country was out of action. Camille was about to take the stairs back up to her room when she caught sight of Jamail, the kindly hotel manager who'd been so helpful to her. He was grey-haired and stout, with a flattened nose that had big pores in it, and a slightly crooked back. From the day she arrived, he'd made sure she had everything she needed—phones, faxes and speedy room service. He was the only Iraqi she'd ever talked to properly—albeit in his broken English—and her heart had warmed to him: when there was so much to disorientate her, she found his presence reassuring. He told her Jamail meant 'charming', and she decided the name suited him. From what she had heard about her brother's murdered driver, Jamail and Mohammed were very much the same, both gentle and generous men. True Iraqis.

He was going through some paperwork at the reception desk when she saw him, occasionally handing out or collecting a room key.

'Ah, Miss Camille, hello!' He gave her his usual lifting smile. 'Anything we can do for you?'

'I'm fine, thanks.'

She could tell he had something on his mind. He was looking around to see who else was in the lobby; no one was, but he lowered his voice anyway.

'I want to say to you, I have friend—Saddoun.'

'Uh-huh?'

'We fight in war together, against Iran. The long, long war. Too long. You hear of Fao Peninsula?'

'Yes, sure.'

'We fight in trench there. Many friends die. Me and Saddoun we okay, thanks be to Allah.'

Camille wondered how any of this might be relevant to her, but he deserved her patience.

'I get work for him here in hotel. With journalists. Yesterday, his son call me to say Saddoun gone. Disappeared. He hide, afraid for his life.'

'Right.' There were plenty of frightened people in Iraq, Camille was tempted to say; in fact, very few who were not.

"Why?" I ask him. "Why disappear?" Because he drive journalist, say his son. He drive one of Mr Daniel's friends, he say, very best friends. One day only, big money. They shot at, but Saddoun good driver, like racing driver, like Michael Schumacher! He get away. He—how you call it?—he make them feel small. In Iraq that very bad thing, you understand? So he frightened, too much frightened. They know his face, they know car.'

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