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Terence Strong

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Also by Terence Strong

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For Princess,
with love

And huge admiration for
your courage and fortitude
in such terrible adversity

One

'He'll be armed and dangerous. And he's fast, so you'll have to make a clean kill.'

The previous night I'd listened to Morgan Dampier's words very carefully. My life would depend on them.

'What's he packing?' I'd asked.

'A Browning automatic. Spring-loaded holster on his belt. He cross-draws right to left. I'm sorry, Ed, we can't jark it.'

I'd understood. 'Jarking' is army slang for tampering with weapons. And a tampered-with weapon on a corpse would make the police ask too many questions. The wrong sort. I didn't want that either.

Now, in the cold light of day after a sleepless night, I found the man waiting for me. He didn't know it, of course. He would never know that he was sitting there, just waiting for me to kill him. Until it was too late.

I felt a grim sort of satisfaction at seeing him there, exactly as predicted, at one of the aluminium tables on the pavement outside the snack bar on the King's Road in Chelsea.

But, as I watched him from the opposite side of the street, that satisfaction did nothing to quell my growing sense of trepidation. He was tooled up and I knew just how dangerous he would be if I got it wrong. My heart was pumping so hard that I could hear the blood rushing in my temples and a slick of perspiration was gathering on my palms.

It just confirmed what I'd already begun to realize. I'd been out of this game too long.

Cool it, Coltrane, cool it. Take a deep breath. Long and slow . . . and again. As my lungs filled, my mind began to clear. Look and listen, I told myself. Observe. You can't afford to make a mess of this one.

Although the sun was bright in the clear December sky, there was a sharp chill in the air. My target's only concession to this was a long woollen scarf wrapped round his thick neck with the ends stuffed into the front of his dark suit jacket. No overcoat, of course, and no hat. No self-respecting Serb male of his ilk would ruin his macho image by making concessions to the cold. In the icy badlands of Bosnia's mountains or on the fashionable streets of London, the nature of the beast remained the same.

'Yeah, animal you are, Leonid,' I murmured to myself. 'And it's time to put you down. Once and for all time.'

It didn't do to be an animal of habit when you were wanted for war crimes, even if you thought you'd got away with it. Even if you'd been crafty or clever enough to end up working for those who'd issued the arrest warrant in the first place. Because people so devoid of moral principles would only make use of you for as long as it suited them. Then they'd throw you to the wolves.

And one day one of those wolves would come stalking you. Someone like me.

I smiled to myself at that, and gave a small growl beneath my breath.

So don't make it easy for them, Leonid. Never stay under the same roof for more than a day or two. Don't have your own transport and never use a telephone, e-mail or the post to contact friends or family or anyone else important to your survival. Vary your routes of travel and your weekly timetable, and always assume you're under surveillance – because you probably are. It's tough, but it's the only way you're going to make it.

I viewed my quarry through gaps in the never-ending

crawl of traffic before starting to cross to his side of the street.

So Leonid had got it all wrong. The smug, arrogant bastard was staying with his family at the unsafest place of all, a British intelligence 'safe house'. Most nights he gambled and whored with the money that our government paid him, then returned home drunk to slap his wife around before dragging her into the marital bed. No doubt she was long conditioned to his behaviour by now and thought it a small price to pay to enjoy her husband's wealth and protection.

It's never ceased to amaze me what the partners of thugs consider normal, and even come to respect, in their men.

But his puppet masters knew all this detail and it offended what passed even for their moral principles. And, of course, they handed the information on to me as part of the briefing.

But his personal conduct hardly came as a surprise to me. I knew Leonid Rusjivic. We'd never met, but what he'd done seven years ago had ensured that I'd never forget him.

And since then I'd been trying to find him – and the others – for five years, on and off. Okay, unsuccessfully, but I'd learned a lot more about the bastard before the trail had eventually run cold.

I reached his side of the street and sauntered along the pavement towards the snack bar. To give Leonid his due, he didn't take long to notice me. I sensed him taking in my leather jacket and brown cords, my Ray-Bans, the professional's camera around my neck and the aluminium photographic equipment case I carried.

But it was an idle curiosity and he'd lost interest by the time I took my seat at a table about fifteen feet away from him.

I deliberately faced the other way, with my back to him, and placed the aluminium case on the table before I examined the menu.

The combination of glass and the polished chrome

surround of the snack-bar window reflected my own face back at me. A useful sort of face, maybe more careworn than it should have been for my thirty-nine years. A face with no particularly memorable feature. A face that an impressionist comic would die for. A blank canvas that the simplest form of disguise could transform. The sort of face that a dozen people would describe in a dozen different ways. As I said, a useful sort of face to have in this business.

And, beyond that face in the window, I had a perfectly reflected picture of the man I was going to kill.

A bored-looking waitress, black skirt vacuum-packed to her hips, emerged from the snack-bar door. She hovered at Leonid's table, shivering and irritated at having to leave the warmth of the interior. 'Yes?'

She didn't have to wait long: I could have told her what he was going to have. The same thing that he had at this snack bar every Friday when he waited for his wife to finish her shopping.

'Nachos with hot chilli sauce,' he confirmed, smiling up at her so that the sun caught his gold tooth. 'And don't forget the sour cream on the side, sweetheart.'

Her smile in return was as sour as the cream he'd ordered. She moved past him and across to me.

'Just a black coffee, please.'

The waitress turned away and in the reflection I saw Leonid's eyes following the sway of her hips as she returned indoors. Only then did he take a folded copy of the *Daily Star* from his pocket and spread it open at the racing pages.

I still couldn't really think of him as Leonid Rusjivic. Not that it was an unpronounceable name to me, because I spoke very passable Serbo-Croat and had done several tours of duty in the Balkans. Nevertheless it was the absurd code name that our SAS team had given him that stuck in my head.

Leonid had always been 'Tex-Mex' to me and would be until the moment he died.

Seven years earlier, Tex-Mex had been one of President Slobodan Milosevic's bully boys, a Bosnian Serb secret policeman who ran a small fiefdom in the mountains north of Sarajevo enforced by a bunch of Chetnik irregulars. He'd strut his stuff in camo fatigues and a battered straw stetson, with a bandolier of machine-gun rounds draped across his chest. His unkempt *bandido* moustache and his penchant for nachos with hot chilli sauce had clinched our nickname for him. And it had stuck, officially adopted by the Int boys.

In those days he exercised total control of a mountain valley through which one of the crucial arteries to various besieged cities passed. It was Tex-Mex's roadblocks and drunken thugs that controlled access by the UN relief convoys and the peacekeeping troops. His men allowed or denied passage through his territory of any of the opposing sides – the militias of the Bosnian Serbs maintaining the siege or the ragtag Muslim army which was trying to break it.

That also meant he controlled all trade, including that in weapons and ammunition as well as contraband alcohol, tobacco and narcotics. As you might imagine, nothing passed through his domain unless a hefty private tax was paid to Tex-Mex and his merry men, who acted under the so-called regional 'command' of an evil scumbag of a Serb secret police chief, Brigadier Milo Domedzic.

Although run by President Milosevic's men in Belgrade – and therefore by definition supposedly backing the Bosnian Serbs – we soon learned that neither Tex-Mex nor his boss had any real political or military allegiance to anyone but themselves. Horse-trading was generally the name of the game. Sure, priority was given to the Serb military, but only at a price. That price just became even more extortionate when they were dealing with the opposing Muslims. And, of course, the Muslims were far more likely to be shafted or double-crossed, one way or another. So no one in Belgrade

could accuse Brigadier Domedzic or Tex-Mex of being disloyal or unpatriotic.

It was impossible to establish such complete domination of territory in the middle of a bloody and chaotic civil war without an unhesitating resort to brute force. And Tex-Mex certainly showed no such hesitation. His power was as absolute as his corruption. He wallowed in his fearful reputation among the local population and even among the warring militias. Stories of massacres and other atrocities on his patch abounded and reached UN intelligence units almost every day. Many of these were confirmed, at the time or much later, but few details ever reached the TV news programmes in Europe or America. Even by the disgusting standards of the Bosnian war, some of the events were just too sickening to allow into the cosy living rooms of ordinary families.

It was just one such incident that had shattered and changed my life for ever.

I no longer talked about it. I'd like to say I didn't even allow myself to think about it, but the truth was that I'd never stopped doing so. It was there with me constantly. I reckon a man's exceptionally lucky if a woman like Astrid comes into his life at all, let alone if he has the chance to be married happily to her – for however short a time.

I'd been married before but, despite having a son from that relationship, a boy who was turning out to be a lovely kid, it had been a mess. Nothing like my later relationship with Astrid.

I'd wished to hell that I could lay her ghost to rest, but you don't ever forget someone like Astrid or the moments you shared together.

Yet just a month ago I'd been kidding myself I'd started to do just that. In the five years since I'd left 22 Special Air Service Regiment with the dizzy rank of Warrant Officer, I'd spent too much time and my lifetime's meagre savings

returning to Bosnia-Herzegovina to search for Astrid's killers: Brigadier Domedzic who'd ordered her murder, Tex-Mex who had so willingly carried it out, and Zoran Mihac who'd gleefully recorded it.

Of course, in the aftermath of the conflict when they were wanted for war crimes by the International Court in the Hague, they'd all gone to ground. No one was talking and every door of inquiry was shut in my face. I'd pressed on with my quest until the wrong sort of people started to take notice of me and it just got too damned dangerous.

Then last year, at an SAS reunion party at an hotel in Hereford, I'd bumped into Dampier.

'Eddie?' I'd turned at the sound of the familiar voice. 'Eddie Coltrane, you old bastard, it is you!'

Morgan Dampier had emerged flush-faced from a scrum of heavily drinking ex-soldiers. He was as dapper as always, but his Guards tie was askew and his gait a little unsteady.

I'd grinned at him. You might not fully trust Dampier, but you just couldn't help liking him. 'Christ, Morgan, I haven't aged *that* much, have I?'

He'd slapped me vigorously on the back. 'No, Ed, old son, it's just that I haven't ever seen you at one of these shindigs before.'

'Not really my scene. I don't like looking back, never have. But Joe Monk persuaded me to give this bash a try. Said he expected a lot of old faces to turn up.'

Dampier nodded. 'Still wasn't expecting to find you here. Thought you spent all your time in Bosnia nowadays.'

That had brought me up short. My trips to Bosnia had been private and I certainly hadn't advertised them. In fact I'd told absolutely no one about them. But then, I shouldn't really have been surprised. I'd tried to sound cool. 'See you're still keeping the same company, then, Morgan.'

He hadn't actually answered, just given a twist of a smile. Dampier wasn't and never had been SAS, but I sometimes

thought that he knew every soldier who'd ever been in the Regiment. Dampier was with the 'funnies', but you were never sure exactly which one at any given time. I'd first met him when I was running a training course for the top-secret army outfit that's become known as 14 Intelligence Company, or 'The Det'. The Regiment's expertise was used extensively in preparing recruits for their extremely dangerous close-reconnaissance role in Northern Ireland.

'You know how it is, Ed. Every now and again your name pops up on the computer. Ah, there's old Eddie Coltrane . . . sniffing round in Bosnia again.' His smile had faltered when he saw the look in my eyes. 'Er, sorry. I - er - I suppose it's all to do with Astrid?'

'You know damn well it is, Morgan.'

'Of course - sorry. No luck then?'

'You know that, too.'

He'd had the good grace to look truly embarrassed. 'Shit, Ed. I'm making a pig's ear of this. Too much booze mixing with my antibiotics.' He gave a nudge-nudge wink-wink sort of gesture meaning he was still the cad-about-town he'd always been. 'I didn't want to give the impression people are spying on you. It's just that—'

'I know. Save the explanations.'

'I can tell you something, Ed.' Dampier lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. 'You could be wasting your time. For a start that Serb police chief - er - Brigadier Domedzic . . .'

'Yes?' Suddenly I'd been all ears.

'Dead.'

My heart had sunk. Stupid, really, if he was dead. It was just that I hadn't killed him. 'I hadn't heard that.'

Dampier had nodded. 'Fucked his own kind one time too many. Someone with a sense of humour booby-trapped his lavatory. Blew him inside out.'

'When was this?'

'Couple of months ago.' Dampier could hardly have missed my keen interest. 'And as for the others—'

'Others?'

He'd shrugged. 'Tex-Mex. Mihac and the other thugs . . . They've all disappeared. I doubt you'll ever find them. They might well be dead, too. Fed to pigs, buried in quicklime or chucked down a well somewhere. Chances are no one would ever know. They'd all made a lot of enemies.'

'I don't work on assumptions.'

'Sure, Ed. But I just hate to think of you wasting your life. You know, your time and money going down the pan while you're chasing shadows.'

'Been reading my bank statements, Morgan?'

His smile had returned. 'I don't have to, Ed. I can imagine.' He'd drained his glass and took mine from me. 'C'mon, let me fill 'em up.'

And so we'd gone on to get totally blitzed that night, with me waking up the next morning in my hotel bedroom with a splitting headache and a girl nearly young enough to have been my daughter asleep naked beside me. I didn't even remember who she was. Only while giving her coffee before she sneaked out of my room did I discover that she'd been working behind the bar downstairs the previous evening. Her goodbye kiss was small consolation for the realization of just how far out of it I must have been. I hadn't been drunk like that for years.

Brooding over another mug of coffee and a cigarette, I'd suddenly realized that Morgan Dampier was right. I'd been in serious danger of going over the edge. The madness had to stop. As he'd said, I was probably chasing shadows anyway. Domedzic was dead and so, possibly, were Tex-Mex and the others. That or else they'd made sure they would never be traced.

Just then I'd almost heard Astrid's voice in my ear, saying, *'Time to stop, my love. It's time to let me go.'*

Yes, Dampier was right. Astrid was right. It was time to end this idiocy and get myself a life.

Now I looked up as the snack-bar waitress came through the door, carrying a tray. She dumped Tex-Mex's nachos and sour cream unceremoniously in front of him and, ignoring his lascivious leer, put down my coffee before scurrying back inside.

I looked at my watch. Eight minutes to go. Somewhere in a nearby side street two vehicles would be parked – a van and an old Nissan saloon – engines running, their drivers anxiously studying their dashboard clocks and the ticking minutes.

So Morgan Dampier had been wrong and in many ways I was now wishing that he hadn't been. Because in the year following our chance encounter at the Hereford hotel, I really had tried to put my life in order.

I'd cancelled my next planned trip to Bosnia and put in a call to Rob D'Arcy at IAP, an outfit that hired a lot of ex-SAS and other British military personnel for above-board overseas contracts. But, as I might have guessed, at the time all he had was mine-clearing work . . . in Bosnia! I tried a few other similar companies, but with the armed forces going into meltdown under Blair's New Labour, there were too many people chasing too few jobs. Perhaps fate was telling me that it was time to take a proper crack at Civvy Street.

There the situation was reversed. Too many jobs that no one wanted because either the pay or the hours were lousy. So I took one of those, finally landing a warehouse under-manager's job on the strength of my army quartermastering skills. At least I was well used to long and unsociable hours and the salary wouldn't have been that bad if only I hadn't already run up so many debts and had creditors baying at my heels.

At least the job had helped me keep my head above water

and, just a month ago, I had been looking forward to a couple of weeks' holiday. That was when Morgan Dampier had turned up again.

He'd arrived one evening unannounced at my cheap rented flat on the top floor of a dilapidated Victorian semi in a run-down street in Southwark. Since getting home from work, I'd just had time to kick off my shoes, loosen my tie and pour a stiff whisky when I heard the doorbell ring. Few people knew where I lived, so I expected it to be one of the neighbours I'd yet to meet after three months or one of the endless number of people trying to sell burglar alarms. That or the Jehovah's Witnesses.

I'd thrown open the door with a less than welcoming expression on my face.

'Ah, *not* pleased to see me,' Dampier had observed with a laugh.

The hallway light was a feeble unshaded bulb. 'Morgan?' I'd peered at him. 'What the hell are you doing here? Didn't know you even had my address.'

Another chuckle. 'Well, I didn't, but I know a man who had. And I was in the area so I thought I'd just pop in on the off chance to say hello to an old mate.'

I stepped aside to let him in. 'No one just *happens* to be in this area, Morgan, you lying bastard. People avoid it like the plague unless they enjoy being mugged. Still, it's good to see you anyway.'

He'd been quick to notice the whisky bottle on the coffee table. 'Started without me, I see.'

I'd moved through to the adjoining kitchenette. 'No soda, I'm afraid. Will water do?'

'Splendid, Ed, thanks.' He looked slowly around the room, taking everything in. 'Nice place you've got here. Very – er – minimalist.'

'Very – er – diplomatic,' I'd mimicked back, handing him his drink.