

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Between Mountains

Maggie Helwig

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About the Author

Born in Liverpool, Maggie Helwig grew up in London and Kingston, Ontario, and now lives in Toronto. A writer and poet, she has worked as a music journalist, and an international human rights advocate, and travelled in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and elsewhere in Europe, as well as South America. She is married with one daughter.

Maggie Helwig

**BETWEEN
MOUNTAINS**


VINTAGE

Part One

HISTORY

I

The Zone of Separation

13 July 1999

IT WAS JUST before dawn when the trucks began to move. Behind the city the hills were barely visible, black masses in an indigo sky.

A stray dog darted for cover as headlights broke the darkness. Some distance away, a helicopter rose, hovered.

The trucks turned to create roadblocks at key intersections. Men climbed down with machine-guns in their arms. At several points across the city this occurred.

A small brown-haired man was sitting at the window of his hotel room, a laptop balanced on his knees. He was drinking instant coffee from a plastic cup, awkwardly, holding it by the rim so that he wouldn't burn his fingers. It was exceptionally bad coffee. When he heard the engines, he put the cup on the floor, pushed aside the sheer white curtain and saw two of the trucks, passing in front of the apartment block across the street. He watched until they turned a corner and were gone. Setting the laptop down beneath his chair, he picked up a digital camera and a laminated card on a metal chain and hung them around his neck.

In the deserted silence of the early morning, he could hear his own footsteps on the hotel's worn green carpet. The plaster walls were cracked and swollen with damp. At the front desk the night clerk, a thin teenager, was reading

a movie magazine with furious concentration, twirling a bit of dark hair around her finger. Her eyes flicked briefly towards him as he passed, but she didn't raise her head. Outside, the streets were empty; then he heard the rumble of another truck, and stood against the wall as it passed. When it turned west at the corner, he followed.

At the edge of the park, he saw the light of a single taxi, as the driver started the engine and turned the car away, avoiding what might be trouble. Walking under a canopy of oak trees, the reporter listened for the sound of the heavier motors, and turning the next corner he found them, one truck parked sideways across the intersection, a very young, very tall soldier standing beside it. The young man gestured sharply towards him. The reporter raised the card and pointed to it, mouthing 'Press' without making a sound.

'Go home,' said the young man, in accented English. Was he German? Dutch? His accent was soft, and in the dark it was hard to make out the flag on his shoulder. The reporter peered around the broad khaki chest, and saw, about halfway up the street, a knot of soldiers gathering in front of a small block of flats. With a single sharp movement, one man kicked the door in, and the others poured through the gap. A light flickered on in a neighbouring building, and quickly went out again.

'Who are you after?' asked the reporter.

'I told you, go home. Nothing for you to do here.'

'Always something for me to do.' He smiled. But this soldier was too young, he took himself seriously. He was impressed with the gravity of his mission, and instinctively certain that the press must be unwelcome.

'How many times I have to tell you to go home? You only put yourself in danger.'

'Is he dangerous, then, the man you want?'

'They all are dangerous. What do you suppose?'

Other motors were idling, a street or two away.

'Is it more than one tonight? Sounds like more than one.'

‘You can think of any reason I should tell you?’

From inside the building there was a muffled shout, but only one. No gunshots. Then the soldiers were out the door again, a heavy grey-haired man walking stiffly between them. A soldier pushed him down onto his knees, another yanked his arms behind his back, twisted plastic handcuffs around his wrists.

The reporter whistled. ‘Wow,’ he said softly. ‘You finally came for him.’ He lifted the camera and shot around the Dutch – probably Dutch – soldier’s body. The young man scowled but made no move to stop him. ‘That was stupid,’ he said.

They were pushing the man into one of the trucks. The sound of the helicopter was louder, rising over the rooftops. The young soldier turned away, looking back with a quick warning shake of his head, and the trucks were gunning their engines, moving fast, not worried about noise now, up the street and out of sight.

The reporter stood at the corner and waited. A few lights came on, curtains twitched. One head appeared at a third-floor window, then vanished again. The lights, one by one, went out. He was thinking of going back to the hotel when he heard gunfire, down beyond the park. A pistol first. Then machine-guns responding.

His body reacted, tossing him into a doorway, his face pressed into the stone surround. He still dropped to the ground, sometimes, when he simply heard a door slam; real gunfire was an instant return to the years of the siege. The noise only lasted a few seconds but he stood longer, his arms flexed, sweat trickling down his neck. But this was nothing too new or strange. Nothing you couldn’t get used to.

There were distant voices, agitated. He moved forward carefully, his body still close against the walls. The sky was paler now, a bruised wet blue, the shapes of the city emerging from darkness. He ducked across the street

towards the park, heard cars driving away. At the intersection of the main street he stopped.

No one was there any more, but even in the half-light of dawn the pools of blood were unmistakable. He looked around the empty pavements, raised the little camera again.

A man appeared round the opposite corner and crossed over. He too saw the blood, and quickly turned away, pushing his hands deeper into his pockets.

'Excuse me,' said the reporter, speaking in Bosnian. 'Do you know what happened?'

The man looked at him. 'Something bad,' he replied in English. 'Something bad happened here.'

The helicopters rose, turned. They moved swiftly over the hills and rivers of the small country. They carried soldiers and equipment. They carried a prisoner, a dead man and a dying man. The hills were green; rough and pretty in the early morning. The dying man flailed with one arm, not knowing what he meant to say, pink foam on his lips. There were medical supplies on the helicopter, they were flying towards a hospital, but they would not be able to save him. The dead man lay unattended, covered by a tarpaulin.

Between the hills of this country, men and women were digging. They pushed through the heavy earth, wearing boots and overalls and wide-brimmed hats. You wouldn't have thought, if you saw them there by the pine trees, that they were police officers. They might have been digging up orange and sky-blue frescoes, the bull dance at the palace of Knossos. Bowls of hardened grains, parched and desiccated meats and fruits. Ivory-handled knives, small bells, leather belts. They might have been digging up little models of horses for children to play with, or goddess figurines holding handfuls of snakes, or hammers and awls.

The dying man closed his eyes, the morphine entering his bloodstream. A great peace. All his fears and burdens

lifted away and he moved gently towards sleep. He felt such relief. Surely, now, everything was all right.

A few moments later his heart stopped.

In the trenches they were digging up bodies, partly rotted, the flesh beginning to melt together. The photographs, later, would have a strange beauty, the tangled arms and legs, clothing and hair and bones, emerging from mud as if it was clay and they were art, something sculptural. But the women and men digging up the bodies were only aware of the smell. They would shower two, three, four times a day, but their own skin and hair would still smell sweet and corrupt like decaying flesh, and when they went into town people would move away from them in the shops and cafés.

They would separate the bodies carefully, drawing them out one by one, trying to ensure that limbs and pieces of flesh did not fall loose. Whole bodies when they could, then parts of bodies. The backpacks, leather jackets, running shoes. Wallets and small change, photographs eaten away by water. A cat's-eye marble. The blindfolds. The bits of rope that had tied the wrists.

Out of the dark earth we draw the forms of our desire. And here as well. This too was human desire, the sight of those bodies in the trench. The bearded men who lined other men up at the edge would have said, as they opened fire, that they wanted only the things that everyone wants.

A man pinned under his son's dead body in the mud.

The helicopter rises, passing above the graves on the hillsides.

Something bad happened here.

* * *

The first thing that Daniel did when he came back into his hotel room was to trip on his cup of coffee, spilling it out over the hotel carpet. He made a quick grab for his laptop and then stood there, stupidly, watching the brown liquid

spread across the floor, remembering that he hadn't shut the computer down and that there was something wrong with the battery, wondering whether to unplug it right away and put it on the bed, or try to shut it down where he was. Awkwardly he cradled it in one arm, saving his files and shutting down with the other hand while cold coffee seeped through his thin canvas shoes, feeling sure there must be a better way to manage this, aside from buying a laptop that would actually run on its battery like it was supposed to. Besides which, he thought, the hotel could potentially charge him for the damage to their carpet.

As he wiped at the stain with a towel, he had the distinct feeling that the situation was out of his control. He wanted an aspirin, and he was unhappy with the image he was presenting. He was fairly certain that nobody, if asked to picture a war correspondent, would think of a little man with thinning hair and thick glasses, mopping up coffee on his hands and knees from a hotel floor.

When he eventually felt he had blended the stain with the other stains well enough to avoid legal liability, he plugged the laptop in again, arranged it on his knees, and downloaded the photographs. It was early daylight now, the city's crowded life resuming, the makeshift stalls selling hair ribbons and chewing gum and pornographic magazines opening up for the morning, a thin wash of pink in the sky. Some people were grouped at corners, talking, others walking quickly along the narrow pavement.

The arrest photograph was more or less usable, once it was blown up and cropped; fuzzy, but acceptable. He opened another file on the computer, then punched a number on his mobile phone, and fitted it onto his shoulder as he typed.

13 July 1999, Banja Luka, Bosnia-Herzegovina
NATO troops in the Serb-controlled sector of Bosnia have carried out a successful arrest of former Bosnian Serb official Nikola Marković.

Marković, accused of involvement in the 'ethnic cleansing' of northern Bosnia during the 1992-95 war, was apprehended at his home in the city of Banja Luka early this morning, and went peacefully with the arresting soldiers. However, a second raid ...

'Well, you know, you may as well confirm Marković right now because I saw him, so a no comment's just going to make you look ... Because I cover this town. I know when something's going to go down, right? Sure, you go and ask then, I'll hold.'

While he waited, he put the laptop down on his chair, carried the phone to the wardrobe and began to go through his jacket pockets. No aspirin. He collected a used-up ballpoint pen, some receipts and a couple of beer bottle tops, and threw them into the bin. There was a click at the other end of his phone.

'So you will confirm his arrest? Excellent. And he's on his way ... Yep. Now, there was something else that happened. Are you prepared to go on record ... Okay, you understand I'm doing this in a spirit of sharing? I heard shots, I saw blood. Lots of blood. And I will have to report this, but if you talk to me now you get to put a shape on it before ... Mmmhmm, you go check it out then ...'

On the next hook was his flak jacket, unused for several years now. He began going through those pockets as well.

It was heavy even to shift on the hook, the fabric covering a structure of ceramic plates and layers of Kevlar. He felt a weird twist of something almost like nostalgia, remembering the weight on his shoulders, the smell of snow and death. There were tiny scraps of paper in the pockets, which he piled on the desk; and, wonder of wonders, a nearly empty aspirin bottle, stamped EXP JL 97. He shrugged - never heard of anyone dying from stale aspirin - and chewed down two tablets without water.

'Hello? Ah, brilliant.' He moved quickly back to his chair and picked up the laptop, scrolled upwards and began to

retype his lead sentence. 'Just give me as much as you can, right?'

A NATO soldier was injured, and a suspected war criminal killed, in a botched arrest raid in Banja Luka this morning. A second action met with more success, as another indicted suspect was apprehended peacefully.

According to NATO sources, Dušan Jovanović opened fire on arresting troops, seriously wounding the soldier, whose name and nationality were not disclosed ...

He finished typing the story, and emailed it out with the photo. Closing the laptop, he picked up a black pen, walked over to a Wanted poster taped to the bathroom door, a series of grainy photos and captions, and crossed out two faces.

In an old city by the North Sea a woman was walking to work, a cigarette in one hand and a briefcase in the other. From her slightly run-down residential street, she turned north onto a broad cobbled avenue, the trees shielding red-brick mansions, now mostly converted into embassies. The road curved, led her along the side of a wooded park where two grey herons stalked in the shallows of a small canal, then opened onto a street noisy with four lanes of traffic, and lined with tall glass-walled hotels. She crossed at the intersection, and walked past a metal barricade towards a yellow stone building that had once been an insurance company office.

Entering the security booth, passing through the metal detectors, she divested herself of particulars. That she was: age forty, sex female, citizenship French. Hair blonde turning grey, build slight, height average, chronic medical conditions none. Opinions about the bread-queue massacre, her father, Josef Stalin, the Inter-Entity Line, modern poetry, Josip Broz Tito, the Field of Black Birds, where to buy cheese on the rue St-Jacques, all these she had to remove.

What remained - mother tongue Serbo-Croat, perfect command of French, fluent command of English and German, some knowledge of Albanian and Italian. Professionally licensed to interpret in simultaneous and consecutive modes.

This was her part in the drama.

Serbo-Croat, of course, presented some difficulties because it no longer technically existed.

Interpreters shall not exercise any form of influence or power over their listeners.

Interpreters shall convey with the greatest accuracy and fidelity, and with full neutrality, the meaning of the speech which they interpret.

Interpreters shall convey the whole message, including the inflections and intonations of the speaker. An interpreter should provide the most accurate form of a word in spite of any vulgar or derogatory meaning.

Interpreters shall not correct an erroneous fact or statement, even if it is a patent mistake or untruth.

Interpreters shall maintain professional detachment at all times.

Lili felt something in the air as soon as she left the security booth, a soft murmur of excited sound. There was an unexpected cluster of journalists in the small lobby, talking on mobile phones and looking for press officers. One of them moved towards her.

'I'm sorry,' she said in English, walking quickly past. 'I can't speak to the media.' Holding her staff pass up to the automatic sensor, she went through a set of revolving doors at the side of the lobby and entered the restricted area. As she walked up the stairway to the courtrooms, she passed one of the English interpreters and raised an eyebrow interrogatively. He shrugged, palms out.

She went through a series of narrow corridors, cramped offices hastily constructed from plaster and plywood, and into the cluttered slice of a room that served as an office

area for herself and several others. Vanja was sitting at the desk, studying a legal dictionary and drinking coffee.

'There's journalists all over the lobby,' said Lili. 'Any idea what's up?'

'Not a clue,' said Vanja. 'I don't think even the press officers know, they were on the phones trying to get briefed when I came in. Maybe the prosecutor's issuing a big indictment.' She flipped a page of the dictionary. 'So how are you handling this massacre versus mutilation issue?'

'Large numbers killed usually works for me. It does depend, though, doesn't it?'

'I think sometimes we could just go with killing *per se*.'

A security guard arrived to open the doors, and they walked up a few steps into a small soundproof booth at the side of Courtroom Three. From her briefcase, Lili took a bottle of water and a binder full of papers, and arranged them on the desk in front of her. She fitted the earphones over her head, adjusted the mike, and waited.

Her booth was built high up, above the heads of the people who were gradually filling the little courtroom. From where she sat, she looked directly over the prosecution team, who were sorting through documents at their table while clerks wheeled in carts full of huge ringbinders. Against the wall to her right was the taller desk where the three judges would sit in their black and red robes, and directly facing her the defendant, a square-shouldered man with a walrus moustache. An armed security guard sat beside him, his team of lawyers at another row of tables.

A robed court official stood at a microphone and recited, 'All rise, *veuillez vous lever*,' the French badly mispronounced. The judges entered, the courtroom sat, and Lili turned on her microphone and began to speak.

'... prosecution's motion to amend the first amended indictment will be decided in due time, but for the moment the court will turn to consideration of the defence motion

...' She received the proceedings in English through her earphones, and relayed them, seconds later, in the language which currently had no fixed name, but in consideration of the defendant might be called Serbian.

After thirty minutes she handed over to Vanja, who sat in a chair beside her. She closed her eyes for a moment and took a sip of water. She would listen for thirty minutes as Vanja interpreted, and then resume; and they would continue like this, handing off at measured intervals, for several hours. They could work for a total of six hours in a day, no more. It was essential that they did not become too tired, that they did not wander or daydream or lose the thread of words. An exhausted interpreter could fall behind, mistake an idiom, she could compromise the integrity of the trial in ways that could never be recovered. It was a matter of perfect attention. The ideal was transparency, a self-effacement thorough enough that no one in the room would remember they were there.

As a child, Lili was brought up to believe in the Party, the good old hard-line Party that Tito had betrayed, causing her parents to leave Belgrade in a fit of political pique. And for a while she did believe, with a vague and fervent passion, in many things of which she had scarcely any detailed concept. She believed in discipline and authority, in sacrifice. She believed in austerity and historical inevitability, in progress and justice. She believed in the future, in some magnificent unavoidable future without borders or wars, a time of solemn and perfect equality, of happiness in the far distance.

She believed, in a highly abstract sense, that it might be necessary to kill for this future, but she preferred to imagine herself dying for it, on some elusive barricade.

The extreme sweetness of nostalgia, for Lili, would be most tied up with the Fête de l'Humanité, which seemed then far away and the size of the world itself. The music,

the sweet autumn air; *crêpes sucrées*, garlic sausages and almond cakes from the Basque country, and all the people, for miles and miles she thought, the bright colours of their clothes. Driving home late at night, leaning half-asleep against her mother, the sound of fireworks still in her ears.

A thin girl in a navy-blue skirt, she would walk for hours up and down the streets of Paris in the rain, delivering packages of leaflets and *L'Humanité Dimanche*, convinced that in some way she was doing this for the proletariat. At the age of nine - eventually she would find this funny - she fiercely proclaimed the May '68 uprising to be undisciplined and childish. Students fought with the police almost under her window, she walked in the street past graffiti that would become famous around the world - *Under the city, the beach; Be realistic, demand the impossible*. But she resisted the taste of astonishment in the air, she continued to believe in that clearly organized future made up of some combination of auto workers and architecture. She had pictures of Marx and Lenin and Maurice Thorez in her bedroom.

So she did know something about them, the men who had brought the Balkan wars about. Though their vision was not the same as hers, though it was all about nations and borders and blood and soil, she did remember what it was like to believe in history. To believe that history would explain it all, would make you right, would justify any amount of death. That it would converge on a single explosive point. And you yourself would be there.

Of course, for most of the men who came into the court it was not so complex. Some of them plainly, straightforwardly enjoyed degrading and hurting other people. A lot of them just did what they were told, because they couldn't think of anything else to do. Sometimes it was greed, or fear that if they didn't kill first it would be done to them; if they believed in anything, it was no more than a collection of weird fairy tales about their neighbours that

they had recently heard on the television. Most of them were confused about what they had really felt. Almost all of them claimed to have very little memory of what they had or had not done.

Daniel looked through the bits of paper he had found in the pockets of his flak jacket, wondering why he hadn't cleared them out before now. They were a strange assortment - some café receipts, a ticket to Sarajevo's international film festival - and he remembered the mad dashes across Sniper Alley to get to the films and the concerts, to the theatre, remembered that people had made these crazy expeditions partly to drive home a point - *we are Europe too, you must care about us* - but also because they really did want to see the films. Everything from *Aladdin* to *I Burned Their Legs*.

The rest of the papers were notes to himself, almost all of them so cryptic that even he couldn't understand them any more, scribbled in cars veering along back roads at night perhaps. *pale nr checkpoint that guy, cut yer head off, ha ha*, he deciphered from one scrap. *selima k, x-files, has theory*, said another. He was sorry that he couldn't recall what Selima K's theory about the *X-Files* had been. Indeed, he couldn't figure out how Selima K, in a city under siege since 1992, would have heard about the *X-Files* at all. Was a friend in Berlin or London sending envelopes full of plot summaries through one of the aid agencies?

A bit regretfully, he threw all the papers into the bin, checked his watch, and decided to buy some groceries. He felt weightless and sore-eyed from exhaustion but knew that he wouldn't be able to sleep, with the bright sunlight pouring in the window, and the nervous energy of coffee and an exclusive story just filed buzzing in his head, his heart beating slightly too fast. There was nothing for it but to walk around Banja Luka, look for street reaction maybe.

Get on the phone later and see if any levels of government had a comment.

He went into the market first, weaving through the crowds between stalls made of sticks and plastic, piled with cheap jeans and cosmetics, fruits and vegetables. A woman smiled at him as she sold him a bag of apples, but when he asked her about the arrests her face went blank and she turned away. Inside the old grey hall, among the smells of cheese and coffee and votive candles, it was much the same, his questions sending a chill through the room, the open pleasant expressions of the stallholders pinching in sudden hostility. He bought a jar of honey; then he left the market and walked towards the river, passing groups of hard-muscled young men, some of them in the uniform of the army of Republika Srpska. A white UN minivan drove by, slowly, on no special mission.

Across the bridge, where the Vrbas river glittered teal green in the morning sunlight, he walked further into the residential streets, along the crumbling pavements, past white and pale yellow houses sheltered by apple trees and climbing ivy. When he had first come here, these streets looked like any neighbourhood, small, plain. Then painted slogans started to appear on the walls - *Muslim, Croat, Serb* - and the homes that were not labelled *Serb* began to be smashed, burned, peppered with bullets. Then the shelling. Murders in the night. The soldiers' trucks racing down the centre of the street, loaded with televisions and VCRs, the women driven weeping into railway cars heading for Zenica; the men to the camps, the barbed wire, the things that happened there. Now the slogans were gone, the houses under repair in a haphazard way, the population almost exclusively Serb. A cleansed city.

One spring night while he was in Sarajevo, Banja Luka's beautiful Ferhadija mosque had been dynamited. The burned patch of waste ground stood outside his hotel, a part of the landscape he walked by daily.

He wondered what it meant that in some way he did love this city, when he had seen only the final moments of its real life, and knew that it was now an angry remnant, a kind of reanimated corpse. He wondered what it meant to say that he loved this poor lovely country, its green mountains and fast rivers, its old streets and its rock-and-roll kids, when he had never really seen it at peace; if the only thing he really loved was the war, the drama, the terrible poignancy of this wound at the heart of Europe.

Turning onto a street of small shops, their signs a mixture of Roman and Cyrillic letters, he was brought up short for a moment outside a window filled with rubber masks. The faces of Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić stared out at him, blank, multiple, surrounded by flags. I could make this a metaphor of Republika Srpska, he thought, but that wouldn't be quite true either, not exactly. He thought of the Serbian refugees from the Krajina, who had not particularly wanted this war, most of them; who had just been shuffled from place to place until they ended up staying somewhere, maybe here. Not all of them wanted to put on these plastic masks. Still, he took out the digital camera and shot off a few quick pictures.

When he crossed the river again, the sun was high and hot. He walked along the street below the sixteenth-century fort, where elderly women stood above piles of worn blue jeans and lace doilies, part of Banja Luka's small frenzy of commercial activity, a feverish weak economy in a permanent grey zone. He checked his watch and stopped at a small café, where he ordered burek and coffee and took out his mobile, punching numbers in quickly.

By the time the morning session in Courtroom Three wrapped up, Lili was aware of the strain around her temples. She massaged them quickly with her thumbs, then shuffled her papers back into their binders. The security guard locked the door of the booth as they left.

Vanja sat at her desk and pulled a sandwich out of her bag. 'Want a bite?' she asked, holding half of it towards Lili. 'It's smoked eel, it's not bad.'

'Thanks anyway, but I'm going for a cigarette. See you in a bit.'

She went across the hallway to the rather uninteresting cafeteria, picked up a bowl of pea soup with sausage and carried it to a table in the smoking section. She was just sitting down when she heard her phone ringing inside her briefcase.

'*Zut,*' she muttered, realizing that both she and the security guard had overlooked it, and that it might have rung while she was working. She unfastened the briefcase and pulled it out. '*Allô?*'

'Lili? It's me, Daniel.'

'Oh,' she said. 'Oh. Daniel.' She found herself glancing around the room, checking to see if anyone was sitting near her, then thought that she was being silly, there was no need for that.

'You're at lunch, right? I mean, your phone's on, so it's okay to call?'

'Sure, I guess so.' It was good to hear his voice, after all. 'It's not ideal, but ... how are you?'

'I'm good, I'm cool, I'm just bouncing around here and I have to talk to somebody. You remember my old pal Nikola Marković?'

'Oh yes, the nutter. The one with the singing and the emotional problems.'

'The very one. Well, I guess you guys had a sealed indictment on him after all, because NATO picked him up a few hours ago, and on top of that—'

'Wait, wait.' She held up her hand as if he could see her. 'Think about what you're telling me,' she said softly.

'That they ... oh.'

'Exactly. He's under the jurisdiction of the tribunal now. I don't say one word about him, and you don't tell me. And

anything I said before in this conversation, I didn't say it, all right? It's gone from your records.'

'Lili, I wasn't calling you for a quote.'

'Nobody trusts a journalist, my friend. You must learn to live with that.'

'Well, goddamn, this is my best story for ages. An adventure on the streets of Banja Luka. Exclusive photos. Wild times in the not very big city.'

'Are you drunk or something?'

'It's barely lunchtime. What do you think I am?' She reached for a cigarette, turning slightly in her chair to face away from the neighbouring tables. 'What I am,' Daniel went on in his slightly giddy voice, 'what I am is definitely sleep-deprived, because I got this tip that something was going down tonight, last night, whatever, so I spent the whole night sort of spooking around the streets waiting to see what was going to happen, and it wasn't till I finally went back to the hotel to get some coffee around dawn that ... well ... the things happened that happened, you know.'

'I do feel this is a conversation I shouldn't be having. Could we possibly change the subject?'

'Sorry. I'm kind of preoccupied.' She could hear him chewing something. She lit her cigarette and breathed in. 'Well, I can tell you the reason this is important to me is that AFP is giving me trouble again. They're not exactly threatening my *per diem*, but there's been an awful lot of muttering about how much time I spend in Bosnia. Kosovo, they say, why didn't you stay in Kosovo? I filed a dozen stories from Kosovo last month, but this isn't good enough for them. Apparently. Anyway, this time I got them some bloodshed, so they have to be happy.'

She wanted badly to ask him what he meant about bloodshed, she was genuinely curious, and she wanted to make sure that he hadn't been in too much danger. She was bound to hear the whole story within a few hours, this was

a purely symbolic withholding, something of no legal or ethical weight. But she didn't ask.

'Talk to me, Lili.'

'I'm just sitting here in the cafeteria, thinking that my soup looks quite unpleasant. I'm not adjusting easily to the Dutch cuisine.'

'I'm sorry.' Daniel hesitated at the other end of the line. 'I should phone you tonight, shouldn't I?'

'I think that would be a better idea.'

'Okay. I'm sorry. I didn't really expect to reach you.'

'It's all right, it's all right, Daniel. I'll talk to you later.'

She hung up, turned the phone off, and studied her soup, which was now lukewarm. She pushed the bowl away and went back to the counter for a cheese sandwich.

Normally Lili worked in the French booth of Courtroom One, but with some kind of epidemic of summer colds laying the language staff low, she was assigned that day to the Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian booth of Courtroom Three, where at the moment the judges were hearing pre-trial and sentencing proceedings.

The defendant sat in the witness chair with his earphones on - Vanja and Lili would be transmitting the words of the lawyers to him, in the language which might in this instance be called Croatian. He was not someone of great importance; one of the local thugs who ended up in the court sometimes, a step up the chain of command towards someone bigger. Convicted last month of a series of crimes in a particular corner of Bosnia, and sensing that his options were running out, he had recently decided to argue diminished responsibility on the grounds of mental instability. Currently he was engaged in an attempt to convince the court that he had believed himself to be taking orders from a particular, and evidently criminal, ram who lived on a nearby farm.

‘Because you know, sheep have always been pretty bad characters for me. They’re just trouble, however you look at it. Now, cows are different. I never had a problem with a cow, I would say they’re fine animals.’ He paused and took stock. ‘Of course, I understand now that the sheep themselves weren’t really talking to me. This was an aspect of my mental condition at the time.’

‘But you’re answering my questions coherently now. You’re talking about these things in a very objective way. To what do you attribute your remarkable improvement?’

The defendant chewed his thumbnail. ‘I have a healthy lifestyle in the prison,’ he offered at last.

A corner of the lawyer’s mouth twitched. ‘I see. Could you expand on this healthy lifestyle for us?’

‘Well, hmm.’ The defendant frowned thoughtfully and looked around the room. ‘I watch a lot of educational television,’ he said in an optimistic tone. ‘And they won’t let me drink alcohol.’ One of the young court officers put her hands over her mouth and looked quickly down at the table.

She walked home, when the court had closed, in the lengthening shadows of the early evening. When she reached her own neighbourhood, she detoured south, onto narrow streets lined with identical tall brick houses, little shops, people speeding past on bikes and mopeds. She went into the grocery store to buy olives and fruit and Turkish flatbread, and while she waited at the till she heard the story on the radio, as she had expected. ‘A British special forces soldier and a Bosnian war crimes suspect were killed this morning in the Serb-controlled area of Bosnia,’ the Dutch announcer read, ‘while a second suspect was arrested without incident. Dutch troops were reportedly involved in both arrests. The soldier, whose name has not yet been released ...’

She was living in a furnished flat on the second floor of a house on Laan van Meerdervoort, above a friendly small bar, and directly next door to the former home of a nineteenth-century banker who had made a local reputation by painting impeccably bourgeois pictures of sand dunes. His home had now been turned into a museum dedicated to his works, a fact Lili tried to avoid remembering.

It was a nice enough flat - the bedroom had a little balcony overlooking the back yard, and a pretty blue quilt on the bed, and the living room with its kitchenette had wood floors in decent condition. She was not unaccustomed to living among the furniture of strangers, but she found herself doing odd things, uncharacteristic things, to make it her own. She had acquired the Dutch habit of bringing flowers home, something she never did in Paris; there were white roses in a vase on the table, a day old and just starting to wilt at the edges, their sweet, acrid scent drifting gently through the room.

Daniel didn't phone until nearly midnight. She was lying on the couch with a blanket around her legs, reading a copy of *Vreme* which she subscribed to from Belgrade at considerable expense, and wondering if she should go to bed.

'Sorry,' he said, his voice a bit fuzzy. 'I fell asleep sometime in the afternoon.'

'That was probably for the best.'

'So how was your day?'

'Fine.' She folded up the paper. 'I gave up about the soup and ate a sandwich. Honestly, Daniel, I don't know why you even ask me about my day.'

'I'm sure there are things you could tell me. I don't know, gossip about the other interpreters, who's sleeping with who.'

'Of course, because if I knew that, I would certainly divulge it to a reporter.' She stretched one arm behind her

head. 'So I heard on the radio that two people were killed. Jovanović and a soldier.'

'Yeah. Initially the word from NATO was that the soldier was only wounded, but I hear he was gone before they reached Tuzla. Does this mean you can talk about Jovanović?'

'I suppose so. He's out of our jurisdiction now.'

'Out of every jurisdiction but God's, isn't he? Rescued from justice by death.'

'Whatever made him think he could shoot his way out? Were you there?'

'No, I got there just after. I was watching them arrest Nikola - which was kind of strange, in the end. I don't think he saw me. I guess Jovanović was a fair marksman though, I mean, taking down a guy from the special forces is no small task.'

'It's still not how I would choose to die.'

'Well. No.' Daniel paused. 'So there's another thing I need to talk to you about.'

'Oh yes?' Lili sat up, wondering about the edge of apprehension in his voice.

'See, after I phoned you before, I was talking to the *Sunday Times* woman in Holland. She's putting together a fairly major feature on Marković, and because I had this, as it were, relationship with him, she wanted me to drive up there for a bit to work with her on background.'

'Uh-huh.'

'Well, obviously I'm going to do it, in fact I'm coming in tomorrow.' He cleared his throat. 'What I need to know,' he said sharply, 'what I need to know is whether I know you. While I'm in town.'

Lili rubbed her forehead. 'I hate these conversations, Daniel.'

'Look, okay, but I just need to know.'

'I'm not sure.' She exhaled softly. 'I mean, there would have to be a lot of limitations.'

'Right, and the limitations would be ... what, then?'

'I do want to see you, Daniel. Really I do. You must know that.'

'I don't ... Listen, I'm just saying I'm going to be there by tomorrow night, and I need you to tell me what the rules are.'

'Let me think.' She pulled her knees up to her chin and folded her free arm around them, feeling miserable. 'Let me think a minute. I just can't guarantee that this is not a problem.'

The prisoner arrived at the Scheveningen Detention Centre late at night. A few kilometres east of Lili's flat, they took him from a van under armed guard and led him inside. They had earlier changed the plastic handcuffs for metal; now they uncuffed him, took his fingerprints and photograph, and searched him thoroughly. They removed the change in his pockets and a small penknife, writing down these items on an inventory sheet. He was advised of his right to contact his family, and the diplomatic mission of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and also advised that he could defer these calls until morning should he prefer. He could immediately, or in the morning, contact legal counsel. In the event that he could not afford legal counsel, the court would provide counsel for him. They advised him that he would be examined by the medical officer the next day, and that he would appear before the court in the near future to be formally charged. He was given a pamphlet explaining his rights as a prisoner, the disciplinary requirements of the prison, and the process by which he could file complaints.

He was taken to his cell and provided with bedding and a pair of pyjamas. The cell contained a small bed, a desk, a coffee-maker, a barred window with curtains, an alcove with a toilet and shower. It was explained to him that he could have a cable television installed if he wished, but that this would have to be done at his own expense.

It was strange, discomfoting, how carefully they treated him; without warmth or courtesy, but not cruelly; precise and measured. Perhaps it would have made him happier if they were brutal, if they had smashed his teeth and put him in a tiny concrete chamber - he could have courage, then, and honour, he could more easily believe that he was persecuted by mad irrational enemies, that he was a soldier in a long battle. The men who had arrested him had been fighters like himself, he believed. They had hit him a few times in the helicopter. He hadn't minded that; he understood war. But not these jailers here.

Perhaps that was why they were so meticulously proper. With cold civility, they would set out to strip him of his last beloved dreams of persecution.

II

Like a Two-edged Sword

14-31 December 1995

DANIEL HAD MET Lili for the first time in Paris, at what you might call the end of the wars, or at least some of the wars.

Late in 1995, he flew out of Sarajevo, went to the Elysée Palace and watched them sign the treaty, a collection of men in suits, smiling, scowling, rambling weirdly on about history and the future and their own extreme good intentions.

The president of Bosnia, looking grey and emotionless, signed an agreement to slice his country into two things called entities, with something between them that was and was not a border, two bitter enclaves, and the multi-ethnic Bosnia that people had once believed in, had endured a four-year siege to protect, was finally finished. Cleansed.

Suddenly Daniel couldn't feel his hands, and had to stare down at them for a long time to make sure they were there.

There was a transit strike in Paris that day. He ran to his hotel in a cutting wind, pulling his leather jacket tight, thin rain whipping against his face; dodging at intersections, anticipating sniper fire. He lay down on the bed with his wet shoes still on and covered his face.

It got dark outside.

At some point in the night he turned on the light, found a bottle of duty-free Scotch and a toothbrush glass, and