TRANSWORLD BOOKS

Avenger

Frederick Forsyth

About the Book

SOLDIER
Many years ago, Cal Dexter was a Vietnam tunnel rat recruited to ferret out the jungle lairs of the enemy. Today, he's a small-time attorney in a sleepy New Jersey town. But Dexter's life is anything but ordinary.

VIGILANTE
The beast Dexter's been hired to hunt is Zilic, a Serbian warlord cocooned in a South American compound with the best security blood money can buy. But one of the gangster's victims is an innocent American aid worker – and the grandson of a business tycoon who can afford the best revenge.

AVENGER
And so the chase is on. Slowly Dexter begins to draw a net around the killer. But CIA agent Paul Devereaux must find a way to stop him before his quest for revenge throws the world into chaos…

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AVENGER

Frederick Forsyth

For the Tunnel Rats
You guys did something I could never force myself to do

PREFACE

The Murder

It was on the seventh time they had pushed the American boy down into the liquid excrement of the cesspit that he failed to fight back, and died down there, every orifice filled with unspeakable filth.

When they had done, the men put down their poles, sat on the grass, laughed and smoked. Then they finished off the other aid worker and the six orphans, took the relief agency off-road and drove back across the mountain.

It was 15 May 1995.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

The Hardhat

THE MAN WHO ran alone leaned into the gradient and once again fought the enemy of his own pain. It was a torture and a therapy. That was why he did it.

Those who know often say that of all the disciplines the triathlon is the most brutal and unforgiving. The decathlete has more skills to master, and with putting the shot needs more brute strength, but for fearsome stamina and the capacity to meet the pain and beat it there are few trials like the triathlon.

The runner in the New Jersey sunrise had risen as always on his training days well before dawn. He drove his pickup to the far lake, dropping off his racing bicycle on the way, chaining it to a tree for safety. At two minutes after five, he set the chronometer on his wrist, pulled the sleeve of the neoprene wetsuit down to cover it and entered the icy water.

It was the Olympic triathlon that he practised, with distances measured in metric lengths. A 1500-metre swim, as near as dammit one mile; out of the water, strip fast to singlet and shorts, mount the racing bike. Then forty kilometres crouched over the handlebars, all of it at the sprint. He had long ago measured the mile along the lake from end to end, and knew exactly which tree on the far bank marked the spot he had left the bike. He had marked out his forty kilometres along the country roads, always at that empty hour, and knew which tree was the point to abandon the bike and start the run. Ten kilometres was the run and there was a farm gatepost that marked the two-

clicks-to-go point. That morning he had just passed it. The last two kilometres were uphill, the final heartbreaker, the no-mercy stretch.

The reason it hurt so much is that the muscles needed are all different. The powerful shoulders, chest and arms of a swimmer are not normally needed by a speed cyclist or marathon man. They are just extra poundage that has to be carried.

The speed-blurred driving of the legs and hips of a cyclist are different from the tendons and sinews that give the runner the rhythm and cadence to eat up the miles underfoot. The repetitiveness of the rhythms of one exercise does not match those of the other. The triathlete needs them all, then tries to match the performances of three specialist athletes one after the other.

At the age of twenty-five it is a cruel event. At the age of fifty-one it ought to be indictable under the Geneva Convention. The runner had passed his fifty-first the previous January. He dared a glance at his wrist and scowled. Not good; he was several minutes down on his best. He drove harder against his enemy.

The Olympians are looking at just under two hours; the New Jersey runner had clipped two and a half hours. He was almost at that time now, and still two Ks to go.

The first houses of his hometown came into view round a curve in Highway 31. The old, pre-Revolution village of Pennington straddles the 31, just off Interstate 95 running down from New York, through the state and on to Delaware, Pennsylvania and Washington. Inside the village the Highway is called Main Street.

There is not much to Pennington, one of a million neat, clean, tidy, neighbourly small towns that make up the overlooked and underestimated heart of the USA. A single major crossroads at the centre where West Delaware Avenue crosses Main Street, several well-attended churches of the three denominations, a First National

Bank, a handful of shops, and off-the-street residences scattered down the tree-clothed byroads.

The runner headed for the crossroads, half a K to go. He was too early for a coffee at the Cup of Joe café, or breakfast at Vito's Pizza, but even had they been open he would not have stopped.

South of the junction he passed the Civil War vintage, white clapboard house with the shingle of Mr Calvin Dexter, attorney-at-law, next to the door. It was his office, his shingle and his law practice, save for the occasions when he took time off and went away to attend to his other practice. Clients and neighbours accepted that he took fishing vacations now and then, knowing nothing of the small apartment under another name in New York City.

He drove his aching legs that last five hundred yards to reach the turning into Chesapeake Drive at the south end of town. That was where he lived and the corner marked the end of his self-imposed Calvary. He slowed, stopped and hung his head, leaning against a tree, sucking in oxygen to heaving lungs. Two hours, thirty-six minutes. Far from his best. That there was probably no one within a hundred miles who, aged fifty-one, could come near it was not the point. The point, as he could never dare to explain to the neighbours who grinned and cheered him on, was to use the pain to combat the other pain, the always pain, the pain that never went away, the pain of lost child, lost love, lost everything.

The runner turned into his street and walked the last two hundred yards. Ahead of him he saw the newspaper lad hurl a heavy bundle onto his porch. The kid waved as he cycled past and Cal Dexter waved back.

Later he would take his motor scooter and go to retrieve his truck. With the scooter in the rear, he would drive home, picking up the racing bike along the road. First he needed a shower, some high-energy bars and the contents of several oranges.

On the stoop he picked up the bundle of newspapers, broke them open and looked. As he expected, there was the local paper, another from Washington, from New York the big Sunday *Times* and, in a wrapper, a technical magazine.

Calvin Dexter, the wiry, sandy-haired, friendly, smiling attorney of Pennington, New Jersey, had not been born to be any such thing, though he was indeed born in the state.

He was created in a Newark slum, rife with roaches and rats, and came into the world in January 1950, the son of a construction worker and a waitress at the local diner. His parents, according to the morality of the age, had had no choice but to marry when a meeting in a neighbourhood dance hall and a few glasses too much of bad hooch had led to things getting out of hand and his own conception. Early on, he knew nothing of this. Babies never know how or by whom they got here. They have to find out, sometimes the hard way.

His father was not a bad man, by his lights. After Pearl Harbor he had volunteered for the armed forces, but as a skilled construction worker he had been deemed more useful at home, where the war effort involved the creation of thousands of new factories, dockyards and government offices in the New Jersey area.

He was a hard man, quick with his fists, the only law on many blue-collar jobs. But he tried to live on the straight and narrow, bringing his wage packet home unopened, trying to raise his toddler son to love Old Glory, the Constitution and Joe DiMaggio.

But later, after the Korean War, the job opportunities slipped away. Only the industrial blight remained and the unions were in the grip of the Mob.

Calvin was five when his mother left. He was too young to understand why. He knew nothing of the loveless union his parents had had, accepting with the philosophical endurance of the very young that people always shouted and quarrelled that way. He knew nothing of the travelling

salesman who had promised her bright lights and better frocks. He was simply told she had ‘gone away’.

He had accepted that his father was now home each evening, looking after him instead of having a few beers after work, staring glumly at a foggy television screen. It was not until his teens that he learned his mother, abandoned in her turn by the travelling salesman, had tried to return, but had been rebuffed by the angry and bitter father.

When he was seven his father hit upon the idea to solve the problem of a home and the need to search for work far and wide. They moved out of the walk-up tenement in Newark and acquired a second-hand trailer home. This became his home for ten years.

Father and son moved from job to job, living in the trailer, the scruffy boy attending whichever local school would take him. It was the age of Elvis Presley, Del Shannon, Roy Orbison, the Beatles over from a country Cal had never heard of. It was the age of Kennedy, the Cold War and Vietnam.

The jobs came and the jobs were completed. They moved through the northern cities of East Orange, Union and Elizabeth; then on to work outside New Brunswick and Trenton. For a time they lived in the Pine Barrens while Dexter Senior was foreman on a small project. Then they headed south to Atlantic City. Between the ages of eight and sixteen Cal attended nine grade schools in as many years. His formal education could fill an entire postage stamp.

But he became wise in other ways: street-wise, fight-wise. Like his departed mother, he did not grow tall, topping out at five feet nine inches. Nor was he heavy and muscular like his father, but his lean frame packed fearsome stamina and his fists a killer punch. Once he challenged the booth fighter in a fairground sideshow, knocked him flat and took the twenty-dollar prize.

A man who smelt of cheap pomade approached his father and suggested the boy attend his gym with a view to becoming a boxer, but they moved on to a new city and a new job.

There was no question of money for vacations, so when school was out, the kid just came to the construction site with his father. There he made coffee, ran errands, did odd jobs. One of the ‘errands’ involved a man with a green eyeshade who told him there was a vacation job taking envelopes to various addresses across Atlantic City and saying nothing to anyone. Thus for the summer vacation of 1965 he became a bookie’s runner.

Even from the bottom of the social pile, a smart kid can still look. Cal Dexter could sneak unpaying into the local movie house and marvel at the glamour of Hollywood, the huge rolling vistas of the Wild West, the shimmering glitz of the screen musicals, the crazy antics of the Martin and Lewis comedies.

He could still see in the television adverts smart apartments with stainless-steel kitchens, smiling families in which the parents seemed to love each other. He could look at the gleaming limousines and sports cars on the billboards above the highway.

He had nothing against the hardhats of the construction sites. They were gruff and crude, but they were kind to him, or most of them anyway. On site he too wore a hard hat and the general presumption was that once out of school he would follow his father into the building trade. But he had other ideas. Whatever life he had, he vowed, it would be far from the crash of the trip-hammer and the choking dust of cement mixers.

Then he realized that he had nothing to offer in exchange for that better, more moneyed, more comfortable life. He thought of the movies, but presumed all film stars were towering men, unaware that most are well under five feet nine. This thought only came to him because some

barmaid said she thought he looked a bit like James Dean, but the building workers roared with laughter, so he dropped the idea.

Sport and athletics could get a kid out of the street and on the road to fame and fortune, but he had been through all his schools so fast he had never had a chance to make any of the school teams.

Anything involving a formal education, let alone qualifications, was out of the question. That left other kinds of working-class employment: table-waiter, bellhop, grease-monkey in a garage, delivery-van driver; the list was endless but for all the prospects most of them offered he might as well stay with construction. The sheer brutalism and danger of the work made it better paid than most.

Or there was crime. No one raised on the waterfronts or construction camps of New Jersey could possibly be unaware that organized crime, running with the gangs, could lead to a life of big apartments, fast cars and easy women. The word was, it hardly ever led to jail. He was not Italian-American, which would preclude full membership of the Mob aristocracy, but there were Wasps who had made good.

He quit school at seventeen and started the next day at his father's worksite, a public works housing project outside Camden. A month later the driver/operator of the earth mover fell ill. There was no substitute. It was a skilled job. Cal looked at the interior of the cab. It made sense.

'I could work this,' he said. The foreman was dubious. It would be against all the rules. Any inspector chancing along and his job would be history. On the other hand, the whole team was standing around needing mountains of earth shifted.

'There's an awful lot of levers in there.'

'Trust me,' said the kid.

It took about twenty minutes to work out what lever did which function. He began to shift dirt. It meant a bonus,

but it was still not a career.

In January 1968 he turned eighteen and the Vietcong launched the Tet offensive. He was watching television in a bar in Camden. After the newscast came several commercials and then a brief recruitment film made by the army. It mentioned that, if you shaped up, the army would give you an education. The next day he walked into the US Army office in Camden and said:

'I want to join the army.'

Back then every American youth would, failing some pretty unusual circumstances or voluntary exile, become liable for compulsory draft just after the eighteenth birthday. The desire of just about every teenager and twice that number of parents was to get out of it. The Master Sergeant behind the desk held out his hand for the draft card.

'I don't have one,' said Cal Dexter. 'I'm volunteering.' That caught their attention.

The MS drew a form towards him, keeping eye contact like a ferret that does not want the rabbit to get away.

'Well, that's fine, kid. That's a very smart thing to do. Take a word of advice from an old sweat?'

'Sure.'

'Make it three years instead of the required two. Good chance of better postings, better career choices.' He leaned forward as one imparting a state secret. 'With three years, you could even avoid going to Vietnam.'

'But I want to go to Vietnam,' said the kid in the soiled denim. The MS thought this one over.

'Right,' he said very slowly. He might have said, 'There's no accounting for taste.' Instead he said:

'Hold up your right hand …'

Thirty-three years later the former hardhat pushed four oranges through the juicer, rubbed the towel over his wet

head again, and took the pile of papers with the juice through to the sitting room.

He went to the technical magazine first. *Vintage Airplane* is not a big-circulation organ and in Pennington it could only be obtained by placing a special order. It caters for those with a passion for classic and World War II aeroplanes. The runner flicked to the small ads section and studied the wanted notices. He stopped, the juice halfway to his mouth, put down the glass and read the item again. It said:

'AVENGER. Wanted. Serious offer. No price ceiling. Please call.'

There was no Grumman Avenger Pacific-war torpedo dive-bomber out there to be bought. They were in museums. Someone had uncovered the contact code. There was a number. It had to be a cellphone. The date was 13 May 2001.

CHAPTER TWO

The Victim

RICKY COLENSO WAS not born to die at the age of twenty in a Bosnian cesspit. It should never have ended that way. He was born to get a college degree and live out his life in the States, with a wife and children and a decent chance at life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It went wrong because he was too kind-hearted.

Back in 1970 a young and brilliant mathematician called Adrian Colenso secured tenure as a Professor of Math at Georgetown University, just outside Washington. He was twenty-five, remarkably young for the post.

Three years later, he gave a summer seminar in Toronto, Canada. Among those who attended, even though she understood little of what he was saying, was a stunningly pretty student called Annie Edmond. She was smitten and arranged a blind date through close friends.

Adrian Colenso had never heard of her father, which both puzzled and delighted her. She had already been urgently pursued by half a dozen fortune hunters. In the car back to the hotel she discovered that apart from an amazing grasp of quantum calculus, he also kissed rather well.

A week later he flew back to Washington. Miss Edmond was not a young lady to be gainsaid. She left her job, obtained a sinecure at the Canadian consulate, rented an apartment just off Wisconsin Avenue and arrived with ten suitcases. Two months later they married. The wedding was a blue-chip affair in Windsor, Ontario; and the couple honeymooned in Caneel Bay, US Virgin Islands.

As a present, the bride's father bought the couple a large country house on Foxhall Road, off Nebraska Avenue, in one of the most rustic and therefore sought-after areas of Georgetown. It was set in its own forested one-acre plot, with pool and tennis court. The bride's allowance would cover its upkeep and the groom's salary would just about do the rest. They settled down into loving domesticity.

Baby Richard Eric Steven was born in April 1975 and soon nicknamed Ricky.

He grew up like millions of other American youngsters in a secure and loving parental home, doing all the things that boys do, spending time at summer camps, discovering and exploring the thrills of girls and sports cars, worrying over academic grades and looming examinations.

He was neither brilliant like his father nor dumb. He inherited his father's quirky grin and his mother's good looks. Everyone who knew him rated him a nice kid. If someone asked him for help, he would do all he could. But he should never have gone to Bosnia.

He graduated out of high school in 1994 and was accepted for Harvard the following autumn. That winter, watching on television the sadism of ethnic cleansing and the aftermath of the refugees' misery and the relief programmes in a far-away place called Bosnia, he determined that he wanted to help in some way.

His mother pleaded that he should stay in the States; there were relief programmes right at home if he wanted to exercise his social conscience. But the images he had seen of gutted villages, wailing orphans and the blank-eyed despair of the refugees had affected him deeply, and Bosnia it had to be. Ricky begged that he be allowed to get involved.

A few calls from his father established that the world agency was the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, with a big office in New York.

By early spring of 1995 three years of civil war as the old federation of Yugoslavia tore itself apart had gutted the province of Bosnia. The UNHCR was there in strength, with a staff of about 400 ‘internationals’ and several thousand locally recruited staffers. The outfit was headed up on the spot by a former British soldier, the full-bearded and restlessly energetic Larry Hollingworth, whom Ricky had seen on television. Ricky went to New York to inquire about procedures for enlistment.

The New York office was kind but less than enthusiastic. Amateur offers came in by the sack-load, and the personal visits were several dozen a day. This was the United Nations; there were procedures, six months of bureaucracy, enough filled-out forms to break the springs of a pickup, and, as Ricky would have to be in Harvard by autumn, probably refusal at the end.

The dejected young man was heading down again in the elevator at the start of the lunch hour when a middle-aged secretary gave him a kindly smile.

‘If you really want to help in there, you’ll have to get over to the regional office in Zagreb,’ she said. ‘They take people on locally. It’s much more relaxed right on the spot.’

Croatia had also once been part of the disintegrating Yugoslavia, but it had secured its separation, was now a new state, and many organizations were based in the safety of its capital, Zagreb. One of them was the UNHCR.

Ricky had a long call with his parents, got their grudging permission, and flew New York–Vienna–Zagreb. But the reply was still the same: forms to fill, only long-term commitments were really sought. Summertime amateurs were a lot of responsibility, precious little contribution.

‘You really should try one of the NGOs,’ suggested the regional controller, trying to be helpful. ‘They meet right next door at the café.’

The UNHCR might be the world body but that was far from the end of it. Disaster relief is an entire industry and for many a profession. Outside United Nations and individual government efforts come the Non-Governmental Organizations. There were over three hundred NGOs involved in Bosnia.

The names of no more than a dozen would ring a bell with the general public: Save the Children (British), Feed the Children (American), Age Concern, War on Want, Médecins Sans Frontières – they were all there. Some were faith-based, some secular, and many of the smaller ones had simply come into being for the Bosnian civil war, impelled by TV images beamed endlessly into the West. At the extreme bottom end were single trucks driven across Europe by a couple of beefy lads who had had a whip-round in their local bar. The jumping-off point for the drive on the last leg into the heart of Bosnia was either Zagreb or the Adriatic port of Split.

Ricky found the café, ordered a coffee and a slivovitz against the bitter March wind outside and looked around for a possible contact. Two hours later a burly, bearded man, built like a trucker, walked in. He wore a plaid mackinaw and ordered coffee and cognac in a voice Ricky placed as coming from North or South Carolina. He went up and introduced himself. He had struck lucky.

John Slack was a dispatcher and distributor of relief aid for a small American charity called Loaves ’n’ Fishes, a recently formed offshoot of Salvation Road, which itself was the corporate manifestation in a sinful world of the Rev. Billy Jones, television evangelist and saver of souls (for the appropriate donation) of the fine city of Charleston, South Carolina. He listened to Ricky as one who had heard it all before.

‘You drive a truck, kid?’

‘Yes.’ It was not quite true but he reckoned a big off-road was like a small truck.

‘You read a map?’

‘Of course.’

‘And you want a fat salary?’

‘No. I have an allowance from my grandpa.’

John Slack twinkled.

‘You don’t want anything? Just to help?’

‘That’s right.’

‘OK, you’re on. Mine’s a small operation. I go and buy relief food, clothes, blankets, whatever, right here on the spot, mainly in Austria. I truck-drive it down to Zagreb, refuel and then head into Bosnia. We’re based at Travnik. Thousands of refugees down there.’

‘That suits me fine,’ said Ricky. ‘I’ll pay all my own costs.’

Slack threw back what remained of his cognac.

‘Let’s go, kid,’ he said.

The truck was a ten-ton German Hanomag and Ricky got the hang of it before the border. It took them ten hours to Travnik, spelling each other at the wheel. It was midnight when they arrived at the Loaves ’n’ Fishes compound just outside the town. Slack threw him several blankets.

‘Spend the night in the cab,’ he said. ‘We’ll find you a billet in the morning.’

The Loaves ’n’ Fishes operation was indeed small. It involved a second truck about to leave for the north to collect more supplies with a monosyllabic Swede at the wheel, one small, shared compound wired with chain-link fencing to keep out pilferers, a tiny office made out of a workman’s portable cabin, a shed called a warehouse for unloaded but not yet distributed food aid, and three locally recruited Bosnian staffers. Plus two new black Toyota Land Cruisers for small-cargo aid distribution. Slack introduced him all round and by afternoon Ricky had found lodging with a Bosnian widow in the town. To get to and from the compound he bought a ramshackle bicycle from the stash

he kept in a money belt round his waist. John Slack noticed the belt.

‘Mind telling me how much you keep in that pouch?’ he asked.

‘I brought a thousand dollars,’ said Ricky trustingly. ‘Just in case of emergencies.’

‘Shit. Just don’t wave it around or you’ll create one. These guys can retire for life on that.’

Ricky promised to be discreet. Postal services, he soon discovered, were non-existent, inasmuch as no Bosnian state existed so no Bosnian Post Office had come into being and the old Yugoslav services had collapsed. John Slack told him any driver running up to Croatia or on to Austria would post letters and cards for everyone. Ricky wrote a quick card from the bundle he had bought in Vienna airport and thrown into his haversack. This the Swede took north. Mrs Colenso received it a week later.

Travnik had once been a thriving market town, inhabited by Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims. Their presence could be discerned by the churches. There was a Catholic one for the departed Croats, an Orthodox one for the also departed Serbs, and a dozen mosques for the majority Muslims, the ones still called Bosnians.

With the coming of the civil war the tri-ethnic community which had lived in harmony for years was shattered. As pogrom after pogrom was reported across the land, all inter-ethnic trust evaporated.

The Serbs quit and retreated north of the Vlasic mountain range that dominates Travnik, across the Lasva river valley and into Banja Luka on the other side.

The Croats were also forced out and most went down the road ten miles to Vitez. Thus three single-ethnic strongholds were formed. Into each poured the refugees of that particular ethnic group.

In the world media the Serbs were portrayed as the perpetrators of all the pogroms, though they had also seen

Serb communities butchered when isolated and in the minority. The reason was that in the old Yugoslavia the Serbs had had the dominant control of the army; when the country fell apart, they simply grabbed 90 per cent of the heavy weaponry, giving them an insuperable edge.

The Croats, also no slouches when it came to slaughtering non-Croat minorities in their midst, had been granted irresponsibly premature recognition by the German Chancellor Kohl; they could then buy weapons on the world market.

The Bosnians were largely unarmed, and kept that way on the advice of European politicians. As a result, they suffered most of the brutalities. In late spring 1995 it would be the Americans who, sick and tired of standing by and doing nothing, would use their military power to give the Serbs a bloody nose and force all parties to the conference table at Dayton, Ohio. The Dayton Agreement would be implemented that coming November. Ricky Colenso would not see it.

By the time Ricky reached Travnik, it had stopped a lot of shells from Serb positions across the mountains. Most of the buildings were shrouded with planks leaning against the walls. If hit by an ‘incomer’ they would be splintered to matchwood, but save the house itself. Most windows were missing and were replaced by plastic sheeting. The brightly painted main mosque had somehow been spared a direct hit. The two largest buildings in town, the gymnasium (high school) and the once famous Music School, were stuffed with refugees.

With virtually no access to the surrounding countryside and thus no access to growing crops, the refugees, about three times the original population, were dependent on the aid agencies to survive. That was where Loaves ’n’ Fishes came in, along with a dozen other smaller NGOs in the town.

But the two Land Cruisers could be piled up with five hundred pounds of relief aid and still make it to various outlying villages and hamlets where the need was even greater than in Travnik centre. Ricky happily agreed to back-haul the sacks of food and drive the off-roads into the mountains to the south.

Four months after he had sat in Georgetown and seen on the television screen the images of human misery that had brought him here, he was happy. He was doing what he came to do. He was touched by the gratitude of the gnarled peasants and their brown, saucer-eyed children when he hauled sacks of wheat, maize, milk powder and soup concentrates into the centre of an isolated village that had not eaten for a week.

He believed he was paying back in some way for all the benefits and comforts that a benign God, in whom he firmly believed, had bestowed upon him at his birth simply by creating him an American.

He spoke not a word of Serbo-Croat, the common language of all Yugoslavia, nor the Bosnian patois. He had no idea of the local geography, where the mountain roads led, where was safe and where could be dangerous.

John Slack paired him with one of the local Bosnian staffers, a young man with reasonable, school-learned English, called Fadil Sulejman, who acted as his guide, interpreter and navigator.

Each week through April and the first fortnight of May he despatched either a letter or card to his parents, and with greater or lesser delays, depending on who was heading north for re-supplies, they arrived in Georgetown bearing Croatian or Austrian stamps.

It was in the second week of May that Ricky found himself alone and in charge of the entire depot. Lars, the Swede, had had a major engine breakdown on a lonely mountain road in Croatia, north of the border but short of

Zagreb. John Slack had taken one of the Land Cruisers to help him out and get the truck back into service.

Fadil Sulejman asked Ricky for a favour.

Like thousands in Travnik, Fadil had been forced to flee his home when the tide of war swept towards it. He explained that his family home had been a farm or smallholding in an upland valley on the slopes of the Vlasic range. He was desperate to know if there was anything left of it. Had it been torched or spared? Was it still standing? When the war began, his father had buried family treasures under a barn. Were they still there? In a word, could he visit his parental home for the first time in three years?

Ricky happily gave him time off but that was not the real point. With the tracks up the mountain slick with spring rain, only an off-road would make it. That meant borrowing the Land Cruiser.

Ricky was in a quandary. He wanted to help, and he would pay for the petrol. But was the mountain safe? Serbian patrols had once ranged over it, using their artillery to pound Travnik below.

That was a year ago, Fadil insisted. The southern slopes, where his parents' farmhouse was situated, were quite safe now. Ricky hesitated, and moved by Fadil's pleading, wondering what it must be like to lose your home, he agreed. With one proviso: he would come too.

In fact, in the spring sunshine, it was a very pleasant drive. They left the town behind and went up the main road towards Donji Vakuf for ten miles before turning off to the right.

The road climbed, degenerated into a track, and went on climbing. Beech, ash and oak in their spring leaf enveloped them. It was, thought Ricky, almost like the Shenandoah where he had once gone camping with a school party. They began to skid on the corners and he admitted they would never have made it without four-wheel drive.

The oak gave way to conifers and at five thousand feet they emerged into an upland valley, invisible from the road far below, a sort of secret hideaway. In the heart of the valley, they found the farmhouse. Its stone smokestack survived, but the rest had been torched and gutted. Several sagging barns, unfired, still stood beyond the old cattle pens. Ricky glanced at Fadil's face and said:

'I am so sorry.'

They dismounted by the blackened firestack and Ricky waited as Fadil walked through the wet ashes, kicking here and there at what was left of the place he was raised in. Ricky followed him as he walked past the cattle pen and the cesspit, still brimming with its nauseous contents, swollen by the rains, to the barns where his father might have buried the family treasures to save them from marauders. That was when they heard the rustle and the whimper.

The two men found them under a wet and smelly tarpaulin. There were six of them, small, cringing, terrified, aged about ten down to four. Four little boys and two girls, the oldest apparently the surrogate mother and leader of the group. Seeing the two men staring at them, they were frozen with fear. Fadil began to talk softly. After a while the girl replied.

'They come from Gorica, a small hamlet about four miles from here along the mountain. It means "small hill". I used to know it.'

'What happened?'

Fadil talked some more in the local lingo. The girl answered, then burst into tears.

'Men came, Serbs, paramilitaries.'

'When?'

'Last night.'

'What happened?'

Fadil sighed.

'It was a very small hamlet. Four families, twenty adults, maybe twelve children. Gone now, all dead. Their parents

shouted that they should run away, when the firing started. They escaped in the darkness.'

'Orphans? All of them?'

'All of them.'

'Dear God, what a country. We must get them into the truck, down to the valley,' said the American.

They led the children, each clinging to the hand of the next eldest up the chain, out of the barn into the bright spring sunshine. Birds sang. It was a beautiful valley.

At the edge of the trees they saw the men. There were ten of them and two Russian GAZ jeeps in army camouflage. The men were also in camo. And heavily armed.

Three weeks later, scouring the mailbox but facing yet another day with no card, Mrs Annie Colenso rang a number in Windsor, Ontario. It answered at the second ring. She recognized the voice of her father's private secretary.

'Hi, Jean. It's Annie. Is my dad there?'

'He surely is, Mrs Colenso. I'll put you right through.'

CHAPTER THREE

The Magnate

THERE WERE TEN young pilots in ‘A’ flight crew hut and another eight next door in ‘B’ Flight. Outside on the bright green grass of the airfield two or three Hurricanes crouched with that distinctive hunchbacked look caused by the bulge behind the cockpit. They were not new and fabric patches revealed where they had taken combat wounds high above France over the previous fortnight.

Inside the huts the mood could not have been in greater contrast to the warm summer sunshine of 25 June 1940 at Coltishall field, Norfolk, England. The mood of the men of No. 242 Squadron, Royal Air Force, known simply as the Canadian squadron, was about as low as it had ever been, and with good cause.

Two Four Two had been in combat almost since the first shot was fired on the Western Front. They had fought the losing battle for France from the eastern border back to the Channel coast. As Hitler’s great blitzkrieg machine rolled on, flicking the French army to one side, the pilots trying to stem the flood would find their bases evacuated and moved further back even while they were airborne. They had to scavenge for food, lodgings, spare parts and fuel. Anyone who has ever been part of a retreating army will know the overriding adjective is ‘chaotic’.

Back across the Channel in England, they had fought the second battle above the sands of Dunkirk as beneath them the British army sought to save what it could from the rout, grabbing anything that would float to paddle back to

England, whose white cliffs were enticingly visible across the flat calm sea.

By the time the last Tommy was evacuated from that awful beach and the last defenders of the perimeter passed into German captivity for five years, the Canadians were exhausted. They had taken a terrible beating: nine killed, three wounded, three shot down and taken prisoner.

Three weeks later they were still grounded at Coltishall, without spares or tools, all abandoned in France. Their CO, Squadron Leader 'Papa' Gobiel, was ill, had been for weeks, and would not return to command. Still, the Brits had promised them a new commander, who was expected any time.

A small open-topped sports car emerged from between the hangars and parked near the two timber crew huts. A man climbed out, with some difficulty. No one came out to greet him. He stumped awkwardly towards 'A' Flight. A few minutes later he was out of there and heading for 'B' hut. The Canadian pilots watched him through the windows, puzzled by the rolling walk with feet apart. The door opened and he appeared in the aperture. His shoulders revealed his rank of squadron leader. No one stood up.

'Who's in charge here?' he demanded angrily.

A chunky Canuck hauled himself upright, a few feet from where Steve Edmond sprawled in a chair and surveyed the newcomer through a blue haze.

'I guess I am,' said Stan Turner. It was early days. Stan Turner already had two confirmed kills to his credit but would go on to score a total of fourteen and a hatful of medals.

The British officer with the angry blue eyes turned on his heel and lurched away towards a parked Hurricane. The Canadians drifted out of their huts to observe.

'I do not believe what I am watching,' muttered Johnny Latta to Steve Edmond. 'The bastards have sent us a CO with no bloody legs.'