

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.

In my case minimalism wasn't a fashion statement, it just meant I didn't have any money. And, without any female guidance, my knowledge of interior decor erred distinctly on the side of functional after a lifetime spent in the military. I'd made an effort, though. Instead of following my natural instinct for white paint, I'd allowed the shop assistant to talk me into pale beige for the walls. With my colour sense that suggested the cheapest brown nylon carpet I could find, which was so full of static that I got a shock every time I turned on an electrical appliance. Not that there were many of those. A cooker and fridge-freezer in the kitchenette and a second-hand TV and music centre in the lounge. The sofa, chairs and flip-down dining table suite had been a bargain range from the Argos catalogue. At least they were all in a matching beech and blue finish, which I'd read somewhere was all the rage. There wasn't a wall picture or ornament in sight.

Dampier had thrown his raincoat over the arm of the sofa and sat down beside it. 'No woman in your life, then?'

'Meaning?'

'No woman would put up with a pad as bare as this.'

I'd grinned. 'I'm sure you're right.'

'So what happened to that floozie at the hotel after our last meet?'

'Believe it or not, Morgan, we never kept in touch.'

'Not to be the love of your life, then?' He must have seen the shadow pass behind my eyes then and realized his mistake. 'Sorry, Ed. Still keeping the candle alight for Astrid, I suppose.'

I hadn't answered – I couldn't. If I'd tried to speak, I'd have just cracked up. Even after all this time, when you think you're over the worst, it'll suddenly come and hit you when you're least expecting it. A careless word, a familiar tune, a forgotten memory unexpectedly flooding back . . .

Morgan had seemed to sense it. He'd cradled the tumbler in his hands and appeared to study it. He chose his words

carefully. 'I understand, Ed, really I do. Astrid was special. Everyone thought so. I only met her the once, but – well – she made quite an impression.'

I'd realized he was struggling to say what he'd come to say. I cleared my throat. 'Yeah, Astrid was special. So?'

'You haven't been back to Bosnia?'

'You've been watching?'

He'd shaken his head. 'But someone always is – as you know.'

I'd swallowed the last of the whisky in my glass. 'No, Morgan, I haven't been back since we last met. I took your advice, remember?'

His smile had been uneasy. 'And you've buried the ghost?'

Our gazes had met and seemed to lock together. 'What do you think?'

He'd averted his eyes suddenly and stood up, as if desperately in need of fresh air and some exercise. Striding to the window, he stared down at the back garden several floors below.

'Do you know who I'm with at the moment, Ed?' he'd asked after a moment.

I'd lit a cigarette, wondering just where the hell he was coming from. 'I never have known who you're with, Morgan, ever. It's part of your charm. I'd guess the Ministry of Defence or the Foreign Office – or somewhere in between.'

He'd turned back to face me. 'Somewhere in between, Ed, that's about right. Part of my job is to commission people, trusted people for various black ops in the national interest.'

'Oh, yes?' I'd responded non-committally. I'd never been totally convinced that Morgan Dampier wasn't at least a partial Walter Mitty. The world surrounding intelligence and special forces seems to attract more than its fair share.

'Various deniable jobs for various departments of government, shall we say. I've done it for a while now. Interesting

work.' He'd sighed a little wistfully. 'But now it's time for me to move on.'

'Yes?'

It had hardly been the third degree, but it brought a response that I wasn't expecting. Perhaps he'd just felt the need to unburden himself on someone. Someone who didn't matter in the great scheme of things. Me.

'You know I was with the FRU, the Field Research Unit in Northern Ireland,' he'd confided. I didn't *know* any such thing, but I wasn't surprised. The somewhat notorious FRU called themselves 'Fishers of Men' and ran all army agents and informants in the province under the auspices of the army's Secret Intelligence Wing.

Anyway, Dampier had gone on as though I knew all about his involvement. 'Well, the politicians are setting the dogs loose on us. High-level police inquiry into everything we got up to, no stone unturned. As if Number Ten and Whitehall knew nothing about it, of course. Anything to appease PIRA and keep them in this bloody joke of a peace process.'

I'd read some snippets in the Sunday papers. 'It doesn't surprise me, Morgan, if you're being hung out to dry. There's no honour any more, no respect, no loyalty. You know that's why I left the army.'

His smile had been terse. 'I seem to remember you made it pretty clear at the time. Upset a few sensitive souls who didn't want to hear the truth . . . Anyway, I've decided it's time to make myself scarce. Pastures new. There's a job turned up in the European Commission that looks like it'll suit my talents. I'll bury myself away in Brussels and hide behind one of those million unmarked bureaucratic doors.' The smile had faded quickly. 'It'll also offer me powerful protection against any inquiries by the British police.'

'Sounds like the right place to be,' I'd agreed. 'But what's

this to do with you coming to see me? I take it there *is* a connection?’

He’d held out his empty glass for a refill. ‘Observant as ever, Ed.’

‘It doesn’t take a genius.’

‘My last commissioning job for my current employers – whoever they might be. Your name’s cropped up in fairly exalted circles, old friends who remember your work in the province and Bosnia.’

I’d been sceptical. ‘Didn’t think I had any friends left in exalted circles.’

‘Oh, yes. Not the fair-weather ones, but old school.’

Some ex-SAS officers somewhere, I’d guessed. ‘What sort of commission? Abroad? Close surveillance?’

‘Here in the UK.’ He’d hesitated. ‘And, yes, some close-surveillance work – er – but that’s not quite all.’

‘Spill it, Morgan.’

‘It’s a wet job.’

I’d laughed so hard that I spilt the whisky I’d just topped up. ‘I take it that *is* a joke?’

He’d leaned forward and fixed me with his stare. ‘I’m deadly serious.’

My humour had drained away instantly, to be replaced by a swelling anger. ‘I thought you were supposed to be a friend, Morgan. I’m not *that* hard up.’

Dampier had sat back, still looking intently at me. ‘Not fifteen grand hard up? That’s not what I heard.’

I’d become really riled then. ‘And just what did you hear?’

He’d looked suitably abashed and had shrugged. ‘That maybe fifteen grand would get you out of the shit and give you a fighting chance to sort your life out.’ He must have seen my second’s hesitation and had pounced like the true professional he was. ‘I think you should know who the target is that they have in mind for you, Ed.’

‘Not interested, Morgan. Forget it.’

But there had been no stopping him then. 'Remember I told you Brigadier Domedzic was dead, and probably the others were too . . . Well, I was wrong about the others. One of them's over here.'

He'd got my attention then all right. 'Who the hell is the target, Morgan?'

Dampier had said quietly: 'Tex-Mex.'

The memory of the way he'd dropped the bombshell into my lap brought me back to the present with a jolt.

I'd allowed my concentration to flag. I was staring at the image of Tex-Mex in the reflection of the snack-bar window, but only seeing Astrid. Wide-eyed and close-up with her lips parted in that infectious smile that would stay with me for ever.

Damn it, Coltrane, get a grip.

I squeezed my eyes hard shut until the image faded from the inside of my eyelids. When they opened again, I was back at the pavement table on the King's Road. It must still have been cold, but I felt like I had a fever. My heart was pumping hard and I could feel sweat gathering in the small of my back.

I glanced at my watch. Six minutes to go.

Casually I reached into my pocket and extracted the thin clear filament of fibre-optic flex, pushing its small plug-end into the receptor-jack hole in the photographer's aluminium case that I'd placed on the table. The thin cross-hairs and red laser pinpoint appeared in the right-hand lens of my specially adapted Ray-Ban sunglasses.

I shifted the position of my chair, as if getting away from the glare of the sun, until I now had a direct view of Tex-Mex's back. Then I nudged around the aluminium case on the table, so that the concealed 9mm barrel and the laser light above it were directly aligned within the cross-hairs on the centre of the target's spine.

The version of the weapon inside was specially modified

for close-quarters work. Rapid fire if necessary, but no full auto. Anyway, I intended to fire only a single round. The silencer and baffled outer casing were remarkably efficient in a noisy urban environment, and a battery-operated motor would suck back in most of the gunsmoke before filtering, deodorizing and dispersing it away through two outer vents in the base of the case.

Five minutes and thirty seconds to go. All set. I felt calmer now, my heart rhythm slowing to steadier half-second beats. My head began to clear, my awareness and vision sharpening and the sensitivity of my hearing increasing as though someone had turned up the volume on a television. Sounds rushed in from all directions at once, each demanding attention and analysis. The rumble of a London bus, the squeal of a taxi's brakes, the impatient hoot of some chinless wonder in a Porsche, the conversation of two Dutch tourists at another table . . .

Then an all too familiar voice. Tex-Mex's.

'Hey, Zeta, you spent all my money already!'

I looked up. Oh, shit! It was his wife, a tall, mean-faced blonde wrapped in an expensive coat with an astrakhan collar and matching hat. She was loaded down with carrier-bags and had their two kids in tow.

She was half an hour too early. I really didn't want to believe this; she never *ever* joined her husband before one-thirty! I cursed myself for not having thought about the possibility. Of course! This was no longer the usual Friday shop, it was the start of the pre-Christmas trawl.

Zeta laughed without humour. 'I may have spent all the money, Leonid, but I'm only halfway through the present list!' She dumped some bags on the chair next to him and put others on the ground. 'The shops are so busy you can hardly move . . . and I still haven't found anything for your mother.'

Tex-Mex had a mother. Christ, that was something to

make you think. She was probably a harmless old crone living in a poky flat in Belgrade and doting on her son, his picture in pride of place on the mantelpiece.

‘Give yourself a break, Zeta. Join me for some lunch.’

NO! I screamed silently. If she and the children sat down I’d have to abort. The risk of killing or injuring them would be too great.

She shook her head. ‘I’ve too much to do. I thought I’d just dump some of these bags with you before my arms drop off.’

Tex-Mex shrugged. ‘No problem. Leave the kids too, if you want.’

The boy looked to be about ten, the girl a year or so younger. They were both snuggling up to him in a way that suggested he was a soft touch compared to their mother. He grinned at them, ruffling each one’s hair in turn in a show of genuine affection.

God, I didn’t need this. Top of the list of rules – never get to know your target on a personal level. Never spare the wife or girlfriend a moment’s thought. Forget he has a mother and father of his own, or anyone else who’ll be eaten up with grief at his passing. And certainly never watch him playing with his kids.

Zeta shook her head and reached for her offspring. ‘No, Leonid, I’ve got to get them both new shoes. I’ll be back in about an hour. You okay waiting here?’

He waved his newspaper and chuckled contentedly. ‘No rush – I’ve plenty to read. Take care.’

Thank God for that, I thought as I watched Zeta walk away with the two children skipping at her side.

And just momentarily I thought how the fair hair that peeked from beneath the astrakhan hat could have been Astrid’s, and the kids could have been ours. *Should* have been.

My gaze went down to the watch on my wrist. Now just one minute and thirty seconds to go to the diversion – *if*

my masters were as good as their word. Because in special forces we all knew from long and bitter experience that you could never trust politicians and civil servants or anyone in the intelligence business – as Morgan Dampier had reminded me only the last time we'd met.

Even as I recalled his words, I felt the chill on the back of my neck. 'You can trust me, Ed, but a word to the wise. I've learned that when doing a job, it's smart never to do it at a time and place pre-set by others. And whoever you have to trust, never trust your own. Especially your own.'

Well, despite all that, I did trust Morgan Dampier – just about – and I assured him that, anyway, there definitely weren't going to be any *other* jobs. This was my one and only.

He'd sort of smiled at that and said we also wouldn't be relying on 'our own' for the diversion. That would be provided by hard men from a professional East London gang who acted on contract for cash only with no questions asked. With a kill going down, there wouldn't be an MI5 or Special Branch operator anywhere, seen or unseen. Although Tex-Mex hadn't known it, he had been cut adrift to look after himself from the moment he and his family had stepped out of the 'safe house' that morning, his usefulness to Her Majesty's Government at an end.

They'd want none of their own around when the presumably Serb assassin unexpectedly wreaked revenge out of a clear blue sky. I'd obligingly left a deliberate trail for the police to pick up later. I'd spoken Serbo-Croat in a pub around the corner earlier where I knew there were bar staff from the Balkans. I'd also left a couple of answerphone messages that I knew they'd discover during the murder inquiry.

No one in government, Whitehall or the intelligence services would want their connection with Tex-Mex known.

As Morgan Dampier had told me when we'd sat in my flat at the beginning, the man had signed his own death-warrant the moment he'd agreed to help in return for

avoiding arrest for war crimes. Even the 'safe house' was a fake – with no traceable links to the intelligence agencies.

I'd listened in amazement to Dampier's explanation of how the government had wanted to rid itself of some awkward customers in the ranks of Loyalist terrorist organizations in Northern Ireland who were holding up the peace process by insisting that the whole thing was a sell-out to the Provisional IRA. Knowing that these same outfits were actively seeking an arms deal in Serbia, undercover intelligence officers had introduced them to Tex-Mex, who was fortuitously in a position to supply absolutely *everything* they required. The Loyalist negotiators couldn't believe their luck. It had gone like clockwork.

Twenty seconds to go.

Even as I scanned left and right along the streaming lines of King's Road traffic, I knew that armed police and troops would be swooping on a container ship in Lurgan docks in Northern Ireland. They would seize the arms shipment arranged by Tex-Mex and arrest the troublesome Loyalists – so providing another propaganda coup for their enemies in the Provisional IRA and giving the peace process another prod along.

Tex-Mex's involvement was now a potential embarrassment, of course. But not for long.

Then it happened. There seemed to have been no real reason for it, because the nearside traffic flow on its way to Sloane Square was barely crawling. A plain white van stopped completely, just a short distance from the snack bar where we sat, but the ageing Nissan saloon behind it didn't. All heads turned at that distinctive sound of shattering glass and the crumpling of cheap metal.

A large bruiser of a man with shaven head and tattoos climbed down from the van to come face-to-face with the equally aggressive-looking car driver.

‘Are you fuckin’ blind . . . ?!’ was the screamed opening gambit.

As Tex-Mex watched the furious pantomime and pedestrians gathered to gawp in morbid fascination, I reached into my pocket for my cellphone and pressed the pre-logged number.

This bit wasn’t in the plan. No one knew about it, not even Morgan Dampier. This was personal and it broke every sodding rule in creation.

Tex-Mex was startled and looked mildly irritated at having his mobile phone go off while he was enjoying the angry debacle taking place just feet in front of him. He dragged it from his jacket pocket and as he did I glimpsed the leather holster on the left side of his belt.

‘Is that Leonid Rusjivic?’ I asked in Serbo-Croat.

He grunted. ‘Who wants him?’

‘Jesus,’ I replied gently.

‘What?’ he snarled, suddenly aware that this wasn’t right.

‘Remember Astrid Kweiss?’

‘Who?’

‘Astrid Kweiss. The UN interpreter you murdered in Bosnia seven years ago.’

He was getting really angry now, and the anger was quickly changing into fear as he suddenly realized he didn’t know what the hell was going on. I could see the sweat breaking out on his skin and it wasn’t from the chilli sauce on his nachos. ‘Who the fuck are you?’

I had to raise my voice to be heard above the yelling drivers. ‘I am the avenging angel of Astrid Kweiss—’

I hung up but didn’t bother watching as he stared in disbelief at the mobile in his hand.

At the moment it dawned on him that someone could be watching and he looked up, I pressed the handset button in my pocket.

The red laser spot marked the centre of Tex-Mex’s back

where the single silenced 9mm dum dum round slammed home from the concealed firing port in the aluminium photographer's case on my table. He pitched forward. His belly hit the table rim and he rebounded against the chair-back. For a second he rocked with the momentum, his head lolling sideways. As his mouth fell open, his right arm dropped down limply towards the pavement. His mobile phone detached itself from his grasp and clattered into the small but rapidly growing pool of blood.

It had been so quick and silent that no one had noticed. As I picked up the photographer's case from my table, turned and walked slowly away down King's Road towards Fulham, the two arguing motorists were finally calming down.

The last thing I heard was someone say: 'Is that bloke all right? Looks like he's had a heart attack.'

Then I crossed the main road, turned a corner and kept on walking, steadily and looking only straight ahead.

They say revenge is a dish best served cold.

Well, if this was the dish I didn't like the taste of it. I felt no joy, no sense of victory or even of righting an injustice. I didn't feel the welcome warm flush of relief or the cold hand of fear. I felt absolutely *nothing*.

Worse, I couldn't even conjure the image of Astrid's face in my mind's eye.

To all intents and purposes I felt about as dead as the corpse I'd just left on the King's Road under the cheerless December sun.