

MIKE – October 1992

The steep narrow lane was strewn with debris: bricks, shards of glass, a table with three legs, a tee-shirt abandoned in the gutter. Mike Hennessey bent to retrieve it. A jagged tear across the front of it severed the slogan *I love Sarajevo* in English across a blood-red heart. Dear God, there was even symbolism in the gutters of this benighted city. He dropped the tee-shirt thinking *well at least the children's home is on the the right side of town:* the side least vulnerable to the barrage of death pounding out from the encircling Serb artillery.

Instinctively he drew into the relative shelter of a doorway, then saw it opened into the shell of a house. But the view was magnificent over the city, late autumn sun slanting on to minarets and spires and towers too distant to reveal their scars; and the steep slopes beyond still too densely forested to hint at what they concealed.

“It’s *unreal*,” he had said quietly, those fifteen, sixteen years ago when it had still been Yugoslavia and the world mostly remembered Sarajevo – if it remembered it at all – as the place where that chap shot an Archduke and started the First World War. Or something like that.

He was on holiday then, had fallen in love with the city, and with a girl called Marija with smooth high cheekbones and eyes as green as a mountain torrent. “Sarajevo has always welcomed persecuted people,” Marija had said. “People with different blood feelings from ours.” She meant blood ties, but back then Mike thought her expression got it about right.

God help them.

He had looked for her of course, but in this mayhem it was a forlorn hope, even supposing she still lived here and had survived. She had stopped answering his letters quite soon after his return to England. Or had he stopped writing first, caught up in the self-important busy-ness of his first reporting job? He couldn’t even remember her full name and anyway she would be married by now. As he was. He pictured Sara briefly, the stable constant in his life for eleven years: at home in the rural, well-ordered quiet of Middle England. And longed to be there.

“Get a story about how the kids are coping,” was the latest instruction from Canary Wharf.

He had sent a message to the director of the orphanage the previous day and she was waiting for him. Her name was Jovanka and she looked exhausted. But she smiled as she said “I wondered if you would come. The shelling was bad last night.”

She led him down a long corridor that was very cold and smelt Institution. “We have no heating,” she said. “Little food or water, and light for only two hours. Some days. Soon we will have no candles.”

“I’ll get you some.”

She raised her eyebrows politely. “And most of the staff have gone: to safety, or to fight, or to take care of their families.”

There were about 50 small children. They had been collected into one large dormitory to make the most of whatever warmth and light were available. Most were in bed but some of the smallest had clambered out and were squatting on the floor, sucking their thumbs, rocking to and fro. But noiselessly. It was the silence of so many children in one place that was unnerving: a kind of resignation more suited to a home for the elderly.

Jovanka spoke sharply in Serbo-Croat to a girl standing in the middle of the room. Her head was down, her face concealed by a dark lank curtain of hair and she clutched a book. Jovanka sighed. “She is supposed to be helping me, that one. I ask her to make sure they stay in bed where it is warm now that it is dangerous to play outside. But...” She shrugged.

Mike went over to the child, crouching down beside her. Instinctively he pushed back the curtain of hair. She flinched but did not draw away until he tried to look at her book when she stepped back, clutching it harder and glared ferociously at him. She had dark eyes, a sallow unhealthy complexion and he saw then that she was older than he had first thought – perhaps eleven, twelve? Then he noticed with surprise the title of the book: *Winnie the Pooh*.

“It was in a parcel from your country,” Jovanka said.

“And what is *her* story?”

“Her father was killed by a sniper; Branka, her mother is now very sick. She is an old friend, from long ago and asked if Jasminka should come here. To be safer. To help me....” She

paused. “Branka is a Serb. Jasminka’s father Ismet was a Bosniak, a Moslem. She was playing outside and he had gone to fetch her. She was holding his hand when he was shot.” She shrugged. “I forget to make allowances. But when tragedy is the norm

But tragedy wasn’t the norm in Mike’s life, and he ached with compassion for the girl with the unkempt hair. As he followed Jovanka out of the room, he looked back and saw the child was still glaring after him.

“I’ll get those candles,” he said again later as he took his leave of Jovanka. The shelling had started again and, across the valley, fresh puffs of smoke and dust rose where missiles struck with distant, gentle, harmless-sounding thuds. “And some things for the children. I’ll come back in a few days.”

He did return, but he never intended to get so involved with the girl with the uncombed hair.