

THE EYEWITNESS FIRST CHAPTER

There should have been ghosts. Four and half thousand body bags, every one containing the remains of a human being that had met a violent death, and yet as Jack Solomon walked down the length of the storage facility there were no whisperings of vengeful thoughts, no movements in the shadows, not even a prickling of the hairs on the back of his neck. There was nothing, just the hum of the air-conditioning units that kept the temperature at between two and eight degrees Celsius. Did that mean that the four and a half thousand souls had moved on to whatever form of afterlife lay beyond? Solomon doubted it. Solomon didn't believe in an afterlife. He didn't believe in God, either. He'd seen the aftermath of too many atrocities committed in the name of religion to believe in a god. In any god.

A technician was using an electric saw to slice off a piece of a femur that had been gripped in a carpenter's vice. He was wearing a white coat, medical gloves and had a cotton mask across his face and he nodded as Solomon walked by.

Another technician in dark blue overalls was cleaning the concrete floor with an industrial vacuum cleaner. He too wore a cotton mask across his mouth.

The white body bags were stored in metal racks, seven high, each with an identification number scrawled in black ink. Above the body bags were rows of brown paper bags. Each brown paper bag also had a number on it. For each body bag, there was a corresponding brown paper bag.

Solomon had two numbers on a computer printout and he kept looking back and forth between the numbers on the printout and the numbers on the body bags. The numbers were consecutive. The bodies had been pulled from the same communal grave.

The body bags that matched the numbers on the printout were lying next to each other in the centre of one of the racks. One of the bags, Solomon knew, contained just a torso and a leg. The head had never been found. That was the elder of the two brothers. The skeleton of the young brother was virtually intact. Solomon had read the post mortem reports on both men, written in perfect English by a German doctor who had carried out the autopsies in a portakabin close to the mass grave where the brothers had been found. Both men had been shot in the back at close range. Not once but more than a dozen times. And a hatchet had been used to hack away at their legs. The German doctor had been unable to say whether the hatchet had been used before or after death, but Solomon knew that there would have been no point in inflicting the injuries after the men were dead. They'd been mutilated, thrown on the ground, and raked with machine gun fire.

Solomon pulled over a metal ladder and slowly climbed it to reach the two brown paper bags that went with the two body bags.

Solomon took the bags down a white-painted corridor to the viewing room. There were two Muslim women sitting with the interpreter, a mother and daughter. Mothers were always the worst and Solomon was grateful for the presence of the interpreter. The interpreter was a buffer, a filter for the bad news, and it kept

Solomon one step removed from the horror of the situation. The interpreter was a man in his late thirties, a former soldier who had been especially trained to liaise with the families of the missing.

The room had been made as comfortable as possible, with two small sofas, a low wooden coffee table, and posters of country scenes on the wall. There was a vase of sweet-smelling white flowers on a side table. On the coffee table were two large books. One contained photographs of the clothes and personal effects taken from bodies that had been buried. The photographs in the second book were from bodies that had been left lying on the ground. Solomon had never discovered why that was the distinction. There were so many other ways that the dead could have been segregated. By sex. By age. By manner of death. Before DNA testing, the photographs in the books were the main key to identifying the dead.

The mother and daughter had already looked through the books and had recognised the clothing belonging to two of the skeletal remains in the holding facility. They had both given blood samples, and their DNA had been checked against DNA taken from the bones. It was a perfect match.

The fact that the woman and her daughter had been called back, meant that they already knew to expect the worst. But Solomon knew from past experience that they wouldn't believe it until they had heard it from him and had a chance to view the possessions found with the remains. After denial would come acceptance, and then would come the questions.

They were Muslims and both were wearing yellow and blue headscarves and thick padded sleeveless jackets over cheap cotton skirts. Their clothing was threadbare but clean, and Solomon knew they'd put on their best clothes for him. The daughter had no laces in her worn boots and neither woman had any jewellery. Solomon put the bags down on the table and sat down, forcing a smile.

Both women thanked him. 'Hvala lijepo. Hvala za sve.' Thank you for everything. The people in the viewing room always thanked him. Even though Solomon only ever brought bad news, they thanked him.

Solomon pushed one of the bags towards the daughter, but it was the mother who reached for it. If there had been any doubt about the identification, the old woman and her daughter would have been wearing medical gloves to prevent contamination. But in this case there was no doubt and no need for gloves. She opened it and took out a black jacket, edged in gold, with a picture of Elvis Presley on the back. The old woman gasped and put a hand to her mouth. The Elvis jacket was the first thing they had recognised in the book. It was very distinctive and Solomon doubted that there was another like it anywhere in the Balkans. The jacket had been cleaned and there were creases along the sleeves where it had been ironed. Down the corridor was a laundry room where every item of clothing was washed and ironed before being placed in a bag. It was horrific enough to view clothing taken from the dead; it would be a thousand times worse if the relatives saw them in the state in which they arrived at the facility.

The old woman laid the jacket out on the table. There were five ragged holes in the back. The woman poked her finger in one of the holes, frowning. Her daughter leaned over and whispered softly. ‘Metaci.’ Bullets. The old woman wailed and sat back, her hands on either side of her weathered face. The daughter took a pair of socks out of the bag. They had been neatly folded. She opened one out and examined the heel, then took a deep breath and blinked back tears. She spoke to the interpreter, the words tumbling out faster and faster, until she ran out of breath and sat back on the sofa, gasping.

‘She darned the socks for her brother the day before the Serbs came and took the men away,’ said the interpreter. ‘She says his wife couldn’t sew, she was always pricking herself with the needle, so she did it for him.’

Solomon nodded and smiled. There was nothing he could say. He wondered where the wife was, but the fact that she wasn’t there probably meant that she was dead, too.

The daughter took the rest of the clothing from the bag and laid it out carefully. She bit down on her lower lip and nodded. There were rips in the cotton trousers, at the back of the knees. Solomon knew they were the cuts from the hatchet blows, but at least the bloodstains had come out in the wash.

There was a rusting wristwatch at the bottom of the bag and the old woman took it from her daughter’s hand and stroked it softly.

The second bag contained just a shoe with the upper coming away from the sole, and a torn plaid shirt. Like the Elvis jacket, it was peppered with bullet holes.

The daughter peered into the bag. Solomon knew that she was wondering where the rest of her brother's belongings were. It wasn't a conversation he wanted to have. What had happened to her brothers was horrific enough without having to explain that the bodies had been moved several times by Serbs trying to cover up the evidence of their crimes, and that while the bodies been buried and reburied, many had fallen apart, bits had been lost, remains had been mixed up.

Solomon spoke in English, pausing to allow the interpreter to translate. 'I want to explain what has happened, so that there is no confusion,' he said. 'The DNA we have taken from your blood matches two of the remains we have here in this facility. The belongings we have here were taken from the remains, but it is the DNA which gives conclusive proof.' Solomon turned so that his body was facing towards the younger woman. Siblings were always easier to deal with. The pain was bad, but not as bad as for a mother who had to accept the fact that her children had been murdered. 'There is no doubt that it is your two brothers. No doubt at all. We can make arrangements for you to collect the remains so that they can be buried according to your religion.'

'We have no money for a funeral,' said the daughter.

The interpreter translated and Solomon nodded. 'There are charities that can help. We can tell you who to contact.'

The old woman spoke quickly, almost jabbering, her hands stabbing at the air to punctuate her sentences.

Solomon waited until the interpreter translated. The old woman had said that she was certain that there had been a mistake, that her sons were not dead but were being held prisoner in a concentration camp deep inside Serbia.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Solomon slowly. ‘With DNA, there is no mistake. I know that mistakes were made in the past, that funerals were held and then those that were thought dead returned, but that was before we had DNA. There is no doubt. I am sorry. Very sorry. But it is time to bury your sons and to mourn. It is time to accept that they have gone.’

The old woman looked at him with tear-filled eyes and slowly nodded. Solomon stood up. The interpreter could give them any more information they needed. Solomon’s work was done.

The daughter grabbed the hem of Solomon’s jacket and spoke to him in rapid Servo-Croatian. The interpreter translated. She wanted to see the bodies. They always did, and Solomon always had to say the same thing. ‘It is not possible,’ he said. ‘Not at the moment.’

It was, of course, perfectly possible. The two women could quite easily have been taken into the room and shown the two body bags among the four and half thousand. But then they would have asked for the body bags to be opened and Solomon knew that the sight of what was inside the bags would stay with them forever. Best that they remembered their loved ones as they knew them, not as the mouldering bones and grinning skulls in the white bags. So Solomon shrugged and repeated that it wasn’t possible, then left the interpreter to it.

He left the viewing room and walked back down the corridor to the exit. He passed the photographic room where a photographer was arranging a pair of trousers on the floor and positioning a camera above it. The photographic work went on. There were more books to be filled with photographs and sent around the world so that relatives overseas could look through them in the hope of identifying something that came from the missing. Solomon found the books more disturbing than the facility with its thousands of dead. The body bags were cold and impersonal, but the books were chilling catalogues, every item personal and every item taken from the body of a murder victim.

Solomon had to unlock the door to get out of the facility, and then relock it behind him. The door to the outside was always locked so that no one could enter by mistake.

Solomon climbed into his white Nissan Patrol four-wheel drive with its diplomatic plates and drove away from the facility. He was always glad to leave the town of Tuzla. Partly because the storage facility was such a depressing place, but also because the air pollution was do bad that his throat was red raw after a few hours. The four-wheel drive bucked and rocked over the uneven road surfaces as he headed out of town. Tuzla was built on a huge underground salt lake that had been mined for hundreds of years. The town had started to sink as the mine works collapsed, so some bright Communist engineer who had forgotten his basic chemistry decided to pump water into the old mine works. The water dissolved the salt and the collapse worsened to the extent that driving around the town in a

regular car meant broken exhaust pipes and scraped bodywork. Following the war, there was no money to repair the roads so the sinking continued unabated.

He drove past the huge coal-fired power station on the edge of town, a massive remnant of the Communist system that had once dominated the region. Huge cooling towers belched clouds of steam into the air, but the damage was done by the chimney from the coal furnace which poured out eye-watering pollution over the town twenty-four hours a day and by chemical plants which had been built around the power station by a Government more concerned with economies of scale than the health of its citizens.

The road back to Sarajevo was a single carriageway that wound its way through mountains and gorges, past small villages where every house had been reduced to rubble, fields with red signs warning of mines and yellow tape cordoning off areas known to be dangerous, awaiting the arrival of mine clearance charities. It was only 130 kilometers to Sarajevo, but Solomon had never made the drive in under two and half hours. There were two mountain ranges to cross and a farm vehicle or a bus or a slow-moving army patrol could produce a frustrating tailback, but even on a clear road the hillside fell away so sharply that Solomon rarely got the four-wheel drive into top gear.

His mobile phone rang about an hour outside Sarajevo, just as he was negotiating a hairpin turn in second gear behind a smoke-belching truck piled high with boxes of toilet paper. He took the call, then held the phone between his shoulder and ear so that he could keep both hands on the steering wheel.

It was Chuck Miller, Solomon's boss. Miller was an American who had worked for a succession of Non-Governmental Organisations around the world, including spells in Sierra Leone, Mongolia and Bangladesh. His stint with the International War Dead Commission was just another line on his curriculum vitae. He was a manager and a grant-getter, an administrator who knew how to play the funding game, and it was as a result of his efforts that the International War Dead Commission's budget had more than doubled since he'd joined four years earlier. 'Jack, where are you?' asked Miller.

'Just about to drive into a gorge,' said Solomon, pulling hard on the wheel and stamping on the brake.

'Take it easy,' said Miller. 'Good co-ordinators are hard to find. Can you talk?'

'Yeah, go on,' said Solomon. 'The road doesn't get any better for the next ten kilometres.'

'Remember that case you handled outside Pristina? Three years back.'

'The family that disappeared? Sure.' It had been one of the first cases that Solomon had handled on his arrival in the Balkans. An entire family had disappeared from a farm on the outskirts of Pristina, the capital of neighbouring Kosovo. It had happened during the spring. A farmer had seen the women tilling the fields in the morning, a Kosovar army patrol had gone by the farm in the afternoon and a sergeant recalled seeing two men from the farm working on a broken-down tractor. The next day, at about three o'clock, a shopkeeper from Pristina had driven down the half-mile track to the farm to buy eggs to take back

to the city. Eggs were in short supply and the shopkeeper could get four times the price he paid the farmer so he made the trip several times a week. There had been no one in the rambling farmhouse and though he pounded on the horn of his car for half an hour, no one had come. No one ever came. The entire family had disappeared. There was a kettle on the stove, boiled dry. Half a dozen cows in a nearby field were gathered at the gate, waiting to be milked. There had been a broken bowl in the kitchen, and a small pool of dried blood on the stone-flagged hallway, the only signs that the family had not left by choice.

The Commission had been notified but all Solomon had been able to do was to compile information on the missing people. No one knew for sure how many had gone missing from the farm but after speaking to the neighbours Solomon had twenty-one names. Men, women and children. Old and young. All related, all Kosovar Albanian Muslims in an area populated by Serbs. Solomon had spoken to all the neighbours, but not one said they had seen or heard anything. They might have been telling the truth, but Solomon knew that even if they had seen something, the neighbours wouldn't have said anything. Right across the former Yugoslavia innocent civilians had been maimed and murdered, some in their own homes, others taken away at gunpoint, and nobody had seen a thing. Houses had been looted and burned, cars stripped and set on fire, and those left unharmed, those who had been of the right race or religion, had turned their backs. All he had to show for a two-week investigation was a list of names of the missing.

‘They’ve turned up, near the border with Serbia,’ said Miller.

‘Alive?’ asked Solomon. As soon as the question left his mouth, Solomon realised what a stupid thing he’d said.

‘Get a grip, Jack,’ said Miller. ‘If they were alive, why would I be calling you?’

TO BE CONTINUED....