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Opening Extract from...

Someone Else's Conflict

Written by Alison Layland

Published by Honno Press Ltd

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First published by Honno Press in 2014
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CF64 4AH

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Published with the financial support of the Welsh Books Council.

ISBN 978-1-909983-12-0
Cover design: Graham Preston
Text design: Elaine Sharples
Printed in [to come]

Prologue

The boy wakes. It is still dark. The intermittent distant rumble is not a storm, or even a dream. He gets up and dresses quickly. The sporadic artillery fire is closer than he has ever heard it. Peering through the curtains, he is unsure whether the faint glow above the bare mountain ridge heralds approaching war or simply the sunrise. As he turns away, about to run to his parents' room, he hears a quiet but insistent tapping on the window. His friends beckon. More afraid of losing face than confronting the still-distant menace of what is approaching from beyond the mountain, he is soon out in the cold, pre-dawn twilight. He waves away their taunting – he is the youngest, and they accuse him of not wanting to come – and after a rapid whispered conference they head for the rise above the village, a perfect look-out. Their plan is to scan the road that winds down from the ridge and run back with details of the vehicles, the weapons, the number of men. Heroes valiantly raising the alert before diving for shelter with their families in the cellars. It is all too unreal, the more so for the constant TV reports, to be truly frightening.

But none of the boys can believe how fast they are. They are still watching the vehicles straggling over the ridge when the front of the small convoy is almost on them. And then the shelling begins. He watches, horrified, as a chunk is blasted from his neighbour's house, then another. He prays silently that no one is inside. Suddenly they are running back down, keeping to the trees, their planned warning

redundant. He trips and the world comes up to meet him with a sickening crunch. It feels like only a few seconds that he lies winded, but it is too long. Although he is not seriously hurt, when he sits up and scans the slope below, it is empty. His friends have either given him up or are themselves too terrified to notice he is missing.

By the time he is on his feet and making his way cautiously through the sparse woods, the war has reached his village. Of course it actually reached them a while back. His best friend and his family, along with the other Croats, left months ago. Others, Serb refugees from Croat and Bosnian-held areas, have come here and taken over abandoned houses. Everyone has stories of relatives or friends elsewhere who have been killed, or horrifically injured, or lost their homes. The war is why he has not been out of the village, even to the next town, for a long while. And it has caused the constant lament and calls for retribution on the news, his parents' attempts to conceal their terror as they watch it all too obvious. Now it has come for him, too.

He picks his way carefully, as if a snapping twig beneath his feet could possibly be heard above the growing chaos below. There is no breeze but he keeps thinking he sees movement around him. He crouches immobile by a tree, watching the destruction unfold as the attackers move in. The returning fire, from the small unit installed to defend them together with men from the village, many of the villagers armed with little more than hunting rifles, does little to stop the onslaught. They were supposed to be safe now. This wasn't meant to happen. But it has; the Croats are moving in to reclaim their land. He is supposed to hate them for it. He has tried, but doesn't understand why his people claimed it in the first place. What does it matter?

Remember what happened in the Second World War, they tell him, never forget how the Ustaše killed tens of thousands of Serbs, lots of them children like you! But that was a different age, and try as he might cannot think of his friend's parents, or his teacher, whom he liked so much more than her replacement, as child-murderers. But now he watches smoke rise from another house. He tries to make out who is running desperately across the street, only to crumple – he shuts his eyes briefly. He desperately wants to reach the comfort of his family.

He wills his feet to carry him down the last of the slope, and creeps his way between the houses. As he reaches the corner with the main street, he crouches behind a parked car. He hopes it won't be hit and explode into flames. The smell of burning is all around him – he breathes it in, and with it, terror. The sound of the gunfire drums into him. There is shouting, women screaming, crying. He wonders if he can hear his mother or his sisters. He cannot tell. It is everyone. The whole village is on fire. There is shooting from windows – his neighbours, his father. Shooting from the street – the others. The shock of an explosion.

He wishes he'd been born a Croat so he could be somewhere else now. This thought shames him and he pushes it aside by trying to work out how he can cross the street to his house. But the shooting keeps him trapped and he crouches further into the shadows behind the car.

He hears the sound of running, peers out to see two men duck into a doorway across the street. The Enemy. One man raises a hand to shield his face. The boy realises the building beside him is ablaze. He cowers between it and the car, cringing in the heat, the noise, the dust. He closes his eyes, wishing he could close his ears, trembling for an age until the shooting and the explosions die down, flaring up

again intermittently. He thinks again of the ragged convoy, cars heaped with belongings, leaving. He is not the hero who set off up the hill half an hour ago.

He hears snatches of the two soldiers' voices. Their words sound foreign. One stands, yells out to his comrades down the street. The boy understands him this time. Blood runs from a cut on the man's cheek. The other pulls him back down, muttering something in the foreign language. The boy forgets his fear in a moment of anger. He would spit if he dared. There is movement as the soldier with the bloody face rises again, runs a little way down the street. The boy slowly leans and risks looking out; the foreigner is watching his comrade, wary, ready to provide covering gunfire. The boy follows his gaze, turning his head as slowly as he can so the foreigner will not notice him. A defeated huddle cowers in the middle of the square; others are being herded in by more soldiers. It is not far, but it looks like another world. Buildings he once knew are belching flames and smoke from windows and doors. People he knows are helpless victims held motionless at gunpoint. He cannot see his mother or his little sisters, but thinks they must be there. Or dead. He wants to pray but the domed church is ablaze and the priest on his knees among the prisoners.

This is not real; he will wake up soon. He watches them pull a man forward. It is his father, shirt stained red. They beat him and kick him until he screams. They beat him until it is no longer his father. Until the body lies twitching on the ground. Until the whimpering stops. Then there is a shot. As the soldier who rubs shoulders with foreigners watches, mutters encouragement, as two men grab another of the subdued villagers, the boy turns away, shaking.

Through tears he looks up and sees the foreigner's rifle aimed at him. Why is this man here? This is not his conflict.

It is not the boy's conflict, it is not anyone's conflict any more, it is hell. The heat from the burning buildings is becoming unbearable. Motionless with fear, the boy stares at the foreigner. It is not the face he expects to see; it is an ordinary man's face. The eyes blazing with intensity, but otherwise unremarkable – dark hair, weathered skin, the shadow of a beard. Not a hideous face. Not a child-murderer's face. The foreigner moves slightly, breaking the moment, and the boy tenses. He does not want to die, not even now.

He realises the man is saying something. *Trčí!* The boy hardly understands through the foreign accent and the crackling of the flames. He hears it again, more clearly. *Run!* The rifle twitches. Not to kill him, not this time, but to indicate the lane he has just come down. *Run, idiot, go!* The foreigner aims high, shoots. The whining ricochet from far above the boy's head snaps him from his paralysis and he obeys.

He runs.

Chapter 1

If he stayed on the bus, what difference would it make? He'd hardly been thinking when he chose to board this one. A sense of developing routine unnerved him. Jay shook his head, smiled a faint self-deprecating smile. The same route, but he could get off somewhere different. Somewhere less remote. He liked the sense of freedom he got from boarding a bus and buying a ticket to the end of the line, to leave himself free to choose where he ended up. This place had always looked good when he passed through. He put his hand on the rucksack beside him in readiness to get off. No rush; someone had stood and rung the bell.

The centre of the little Dales town of Holdwick looked more interesting than the impression its pretty but somnolent outskirts had given. The bus slowed at the edge of a central square – an elongated, irregular square, he told his inner pedant – lined by venerable stone buildings with ground floors housing a collection of neatly tended shop frontages, tea rooms and a pub. A small bustling market stood at its heart. He got up, swung the rucksack onto his back with an ease born of long practice, and braced himself – he'd noticed during the journey that this driver liked playing with his passengers. Having deprived the man of the satisfaction of seeing him so much as flinch as the bus jerked to a halt, he gave a cheery thanks and stepped down. Despite the inexorable advance of years he still prided himself in his agility, though preferred a test more worthy than mind games with a bus driver to prove it.

The fine autumn day had brought plenty of late-season tourists out to join the locals and the colourful market stalls were fairly busy on this Saturday afternoon. A stubborn awareness of the days of the week gave him structure in an otherwise unstructured life. As he passed the greengrocer's stall he caught the proprietor's eye with a smile. First things first; an enticing smell drew him to a fish-and-chip shop. He took a handful of change from his pocket and without counting saw that his bus ticket had consumed the fish – the mental image was an interesting one – leaving him with only enough for a bag of chips. Freedom and a limited diet. Fine. Hopefully that would be put right by the end of the afternoon.

His rucksack gave him anonymity in a town used to hikers and he sat on a bench near the market stall to eat, watching insignificant dramas of everyday life play out before him; concentrating on the activity at the stall. The burly, red-faced trader was pacing around the side of his display, occasionally pausing to adjust the artfully-arranged piles, nodding every now and again to a small team behind the stall, but mainly shouting out to the passers-by: 'Two pound f'r a po-ound!' 'Savoys fit for a king, love!' Jay assumed that cabbages had been a bargain at the warehouse that morning. The undiminished dark green pyramid indicated that Savoys obviously weren't top priority with most of the shoppers today, orbs fit for a king though they probably were.

Time for work. He wiped his fingers on the paper serviette and tucked it with the chip wrapper under the seat to dispose of later – this bench was too strategic to risk losing by going over to the bin – before producing a flute from a rucksack pocket. His colourful cotton scarf was soon spread carefully in front of his feet and his hat positioned

neatly upside-down in the dead centre. A stage wasn't strictly necessary, but he liked the effect. He began to play. An audience started to gather, lingering at the safe distance people always left in these situations. He finished his tune, stood, made brief eye contact with a few in the scattered crowd – enough to intrigue them, not enough to intimidate – and began a story. The ideal tale for this situation, about the king's daughter who refused all her suitors, wasting away as she refused to eat until the right one came along. He had a store of exploits the unfortunate knights and princes performed to try and win her hand – some scary, some downright funny – which he could draw on or leave out as the attention of his audience demanded.

He watched with satisfaction as the dozen or so stragglers grew until he had quite a crowd – often, but by no means always, children dragging their parents over to watch. When he deemed the time was right, he brought in the peasant lad who, refusing to attempt any of the tasks set by the king, tricked his way into cooking the princess a meal. He had no treasure to offer, only the beautiful dark green, crinkly globe of a perfect cabbage from his father's croft, something the princess had tasted far too rarely among the overblown delicacies of court banquets. With the king's kitchens and herb gardens at his disposal, the lad cooked her a meal which in its simplicity was like nothing she'd ever been offered before. Unable to resist the hearty dish set before her, she ate and as she did so knew she'd found her future husband. As Jay came to the happy-ever-after, he glanced sidelong at the stall, smiling as if noticing its wares for the first time.

Ducking his head to acknowledge the scattered applause, he picked up his flute and started to play. One or two people wandered surreptitiously over to the stall. It was

always a pleasure to observe the way they tried to look as if they were merely browsing while listening. Humble cabbages didn't make it easy; he would have preferred the greengrocer to have something exotic to shift like pomegranates, say, or coconuts, but he was adaptable and liked a challenge. Other stories, by no means all food-related (that would be too unsubtle), more music and soon his little crowd had grown, together with the greengrocer's supply of customers. Interested people attracted more people.

After about an hour, he pocketed his flute, gathered up the healthy pile of change and put his hat back on his head. He moved via the rubbish bin to join the customers around the stall, positioning himself at the end near the Savoy's. The stallholder approached him with an open smile and served him in person. He chose a nice selection and delved into his pocket for some of the change he'd just collected.

'These are on me, mate,' the stallholder said, glancing at the crowd of shoppers and extending his hand.

'Thanks very much.'

As he shook the man's hand Jay showed just enough surprise to indicate he wasn't taking anything for granted but knew what he was doing.

'Don't suppose you fancy a final session?'

Jay shrugged in response as the greengrocer, who'd told him his name was Mike, glanced up at the sky. Dark clouds had been gathering as he performed.

'Best get going.' He, too, looked up at the storm clouds. 'Doesn't look promising.'

The greengrocer handed him the bag, and with it a fiver. 'Will you be here again?'

'Could well be.'

'We're here every Friday and Saturday.'

Jay thanked him and turned to go, surprised at the man's generosity. He often earned himself a meal this way, but tips were rare. Beyond the bench that had been his stage was an ethnic clothes stall, and he half-wondered whether to build on his good fortune by seeking to persuade them that the exotic atmospheres conjured by his performance had increased their trade, too. A swarthy young man was examining a rail of colourful shirts; Jay paused to work out if he was the owner or simply a potential customer. As he approached, the lad, younger than he'd looked from behind, turned. Jay stopped in his tracks. A translucence tinged the air at the edge of his vision. He fought the feeling down. The youth seemed to hesitate for an instant, watching him, before he turned and moved quickly off through the market. He soon disappeared from view among the shoppers.

Jay collected himself and walked over to the sandalwood-scented stall.

'Excuse me,' he said to the woman who was quite obviously the owner now he came to look, 'That lad in the leather jacket who was here just now. Do you know him?'

'Sorry, never seen him before.' She smiled. 'You're the street entertainer, right? I really enjoyed listening, between customers.'

'Thanks,' he smiled back. 'I think I'll be here again before too long.'

He left more abruptly than he'd intended, unable to resist heading in the direction the youth had taken. He knew he'd already lost track of him and told himself his story-heightened senses had overplayed the resemblance anyway. Normality began to settle around him. After scanning the streets for a few moments, he shrugged it off as uncanny but impossible and went in search of a newsagent's to buy

some pipe tobacco. A snatch of overheard conversation in the shop confirmed that storms were on the way, borne out by the gathering clouds, so his next move would be to find somewhere to spend the night before the rain arrived.