

**GHOSTS
AMONG THE
GUMTREES**

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Glossary

Ćevapi, skinless beef sausages

Fildžan-demitasse coffee cup

Džezva-coffee pot

Minaret-a slender tower, typically part of a mosque, with a balcony from which a muezzin calls Muslims to prayer.

Hadiths-a collection of traditions containing sayings of the prophet Muhammad which, with accounts of his daily practice (the Sunna), constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Quran.

Mihrab-a niche indicating the direction of Mecca that all Muslims prayed too.

Potočari-Industrial base seven kilometres away from Srebrenica

A note on pronunciation:

Č č=Ch

Ć ć-a softer Ch sound

Đ đ=softer Dj sound

Š š-Sh sound

Ž ž-Dj sound

J is pronounced as Y, so *ašikovanje* is pronounced *ashikovanye*.





1-Silver Cross

1997



I stepped out of the cinema doors and blinked at the bright light blazing down from the undulating ceiling that was criss-crossed with square light boxes. Ninu took my hand as we walked and smiled at me, his chocolate brown eyes crinkling up in the corners, his dark hair gelled back. I knew he was imagining us together, his tanned skin against my white as we moved against each other. Lust coursed through my bloodstream, jump-starting my heart and making me feel alive. His jeans hugged his hips, and he wore a black t-shirt, a finger through the loophole of a black leather jacket over his shoulder. He was a fine-looking specimen.

He gently lifted his hand and cupped my cheek, pressing his lips tenderly against mine. *Oh, no.* I detached my hand from his as we walked towards the stairs, my eyes glued to the red patterned carpet I was walking on, my copper wire eternity ring glinting on the ring finger of my right hand, a constant reminder of the price of love.

“I need to go to the bathroom, Phuong-Vy,” I called when we reached the bottom of the stairs.

Phuong-Vy turned towards me, her black hair with purple streaks swaying, her blue eyes meeting mine. Looking into the bright blue-eyed contact lenses that hid her naturally brown eyes was disconcerting. She looked mysterious and slightly alien.

“Let’s go to the bathroom,” I nodded.

“I don’t need to go,” she said, hanging tighter onto the muscled arm of her new boyfriend Tom, the white singlet he wore emphasising his ropey physique. He was blonde and blue-eyed, his hair reaching his shoulders. Even though he was average height for a man, he loomed over Phuong-Vy, who barely reached 160 cm, in the high-heeled stilettos she’d paired with a red and white plaid mini skirt with knee-high socks and a white high-necked polo top. She looked adorable, a perfect mix of cute and sexy.

“Yes, you do.” I gritted my teeth and grabbed her arm, marching her to the toilets at the back of the foyer.

Phuong-Vy pouted but said nothing, her short legs taking small, rapid steps to keep up with me.

“What’s wrong, Seka?” she asked when we entered the bathroom, her Vietnamese accent cutting off the syllables in the words.

“I told you this was a bad idea,” I said, pacing in front of the mirror.

“So what if he looks at you with puppy dog eyes?” Phuong-Vy stared at herself in the mirror as she used her finger to wipe the edge of her lipstick. “You don’t owe him anything.” She opened her handbag and rifled through, finding her lipstick.

I glared at her, fighting the urge to wrap my hands around her neck. When she'd suggested a couple's movie and dinner date night, I'd immediately said no. Going on double dates was a message I did not want to send to Ninu. We'd met on the job. I worked as a receptionist at a vet clinic, and he was the council ranger who came in sporadically to collect surrendered animals. We'd hooked up a few times, nothing serious, driving in his ute in the back streets to park on a dead-end road on the edge of the airport. The closest we'd come to a date was eating a pizza afterwards.

Phuong-Vy had worn me down. The date wasn't just any date; it was her birthday celebration. She'd lied to Tom that she was turning 21, the same age as me. She'd met Tom last weekend at a club and wanted to test if he was 'date ready' with a double date. Unlike me, she wasn't interested in random hookups without love and commitment; she was looking for the real deal. Now Ninu was getting the wrong idea—he thought we were in an actual relationship.

"Isn't Tom gorgeous. Those blue eyes, that blonde hair," she gushed.

"He's not my type." I looked at myself in the mirror and smoothed down my long brown hair, which was mussed.

"One of these days you'll have to tell me what you have against blondes?" Phuong-Vy said, handing me a brush. "What did you think of the movie?"

"It was good," I said, brushing my hair out. My jeans were loose, the pants fabric distressed with the knees cut out where I'd taken the scissors to them. My t-shirt was loose, but I'd tied the front into a knot, showing off my navel, my flannel shirt

open over it. I'd purposely dressed down so Ninu would not think this was anything more than a movie catch up.

"It was so romantic when they did that parachute jump from the Eiffel Tower," Phuong-Vy said. We'd watched *French Kiss*, a rom-com featuring Meg Ryan and Kevin Kline.

"Yeah, sure." I handed her back the brush.

"I knew it. You didn't watch one bloody minute. There was no parachute jump. Maybe Ninu has the wrong idea because you couldn't keep your hands off him," Phuong-Vy said.

I glared at her. She smiled gleefully at me, her white teeth glinting in the fluorescent light against her tawny skin. I burst out laughing. She knew how to get me. My hormones always overpowered my good sense.

She took my arm and walked me to the bathroom door. "You just need to relax, enjoy tonight. Ride him good," she giggled as she opened the door.

Tom eyed Phuong-Vy hungrily as she walked towards him. I met Ninu's eyes. He watched me cautiously, like a feral cat deciding whether to trust a stranger.

"Are you okay?" he asked when I was at his side, his hands in his pockets.

"Yeah, great." I smiled, looking somewhere over his shoulder as I spoke.

Tom had his arm around Phuong-Vy's shoulder, his eyes on her cleavage as he looked down at her.

"Let's go to Chinatown for dinner," Phuong-Vy said. "I know the best restaurant."

We exited the double-storey glass doors and stepped under the awning jutting onto the footpath.

"Are you cold, babe?" Tom asked as Phuong-Vy shivered.

While it was a warm November day, now that it was later in the evening, there was a chill in the air. I don't know why he bothered asking, it's not like he was wearing a jacket he could lend her. He'd arrived in the singlet.

"I'm good. You keep me warm." Phuong-Vy tilted her head up, and he kissed her.

I resisted rolling my eyes as I took my jacket out of my backpack and shrugged it on. As I struggled with the sleeve, Ninu stepped forward, gently untangling it for me.

"Thank you," I murmured.

He nodded, not meeting my eyes. He looked like a wounded puppy. I don't know why I was being so churlish. I just needed to keep it light, the way Phuong-Vy said.

I put my arm through his and smiled at him. He smiled with relief. "I thought I did something wrong," he said.

"No, you're great." *Too great, and I don't want to hurt you.*

We followed Tom and Phuong-Vy a block and entered Chinatown through the large gate covered with a gold roof, the jade green pillars reaching the second floor of the buildings on each side where dragons were perched, red lanterns bobbing above us on each side of the street and casting a warm glow.

Phuong-Vy stopped suddenly, her foot awkwardly lurching as her heel caught in a drainage grate. Tom held her steady, and she didn't fall.

"My hero," she said, placing her hands on his chest and simpering.

I wouldn't have put it past her to be faking. As I watched them, the face from my nightmare appeared beside them. The thick black eyebrows above eyes so dark they looked black,

the black hair I remembered as being dishevelled and long, now shorn short.

My stomach lurched, my skin breaking out in goose bumps as his craggy face took me back to that night of horror. Ninu was speaking next to me, but I couldn't hear anything he was saying. My heart hammered in my chest, lungs tight as I fought for breath, my legs weak. Could it really be him? The man was looking up and didn't see the woman who stopped suddenly in front of him, bumping into her. He smiled at her in apology, his hands holding her arm as she regained her balance, a gold tooth winking on his incisor. It was him. It was the bastard. Fear flooded my body, and my legs wobbled as I wilted.

"Seka," Ninu shouted as he held me up, his brown eyes crinkled with concern. "Are you okay?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but my chords were paralysed with fear. How to say the unspeakable?

Phuong-Vy tottered over to me. "You look like you're going to faint." Her icy hands gently touched my face, and as I met her fake blue eyes, I came back to earth with a thud. Which path do I follow? The path that led to my future, or back to my doomed past. My hands reached for the coin threaded through a necklace around my throat, and I rubbed the coin between my fingers.

"I have to go," I said, my vocal chords struggling to form sound.

I broke from her embrace and ran, my eyes searching for the dark-haired man wearing a blue shirt. He bobbed ahead in the crowd to my left, and I ran to catch up, blind to the entreaties and pleas of my friends. He was at the Bourke Street tram stop, and as the 96 tram pulled up, he waited for the

doors to open before stepping onto the street and up the stairs. I threw myself up the stairs of the doorway closest to me, the doors shutting with a hiss behind me. As the tram sped up, I looked out the window and saw Ninu watching me from the street corner, frowning with confusion.

I turned away, walking down the middle of the aisle until I spotted the man. He was sitting on the right-hand side, his back to me, looking out the window. I sat on the opposite side of the aisle and watched him as we travelled down Bourke Street, turning onto Spring Street and passing Parliament House, before continuing down Johnstone Street and into Collingwood. Where was he going?

I shivered, clutching the silver coin commemorating Marshall Tito's death, 1892-1980, the second possession that I carried the day I left my home and became a refugee.

I was transported once again to three years before in the Potočari factory, the smell of death and decay permeating the surrounding air. The Serbs walked in packs, hunting for prey. The torchlight landed on me.

"What's that?" a gruff voice demanded, and hands yanked me to my feet. Rough hands grabbed the necklace at my throat, the chain cutting into the tender skin at the back of my neck.

His face was so close to mine that I smelled *rakija* as he breathed on me, a large silver cross dangling among the dark hair of his chest. "You're a genuine patriot," Silver Cross said, his finger rubbing the surface of the coin I had converted into a necklace, caressing President Tito's profile.

I looked into his soulless brown eyes, my back ached unwillingly towards him, the pressure from the necklace stop-

ping me from stepping back. I knew better than to reply. You didn't provoke a beast in the wild.

"Is there any value there?" another Serb asked from behind him.

"No, just remnants of a dead nation," Silver Cross said, dropping the coin. "You can keep your silver, a reminder of your silver town long after you're gone from here."

As I swayed on the tram, I fought to breathe, hyperventilating. My mind jumped from one image to another.

I walked up to him, stabbing him with a knife to the chest, quickly, viciously, smiling as he fell to the ground, blood seeping from his wound.

I stood over him with a rock in hand, beating his head, crushing his skull as he moaned with pain.

I held a gun to his head, my finger on the trigger—

The image changed. Silver Cross stood behind Ramo, his finger on the trigger.

"Stop it," I muttered, slapping my head, pushing the thoughts away.

The woman across from me shifted in her seat, eyeing me nervously.

I looked back at Silver Cross; he was calmly in his own world, glancing out the window as we travelled down High Street while my blood was coursing through my veins like acid. I had to remain calm and not reveal who I was.

I practised the grounding exercise the counsellor had taught me. She called the 5 4 3 2 1 breathing. I looked out the window and counted with my fingers. The tram had stopped, and opposite was a large oak tree in the front yard of a house, the green leaves glistening in the sun. "I can see the tree

outside the window,” I held my thumb as I took a deep belly breath. The tram moved, and I looked back inside. Down the aisle was a baby in a pram. “I see the red balloon,” I said, noting the string tied to the pram handle as I held my index finger and breathed out. “I see the feather.” My eyes caught on a black straw hat with a purple feather tucked into the hatband as I moved to my middle finger, my breath calming my rapid heartbeat. “I see the yellow shirt,” I stared at the man standing on the stairs as I held my ring finger. “I see the blue bike.” I glanced out the window at a man racing the tram as I reached my pinkie finger.

I straightened my fingers, feeling calm descending. “I feel my feet on the ground. I feel my handbag.” I touched the textured leather of the bag in my lap. “I feel the seat.” I pressed my back against it. “I feel my jeans.” I rubbed the fabric.

I tuned myself to the surrounding sounds, focusing on three sounds. “I hear the tram. I hear the motorbike. I hear the pedestrian crossing.”

“I smell the perfume from the woman across from me. I smell the kebab the man a few seats down is eating.”

“I taste popcorn,” I remembered the popcorn I ate as I watched the movie.

As we neared the corner of Thornbury Village, he got up and stood near the door. When he stepped down the stairs at the back of the tram, I stood, heading for the door closest to me in the middle of the tram. He watched the street before he crossed, ignoring the pedestrian crossing two metres to the left. A car barely passed, and he launched onto the street. The oncoming car beeped, the driver gesticulating. Silver Cross continued walking as if the driver was invisible.

I walked to the pedestrian crossing and pressed the button. I wasn't going to do a Road Runner imitation for this bastard. Besides, he was walking slowly, so I could easily see him. He ducked into Psarakos, the shopping centre on the corner named after its Greek owners. I followed, looking at the dried fruit and nuts as I spotted him. He spent fifteen minutes decisively shopping. I collected some dried figs and weighed them. I went ahead of him and paid, then stood by the door, picking my figs as I waited for him to finish.

There was a Serbian newspaper on the stand beside me, and I impulsively bought it. It was written in Cyrillic, but having gone through the Yugoslav education system, I had alternated between the Latin script of English-speaking languages and the Cyrillic script created by a Serb linguist, Vuk Karadžić. The headline screamed:

***Men from Srebrenica Hiding in Plain Sight* by Dragica Milovanović**

The Bosnian Muslims claim that over 8,000 men and boys in Srebrenica were massacred and buried in mass graves, but this writer has found proof that this is Jihadist propaganda cooked up to gain international sympathy.

Radojka Živković, a former resident of Srebrenica who works as a cleaner, has seen her former neighbour, Zariif Avdić, on the streets of Melbourne. "I was catching the train home from the city after work. I got on the train at Flinders Street Station when I saw Zariif walking past the window. His wife claimed she was a widow, that her husband was lost and must be buried in mass graves, but there he was, healthy

and hearty as the day I last saw him before I had to leave my beloved homeland.”

Radojka is not the only person who has seen so-called victims alive and well. Nemanja Tomić said he spotted a former workmate from the tapestry factory they worked at in Chadstone Shopping Centre. “He was buying Reebok shoes at Shoe Warehouse. I called out to him, Zehrudin Hadžić, but he pretended not to know me. I know that our people would not have done this. It is not in our nature to be murderers, but it is the Balija’s nature to murder and kill, that’s what they’ve been doing since the Turk came and claimed our Serb kingdom and subjugated us.”

This writer is collecting daily reports of more and more men claimed to have been killed in a fictional massacre, alive and well. In Germany, we have had numerous members of the Serb diaspora reporting seeing their former neighbours and workmates.

We will continue to exert pressure on the international community to stop promoting the ludicrous narrative that these men were bused from the Potočari Industrial Complex seven kilometres from the town of Srebrenica and then massacred. How many buses would it take to bus 8,000 + men? This lie is based on a ridiculous fallacy and has now been commemorated with a memorial built at Potočari with tombstones erected over empty graves to represent each one of these fictional deaths.

The international community must tell the truth—there was no massacre, there are no mass graves. Serbs are not the war criminals, it is in fact the Muslims who are blackening our names and committing war crimes by telling these lies.

My vision narrowed, and I balled the newspaper into my fist as rage coursed through my veins. These cowardly fuckers. They had committed massacre upon massacre, with mass graves being uncovered every day filled with broken bones from those they murdered, and yet they were playing the victim. I threw the newspaper into the rubbish bin, wanting to wash my hands of the filth attached to them.

I took deep breaths as the counsellor had instructed, calming myself until I regained composure. Once I was centred, I remembered my task and glanced around for Silver Cross. He had disappeared. In a panic, I dashed out of Psarakos and spotted his blue shirt further up the street. I hurried to catch up, relieved to see him walking slowly home with plastic bags swinging from his arms.

Silver Cross turned left. I reached the corner and saw he was gone. I ran up the street, eyeing the houses on the left-hand side he'd walked past—the front door closing on one house. I crossed the street and lurked behind a gum tree. The living room window had no curtains, and I saw Silver Cross walk through the room and into what must be the kitchen. He placed his shopping on the kitchen table and looked at the window. My heart stuttered to a stop. God, he saw me. He was coming to kill me.

He walked to the window and pulled the curtains closed.

I gasped with relief. I noted the number on his mailbox, 32, and looked at the street sign on the corner. David Street.

I've got you, you bastard.

I don't know how long I remained outside Silver Cross' house. Only when my teeth began chattering did I realise my legs and back were aching from standing in the same

spot for so long. I was terrified he would disappear from my sight if I wasn't there to watch him. I breathed in and out, practising my grounding exercise, calming myself. He wasn't going anywhere. This was his home, and he didn't know I'd made him.

I walked to the tram stop, shivering. No trams were coming. I looked at my watch and realised it was after midnight. Public transport had stopped for the night. I spotted the orange NightRider sign for the buses that travelled during the early morning hours, providing safe passage to late-night revellers, and waited on the side of the road. Thankfully, the street was busy and well lit.

The bus arrived, and the doors opened before me.

"Are you okay, love?" the female bus driver asked as I stumbled on.

I nodded. I sat and looked out the window, seeing my reflection—no wonder the bus driver was concerned. I looked like I was a victim of a crime—my hair dishevelled, my eyes red, my face pale, shivering with shock. In a way, it was true, I was a victim of crime, it's just that the bruises and pain were internal.

The bus route ended in the city, and I walked another block to catch the NightRider to St Albans. The bus stopped at the train station, and I sighed and walked twenty minutes along Main Road East, past the high school, to Phuong-Vy's house. I opened the side gate and walked to the bungalow in the backyard, light seeping around the edges of the curtained windows even though it was 2 am.

I knocked gently on the window and called her name. Her front door opened, and she appeared wearing lavender silk

pyjama shorts and a singlet, her hair loose around her shoulders.

“What happened?” she asked, quickly yanking me in and closing the door behind me.

“I saw the man who killed my father and fiancé,” my teeth were chattering as I spoke.

2-Haunted



Phuong-Vy quickly rallied. “Shower first.” She took my handbag off me and helped me take off my jacket. I clumsily attempted to undo my jeans, but my fingers felt thick. Phuong-Vy quickly helped me undress and wrapped a towel around me. She’d spent years caring for her mother, who had dementia and was well-versed as a caregiver.

Her bungalow was long and thin. We were in the kitchen and bathroom extension. There was a shower with a ceramic base surrounded by a shower curtain, opposite a long kitchen cupboard with a sink, and a kitchen table in the middle.

She deftly tied my hair up in a bun thanks to her years of experience as a hairdresser, then gently led me to the shower, opening the shower curtain and turning on the tap. She held her hand under the water until she was satisfied with the temperature. “Okay, step in.” She took off the towel and folded it over the kitchen chair. “You okay?” she asked.

I nodded. She closed the curtain. The tension and fear left my body as the warm water sluiced over me. I cried for the first time since seeing Silver Cross, the sobs heaving from me. I heard Phuong-Vy pattering in the kitchen, but she didn’t rush

or interrupt me. She knew all too well that the only way to deal with pain was to let it wash over you in waves.

I turned off the shower. The curtain opened, and Phuong-Vy embraced me, wrapping a towel around me.

She started drying me, and I laughed. "It's okay, I can do it myself."

She smiled and handed me my pyjamas. I'd left my sleep-over bag at her place. Whenever we went out, I stayed at Phuong-Vy's place. Mama would not be happy with my nocturnal activities. She still needed to believe I was her untouched Bosnian girl, waiting for the wedding ring and certificate to give up my virtue. She didn't need to know that I had vowed never to marry or have children. War had taught me you had no control over life, and I wouldn't ever allow myself to be vulnerable again. If you don't love, you can't lose.

After I dressed, I followed Phuong-Vy up the stairs to the long room, which was her living room and bedroom. She'd used a cane screen to hide the bed and demarcate the two spaces. She was sitting on the armchair, and I sat on a two-seater sofa under the window. On the coffee table was a bowl of white rice with stir-fried vegetables and chicken on the side, a fork next to it. I'd attempted eating with chopsticks but was too impatient to learn. She urged me to eat as she poured us green tea from a teapot.

I didn't realise I was hungry until I saw the food and inhaled the chicken aroma. I served rice and stir-fry together and ate with a fork while Phuong-Vy patiently sipped her tea. Now that she was home, her energy was calm. It's like she put on a persona when she entered the world outside her home—with her fake blue contact lenses and brightly coloured hair clip-on

extensions came the sparkly personality, but now she was all natural and the girl I first befriended three years before.

We had been new arrivals to Australia, learning English at the St Albans language school. She had been all natural, a typical Asian girl with waist-length black shiny hair, pale skin, and a scared look in her eyes. We had bonded over losing years of our lives—she was 29 years old, but looked so much younger.

She was the youngest of five siblings, a surprise when her Vietnamese parents thought their childbearing years were behind them. There was a ten-year gap between her and her next sibling. Her siblings had all married, a few moved away to live in Ho Chi Minh city, three of them emigrated to Australia, and so she was left to care for her elderly mother after her father's death when she was 12 years old. In the last few years, her mother had developed dementia, and she'd battled caring for her at home, attempting to piece together an income from sewing and money sent from her siblings living overseas.

When her mother passed away, she sold up everything she could and bought herself passage to Australia, travelling on a rickety boat—the only option available with her meagre funds. The trip had been long and dangerous. Pirates attacked the boat and stole the few trinkets the travellers had. *Phuong-Vy* lost her mother's pearl ring—the only thing she had of value. She never told me the specifics about what happened. All I knew was that there was a scar across her torso from a knife and that she'd spent months in a hospital recuperating from her injuries. I recognised the look in her eye as that of a woman who had suffered violence, the same

look I had seen in the eyes of Bosnian women who were survivors of the rape camps.

I finished my *Banh mi* and collected the crumbs from my plate using my finger.

“What would you do to the men who hurt you?” I asked. “Like if you saw one of them walking the street. Would you want to hurt them back? Make them feel a little of the terror and pain you felt?”

Phuong-Vy stared thoughtfully at the wall in front of her. She shook her head. “I don’t want to be who they are. I don’t want to hurt them back.”

“What? How can you say that?” I demanded, my hands fisting.

“I didn’t always feel like this. I was angry when I went to the temple after I came to Australia. I wanted to hurt the men. Every night, I tossed and turned, my anger like fire burning me alive. I would fantasise about the most horrible ways of hurting them to get my revenge.” Her eyes glinted with a remnant of that rage.

“I was losing weight, not getting better. The priest told me that Buddha says ‘You will not be punished for your anger, you will be punished by your anger.’ That’s what was happening. My anger, not the men who hurt me, was punishing me. I had to change. I prayed every day, learning to forgive, and when I let go of my anger, I moved on.”

Phuong-Vy nodded to the altar in the corner she’d made on a small coffee table, placing a photo of her parents with a vase of brightly coloured flowers, incense and a platter of oranges. Every morning, she lit incense and knelt before the altar to perform a prayer. Sometimes I woke and watched her from

the coach, her face calm, the same tranquillity that my mother and brother exuded when they prayed as Muslims.

“You have to do the same, Seka. If you hold on to this rage, if you seek revenge, you will only be what this man is. You will become his hatred.”

“How can you forgive such a monstrosity?” I demanded, my guts churning as I squeezed a cushion.

“I believe they will suffer karma and be punished.”

“I don’t believe in karma or God. That kind of faith eludes me. After what I had experienced in the war, I felt that God had abandoned this world long ago, leaving us trapped in chaos.

“You believe in justice. These war criminals are going to jail. You need to use that system and keep your hands and your conscience clean.” Phuong-Vy pointed to the television. We’d watched the news last week featuring a report about the International Criminal Court that was in The Hague, Netherlands, where war criminals were going through the justice system and being jailed.

“But how do I go about getting him charged as a war criminal?” I had been so focused on wreaking pain and destruction that it hadn’t even occurred to me that there were other avenues.

“You research. You call the police. You can find out. There is a system for everything in Australia, you just have to put in the work. You can do that.”

I realised I knew someone—Alyssa Jones, the Australian journalist I had met and translated for while I was under siege in Srebrenica. She had been a war correspondent and was

now travelling to The Hague to watch and write about the trials. She would know what to do.

I told Phuong-Vy about Alyssa. "I can track her down at the newspaper tomorrow at work."

"Good. You keep your thoughts pure. Buddha says, 'We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts, we make the world.' With your thoughts, you make justice, you make the world a better place by putting an evil man in jail. You don't think about anything else."

"You're right. I'll do that." I yawned, a wave of fatigue sweeping over me.

Phuong-Vy helped me up and quickly opened the sofa into a bed, placing bedding and pillows on it as I droopily watched her from the armchair.

"Tomorrow you have to call Ninu," Phuong-Vy said. "He was pretty down after you left. He left after you did."

I nodded, my mind shying away. I did not want to deal with that chestnut.

"How did it go with Tom?" I asked.

"Good." Phuong-Vy smiled like the cat who got the cream. "He was a consummate gentleman. He brought me home and kissed me at the door. Didn't try to come in."

"Wow," I arched my eyebrows. "That's great."

Phuong-Vy smiled with delight. "This might be the one. This might be my Mr Darcy."

She'd been reading *Pride and Prejudice*, a novel she'd loved in Vietnamese and was now re-reading in English to improve her language skills. She was obsessed with Austen's world of social propriety and matches that were all about marriage. I worried about her romantic outlook, but couldn't say any-

thing. She was a 29-year-old virgin and was saving herself for marriage. She'd spent most of her life being her mother's carer and now wanted to have her own family.

Her sister had attempted to set her up with eligible men in the community, but they were all older and either widowed or divorced, often with children from previous marriages. "They're not seeking a wife. They're looking for a babysitter," she said. She was determined not to be burdened with caring for others again. She desired an Australian husband, hoping it would offer her more freedom and less adherence to traditional expectations. Moreover, she wanted to have her own child, just one. Growing up in a family plagued by poverty, she wanted a brighter future for her offspring.

"I hope Tom is the one," I said, pulling her into a tight hug. "He'd be lucky to have someone as amazing as you."

Phuong-Vy rubbed my back. "Me too."

I lay down, and she covered me. I heard her padding to the bed behind the screen and fell asleep hard.

I lay on a jacket on the cold concrete floor, my legs rubbing on the rough surface where the jacket ended. I heard creaking and opened my eyes. Above me was the sawtooth factory ceiling, crisscrossed with beams. A doll hung from one beam by a rope, creaking as it swung. I looked closer. It was a young girl hanging by the neck, blonde hair trapped in the rope, her face purple and swollen, dried blood visible from under her torn dress and on her legs. Fear choked me, turning my body to jelly as her blue eyes stared at me sightlessly, pinning me in place.

Suddenly, the concrete floor vanished, and I was in a field littered with skulls. The blonde girl was on the ground at my

feet—she decomposed before my eyes, her skin turning blue, then grey, flaking away and falling off, leaving nothing but her skeleton. I tried running but felt laden and heavy, as if trapped in mud. As I stepped, the crunching sound of a crushed skull echoed beneath my feet. Glancing down, I saw my foot had crushed her skull, and her skeleton was sinking into the mud, pulling me under.

The field vanished, and I was lying in a pit of dead bodies, a bright light above me. People were kneeling on the edge above me. *Pop, pop* and bodies fell into the pit, covering me. The blonde girl landed on top of me, her body crushing me so I couldn't breathe, her blue eyes staring into mine. My scalp prickled, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up as bulldozers began pushing earth on top of me, burying me alive. I tried wriggling and grunting with exertion, but something pinned my arms to my side.

Two arms reached for me into the pit, moving the girl off me, lifting me out of the pit.

"You're okay, Seka. You're safe." Arms clasped me. I opened my eyes and saw *Phuong-Vy's* face above mine, her black hair tickling my face. She was on the sofa bed with me, my torso across her lap as she rocked me.

"I couldn't help her. I couldn't help any of them," I cried, waves of guilt crashing over me. Why did I survive when so many died? If I hadn't gotten my period that night in *Potočari*, it might have been me the Serbs took away and raped. I might have been the one who swung from the rope rather than live with the horror.

"I know." *Phuong-Vy* caressed my hair as I trembled, fear coursing through me.

My throat hurt and I realised I must have been screaming. "I'm thirsty."

Phuong-Vy helped me sit up and brought me a glass of water. I gulped it down, my mouth bone dry. I must have been screaming for a while. Phuong-Vy returned with a damp cloth and gently bathed my face.

I was so tired, my body ached, and my head throbbed. I closed my eyes, then jerked awake, too scared to sleep.

"It's okay. I'm here." Phuong-Vy lay under the doona with me. She put her arm under the pillow and let me curl against her. "You're safe now."

I glanced at her; she was staring at the ceiling, tears seeping from her eyes. "I'm sorry," I said, touching her wet cheeks. She had suffered her own night terrors, but in the past few months had enjoyed a peaceful sleep, and now I was burdening her with mine.

"This is our refugee baggage. We carry it every day." She stroked my back, soothing me to sleep. "Tonight I will keep you safe from the hungry ghosts."

Phuong-Vy called the dead spirits who haunted us hungry ghosts. They were souls who had not received a proper burial and so haunted the living, searching for recognition. We had spent many a night being sentinels guarding the other from the darkness of our past. I wondered if I would ever again know a peaceful night, or if haunting dreams would forever plague me.

3-Photo



I waited in the coffee shop, twirling a serviette in my hands. Alyssa Jones walked past the glass window, her shoulder-length black hair loose around her face. It had been three years since I saw her in Tuzla airport when I was a refugee, where my mother, brother, and I shared a tent as we waited for a visa to come through for Australia.

Alyssa stepped into the cafe and scanned it with her dark eyes crinkling around the corner. Her father, an Australian National Serviceman, was conscripted into the Vietnam War, where he met her mother. Alyssa inherited her mother's Asian eyes and her father's freckled Anglo nose.

She saw me and walked towards me with a smile. I had changed little. I was filled out more, and my hair was long again. I'd cut it while we were in the refugee camp, but I could not keep it clean. Three years of war, rationing, and starvation in Srebrenica left me emaciated and pale before our expulsion. I now looked like any other 22-year-old Australian girl, pink-cheeked with good health, curvy and womanly. I'd had multiple oral surgeries to repair the rotten teeth from my wartime diet and could now smile again, even though there was nothing to smile about.

Alyssa approached, kissing me on the cheek. “Salam Aleikum,” she said the Arabic phrase of peace be upon you.

“Aleikumu Salam,” I returned the greeting, peace be upon you.

She’d spent many times in Bosnia and was used to our customs. I met her when I was 15, and I translated for her at Srebrenica Hospital, enduring medieval surgeries performed on shelled and shot patients without anaesthetic while Alyssa reported to obtain international aid. The international community didn’t save my people, but Alyssa had spent the six years in between writing about the war, refugee experiences and now about the War Tribunal.

“How long have you been in Australia?” she asked, sitting.

“Three years.” I caught her up on my studies. My lifelong dream was to be a veterinarian. I was now in my first year of university.

A waitress approached, and we ordered coffees.

“I’m so glad you’ve picked up where you left off,” Alyssa said.

“Yes, four years later,” I said bitterly. When we came to Australia, I first completed an English language course, then high school at an adult learning centre, and now university. I wouldn’t finish the seven years of undergraduate and post-graduate studies required to be a vet until I was 30. The war had stolen more than my fiancé and father—it had stolen years off my life.

“How is your family?” she asked.

“Mama is working as a cleaner. It was the only job she could get because her English is rudimentary.” My mother had been an administrator in our homeland, working in the factory

where my father was an engineer, dressing every day in pretty dresses and wearing red lipstick. Now she cleaned high-rise buildings with a Bosnian cleaning crew. Her back hurt, and her hands were rough and dry from the cleaning product. She looked much older than her 45 years with her hair grey and her face creased from grief and pain.

“Emir works at an assembly line factory. He’s studying part-time and hopes to get into the designing department.” My brother wanted to be an engineer like our father, but at 25 years old, he had given up on that dream. We needed his salary to keep us fed and housed. Instead, he was completing a trade course in Computer Aided Drafting, hoping to get a job in the design department of the car factory where he worked.

“I brought something for you. After you emailed me, I went back through my archives and found this.” She slid a photo across the table.

I gasped when I saw Ramo in the photo. I didn’t have a picture of him. His likeness only existed in my mind since I last saw him. The UN had arrived, bringing in a food aid convoy, journalists with them eager for news. Ramo and I had followed the convoy to the textile factory, desperate for food. In the photo, we were standing side by side, he was slightly in profile, glancing at me, the textile factory in the background. His blonde hair glinted in the sun, his blue eyes hidden in shadow, but I remembered how blue they were. He was looking at me, a softness on his face, his love apparent. Fifteen-year-old me stared hard at the camera, my face narrow and pale from malnourishment, daring the world to care about us.

I reached out, gently tracing his face as tears flowed down my face.

“Have they found him?” Alyssa asked.

Bodies were being exhumed from mass graves daily. Emir went to the Melbourne Bosnian embassy to submit his DNA; this would allow for a match if our father’s remains were found. I had been in touch with Ramo’s mother, Edina, who had submitted her DNA. She now lived in Sarajevo and campaigned with a women’s group she’d helped establish, the Mothers of Srebrenica, fighting to recognise the massacre and international aid. She and the other mothers successfully got a memorial built at Potočari to bury the massacre victims. They erected tombstones inscribed with each victim’s name, to be laid to rest when their remains were found.

I shook my head, hugging the photo to my chest. I was back in Potočari, the industrial complex that Srebrenicians had fled to seeking shelter as Serb forces attacked the town, sure in the knowledge that the UN, which had declared the city a Safe Zone, would use air bombs to repel the enemy. Instead, we’d spent three days sleeping on concrete floors, enduring torture and rape, as we waited for the Serbs to make their final move. As the Serbs led us to the buses, it was a beautiful summer day, the green fields around us shimmering in the warm breeze.

I’d felt Ramo’s hand gently touching my hair, his whisper tickling in my ear as he told me not to worry. The Serb soldier who pushed him away from the bus doors as he tried to climb in lied and told me he would be exchanged for another prisoner. I knew in my heart that it would be the last time I saw him. He remained frozen in time, his golden hair distinct among the other men being led to their slaughter, as he walked to his certain death. Three years earlier, Serbs had taken his father and three brothers from a different bus as they tried to

escape their village, slaughtering them on the roadside while Ramo and his mother drove away. His youth saved him then. On 11 July 1995, in Potočari, he was 19 years old and out of miracles.

“I’m sorry,” Alyssa said. “It’s so hard for the survivors left behind. So, what did you come and see me about?” Alyssa asked.

“You’ve been reporting on the Criminal Tribunal,” I said.

Like all Bosnians, I was following the newspaper reports about the war crimes that were being judged in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). The Tribunal was a United Nations court of law established to deal with war crimes that took place during the Bosnian War. The United Nations created it in 1993, during the war, after witnessing the atrocities perpetrated by the Serbs; yet, even with this proof, they left Srebrenica alone and undefined in 1995, when the greatest massacre on European soil since World War II occurred, according to my newspaper reading. I found it to be a remarkable irony that when World War II ended with the Holocaust, the world had vowed never to let the same thing happen again. Yet genocides keep happening all around the world, in Rwanda, in Srebrenica, in Cambodia. We never learned.

Alyssa nodded. The waitress brought out coffees and placed them in front of us.

“How is a war criminal arrested?” I asked.

Her eyes narrowed with curiosity, but she didn’t ask. “The Tribunal has collected testimonies from survivors since its establishment. Consequently, the Tribunal has recorded the names of the perpetrators and the victims. They give some

witnesses an alias to protect their anonymity.” She stirred the sugar into the coffee. “Once sufficient evidence exists, the prosecutor requests an arrest warrant or a voluntary summons, so the suspect’s country of residence must arrest and extradite them to the Netherlands.”

“Is that why so many of them are hiding in Serbia?” I demanded.

Alyssa nodded as she licked the foam off her spoon and placed it on the saucer. “A lot of Serbs are true patriots and are hiding them.”

“What if they’re in Australia?” I asked.

“Australia is a signatory to the UN Charter and will extradite war criminals.”

“Doesn’t it take years for someone to go through the court system?” I’d read about a war criminal who committed crimes in 1992 in Omarska, the Bosnian concentration camp where people suffered torture in the most foul manner. They indicted him in 1995, and five years later, his case was undergoing appeal.

“Yes, justice moves slowly, but it does move. And with each war criminal indicted, victims receive more information about their missing relatives,” Alyssa said.

I fingered the piece of paper in my handbag, unsure whether or not to hand it over. Before meeting Alyssa, I had retraced my steps to Silver Cross’ house, wanting to make sure that everything I saw wasn’t a figment of my imagination. As I watched his house from across the street, a postie rode up, placing envelopes in the mailbox built into the brick fence. The wad was thick and didn’t drop into the mailbox; instead, it remained hanging out onto the street. A dog barked from

the backyard, and I saw its muzzle as it pushed through the hole in the gate at the side of the house. I waited to see if anyone would emerge to go to the mailbox, but all remained quiet on the suburban street. The postie rode his bike around the corner, but no one else appeared on the street.

Seeing my chance, I walked past Silver Cross' house, my hand snatching the envelopes jutting out as I continued walking, the dog's barks following me down the street. My shoulders tensed as I waited for someone to shout or chase me. The dog stopped barking, and quiet descended. I went to the tram stop and looked at the envelopes. They were bills, a water bill, and junk mail for the residents of the house. I read his name *Miroslav Vlahović*. Miroslav—an ironic name in this instance, as it translated to Peaceful Slav, and yet he was anything but peaceful. He had looted and terrorised Bosnian refugees at Potočari and then helped massacre thousands.

I dropped the letters into the red mailbox near the bus stop. The post office would re-deliver them, and Silver Cross would be none the wiser about what I did. As I travelled on the tram, I wrote all the information I had collected about Silver Cross for Alyssa, including witnessing the atrocities he committed at Potočari. I now hesitated about handing it over. It was out of my hands once I gave this information to Alyssa. The path to justice would trundle slowly. Could I endure the years it would take to bring him to justice? Wasn't it better to exact my pound of flesh and practice an eye for an eye?

"The best way to flush these criminals out is to write about them. Collect evidence from as many witnesses as possible and publicise them. Then more witnesses will come forward, and they will be arrested," Alyssa said.

I remembered Phuong-Vy's advice: *If you hold on to this rage, if you seek revenge, you will only be what this man is.* I had to think about the bigger picture. The more criminals who went through the justice system, the more it would help victims.

I handed over the piece of paper. Alyssa looked down as she read. A minute later, she looked up thoughtfully.

"Miroslav Vlahović," she said his name. "I'll contact my sources at the Tribunal and see if his name came up in witness testimonies. Do background research about him. The Tribunal will send a representative to interview you and your family, collect witness statements. When the story is solid, we publish. The more pressure we bring, the quicker he'll get indicted."

"What can I do?" I asked.

"Nothing. You don't want to tip him off that someone knows about his history. He might leave, go underground, and then become untraceable. We need to work in secret, remaining hidden until the trap is set."

I nodded.

"Promise?" Alyssa asked.

I nodded.

She squeezed my hand. "We'll get him Seka. Trust me."

A weight had dropped from my shoulders. It was now out of my hands. Alyssa was the one who would take on this job.

Alyssa stood and placed her handbag over her shoulder. "Did you ever get in touch with your friend Zora?" Alyssa asked.

The last time we saw each other, Alyssa had passed on a letter from my best friend Zora. We'd grown up together,

our houses side by side, our fathers' best friends, thinking we were one people—Yugoslavs. And then the war arrived in our small mountain town, and we were now Serb and Bosnian, on opposite sides of a war that we didn't believe in or want.

I shook my head.

“Oh, well, if you ever do, I'd love to write about it.”

I watched her walk out of the cafe with purpose and resolve.



BONUS CONTENT

ZORA'S STORY
ESSAY ABOUT WAR CRIMINALS IN
AUSTRALIA

SCAN HERE



<https://www.amrapajalic.com/seka-torlak-series.html>

Seka Torlak Series

Forged on the war-torn streets of Srebrenica, Seka Torlak fights for justice, retribution and truth.



0.5: The Tree That Stood Still

Srebrenica 1992

In a town shattered by prejudice, two girls forge a friendship that defies the ravages of war...

Seka and Zora have been inseparable, growing up as neighbours and best friends in the once peaceful town of Srebrenica. But as Yugoslavia begins to splinter and nationalism sweeps through the region, their town is torn apart by prejudice and violence. Suddenly, Seka and Zora find themselves on opposite sides of a brutal conflict, their friendship strained by the rising tide of hatred.

As the horrors of war descend upon Srebrenica, Seka and Zora's bond is tested like never before. With nationalist propaganda fuelling distrust and fear, the streets they once played in become battlegrounds. Amidst the chaos, they must navigate a world where friends can become enemies overnight. Will their friendship endure the storm of war and prejudice, or will it be shattered by the forces tearing their town apart?

Book 1: Time Kneels Between Mountains

Srebrenica, 1992

In a town where survival is a daily battle, there are those who seek justice...

Overnight, Seka Torlak's life as a regular teenager is up-ended as Srebrenica, her once peaceful town, falls under siege and she faces starvation, shelling, and sniper attacks. When desperately needed antibiotics and food disappear and are sold on the black market, Seka vows to investigate the corruption and bring the culprits to justice.

As the war ravages Srebrenica, Seka's resilience is tested as she navigates loss, fear, and the harsh realities of war. Yet, amidst the devastation, she finds a glimmer of hope as her relationship with Ramo blossoms from friendship to love. But as she fights for justice and love, will Seka triumph, or will the brutal war tear everything she holds dear apart?

Bonus Short Story: Belma's Liberation

In a village shadowed by abuse, there are those with courage who fight for liberation...

Sign up to my newsletter and read *Belma's Liberation* to find out how Seka saved her friend from her abusive father

Book 2: Ghosts Among the Gumtrees

Melbourne, 1997

In a city where the guilty roam free, there are those who seek retribution...

After surviving the brutal siege of Srebrenica, Seka Torlak is trying to rebuild her life as a refugee in Melbourne, 1997. But her fragile peace is shattered when she spots a war criminal responsible for her father's death walking freely in the city. Determined to uncover his true identity and bring him to justice, Seka delves into an investigation that reveals a sinister underbelly of suburbia, where genocide deniers hide in plain sight.

Haunted by memories of war and loss, Seka grapples with the raging conflict within her: the pursuit of justice versus the thirst for retribution. As she navigates this perilous path, she must decide what she is willing to sacrifice for the truth. Will Seka find her salvation, or will she lose her soul in the process?

Bonus Short Story: Zora's Story

In the ruins of war, there are those who cling to memories of friendship...

Sign up to my newsletter and read *Zora's Story* to find out her story in escaping the war

Book 3: Mad Dawn Winter*Riverwood, 1998*

In a town submerged with secrets and corruption, there are those who seek the truth...

Seka Torlak, now a journalism cadet, relocates to the tranquil town of Riverwood in 1998, seeking a fresh start. However, her peace is short-lived when she stumbles upon a cold case involving the murder of a former Vietnam Vet. Driven by a grieving mother's plea for justice, Seka begins to uncover a web of secrets that this seemingly idyllic town has buried deep.

In her quest for truth, Seka befriends Dawn Winter, a fellow Bosnian woman haunted by the loss of a friend and ostracized by the townspeople for her tributes to the fallen. As Seka digs deeper, she finds herself entangled in a dangerous game of deceit and loyalty, facing ghosts of the past and present. Will she unravel the truth and deliver justice before it's too late, or will the town's dark secrets consume her?

Bonus Short Story: Art's War

In a time of loss and grief, there are those who pursue the truth...

Sign up to my newsletter and read *Art's Fall* to find out about his investigation first-hand

Bonus Short Story: The Regrets of Ben Hayes

In a war where fear reigns, love remains unspoken...

Sign up to my newsletter and read *The Regrets of Ben Hayes* to find out about his first love during his service as a National Serviceman.

About the author



Amra Pajalic is an award-winning Australian author, educator, and indie publisher known for crafting compelling stories that blend heart, humour, and heritage. Her work explores themes of identity, belonging, and resilience, often drawing from her Bosnian background.

She won the 2009 Melbourne Prize for Literature's Civic Choice Award for her debut novel *The Good Daughter*, re-released as *Sabiha's Dilemma* (PishukinPress, 2022). The anthology she co-edited, *Growing up Muslim in Australia* (Allen and Unwin, 2014), was shortlisted for the 2015 Children's Book Council of the year awards and her memoir *Things Nobody Knows But Me* (Transit Lounge, 2019) was shortlisted for the 2020 National Biography Award. Her short

story collection *The Cuckoo's Song* (Pishukin Press) features previously published and prize-winning stories.


Amra is the author of the Sassy Saints series, a young adult contemporary trilogy set in Melbourne's western suburbs. These stories feature smart-mouthed teens, love triangles, fake friends, and fierce girl power, offering a refreshing take on multicultural Australian life.


She is also the creator of the gripping Seka Torlak crime mystery series. Forged on the war-torn streets of Srebrenica, Seka Torlak fights for justice, retribution and truth.


Amra is committed to accessibility and inclusion in publishing. Through her micro-press, PishukinPress, she releases her titles in a wide range of formats—including audio-book, large print, dyslexic font, paperback, ebook, and hard-back—to ensure all readers can experience her stories.

When she's not writing, Amra is podcasting on *Amra's Armchair Anecdotes*, mentoring emerging writers, and delivering workshops across Australia on self-publishing, writing craft, and creative resilience.


Amra Pajalić publishes her dark fiction using pen name A. P. Pajalic. She also publishes romance novels under pen name Mae Archer.


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can make a world of difference. You can leave a rating or review wherever you bought the book.

Thank you for championing this series and being part of its journey into the world.

Hvala lijepo! Much thanks,

Amra Pajalić

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Time Kneels Between Mountains
Ghosts Among the Gumtrees
Mad Dawn Winter

Memoir

Things Nobody Knows But Me
Growing up Muslim in Australia

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