

Josip Mlakić

**The Black Raven
and the White Crows**
(Crni gavran i bijele vrane)

Novel

Translated by Valentina Marconi and William Gregory



JOSIP MLAKIĆ is a contemporary writer from Bosnia and Herzegovina. He was born in Bugojno in 1964. He lives in Gornji Vakuf, writing screenplays, short stories and novels. He published collected stories *Puževa kućica* (*Snail Shell*, 1997), *Odras u vodi* (*The Reflection in the Water*, 2002) *Obiteljska slika* (*Family Portrait*, 2002); novels *Kad magle stanu* (*When the Fogs Cease*, 2002), *Živi i mrtvi* (*The Living and the Dead*, 2002), *Ponoćno sivo* (*Midnight Grey*, 2004), *Psi i klaunovi* (*Dogs and Clowns*, 2006), *Tragom zmijske košuljice* (*Following the Slough*, 2007), *Čuvari mostova* (*Bridge Keepers*, 2007), *Ljudi koji su sadili drveće* (*People Who Planted Trees*, 2010), *Planet Friedman* (2012), *Svježe obojeno* (*Freshly Painted*, 2014), *Božji gnjev* (*The Wrath of God*, 2014), *Majstorović i Margarita* (*Majstorović and Margarita*, 2016) and *Bezdan* (*The Abyss*, 2016). His novel *Živi i mrtvi* (*The Living and the Dead*) won the V.B.Z. Award for the best previously unpublished novel in 2002 and was made into an awarded movie. His novel *Svježe obojeno* (*Freshly painted*, 2014) won the annual Vladimir Nazon Award for literature. For his last novel *Crni gavran i bijele vrane* (*The Black Raven and the White Crows*, 2018) he was awarded with Balkan Noir prize for the best regional crime novel.



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AWARDS

Balkan Noir prize for the best regional crime novel

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When a heavily tattooed male body is found in the woods, inspectors Sećija and Sadik assume the case will be very soon neglected and closed, like most of the others in Central Bosnia. Instead of justice and moral, many of members of society go by their best interest: how to work as little as possible and take a shortcut to making fortune, while enjoying lascivious practice of some kind of vice. But investigation of the “case Raven”, as they’ll call the body, will absorb the two detectives of questionable principles deeper into the comprehensive social problem, through narco-milieu, dormitories for the war orphans, encounters with wide spread mafia net, numerous rapes, and even more murders. Painting a much bigger picture of a harsh reality in Bosnia, they will reveal capillary corruption, deep misery and poverty, decay of legal institutions and moral values.

This hard-boiled detective story *The Black Raven and the White Crows* goes beyond a popular literary form of a crime novel. Inspired in real life events, this uncompromising page-turner is Mlakić’s confrontation with the dark Bosnian reality almost in a Balzaquian manner, invoking collective responsibility of society that already lost so much and many to the war.

PRAISE

“I haven’t felt that kind of satisfaction in reading this kind of literature ever since I was reading famous authors of crime novels.”

– Alen Galović

“Exemplary and classic in its formal aspects, written by a hard-boiled detective story model, *The Black Raven and the White Crows* isn’t just a simple whodunnit, but a novel that offers an examination of a Bosnian and Herzegovinian everyday life built from the net of old and new sins.”

– Jagna Pogačnik

Chapter 1

The body was found around seven a.m. by the still half-sleeping workers of the Novi Travnik municipal forestry service. It had been left in the woods, about a hundred metres from the gravelled road from Novi Travnik to Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje.

The road spanned the gorge of the River Bistrica, a tributary of the Vrbas ten kilometres away. Suddenly smelling an unbearable stench, the workers had been led to the corpse by the green and golden flies swarming around it. It had been covered haphazardly with a branch, hacked with a knife from a nearby pine. Its face had been blown up by a shotgun and worms writhed in the blood-soaked mishmash of bones, skin, flesh and pine needles. It was autumn, the time of year when the gorge is probably the loveliest place in the world. Thanks to its perfect altitude, there grew a mix of possibly all the species of trees to be found in the region: oak, beech, scots pine, fir, hornbeam, maple, field maple, Montpellier maple, elm, wild pear, willow, alder and dried wild apple, its foliage squatted in by mistletoe. The leaves made for an incredible array of colours. And yet, in its own morbid way, the rotten corpse fitted in with the wild, idyllic scene. Whoever it was had chosen the perfect place to hide it: counting both directions, barely ten cars a day drove past on that road, plus the odd truck carrying timber and slabs from the nearby sawmill, and on both sides of the gorge the forest extended in all directions. It could only have been found by complete chance, which was precisely what had happened: a few days earlier, a storm had felled some trees not far from there, and the forest workers had come to clear up the debris.

Inspectors Vinko 'Sećija' Marić and Sadik Šarić watched in silence as the crime-scene technicians unrolled the tape. Their colleagues in the police force nicknamed them Mijo and Zijo, Mijo being Sećija, a Croat, and Zijo being Sadik, a Bosniak. The technicians had run out of crime-scene tape, so in one section were using some that read 'telecoms cable' in German. Sećija and Sadik wore surgical masks but they didn't really help much. The scene turned their stomachs,

even though they had both seen their share of all kinds of dead bodies during the war: countless brains torn to pieces, corpses mutilated by grenades or landmines, broken arms and legs, wounded comrades who had crawled along the ground with their last ounce of strength leaving a wide trail of blood behind them... It was true they had seen endless 'fresh' corpses during the war, but this was completely different. They had fought the war on opposite sides, Sadik in the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Sećija in the Croatian Defence Council. Where they lived, in the Central Bosnia canton – or 'županja' – everything came in pairs, with one version for the Bosniaks and another for the Croats. This even included words: 'županja' or 'kanton' for 'canton', 'kruh' or 'hljeb' for 'bread'; and 'black and white' or 'white and black', depending on the point of view. Everything there was divided, cut. The so-called 'alliance' was a forced one, put in place by 'Dayton' when, after an exhausting and relentless series of diligent, reciprocal killings, the Americans put the Croats and Bosniaks at a handcuff's distance apart and threw the key into the muddy River Lašva. Or the muddy River Vrbas. Nevertheless, Sećija and Sadik, Mijo and Zijo, swam easily in this forced symbiosis, a sort of brotherhood-and-unity utopia, flawed from its very foundations.

"Fuck!" said Sadik.

The mask muffled his mouth, but it was clear what he had said. Really there was nothing else to say.

The victim was a young man, in Nike trainers and stonewash jeans like those you could buy for twenty marks at any local market or at FIS, the big shopping mall near Vitez. His green sweater and leather biker jacket were caked with dried blood, splinters of skull and shreds of skin. Wild carnivores or stray dogs had gnawed away at his thighs. In parts, the bones of his legs were completely white, where the worms had cleaned up the rest of the flesh. Sećija thought of the dogs: if he'd had to, he'd have bet his money on them. The towns of Bosnia and Herzegovina were full of stray dogs. They were hungry and disoriented and some packs had long since ventured out of the towns and started roaming around, usually on the roadsides and close to the villages, where there was more chance of finding something to eat. Those dogs were the most dangerous. They attacked sheep, harassed the sheepdogs that guarded them, and howled rabidly during the night. They broke into the sheepfolds, gorged on the newly slaughtered lambs, then slowly dragged themselves back into the woods, bellies full and snouts bloodied, or ran clumsily away from the shower of pellets from the hunting rifles aimed at them by the owners of the slaughtered lambs. On their way there, a few kilometres away on the road from Novi Travnik, Sećija and Sadik had seen a pack of five or six dogs tearing at some leftover innards fly-tipped on the roadside overnight by the butchers from the local abattoir. Among the other recent remains

were the gnawed-at cow skulls discarded sometime before and the perfectly white jawbones washed clean by the rain. Like a solemn monument to human 'ingenuity'.

The technicians took a few dozen photos then transferred the corpse to a body bag. In the spot where it had been lying, a white carpet of worms remained. Nothing more.

After the initial shock, the forest workers sat beside the road with their saws and axes and watched indifferently as a small crowd gathered around the body. They were waiting for the bus to pick them up and take them back home, stinking of motor oil, sawdust and stale sweat. They drank cheap local beer from two-litre plastic bottles known locally as 'bamboocha', or watered-down buttermilk from one-litre glass bottles, and ate what they had brought with them for lunch, typically sandwiches filled with cheap chicken paste that tasted of sawdust. One of them, a young man whose look didn't suggest any particular intelligence, wore a Milan tee-shirt with 'Maldini' and a big number three on the back.

Sadik called out to him. "Maldini!"

Maldini replied. "What's up?"

"You're meant to say 'Yes, Sir?'" said one of the workers. "Listen to him: 'What's up?'"

"Did you get laid yet?"

The workers smiled as Maldini blushed with embarrassment. Bullshit like this always had a delaying effect: like cats in horror films, a false climax preceding the terror. They had made similar jokes during the war, when the vast amounts of alcohol and the fog of weed-smoke weren't enough completely to neutralise the horror unless combined with these kinds of comic ambush. "Did you get laid yet?" was a classic.

pp. 7-17

Chapter 2

The young man must have been twenty. No documents were found on him and the tips of both his index fingers had been cut off with a knife, maybe the same knife the killers had used to cut down the pine branch they had tried to cover the body with. He was circumcised, so it was assumed he was a Muslim. He also had a mysterious tattoo in Arabic on his chest. Sadik took a picture of it, saved the picture on his desktop in the office and printed it out. They rarely used the computer; most of the time it just sat on Sadik's desk, dutifully collecting dust.

"Do you know anyone who can translate that?" Secija asked.

"I do."

"It reminds me of the inscriptions on the mujahedins' flags."

Sadik nodded.

"He was too young to have anything to do with that," he said. "Anyway, I don't think Arabs do that. They think having tattoos is *haram*."

The tattoo on his upper right arm was much more interesting: a raven with its beak ominously open and inscribed inside a circle. Like the emblems of military units.

"What the fuck is this?!" said Sećija.

Sadik had taken a photo of that too and printed out two copies. Sećija folded his copy into four and put it in his inside jacket pocket. The dead man now had a name, the same as his case: "Raven".

"Was there a unit called the Ravens, the Crows or something like that on your side?"

"I know of the Black Swans," Sadik replied.

"Something like the Black Ravens?"

"No. If it did exist, I never heard about it."

"Look at this," exclaimed Sadik.

He pointed at the Raven's biceps.

"Into his weights?" Sećija asked.

“Not just that. He was on steroids.”

Sadik went to the gym twice a week, was choosy about his food and knew enough about the subject.

“You can’t get that unless you’re on steroids,” he said.

The young man’s clothes, cleared now of worms, lay on the metal counter next to the body.

“What about the trainers?” Sećija asked the pathologist. “Are they original?”

He knew they were expensive; his daughter Lidija had a similar pair.

“No idea,” replied the pathologist. “They all look the same to me. Fakes and originals. But there is something else. I found polyester fibres in the face wounds. I can’t think where they can have come from unless he was killed somewhere else. Maybe in a car, then moved to the woods. That’s the only explanation I can think of. They were thick fibres, similar to the ones used for car interiors or seats. They must have blown his face off in the car, I think.”

“Are there any new car theft reports?” Sećija asked. If the guy had been killed in a car, it was most likely a stolen car, the cheapest option, most often a Golf Mk2, which amateur thieves could break into without any difficulty. That was the usual pattern. Golf Mk2s didn’t attract much attention. The police didn’t make much effort to try and track them down. They were the most common car on the road in Bosnia and Herzegovina, even though the last one had come off the assembly line over thirty years earlier.

“I’ll check,” Sadik replied.

“Get Sanela to check about the clothes and shoes,” Sećija said.

Sanela was the only child of a local big cheese. He was a cantonal prosecutor or something like that, and one of the people who had spent the war doing as he pleased and generally calling the shots in the surrounding area. Sanela was around thirty and married with no children. She had gone to university in Sarajevo for about ten years, changing course several times, first reading Law, then Economics and then Arabic, but without any success. In the end her old man had bought her a degree from one of the private universities in the Republika Srpska. She said she was a lawyer, but no one had actually seen what it said on her diploma. Sadik had confirmed it was written in Cyrillic. Sanela was Sadik’s occasional lover and he often bragged about it. Sećija assumed his visits to the gym were motivated mainly by Sanela: for Sadik it was the only way he had left to bridge the fifteen-to-twenty-year age gap between them. Sanela’s husband also worked in the cantonal administration; he was some sort of inspector. The guy was irritating and spoke in bombastic phrases, “he ruined his life”, “it’s a matter of two-way communication” (as if one-way communication even existed!) and the like, which he would enunciate angrily while frothing at the mouth, so much

so that Sećija was somehow grateful to Sadik for sleeping with the man's wife. He really got on his nerves. But there was one thing Sanela was unrivalled at: she knew clothing, perfume and shoe brands better than anyone else...

"She's such a little whore," Sadik had once said to Sećija.

"One of these days you'll end up on steroids because of her," Sećija replied.

"Steroids are rubbish," he said. "They're basically make-up."

"What about Viagra?"

"Do you know that quote from *The Dervish* by Meša Selimović? The one about being forty?"

At the beginning of 1992, Sadik had graduated in Literature from the Philosophy Faculty in Sarajevo. It had taken him ten years. He had left Sarajevo about fifteen days before the barricades appeared on the streets and all hell broke loose. He had never used his degree professionally. During the war he had worked in the AID*, the Bosniak secret service. He'd been powerful. After the war in Travnik there was a whole series of unsolved murders of Croatian returnees. Among those killed there were also a few policemen. For a while there were rumours that Sadik had been one of the people who had organised it. Sećija didn't know him at the time, but he could see how Sadik was the right man for that kind of job. Brutal, and clever enough to do it neatly. In post-war Bosnia that was the ideal combination. The recipe for success.

"No," replied Sećija.

When the war started, Sećija was in his fourth and final year at university. He read Chemistry, also in Sarajevo. He only had a few exams left to graduate. After the war he had passed the exams and got his degree. Or rather he'd bought it. The diploma served as a passport: all the most sought-after jobs routinely requested a university degree, the famous VSS, the *Visoka Stručna Sprema*. Going back to studying after the war hadn't been an option. It was just too hard. Sećija had never heard of Sadik's quote, even though he had read the novel *Death and the Dervish* at high school; it was on the compulsory reading list. Since then, he had not read a single book.

"I'm forty, a terrible age: a man is still too young not to have desire, but already too old to satisfy it," Sadik explained. "Get it?"

"No. Does that have to do with Viagra?"

* AID is the acronym for the Bosnian Security Agency (Agencija za istraživanje i dokumentaciju). This was the Bosniak secret services, which were active during the war and in the first years after the war.

“It does. How about this? ‘I am fifty, a terrible age; a man is still too young to use Viagra, but already too old to get a hard-on as easily as a thirty-year-old.’ Do you get it now?”

That was a pretty good description of their generation.

“We only have one stolen car,” Sadik told him shortly after.

They were sitting in the café next door to the police station.

“A Golf Mk2?” asked Sećija.

“No. A Zastava 101. Stolen in Zenica a month ago. Not been found yet. It must be somewhere close.”

Sećija nodded. If that was how Raven had been killed, the car had probably been abandoned near the spot where the body was found, on one of the roads in the nearby woods. And it had most likely been burnt after that. Those were the basic steps. Up there in the wilderness no one would have been able to see the flames and potentially report it to the police. Plus, the body had been left somewhere on the border between two local police districts, Novi Travnik and Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje, and in the minds of the bureaucrats those areas were dark zones that didn’t belong to anyone.

“Let’s go and see,” Sećija said.

pp. 34-41

Chapter 6

The fog followed them on the road to Sarajevo, along the valley of the River Bosna. They went in the police Golf. Sadik was driving. At one point Sadik's mobile rang. The ring tone on his mobile was the song 'If it wasn't for you, Alija', by the Bosnian pop legend Dino Merlin.

"Look and see who's calling me," Sadik said.

Sećija took the phone and looked at the screen.

"Indira," he said.

"Answer it."

Sećija answered.

"It's not Sadik, it's Sećija," he said.

He turned the speaker on.

"Listen," Indira said, "the match with coefficient 3.5 was last night. You got it right. The other one is tonight. You can delete it from the third coupon and take the money for the two matches that have already been played. Or you can bet on a new one."

"No way," Sadik said.

"You'd be waving goodbye to three and a half thousand marks," Indira said.

"Never mind."

"What about you?" Indira asked.

"Not me either," Sećija said.

The shop that sold BOSS jeans was on Ferhadija Street. Sećija found the pair that looked most similar to the ones Raven wore. They were 650 marks. Sadik called the shop assistant.

"They sell more than all the others," she said.

"We're interested in a young man who bought a pair of these, about 1.9 metres tall. We're police," Sadik said showing his badge.

"When?"

“I don’t know.”

“Look, we sell about fifty pairs of these each year, usually in sizes thirty-four to thirty-eight. That guy probably bought a similar pair. What did he look like?”

“Tall, well-built...”

“I don’t know. That’s what most of them look like.”

“What about your colleagues?”

“It’s just me here.”

They went back to the car, which they had parked in a nearby parking lot, and headed for the tattoo parlour. Those were the only two leads they had. In Bašcarsija they ran into a traffic jam. Some kid had got himself caught on a tram and on the bend after the Vijećnica Building he had fallen straight under a car driving right behind it. They had to wait for the boy to be transferred to an ambulance and for the road to clear up. Sadik kept swearing.

The tattoo parlour was called LA Tattoo. The door and the windows were decorated with dragons, butterflies, chubby, pot-bellied angels, and roses. Hare’s neck and arms were covered in tattoos. He had the word ‘muHAREm’ tattooed on his right wrist. ‘Hare’ was tattooed in red ink, whilst the rest was in black. Sadik showed him the photos of Raven’s tattoos. Behind their backs, a skeleton-thin girl with red hair, a ring in her nose and a tattoo gun in her hand was carefully pricking the shoulder of a forty-year old man whose belly spilled over his trousers’ waistband. You could just about see the outline of the tattoo, a bird in profile with its wings open and a beak. Like the eagle of the Wehrmacht.

“I know this. I did it a year or two ago,” Hare said.

“Both of them at the same time? The raven and the Arabic inscription?” Sadik asked.

“No. I did the raven first, then the inscription a month or two later.”

“What does it mean?” Sadik asked, showing the photo of the tattoo in Arabic.

“Don’t know. He brought it in written in pen on a piece of paper. I asked him what it meant but he didn’t want to tell me. Maybe it’s some kind of charm from the Quran*, a good luck charm?”

“What about the raven?” asked Sećija.

“He brought that with him, too. The circle and the raven inside it.”

“Do you remember what he looked like?”

* A charm in this case is a specific type of amulet, Arabic inscriptions given by the imams. Most of the times they are quotes from the Qur’an.

“No. He was dark, I think, short hair... Tall, well built.”

“Do you have his name?”

“No. He didn’t want to leave his details, even though we give a warranty. For everything: the quality, or if there’s complications... People are still suspicious about tattoos here.”

Sadik had left the car in the narrow one-way street where the tattoo parlour was. A queue had formed behind it. Some of the drivers were honking their horns. Sarajevo was an edgy town, always close to breaking point. When Sećija had come here for the first time after the war, because of the exams he still had to pass at university, there had been a fight on the tram from Ilidža to Pofalići. The passengers had parted to a safe distance and watched indifferently, while the driver stopped the vehicle, worried that the men, two grown-up kids who had taken knives from their pockets, might get carried away with their ‘fight’, fall on the nearby passengers and maybe hurt someone. Then he had opened the door and most of the passengers had left in panic, walking along the rails to the next stop. The tension was infectious. Sadik stood aggressively at the front of the queue.

“What’s your fucking problem?” he exclaimed, holding his police badge in his left hand and opening his jacket with the right to show the holster of his gun.

The horns went quiet and people went back into their cars.

“Let’s go out for lunch,” Sadik said. “My shout.”

“OK. You’ve already won two and a half thousand, even if you get the second one wrong.”

Sadik nodded and honked his horn; the driver in front of them had fallen asleep at the traffic light.

“What are you fucking doing?” he said.

“Where are we going?” Sećija asked.

“Out of town. I’m getting pissed off. Sarajevo arseholes.”

Truth was, Sarajevo and its arseholes pissed everyone off. They lived in their own world, completely unlike the rest of the country, far from the Bosnian mud or the ravaged land of Herzegovina; far from the carefully tended orchards that the frost had destroyed and whose desperate owners wandered around, touching what was left of the leaves and the buds; far from the vegetable gardens they covered in water in the hope it would break through the layers of frost and salvage a small portion of their crop; far from the people whose faces reflected the despair of a defeated army, the ugliest and most horrific image Sećija had ever seen in his life; far from the devastated factories overgrown by weeds and brambles. Hopelessly far, in other words, from the very provincial philistines they could potentially have used to inflate their own egos even further. Sarajevo’s ćevapi

sausages, made by unpopular Albanians from Kosovo, were the best; their girls were the prettiest in the entire world; the snow on Mount Bjelašnica and Mount Igman was the deepest and the whitest; compared to their street thugs and war heroes, the Marvel characters Super-this and Super-that were sickly little whingers; and their football teams, Željezničar and Sarajevo, were incomparably better than the hicks from Mostar or Banja Luka, even though more and more often they stole the championship the Sarajevans were already celebrating in advance from under their very noses. Over time, all these inflated Sarajevo myths had become unchallenged, sacred truths. The arseholes were delicate flowers. The fashionable resorts of Turkey, Egypt and Tunisia were closer to them than Zenica, Travnik or Mostar. Even though it was the capital of a country patched precariously together, Sarajevo was becoming a closed-off desert with no purpose but itself. It was a world of its own and had become the capital of its own narcissistic image in the mirror.

“Should we check the gyms?” Sećija asked.

“No, there’s no point. I’ve no idea how many there are in Sarajevo, but I imagine there’s a lot. Plus, the guy was on steroids. I don’t think we’ll get any more information there. Steroids are classed as drugs. Do you know the US Drug Enforcement Agency considers steroids the same as cocaine? There is no way they’ll admit to knowing someone on steroids. Especially gym owners. They’re the dealers most of the time. They make more from steroids than they do from membership fees.”

Sadik drove past the park and turned towards Koševo.

“We’re going to Vogošća. I called a friend of mine,” he said. “He works for the Intelligence and Security Agency^{*}. He’s from Travnik originally, but he’s more Sarajevan than Bašeskija” now. You can put quotation marks around the word ‘friend’. There are no friends in that world. We were at high school together. I sent him some photos of the tattoos. Let’s see if he’s done anything with them.”

Sadik’s ‘friend’ was named Mirnes. They met in a restaurant, with two lambs roasting on a spit outside. The restaurant was on the outskirts of Vogošća. The

^{*} OSA (Obaveštajno-sigurnosna agencija BiH), the Intelligence and Security agency of Bosnia and Hercegovina, originated when the Intelligence and Security services of the three warring sides in Bosnia and Herzegovina merged together.

^{**} *Mula Mustafa Bašeskijac, chronicler born in Sarajevo in 1731 or 1732 in the Mimar Sinanova neighborhood. It is assumed that he also died in Sarajevo, in 1809.*

spit was kept turning by water pouring into plastic cups attached to the circumference of a wheel. Mirnes was waiting for them inside.

"Welcome," he said to them. "Mijo and Zijo, eh? Nice names."

They ordered lamb roast.

"I checked those tattoos," said Mirnes. "'The only sacred thing to a bandit is his mother.' Ring any bells?"

"No," Sećija replied. "Is that what he had tattooed on his chest?"

Mirnes nodded.

"I think I've heard it before, but I can't remember where. I think it's from a book," Sadik said. "What about the raven?"

"No idea. Looks like a military emblem. But that young man of yours is too young for war," Mirnes said.

"Was there a military unit called the Ravens or the Crows?" Sećija asked.

"I don't know. I know about the Black Swans," said Mirnes.

"Can you check with the Serbs?" Sadik asked.

"No point. Why would a Muslim have a Serb military emblem tattooed on him? Didn't you tell me he was circumcised?" Mirnes asked.

"Yes."

"The Serbs love ravens," Sećija said. "There's that song of theirs from the war: 'The black raven, the black raven spread his wings.'"

"Baja, the Ninja from Knin*," Sadik said. "Did you know his songs were popular with us Bosniaks?"

"They were with us Croats, too. Especially the one about Alija," Sećija said.

Sadik and Mirnes smiled.

"I can imagine. How does it go?" Sadik said. "I don't like you, Alija, 'cause you are a Balija"..."

Sećija nodded.

"You destroyed a peaceful dream..." he said.

"You know what I don't understand: are there any ravens other than black ravens?" Sadik asked.

* Baja the Ninja of Knin, a city in the Šibenik-Knin County of Croatia, capital of the self-proclaimed Republic of Serbian Krajina, is a Serbian folk singer and songwriter part of the turbo folk scene. He is known for his Serbian nationalistic lyrics.

" Derogatory term for Muslim. The *Alija* referred to in the song is *Alija Izetbegovic*, President of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s.

“I don’t think so,” Sećija said. “There are crows that aren’t black. I know there are grey crows.”

“Why ‘Black Ravens’ then? When you say ‘black sheep’, you know why. If you just say ‘sheep’, people know you’re thinking about a white one. Have you ever heard anyone say ‘white sheep’?”

“No.”

“I’ll try and find out more about that. I agree: it smacks of Serbs,” Mirnes said. “Ravens are scavengers, just like them.”

pp. 126-133

Chapter 25

“Mirnes got in touch,” Sadik said one morning. “There was a Serb chetnik unit in Višegrad. Called the ‘Black Ravens’.”

A van drove past the police station. It was advertising a so-called ‘folk concert’ by some starlet in a night-club a few kilometres out of town, on the road to Vitez. They fell silent until the van had gone. Sadik was sitting at his computer playing solitaire. A couple of days earlier Sećija had shown him how to play.

“They slaughtered, killed and raped people. But so did everyone else,” Sadik said. “He didn’t have much information about them. Just a few names.”

A southerly wind was blowing outside, and the gutters were rattling. Sanela was still on sick leave.

“We should check that out,” Sećija said. “Did they have an emblem?”

“Wait, you have to match colours from the highest to the lowest card?”

“Yep.”

“And if I don’t have one of those cards to play, what am I meant to do?”

“Then you’re fucked. You have to start a new game.”

Sadik nodded.

“They probably did have an emblem,” he said, “but we don’t have any information on that. Mirnes looked all over the internet. He couldn’t find anything, not even on there.”

“I’ve got a friend in Višegrad,” Sećija said. “We were housemates at uni.”

“Is he still there?”

“Yeah, we speak now and then.”

“You think he could tell you something about the Black Ravens?”

“No idea. Does he know anything, is the question. He wasn’t in Višegrad during the war.”

“Where was he?”

“Serbia. Or Montenegro. What country is Sjenica in now?”

“Serbia.”

"He was teaching chemistry at a high school there. His mother was mixed race, from Sjenica. The half-Serbian, half-Bosniak sort."

"I suspect he probably does know something then."

"I don't know. But it'd be good to get out there anyway."

Sadik nodded.

"Yeah. That'd be best. People don't like talking on the phone about these things. Especially if it's about Višegrad," he said.

"I'll go there, then," Sećija said.

"Have you ever been to see him?"

"Yeah. A few times. While we were still at uni. He came here too."

"Want me to come with you?"

"Better not. I'm not sure how much he'll believe me, let alone you. I'll go there tomorrow, leave early. I'll make up a story on the way."

Sadik nodded. The van advertising the 'concert' came back, this time from the opposite direction.

"I've had an idea. Could you get a Black Swans ensign somehow?" Sećija asked.

"Today?"

"Yeah."

"I can try. What for?"

"I'll try and find the ensign of the Black Ravens, if there is one. Compare it with the tattoo. I'll pretend I'm a collector. There are people who collect those ensigns. I might get lucky."

"You're going to swap the Swans for the Ravens?"

"Yeah. I'll tell them I'm only interested in ensigns from units that used the names of birds. I'll take the HVO's Hawks ensign with me too."

The Hawks had been an HVO elite brigade that had fought in Central Bosnia, between Travnik and Kiseljak. After the war they had become a professional unit. Sećija had spent a year in that Brigade and had a few of their ensigns.

"Do those sort of collectors exist?" Sadik asked.

"No idea. I used to collect stamps ages ago. And there were people like that: people who'd only collect stamps with birds on them, or sports, or stamps with cities on them. They're not interested in any of the others. I imagine there might be something similar in this area. I'll check online."

"Good idea."

Sadik switched off his computer, left and came back an hour or two later. He had the ensign of the Black Swans with him, and another from the White Crows, another of the units that had fought alongside the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

"White Crows," Sećija said. "Were they taking the piss or what?"

“That’s like the Black Swans,” Sadik said. “Myths. Wonders. Like an honest policeman.”

He left Vitez for Višegrad at around 5 a.m. The drive to Kakanj dragged on because of the dense fog. He reached Višegrad at around 10. His friend’s name was Branko Jadrić. They had planned to meet up on the bridge, at the wider part at the very centre. Sećija had called him from Sarajevo. The bridge stood on eleven arches, and the wider part was in the middle of the sixth. Sećija got there first. The River Drina was muddy and swollen. There, on that bridge, several Bosniaks had been killed at the beginning of the war, slaughtered and thrown in the water. Similar things had happened during the Second World War. Sećija thought about those crimes. How many people had taken part in them? It must have been at least five, mustn’t it? Two to hold the victim, one executioner, and two more to throw the lifeless bodies into the river.

Branko arrived shortly after.

“Hey, listen: ‘Read? I’ve walked on it!’” he said.

Sećija smiled. He had heard that corny joke countless times. It was probably as old as the novel it was based on: *The Bridge on the Drina* by Ivo Andrić. A teacher asks a student – or the standard joke character in these parts, Mujo, asks his friend Suljo – whether he has read *The Bridge on the Drina*, and he replies: “What do you mean, ‘read’? I’ve walked on it!” Several times, before the war, Sećija had been there and walked on the bridge, famous from the novel and from the joke.

“I was surprised to hear from you,” Branko said.

They walked to a nearby café. Inside, loud turbofolk was playing.

“That singer’s from here,” Branko said. “From a village not far away. She was on Pink Superstar a couple of years ago. Made her quite famous.”

Sećija nodded.

“So what brings you to Višegrad?”

The whole river could not be seen through the glass; just a section of the muddy water, hypnotising and dizzying.

“Just passing through. I’m on my way to Belgrade. I’ve got a conference there, something about regional cooperation. Something like that. I don’t need to be in Belgrade ‘til 8, so I stopped off here, even though it’s a bit of a longer route. How long does it take from here?”

“Four hours max.”

“Is there anyone in Višegrad who collects military ensigns?”

“No idea.”

Sećija showed the Hawks’ ensign.

“This is the ensign of the brigade I was part of during the war. I collect this

sort of thing. But only the ensigns of units with birds' names. Like, I've got one of the White Eagles. Or these," he said, showing the ensigns of the Black Swans and the White Crows. "These are from the Army of the Republic."

"How many have you got?"

"Fifty-six. HVO, Army of the Republic, Armed Forces of Yugoslavia, Army of Republika Srpska, so on. I don't care what army they're from. I've got a few foreign ones too. Found them online. I've even got one from the Kosovo Liberation Army: the Black Eagles. I heard there was a unit called the Black Ravens here in Višegrad. Or maybe it was Rogatica? I'm not sure. I'd like to find one of their ensigns."

"The Black Ravens are from here."

"Do you know anyone who has their ensign? We could swap, or I could buy it. I don't mind. I'll go up to a hundred marks."

"I don't know. I've got a colleague, though. He's a History teacher. He's obsessed with the idea of opening a military museum here in Višegrad. From all the wars. Not a single one of the wars that happened round here bypassed this town. He'll probably know a lot more about this. He's got a few pieces. Should I ask him?"

"Sure."

Miloš Simović was a young man with a sparse grey beard. He wore glasses, and kept wiping them with his tee-shirt. He was about thirty. He was originally from Užica, in Serbia. His family was still there, but he had moved here for work and ended up staying.

"I have two," Miloš said, giving Sećija the ensign, as Sećija handed him a hundred-mark note.

It had a round emblem on it, which at first sight it was identical to the tattoo. The name of the unit was written in Cyrillic on the rim of the circle: the Black Ravens.

"Great," Sećija said. "Do you know anything about them? I'm interested in how big they were, number of people. That sort of thing's really important. The smaller the unit, the more the ensign's worth, 'cause there's less of them around."

"It started out as an independent platoon, active before the Višegrad brigade was formed. They joined the brigade later. It would have been thirty people at most," Miloš said. "I mean officially. I think the real number was about twenty. They fought here, at the beginning, in 1991, then around Goražde and up near Žepa. A few of them survived. Seven, I think. Or maybe six. One of the ex-Ravens was killed last year. You might remember that murder. It was odd. The whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina was talking about it. He was killed by some prostitute. Or so people said."

"Branko told me about the museum. It's a great idea."

"Yes. Višegrad's interesting from that point of view. All the wars broke out

around here. I don't know if you knew that Draža Mihailović hid in this area during the Second World War. And there's that passage in The Bridge on the Drina when the Austrians blow up the river. This ensign's a museum piece too. And each exhibit needs a caption. That's how come I know all this stuff. I do have to do things properly, like a good historian. The number of people who died and the number of survivors are key facts for every military unit."

"So did they arrest this prostitute?"

"No," Miloš said. "That was just a theory. They never did find the killer. He was seen with her before the murder. He was found naked. His face had been blown up. He'd been shot right in his forehead. His penis had been cut off and stuffed into his mouth. That's why everyone thought it must have been the woman."

"Fuck!" Sećija said. "I've seen everything, but that's... Where was she from?"

"Who knows? She said her name was Sanja Andrić, from Novi Sad," Branko said. "She was working as a waitress in a tavern up towards Mount Bikavac. That was where she got involved with Đorđe. Later it turned out that was a false name. Whores often do that: use false names."

"You knew this Đorđe, did you?"

"I knew who he was. He played football for Visegrad HE Drina before the war. Nearly ended up in Red Star Belgrade in the eighties."

"What did this Sanja look like?"

"They say she was hot. Must have been about twenty."

"Wait, Đorđe must have been rich, then."

"No. He was an alcoholic. His wife had left him five, six years before that."

"What a weird story. Shit, listen to me asking you stupid questions. Force of habit, I guess," Sećija said.

A few hours later, Sećija stopped for a rest at a tavern in Ustiprača and compared the emblem on the ensign with the photo of the tattoo. There was no doubt the tattoo had been copied from the emblem. The proportions were exactly the same: the diameter of the circle in relation to the length and height of the raven, and other minor details such as the beak. He called Sadik.

"I found the emblem."

"Great. Where are you now?"

"In Ustiprača. On my way back."

"What do you think?"

"The tattoo was copied from the emblem, I'm a hundred percent sure. There's another thing too, but I'll tell you that tomorrow when I'm back."

Chapter 43

He sat in a café looking out at the entrance and courtyard of the run-down family house where Rasim Jusić, Sanela's father, lived. Jusić's dark Audi A6 was parked in front of the house. No one had cleared the snow from the courtyard or the car. A narrow path in the snow led from the gate to the front door. Footprints could still be seen frozen in the snow; they reminded him of glass slippers. It was Sunday. Sećija had arrived in Travnik early, at around 8 a.m. Just outside the house was the kiosk where every morning Jusić bought his newspapers, *The Daily Voice* and *Liberation*.

The town was still asleep. The snow was dirty from the soot coming from a thousand chimneys, and the air smelled of rotten eggs. The coal they burnt here was low quality, from the local mines and full of sulphur.

Then he saw him. It was past nine. He was slowly walking towards the kiosk. Sećija left the café, waited for Jusić to buy the newspapers and turn to go back to his house, and then approached him.

"Mister Jusić," he said.

Jusić stopped and turned towards him. His eyes were dull and dead, and snake-like.

"My name is Vinko Marić," Sećija said. "I used to work with Sanela."

"I know who you are," Jusić said, and carried on walking.

Sećija hesitated for a moment, then caught up with him. He walked alongside Jusić.

"I need to talk to you. It wasn't an accident. Sanela was murdered."

Jusić stopped, and looked at Sećija. He stared at him for a long time, then took out a cigarette and lit it.

"Sadik and I conducted the investigation. We declared it an accident so the killers would feel more secure. They're more likely to make a mistake that way. Someone drove Sanela off the road and into the gorge on purpose. We found the

4x4 they used; I can show you if you want. Two masked men stole it from a villager up on Mount Vlašić. The clues led to our police station.”

Jusić clenched his fists, crumpling the newspapers.

“It’s the truth. I know who’s responsible for her death,” Sećija said.

Jusić was quiet for a long time.

“What’s the point of this now?” he asked, finally.

“I don’t know. Maybe it could give you some purpose. What’s the point of those newspapers? What’s the point of your life now?”

Jesić looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded and threw the newspapers in the snow. Sećija thought about the passage in the Bible, about God’s wrath; it was the part that had stuck with him most, from the days when he still went regularly to church.

They went into Jusić’s living room, dominated by a lavish cabinet and a round, dark, walnut table covered in deep pseudo-Ottoman carvings. They were produced in a factory in Sarajevo and were ridiculously expensive. Not only were you buying kitsch furniture, you were somehow buying fake tradition too. Alija Izetbegovic had the very same cabinet in his office; he was the manufacturer’s most famous model, and made their phony tradition packaged in glossy walnut wood seem almost legitimate.

“Should I start from the beginning?” Sećija asked.

“That would be ideal.”

Sećija placed a yellow folder on the table. It was all the evidence he had.

“Do you know who Bakir Memić is?” he asked.

“Yes. Do you have evidence for this whole story? You do know what this would mean?”

“Yes, I know. I don’t have enough evidence, otherwise I’d go to court. Do I need evidence?”

“No. Just convince me, that’ll be enough.”

“OK, I’ll try. It all started when the workers from the forestry department found the body of a young man with his face blown off in the River Bistrica gorge. Did you hear about that case?”

“Yes.”

“Do you mind if I smoke?”

Jusić shook his head and pushed a heavy crystal ashtray towards him.

“The young man had a raven tattooed on his shoulders. He’d copied it from the emblem of a Serbian unit from Višegrad. They were called the Black Ravens. They took part in various murders and rapes at the beginning of the war.”

“So did everyone.”

Sećija nodded, then took the Black Raven ensign and the photo of the tattoo

out of the folder. He pushed them towards Jusić. Jusić put his glasses on and looked at the two images for a long time. Then he nodded and gave them back to Sećija, who returned them to the folder.

“Why are you doing this?”

“I want justice for Sadik and Safet – that’s the name of the young man. And you want justice for Sanela. That’s all.”

“The honest policeman.”

“No. I’m as corrupt as everyone else in this country. Including you, I dare say. You didn’t buy this cabinet and this table with your salary. I know how much they cost. Honest policemen and honest politicians don’t exist. Not in this country, at least. They’re like white crows. And I wouldn’t want to end up like they do.”

“You know Sadik was one of the ringleaders of the murders of the Croatian returnees?”

“Yes, I do. So were you.”

Jusić tensed and briefly nodded.

“And that doesn’t bother you.”

“It does. But that’s not the reason I came here. You can sort that out with Him upstairs. If there is anyone.”

“OK. Go on.”

“The murdered young man was wearing a leather jacket. Sadik and I went to the place where he was found, while Sanela had a look at his clothes. We wanted to know everything about them. Sanela was good at that sort of thing. It was the only lead we had. It led us to Sarajevo. The young man was wearing expensive clothes, the sort you can only find in Sarajevo. That was when Sanela found drugs inside the lining of his jacket. I assume you didn’t know about this...”

“No.”

“It seems she didn’t tell anyone. I don’t know about Ahmet. She acted alone. She offered the drugs to Gidra and Pilav. Do you know who they are?”

“Yes.”

“It was cocaine. Worth about 250,000 marks. Sanela asked for 100,000. They didn’t mind the price, but in the end they didn’t take it. They didn’t know where it was from. They were worried it might belong to some bigger players, maybe someone else in the police.”

“They told you this?”

“Yes, but they didn’t mention Sanela. Sadik and I found her name later, but we didn’t have any proof.”

“Did you want your share?”

“Kind of. At first. Gidra and Pilav wanted to stay out of it. And they did, until

the end. After a while Sanela went to someone else in the police, and they passed the drugs back to their 'owner' in Sarajevo."

"Masleša?"

"Yes. We'll get to that. In the meantime, we'd found out who the Raven was. That was the nickname we gave the young man who'd been killed. His name was Safet Hodžić, his mother had been raped in Višegrad in 1991. She committed suicide three months after Safet was born. She was 19 at the time. That happened in Zenica. After the war Safet was moved to Sarajevo, to an orphanage."

"You've gone off on a tangent."

"No, I haven't. Someone sent an anonymous email to Sanela." Sećija took the printout of the email he'd sent to Sanela from Zenica out of the folder and handed it to Jusić.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Read it. It's the email. Sent from an internet café in Zenica to Sanela's work address. It was a trap. Sanela must have asked for money for herself. And that's why she was killed."

"How do you know she was killed?" Sećija gave him the photo of the wrecked Toyota. He had circled the scratches on the car body with a felt-tip pen.

"These are the scratches left by the 4x4's front bumper when it pushed Sanela's Toyota into the gorge. This is the car," Sećija said, handing him the photo of the Opel Frontera.

"We found it near Donji Vakuf. It's still there, I imagine. They threw the 4x4 in the ditch. There someone was waiting for the driver to pick him up. We also found the place where the 4x4 waited for Sanela to pass by in her car. Then it followed her and waited for the chance to push her off the road. I've got a photo of that too."

He gave Jusić another photograph. Jusić looked at it briefly and gave it back. Then he lifted his arm. Sećija waited. Jusić was staring at the table in front of him. He lit up a cigarette. Sećija pushed the ashtray back towards him.

"Go on," he said eventually.

Sećija then handed him the photo of Jusuf Masleša, Fikret Huskić and Bakir Memić.

"This was taken in Sarajevo. I think that was when they decided to kill Sanela. The Opel Frontera was taken a few days before Sanela's death, from a villager somewhere up towards Mount Vlašić. The guy described the people who stole the car to us, even though they were wearing balaclavas. From his description, the age and height of one of them corresponded to Fikret Huskić, Masleša's driver. I'm convinced he was the one driving the 4x4, although I have no proof other than this photo. Sadik acted alone a few times. That was why they torched his

car. While I was in Sarajevo for Safet's funeral, the front tyre of my Golf was slashed. It exploded near Kakanj, and I ended up in the ditch. That's how I got this," he said, showing the scar on his forehead. "That was meant for Sadik too; he was supposed to be at the funeral with me. They'd planned it before we left for Sarajevo. They were warnings. Sadik kept meddling with the case so in the end they had him killed. They were professional killers. I was the first one at the crime scene. They'd done a perfect job."

"Where did you find this photo?"

"It doesn't matter. You can keep it if you want."

"No. What was it all about? Just drugs?"

"No. That was just a small part of it. Bakir Memić was the director for a while at the orphanage where Safet Hodžić grew up. He was a real shit. Slept with the under-age residents there."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I know the name of one of the girls he used to sleep with. She lives in the Netherlands now. Memić was a Ševe^{*} agent during the war. Did you know that?"

"Yes."

"And did you know he joined the Army in August 1992?"

"Yes."

"And that didn't bother you? I know your wife was killed in Ključ around that time."

Jusic was silent for a long time.

"Yes, it did bother me."

Then he stood up, briefly left the room and came back with a bottle of Jack Daniel's and two glasses. He half-filled both glasses and immediately downed his.

"From the orphanage he moved to the police, to the organised crime department," Sećija said. "That's where he got the drugs from. They were confiscated drugs that should have been destroyed. He used the boys and girls from the orphanage as dealers; he trusted them. Safet was one of them and at some point he stole some of the drugs and run away to Zenica. Memić's men searched his flat. In Zenica Safet had a friend who'd grown up with him in the orphanage. His name is Faruk Handžić. He works for Memić too."

^{*} Ševe was a secret police organization of the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

"Explain this one thing to me, and I'll believe your story. Why did Safet have a raven tattooed on his arm?"

"His mother left him the emblem of the black ravens. She must have torn it from the uniform of the man who raped her. She left it to him in her will, together with the man's name. He had it tattooed as a warning, as a reminder, I guess."

Jusić nodded.

"She gave him the man's name, eh?"

"Yes."

"Did you see it?"

"Yes. Safet wanted to be buried with it. He posted it to a friend in Zenica a few days before he died. He'd worked out he was in the shit. Here are the photos," Sećija said. He slid Jusić some new photos of the contents of the envelope Safet had sent to Damir. But Jusić gave them back without looking at them.

"What was the man's name?"

"Djorđe Manojlović."

Jusić's left eye twitched, then he wrote the man's name in his diary. Secija had heard about this tic of Jusić's from an acquaintance of his, a Croatian guy from Travnik. He had been a witness at the Hague Tribunal and had described Jusić's tic in his testimony. The Croatian had been imprisoned, and during an exhausting interrogation conducted in turns by Jusić and a doctor from Travnik, at one point Jusić's left eye began twitching. He had then pushed him onto the floor, and kicked him violently in the head and ribs. Sećija's acquaintance had been left with three broken ribs that had grown back crooked, and with ugly scars and protrusions.

"There's no need," Sećija said. "Safet killed him a year ago. I went to Višegrad. The girl Memić used to sleep with helped him."

Jusić was surprised. He looked at Sećija open-mouthed, then crossed out the name in the diary.

"You really went above and beyond," he said.

"Thanks."

"Go on."

"When Safet got to Zenica he had no money. All he had on him was the drugs. Faruk suggested they steal a Golf, push it into the River Bistrica and then ask the owner for a ransom. That was how they lured him into the forest. And once they got him there, they killed him. The owner of the stolen Golf told us that the night his car was taken, he'd seen two young men hanging around in the car park. One of them had a leather jacket. That was Safet. And that's pretty much the whole story. Just one more thing," Sećija said, handing him the article from Plus. "You have to read this."

Jusić read the article once, and then again, more slowly. As if in disbelief at what he was reading. His eyes filled with tears and hatred, and his chin trembled. His left eye twitched. Sećija wasn't sure what he was thinking at that moment, whether it was about Sanela or the Raven, but he was sure that 'justice' would follow.

"That's how Memić tried to fool the police. Who'd suspect the Humanist of the Year?" said Sećija.

"So: Jusuf Masleša, Fikret Huskić and Bakir Memić." Jusić added.

It sounded like a death sentence.

"Yes," said Sećija.

"What have you decided about the young guy? Faruk?"

"I don't make the decisions. You do. But if you ask me, people like him never last long anyway. They're disposable. Like Safet."

Jusić nodded as Sećija picked up the folder.

"Do you need anything from this?" he asked.

"No. I've heard enough. I'd destroy it if I were you."

Sećija nodded, took the folder and left. Jusić remained seated at the table. Outside, the kids had made a huge snowman with the dirty snow. They must have carried the snow from somewhere on wheelbarrows, because the snow around them was trodden and icy and sparkled like dark glass. They stood on folding ladders splashed with white paint to add the upper sections of the snowman's body, the top part and the head. Sećija stopped, lit up a cigarette and looked at them. They placed a 20-litre plastic paint bucket on the snowman's head, and stuffed a ripe, blackened banana in his mouth. For a moment, he saw Jusić's shadow at the window. Sećija waved his hand towards him, and the shadow disappeared.

From there, Sećija went straight to his parents' house. He moved the broken door of the drying room to one side, and lit a fire in the hearth. Then he went back to the car to pick up the folder. He sat on the stump in front of the hearth and, one at a time, threw all the pages from the folder into the flames, waiting for one to burn before throwing in the next. Finally, he threw the empty folder in the fire too. He waited for it to burn, then left the room and put the broken door back against the door frame.

pp. 216-226