

Chapter 1

The silhouetted fishing boats reminded Inspector Marko Despotović of corpses that had floated down from Vukovar during the Yugoslav War.

Marko turned from the view of the Danube, lit up by the rising sun, picked up his Serpico-style sunglasses and slid them into his shirt opening. He smiled at his wife, who was sitting up in bed, at work on her laptop. She looked up and asked:

‘Thought you’d finished your early shifts?’

‘One more day of holiday to cover.’

Branka rose out of bed and adjusted her silk slip, said:

‘I’ll make you breakfast.’

His wife had already ironed his shirt, was writing up an article and was ready to make him breakfast. Marko put an arm around Branka’s waist, pulled her warm body to him, said:

‘Kiss me first.’

‘Feeling romantic this morning.’

‘I’m a romantic guy.’

As they kissed, Marko pressed his groin into Branka, who raised her eyebrows:

‘Uh huh, really romantic eh big boy?’

Branka smacked him on the arm, just like she had the first time they’d gone on a date. But she’d kissed him that time too. They’d met when Branka was studying journalism and Marko had just joined the police.

Attractive rather than beautiful, it was her sense of purpose that was most noticeable. As an investigative journalist for Danas newspaper, her one-woman crusade to expose corruption in Belgrade was widely admired but also the subject of various death threats. But after the shit

Marko had witnessed in Kosovo and the danger of breaking up the Zemun clan, he wasn't spooked by a few threats.

They'd been together since they were twenty, both now forty-years-old. He still found her attractive. They were both older and she had lines around her eyes. But when she smiled, her face lit up and the sex was full of love.

It wasn't as if he was Dragan Bjelogrić, though he had been compared to the handsome actor. He still had thick black hair and did enough exercise to keep fit – had to be to have a chance of winning a game against his tennis-playing son. He'd found one white hair on his chest a week earlier, but had plucked it in the hope more wouldn't appear. Marko kissed Branka on the head and headed to the front door, saying:

'Don't worry about breakfast, I'll grab some *burek* on the way.'

He paused by his son's door and silently spied in. At fifteen-years-old, Goran was too old to be checked on, but Marko couldn't help it. Goran was spread out on the bed, his long limbs dangling off it.

In the hallway, Marko reached up for his police standard Zastava revolver and holstered it. Marko had built the high shelf when his son was little so that the gun was out of sight. These days, Goran could reach it with ease, but Marko trusted his son. Marko had never killed anyone, but he'd fired the gun in a few car chases.

Marko left the flat and went down to his car. Imagining he was in Al Pacino's Mustang, Marko drove his Ford Focus out of New Belgrade, zig-zagging the grid system one-handed. The car was hardly *Serpico* cool, but better than the Yugo he'd had for ten years.

Cruising over the Sava, Marko passed Kalemegdan. The medieval fortress stood over the intersecting rivers, still standing despite being a battlefield in wars against the Romans, the Turks and the Germans. The Yugoslav War had taken place outside of Serbia's borders, so the fortress hadn't featured in those battles.

Turning down into Stari Grad, Marko parked diagonally over the kerb on Simina Street. The street had once housed Belgrade's aristocracy, but Tito had supposedly made everyone equal and several of the buildings had been left to ruin since the fifties.

Marko opened the ornate metal gate covered in wisteria and heard his name called. He looked up and saw Milica on the stone balcony, wearing nothing but a towel as she leaned over and said:

'So the Inspector calls.'

'Just doing my duty.'

Marko smiled as he entered the building. Downstairs was derelict, but the second floor had a basic bathroom, kitchen and bedroom. Milica had added her own touches – a bookshelf, make-up table and Pulp Fiction poster personalising the bedroom.

Milica was his neighbour-cum-friend's daughter. Twenty-four-years-old, she had dropped out of university because of her heroin habit. Charged with possession after a car chase that ended with her in hospital, Marko managed to get her off as a neighbourly favour.

He'd known her as a neighbourhood kid, saw less of her as a teenager and hadn't thought about her since then. In the hospital, she was pale with needle marks on one arm and a cut from the car crash on another. Yet she still had a defiant beauty, wanting to get out of the life, but refusing to name names. Marko had tried:

'If I'm going to get you out of this, I need to know who the dealer is.'

'And I thought Dragan Bjelogrić had just come to visit me in hospital.'

That line sealed the deal. Being compared to the actor had hit his vanity. He got her into rehab for a year and set her up in the flat. The place had been seized by the police in a drugs bust and he had the keys. With Milica's dad a recovering alcoholic and her mum living in Novi Sad, they were happy she was on her way to recovery. She'd even gone back to her

Literature course at university. Whenever she went to the toilet, Marko always had a secret search to check she was still straight.

Marko told himself he was doing it for his friend, but was also excited every time he was near Milica. The first time he showed Milica the flat, she had shown her gratitude by giving him a kiss, which he had reciprocated before backing off. He resisted his impulses but popped to see her whenever he could before work and had stopped telling his wife about the visits.

Still in only a towel, Milica sashayed into the kitchen to make coffee. With the Turkish coffee in a pot on the hob, Milica lit a Lucky Strike and stood in a provocative pose. Marko waved the smoke away and Milica pouted:

‘I need to have one vice.’

‘How’s Uni?’

‘Got to write a paper on Ivo Andrić.’

‘Yea?’

‘You’ve never read him have you?’

‘No.’

The pot of coffee came to the boil. Milica poured a cup and asked:

‘Are you going to let me read your coffee?’

Marko checked his watch, said:

‘Can’t. Shift starts soon.’

He still had time, but out of warped loyalty to his wife, he wouldn’t have breakfast with either woman. Milica took a drag of her cigarette, looked at Marko through the smoke and asked:

‘Are you scared of what I’ll see?’

‘You know I don’t believe that shit.’

Milica shrugged:

‘Maybe you should, might help with solving a case one day.’

Marko got up and Milica kissed him on the mouth, so that he could taste her cigarette. He didn’t like smoking, but with her, everything was alluring. Milica pushed him away, said:

‘Go on, go to work.’

For the second time that morning, Marko said goodbye to a woman. He started to cross to his car, when a tram rattled past, Marko startled as he stepped out of harm’s way. The only passenger was a gaunt old woman all in black, Marko not sure he’d really seen her or if she was just an apparition. His mum would say it was some kind of omen. But then she would also say he needed to eat.

He still had time to grab some *burek* before work, so he drove around the corner to *Pekera Trpković* on Gospodar Jovanova, where a black-windowed Audi was silently idling. Parking a few metres behind, Marko watched as the Audi drove off.

The car belonged to Dragan Mladić, a drugs dealer and hardcore Partizan fanatic who never seemed to be caught. Marko knew that it was Dragan who had supplied Milica even if she wouldn’t admit it. On that late summer morning, Marko bore no bitterness. It didn’t matter that a criminal had a better car than a police inspector. Without criminals, there wouldn’t be police - so it was all copacetic.

Nemanja, the perpetually sweating proprietor, greeted Marko as he took a tray of *burek* out of the wood-burning stove:

‘Good morning inspector, mushroom for a change?’

‘I’ll stick with the cheese. And cut the ‘inspector’, mister will do.’

Marko took a stool at the counter. Nemanja wiped his big hands on his white apron, sliced a slab of *burek* and placed it on the counter. Marko took his wallet out, but Nemanja waved it off:

‘Come on inspector, you know you don’t pay in here.’

Two months earlier, Nemanja had been hauled in for tax evasion. He hadn’t asked Marko to intervene, but it was a shame if the place closed down, so Marko had a word with the tax inspector. Nemanja paid up his taxes but didn’t get closed down.

Marko finished his *burek*, wiped the oil off his chin and gulped down some yogurt. He thanked Nemanja and got back in his car. He donned his sunglasses, put the Ford in gear and bumped over the tram lines. Some of the old buildings still bore bullet holes from the Second World War, but the stone gargoyles were lit up by the morning sun, preserving the ugly beauty. Marko loved his city.

Pulling into the police headquarters on Bulevar Despota Stefana, Marko remembered when the street was called 29 Novembra – a Yugoslav national holiday. A BMW parked beside him, Inspector Jovanović inside. Jovanović was the same age as Marko, but dressed like a younger man and acted as if he was the older colleague. He claimed the car had been obtained at a police auction, the BMW seized in a drugs bust and never reclaimed. Jovanović also claimed his dress sense helped him integrate with the criminal underworld and get informants.

Marko knew it was a thin line. If a case could be solved with minor coercion, then fine. But they’d spent so many years fighting corruption, you couldn’t succumb. Some police still did, he knew that.

Jovanović jumped out of his BMW, looking like he’d come from Miami in his white Armani jacket, and slapped Marko on the shoulder:

‘Thanks for the holiday cover Despot.’

‘No worries Jova. So you survived the Montenegro mafia.’

‘Not a mafia guy in sight. Just rich Russians with their model girlfriends.’

The two inspectors strolled into headquarters together and headed for the second floor. The place had been designed for giants, but Marko took the steps in his stride. Above the stairwell was a discoloured patch where portraits of Tito and then Milošević had once hung. In the department for the fight against organised crime, the Chief of Police waved them both over to his office.

Ivan Dragić was a striking figure with his shock of white hair, moustache and broken Roman nose – appearing in a haze of smoke.

Ivan had been prominent in the post-Milošević clean-up, making his name as lead inspector in the break-up of the Zemun mafia clan. In cynical moments, Marko wondered who had benefited the most. Belgrade was a safer city, that was true. But with the main criminal clans split up, it was hard to tell who was with which remaining gangs.

Ivan slapped Jovanović on the back and slapped a file into Marko's hands. He smiled at Jovanović:

‘How's our country house?’

Jovanović sniffed and rubbed his nose:

‘Caught a bloody summer cold. But apart from that, all in good order Chief, all in good order.’

‘Good, good. Come on in and tell me about it.’

Ivan and three inspectors had a share in the Montenegro house. They'd asked Marko if he wanted in, but he'd opted out. Ivan turned to Marko and gestured at the file:

‘Burglary in Banovo Brdo. Usual suspects. Sure you'll sort it. Take Nebojša with you. Let him see how it's done.’

Putting the file under his arm, Marko called for Nebojša, the guy just out of police academy – a young gun blazing with ambition and righteous indignation at any crime. Every day,

Nebojša came into work clean-shaven and with his ironed shirt tucked in, hoping he would one day be given a real case.

First stop was the old woman who had been burgled in Banovo Brdo. The flat was full of tradition – table covered in embroidered cloth, Orthodox icons adorning the walls. Sweat trickled down Marko's head, but he knew there was no point asking to open a window. The old woman would cite '*promaja*' as a reason not to – the deadly draught meaning no breeze was allowed even in extreme heat.

With the woman seated, Marko started. According to the description she'd given the street police, the thief was gaunt and had a moustache.

While Nebojša watched from the side, Marko showed a set of photos to the old woman – two of the ten men with a moustache. The old woman dithered between two photos:

'Both of these look a bit like him.'

'Both heroin addicts who burgle old people's homes. To be honest, we're not sure if this guy still has a moustache as the photo is old. But the other one is recent because we had him in for stealing from another vulnerable woman like yourself.'

'Yes, I think it's him.'

Marko got the woman to sign a witness statement, then asked to use the bathroom, where he pocketed a bottle of prescribed sleeping pills with her name on.

Leaving the old woman's flat, Nebojša knew he was the junior partner, but couldn't help questioning Marko's method:

'You didn't give her much choice about which guy.'

Marko shrugged:

'The Chief wants an arrest and so does the old woman.'

'But what if the guy's innocent?'

‘He’s not. He’s been arrested seven times for burglary and is a known smack addict.

Getting him off the street for a while will help everyone, including himself.’

The rest of the morning was spent tracking down the identified thief. They found him with a load of junkies in a nearby flat, the guy half out of it. Marko slipped the old woman’s pills into the junkie’s pocket and let Nebojša find them – his younger colleague having to admit they’d got the right guy. Marko smiled to himself, remembering how he used to trick his son with ‘magic’.

In the police interview room, Marko patted the junkie down for harder drugs than the old woman’s pills but couldn’t find anything. The junkie declared:

‘I’m clean man.’

‘Get your clothes off.’

‘You want to see my dick?’

‘I want to see where you’ve put the smack.’

The junkie shrugged and took off his clothes. He spread out his arms:

‘See.’

‘Turn around.’

The junkie sighed and turned around. His arse was covered in some kind of oil. Marko shook his head:

‘Why’s your arse all oily?’

‘So you can fuck me easily.’

Marko exhaled as he snapped on rubber gloves and said:

‘I know where it is, so you want me to put my hand up there or you going to do it yourself?’

The junkie turned to face Marko:

‘I’ll do it myself.’

The junkie squatted and squeezed a shit onto the floor, a sealed bag of heroin dropping out with it. Marko screwed up his nose as he picked up the bag. At a guess, the amount was five grams, or ‘ten dolls’ as it was called on the street – ‘a doll’ being half a gram. The junkie had obviously sold what he’d stolen from the old woman and bought the smack. In case the junkie was feeling talkative, Marko asked:

‘Who did you buy it off?’

‘Found it.’

‘You found ten dolls and thought you’d like them up your arse?’

‘They were nice dolls.’

Marko could see that the junkie preferred being put in a cell and possibly bum-raped to naming whoever the main dealer was. Turning to Nebojša, Marko dismissed the junkie:

‘Lock him up.’

By mid-afternoon, Marko was writing up a report, thirty minutes from finishing his shift. He couldn’t wait to have a shower and wash the day’s heat off his body. A family meal, perhaps a quick tennis match with Goran. Even if he got thrashed, it was always a joy to see his son in action. Marko’s pleasant thoughts were interrupted by Ivan calling urgently from his doorway:

‘Despotović, you’ve got a murder. Dorćol depot, now. I’ll meet you there.’

Heading to his car, Marko knew some shit had gone down. If it was so urgent that Ivan was coming along, some big-shot had been killed.