

Chapter 1

An Unease Arises

It was early spring in 1992 when fifteen-year-old Amir Kovacevic came home with sweat caked on his forehead, hair slicked down, and grass stains on his team jersey.

“We won again,” he proudly shared. “One more victory and we’re going to the regional tournament in Prijedor.”

Unfortunately, various chores got in the way of the family going to his game. But they promised to attend the tournament if they got in. Danis was especially unhappy not to attend, but he hadn’t done his homework, which was the toll he needed to pay in order to watch his brother play.

Amir had a zest for life, especially sports. Aside from soccer, he loved basketball and followed the great Yugoslav National Team. His favorite was the Croatian star, Toni Kukoc. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, in both world championships, and the Olympics, the national team dominated every country, including the United States. He followed the NBA, too, and was hungry for any information he could find. Magic Johnson was his hero in the U.S., and he loved the Los Angeles Lakers, watching videotaped games of them whenever they were on TV in Bosnia, which was not very often, but a treat nonetheless.

Thirty-four-year-old Hajra had just begun to warm the burek, her delicious ground lamb pie, for a picnic planned for later that day when her son burst through the front door of their modest home with his good news.

“I am proud of you, “sefe.” She would tease calling him the “chief” being the older brother, and because as captain he led his soccer team with pride and leadership.

The mother in her didn’t care that he was dirty and sweaty, and she gave him a warm hug and kiss on top of his head. She marveled at his mop of thick, wavy black hair more so lately reminding her of her father who had the dark complexion, and deep brown eyes of Roma, which in fact he was.

Just then, Halima entered the kitchen to see what the fuss was about. The twelve-year-old was lighter skinned with blue-green eyes and light brown hair that was more in line with Bosnia’s Muslims, Croats, and Serbs who, other than affiliating with different religions that began centuries before, came from the same Balkan genetic make-up. She looked more like her father’s side of the family. A small girl, she could pass for nine or ten-years-old, and that disturbed her. She was ready to be a teenager. Halima was the most curious of the children; often asking questions.

“Are you guys moving on in the tournament? No surprise there. You and Nikola don’t mess around on the pitch,” she exclaimed.

Whenever she heard herself or someone else mention Nikola’s name a slight flush appeared on her cheeks. Amir never failed to pick up on it, and he’d slap her knowingly on the shoulder. He never told

his friend recognizing that it would embarrass his sister. Still, she'd practically run away as if she had something very important to attend to elsewhere not wanting to acknowledge his playful teasing. Since she was very studious it was easy to excuse herself to head back to her studies, which made perfect sense. Of all three children, she loved school the most. Actually, she had told her parents she wanted to be a lawyer someday. And they never ceased to encourage her to follow her dreams.

Danis, the nine-year-old had his radar tracking his older brother's location. He was especially attuned to when Amir returned from a soccer game that he was not allowed to attend. He was listening for the front door to open.

Like a stone hurled from a slingshot, Danis bolted from his room and yelled to his brother even before he was in his presence.

"I knew you'd win. I knew it! How many goals did you score? Two, three?"

"Hang on. Slow down. OK, well I did get one. A header from Nikola's cross. The keeper had no clue where I was going to direct it. And we won 3-0. We're going on to the big tournament!"

Danis' gangly body didn't always have control over itself. When he came into a room the energy level rose. He idolized his older brother, and wanted to be a soccer star like him. He looked like a younger version of Amir displaying the Roma features of their mother. He often had a serious look on his face, but when prompted he could break out some great impersonations of British rock stars like David Bowie. And he was bit spoiled as the youngest often was; a point that Amir and Halima never failed to remind him of.

"Kids, go get ready please. Your dad is coming home early and we're going to meet Uncle Tarik and Aunt Merjem and your cousins down by the river. We're going to picnic with Emir and Safija."

"Can we invite Nikola with us?" asked Amir.

Halima's ears perked up at hearing this, even from her bedroom.

Nikola was a Serbian boy who was practically Amir's brother. They went everywhere together. In school they were inseparable meeting up with other friends, most of whom had been on their soccer team since it formed five years earlier.

On some weekends, either Nikola slept over Amir's house, or vice versa. Nikola's mother often sent over some of her homemade baked goods like bundevara, a scrumptious pie with phyllo dough crust, grated pumpkin, sugar, cinnamon or nutmeg, and that if you didn't pay attention, would be devoured by the boys before anyone got a chance to sample. Or, she might send over some fried dough sprinkled with powdered sugar, which was usually closely guarded by Danis to ensure that everyone would get some for dessert.

Hajra and Elvir loved Nikola, too. He was a respectful boy with a wry sense of humor. Halima's crush on him was a more recent occurrence. His shoulder-length blonde hair and blue eyes attracted her

attention, though she only had a burgeoning notion that this was the beginning of an infatuation. And he did not seem to pay much attention to her anyway. After all, though she was twelve-years-old she looked younger and she was sure that would be a no-go for him.

It was an unusually mild day in March, and the buds of the native flowers were just beginning to reveal themselves. It was mid-afternoon and Elvir had just come home. Although some vague rumors of nationalist activity were making the rounds in nearby Prijedor where his brother lived, they were not so disconcerting to prevent an enjoyable family gathering.

“Good idea to have a picnic at my cousin’s house. I love the river this time of year. And I’m glad Tarik and his family will be joining us.”

The nearby Sana River was where the family often went to sit under its sprawling beech trees. The water always provided the family with a place of respite; a place of calm. But Elvir was not comfortable with picnicking at the river’s edge with concerns about what was going on in Prijedor. Besides, it was still wet from the winter snow melt. So, rather than going to their usual spot, he had suggested to Hajra that they go to Emir’s house, which sat 500 meters from the river’s banks and only a few kilometers further from their usual spot.

The six of them squeezed into the Russian-made Lada station wagon, and wound their way to Emir’s house.

When they arrived, his brother Tarik’s car was already out front. They were just about to enter the house when they saw the Lada pull up. Tarik, a year younger than Elvir, and Merjem’s two young daughters, Azra and Fatima made a quick U-turn toward the new arrivals. How they loved their cousins from Kozarac.

The two families greeted each other warmly as Emir stepped out of the house. He beckoned them all to come in; that the food was ready.

Emir’s wife, Amela knew the children loved her dolma. The luscious aroma of the green peppers stuffed with ground meat, onions, carrots, and spices, greeted the guests at the door along with hugs. Accompanying Hajra’s burek, and Merjem’s Djuvec, her delectable vegetables and rice, was a loaf of hard-crust bread fresh from the bakery that Elvir had stopped at before heading home. Hajra and Amela dished out the food on plastic flowered plates while Merjem delivered them to the table. The others complimented the chefs as they dug in. The bundevara that Nikola’s mother sent was the perfect ending to a lovely late afternoon meal.

Before exploring the riverbank after they ate, Elvir told the children to be back before dark. He was not comfortable having them wander too far for too long. Being close to the house, their laughter echoed from where they played.

The adults settled down to some coffee outside on a small, concrete patio surrounded by trees, facing the river. They were all acutely aware of the stirrings within some in the Serb Orthodox Christian communities in both Prijedor and Kozarac. Actually, there were rumblings everywhere in the Municipality since Bosnia and Herzegovina voted for its independence on March 1st.

“How’s the import/export business these days?” Emir asked Elvir.

“Not bad. It seems to be a little more difficult getting some fabrics in from Asia lately. But otherwise, OK.”

“Although our new independence from Yugoslavia is a wonderful thing, I don’t know that many of our Serb neighbors think so,” Tarik said, almost not paying attention to the previous question.

“Tarik,” Merjem interjected, “we’re just talking about your brother’s business. Can’t we wait to speak about politics till later? Or not all?”

“I’m sorry, Elvir. I guess my mind is elsewhere. Um...delicious meal. Thank you for preparing it, you three,” he said quickly veering from his real worries of the present-day.

“No, no, Tarik is right, Merjem. We have concerns that supersede talking about my work,” Elvir responded. “I know that we’d all like to just talk about our daily lives, that would truly be the most really pleasant, but maybe we need to talk a look at what’s happening around here and not pretend it isn’t. I’m hearing there’s some tension now between both parties, SDS and SDA.”

“You know,” added Tarik, “I’ve been talking to Merjem about what I’ve seen at my precinct in the past few days. I love my new job as inspector, but after that damned Stevanovic from the Serb Democratic Party was appointed to be their leader in our city government, some new Serb reservists have joined our ranks. I don’t know how they bypassed regular police training, or maybe they had some secretly somewhere, but they are starting to show up. And I’m hearing there’s some tension now between SDS and our own SDA party.”

“The other day, I overheard something in Prijedor when I went in to pick up some tools to fix the leaky sink faucet. I heard two guys talking. I am sure they’re Serb and part of the SDS. I’ve seen them go in and out of the government building. They were speaking somewhat quietly, but I got the gist of it. From what I could gather, they were saying that any Muslim extremists in the municipality who showed their faces should be arrested on the spot. They stopped talking when they saw me walk past. Have you ever heard of such thing? I can’t say that I know any extremists or have heard of any activity, to be honest,” said Emir.

“I’m hearing some of that talk, too,” replied Tarik.

“Why would they tell these lies? Why stir up the local Serbs against their friends and neighbors? We’ve even spoken with our Serb friends and have gotten assurances they didn’t buy into these lies.” Merjem said.

“It’s absurd,” said Hajra. “I can’t believe that anyone in Prijedor Municipality would buy into this, including Serbs. I mean, it’s 1992. This is not the Ottoman Empire, or even the 1940s for God’s sake. We all should be well past that.”

Hajra was referring to notable periods of violence between the three major ethnicities in the region. But all nodded in agreement with her assessment.

“I hope you’re right,” Tarik said. “It just feels a little strange since we became our own country.”

“We all saw the results of the voting. Most of us Muslims and the Croats in Bosnia wanted independence, while about thirty percent of the Serbs did. That leaves seventy percent who are not pleased. But even with that, we all will benefit from a new prosperity being a sovereign state,” said Amela.

“True, and we’ve been nothing but good neighbors to everyone no matter what religion. We’re Yugoslavs first. Well, now we’re Muslims from Bosnia is a better way to put it,” replied Merjem with a smile.

“Don’t know if you are aware, but the Yugoslav constitution entitles republics to vote for independence, so we’re just following suit after Slovenia and Croatia. And, many of the world’s governments wanted us to verify our desire to be independent since last year,” added Amela.

“Maybe we’re jumping the gun here,” said Elvir. “Maybe what you overheard, Emir, was the minority. I want to believe that this is the case. And maybe we should finish our coffee and the delicious dessert that our dear Nikola’s mother sent over. It’s getting dark, so we’ll need to round up the kids soon and get on our way.”

The others agreed and shifted the conversation back to the mundane. As they all cleaned up, the children came to the house from the river bank laughing and teasing each other. The men smoked one last cigarette before the families said their goodbyes.

Before the two brothers and their families got in their cars, and while the cousins and Nikola were still horsing around in the front of the house, the four adults quietly entered into one more brief conversation.

“I don’t believe that anything will happen here, you’ll see,” Hajra said. “We are a young country now. We get along well with all of our neighbors, Croat and Serb. In Bosnia, there is always a place for us all. Look at the beauty surrounding us. Perhaps we are being overly concerned.

“You’re right. But with the invasion of Slovenia and Croatia by the JNA after they voted for independence last year, and the restlessness in Prijedor, I guess I’m a bit wary,” said Tarik.

“Those Kozarac committees I’m on with all our residents represented is still pointing toward improving our city. I have faith that that’s how we’ll proceed. Anyway,” Elvir concluded, “let’s make sure our cities and the municipality move forward, not backwards.”

“Kids,” yelled Merjem, “time to go. Say goodnight to your cousins.”

They all hugged one more time and then each car sped off as they headed for their homes.

Elvir peered into the rear-view mirror. He saw how his children and Nikola seemed so content with one another. Nikola’s family could never feel bitterness toward Amir and his family. Or for Muslims in general. Look at the fine son they’ve produced.

While the children chatted away Elvir and Hajra stared silently at the road in front of them each lost in their own deep thoughts.