

The **Clarendon House**
Short Story Magazine

**Satisfying Fiction from
Clarendon House Publications**
Free to download wherever you are

**Issue
13**



**Two gems from some of the best storytellers on the planet:
Sharon Frame Gay and Gabriella Balcom**

The Clarendon House Short Story Magazine

Satisfying Fiction from Clarendon House Publications

Welcome to your free copy of this bi-monthly e-magazine from Clarendon House Publications.

Downloadable for free from the Clarendon House website [here](#), each magazine contains a selection of stories from the collections which Clarendon House has already published — but because the magazine is a directly downloadable pdf, each story is fully illustrated. As you will know if you're reading this, you have been able to obtain the pdf easily, without having to input even an email address. We encourage you to forward this pdf far and wide for the enjoyment of readers everywhere. It contains links to the Clarendon House collections from which each story is drawn, so it helps every author involved to reach more and more readers.

Feedback is welcome! Drop us a line at grant@clarendonhousebooks.com

In this issue:

Jughead by Sharon Frame Gay

A horse with a reputation turns out to be something else entirely in this heart-wrenching tale from the Queen of the Western, Sharon Frame Gay.

Nun or Not? by Gabriella Balcom

Set in old Slovenia, this is a surprisingly moving and intricately well-told romantic tale, one of the best short stories submitted to Clarendon House in the last six years.

We hope you enjoy the magazine!

All rights reserved. This publication is licensed to the individual reader only. Duplication or distribution by e-mail, floppy disc, network, printout or by other means to a person other than the original recipient is a violation of international copyright law. © 2023 All stories, articles and other items are copyright of the authors as shown herein, and are reproduced here with permission. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a license permitting restricted copying in the United Kingdom issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency Ltd, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 9HE. © 2023 Clarendon House Publications, 76 Coal Pit Lane, Sheffield, England. Published in Sheffield 2023.



RECOGNISED INTERNATIONALLY AS THE WORLD'S MOST EXCITING WRITERS' MAGAZINE!

SUBSCRIBE NOW

FREE GIFTS FOR ALL SUBSCRIBERS INSIDE!

PHENOMENAL THIRTIETH ISSUE \$2.00

INNER CIRCLE WRITERS MAGAZINE

How Stories Really Work Special Workshop continues

Meet **ASH GALLAGHER** author of **Reckoning in the Rubble**
The words on the paper were surgical tools and I breathe a little easier these days.

The Great Clarendon House Writing Challenge

Meet the **FINALISTS** for 2021 INSIDE!

www.clarendonhousebooks.com/magazine

CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

CHARLOTTE LANGTREE



Fractured: Tales of Flame and Fury



A Fantasy Collection by Charlotte Langtree

Darkness shadows all worlds. Gods war, queens fall, and trust is broken. A frightened mother beseeches an uncaring god. Rebel Sisters dance on the wind, and doors open to long-forgotten realms. In the depths of the ocean, an ancient dragon stirs. When all hope is lost, who will rise? Who will resist? And who will rain ruin on a fractured land?

Lose yourself in eight tales of courage and chaos, powerful magic, and the women who hold their worlds together.

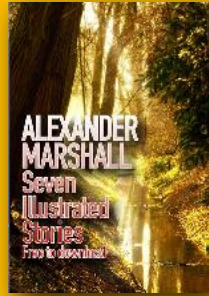
www.clarendonhousebooks.com/charlotte-langtree

INCREDIBLE FREE DOWNLOADS FROM

CLARENDON HOUSE PUBLICATIONS

Alexander Marshall: Seven Illustrated Stories

Victorian time travel, gothic fantasy, superheroes, science fiction, magical realism and literary drama - this mini-collection has it all! And it's free!



Gary Bonn: Six Illustrated Stories

What if everything you've been told is wrong? Outside what we're told is reality are paths no one takes ... because they're yours.

The Clarendon House Short Story Magazine

A bi-monthly e-magazine from Clarendon House Publications, downloadable for free from the Clarendon House website, containing a selection of stories from Clarendon House collections —each story is fully illustrated.



The Sword Sundergost: An Illustrated Companion

A free, lavishly illustrated e-book to give you a glimpse into the wide world of Gandria — from the mighty mountains of the Penning to the deserts of Turgal; from the heroic and tragic Valkurn to the twisted and burned Dare-kor; from ancient and powerful gemstones to the Sword Sundergost itself, herein are many windows into the imagination of Alexander Marshall.

The 'Laws' of Spamming

Are you putting out post after post on social media about your book, hoping that someone will buy it?

Have you realised yet that this approach doesn't work?

Don't do it!

Instead: • Find your ideal readers • Learn about the Two Kinds of People • Discover How Money Works • Build Up Affinity with Potential Readers



Your Biggest Challenge as a Writer — and What You Can Do About It

Haunted by your twin enemies, Lack of Time and Procrastination? This 25,000 word e-book shows you the pathway to freedom as a writer.

How to Blog Every Day Possibly Forever

So you'd like to be able to **generate volume blog content** so that you can create a new blog post **every day of the year** — including weekends and holidays? Creating a daily blog has **tremendous spin-off benefits** that you probably haven't thought of.



...and more! All totally free, no email address required:
www.clarendonhousebooks.com/free-items

CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR



CARMEN BACA

CUENTOS DEL CAÑÓN

Journey to a world that is both deeply human and strangely phantasmagorical...



Viajes con Fantasmas

La Quinceañera



www.clarendonhousebooks.com/carmen-baca

What if everything you've been told is wrong?



GARY BONN



COLLECTED WRITINGS

Gary Bonn has lived all his life as an artist, rebel and writer, on the margin of life, and is the author of over 500 short stories covering a variety of genres. He's also written books, self-published and otherwise. His writing is a crusade, words are his lance. Gary lives in the UK with his wife and family.



www.clarendonhousebooks.com/gary-bonn

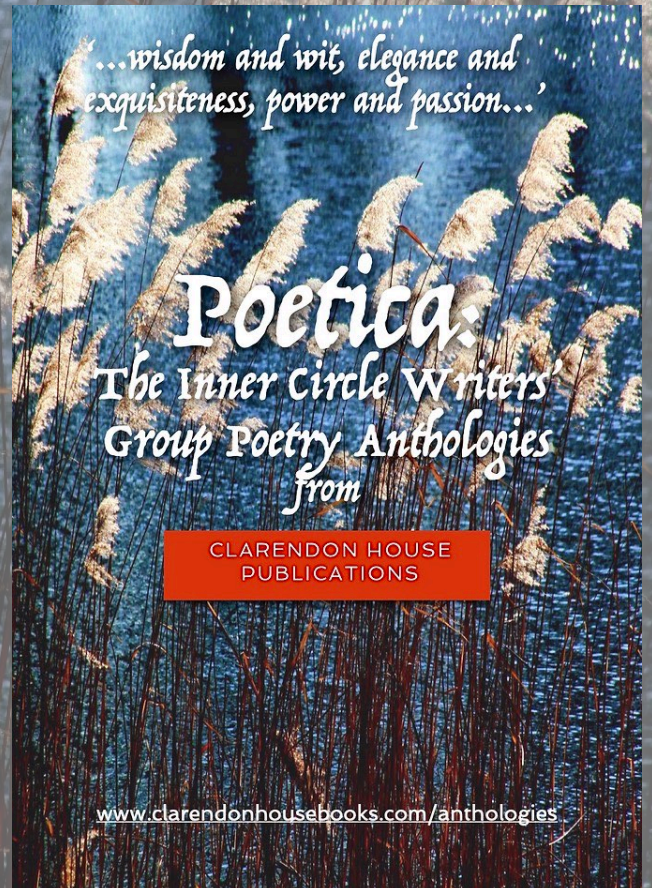
CLARENDON HOUSE
PUBLICATIONS

The

Poetica

anthologies

*Poetry should surprise
by a fine excess and not
by singularity—it should
strike the reader as a
wording of his own
highest thoughts, and
appear almost a
remembrance.
— John Keats*



For a complete guide to the Poetica anthologies,
including new submission guidelines,
please download this free guide at
www.clarendonhousebooks.com/submissions

CLARENDON HOUSE
PUBLICATIONS

GALAXY ANTHOLOGIES

VISIT ANOTHER
GALAXY
TODAY

GALAXY

INNER CIRCLE
WRITERS' GROUP
SCIENCE FICTION
AND FANTASY
ANTHOLOGIES
FROM

CLARENDON HOUSE
PUBLICATIONS

www.clarendonhousebooks.com/anthologies

For a complete guide to the Galaxy anthologies,
including new submission guidelines,
please download this free guide at
www.clarendonhousebooks.com/submissions



Jughead

by

Sharon Frame Gay

"He ain't the best lookin' horse around," Old Mike said. He gestured towards the sorrel gelding in the corral. "Hell, he ain't even the second best lookin' horse around. Tell you what, Jess, I'll give you a deal. Thirty bucks and he's yours. I'll even throw in an old saddle I have, so you can ride out of here in style. If you think you can ride him. He's got a fiery eye for a jughead, and he ain't too shy to buck you from here to kingdom come. So, take it or leave it."

It seemed like Old Mike was finished talking. He shifted a wad of tobacco in his cheek and peered at me out of the corner of his eye. Then let loose with a stream of juice and cleared his throat.

I glanced over at the gelding.

Mike was right about the horse. His head was heavy and square, with no delicate features. Even his eyes looked windswept and tired. He had a drab sorrel coat, fringed by a mane that hung in wisps about his neck. A large white blaze began at his muzzle, then shot skyward like a lightning strike into his bony forehead. His tail was a beauty, though. It almost touched the ground and looked like flaxen swirls in the September breeze. The horse wore clods of dried dirt on his fetlocks and haunches. He hadn't been curried in a long time. His hooves could use a good trim, too.

The sorrel's back was straight, though, and there was a breadth to his chest that looked almost mighty, until he turned that massive head towards me and blew air through his nostrils. To say he was ugly would be a kindness.

"I'll take him," I heard myself say. Thirty dollars was a lot for a horse like this, but I

figured he'd be a hard worker. If nothin' else, he'd work out of gratitude, because I couldn't imagine anyone else wanting him.

Mike nodded and ambled over to the barn. A few minutes later, he came out with a saddle so worn, I wondered if the cinch would last long enough for the ride home. I dug through my pocket and handed over thirty dollars, then took the saddle and set it over the fence railing. Hell, there wasn't even a blanket to go under it. A frayed bridle draped over the horn. I picked it up and walked into the corral.

The gelding lowered his head and eyed me with suspicion. I can't blame him. Here I was, just twenty-two years old, trying to bust sod in the wilds of Nebraska. The horse probably figured I was not a man of substance, and he was right. Almost every penny I had went into buying a hundred acres in the middle of nowhere. It was my dream to work the land, live out here away from the cities where the air was clean, and eventually attract a wife and start a family.

The horse stood patiently while I looped the bridle over his head. He took the bit without a head toss, his yellowed teeth fitting over the metal in a practiced manner.

I lifted the saddle over his back. Again, there was no roll of eyes or swish of the tail. He allowed me to tighten the cinch and adjust the stirrups.

We walked out of the corral, and I tightened the cinch one more time. I put my foot in the stirrup, then swung my other leg over his back.

I barely hit the saddle before I hit the ground. My leg bounced off a large rock and stung.



That old jughead bucked so hard the earth shook. Then he took off down the road like the Devil was after him, crow-hopping like a jubilant wind across the Nebraska plains.

Mike's head worked its way around the barn door, then ducked back in. I swear I heard him chortle.

Afternoon was rolling in, and now I had to spend the rest of the day searching for that damned horse. I started off in the same direction Jughead flew a few minutes ago, my leg and self-esteem bruised and angry.

I wasn't too far down the road when I saw him grazing in an open meadow, tearing out sweet grass in energetic yanks, and not paying attention to much else.

He was easy enough to capture. I was furious and walked right up to him in angry strides. I think somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew he'd gone too far. He turned his ponderous head towards me with disinterested eyes and let me grab the bridle under his jaw. I looped the reins over my arm and we walked away. I wasn't about to get back up on him yet. He was tricky, I figured, but once we got home and into my corral, I'd work with him, make it all right again. After that, he'd learn to pull the small plow I had in the barn. He might work best that way. Maybe someday I'd buy another horse for saddle ridin', but for now he'd have to do.

It was a long walk home, and we wouldn't get there until deep in darkness. The path across

the plains was narrow. The breeze bent the prairie grass into undulating waves that danced in the mind's eye.

Every once in a while, I stopped and let Jughead snatch at his dinner, his tail twitching in a rhythmic way as he ate. Tired, I longed to mount up and ride home, but I remembered how quickly he'd bucked me off, and didn't want to spend more time chasing him past the setting sun. There were about four hours of daylight left, and hopefully we'd make good time walking.

There was a movement out of the corner of my eye. I figured it was the wind again, but this seemed deeper, richer, as though it was an extra layer beneath the sky and horizon.

I stopped and peered out across the prairie to a solitary tree standing in a field in the distance. Then I saw movement again. This time, there was no mistaking it. Something was crawling through the grass, weaving in and out of the afternoon sunlight.

Squinting my eyes, I barely had enough time to figure out it was a person when three Indians popped up over a hill as though they had been hovering nearby like hummingbirds. There they were, bearing down at a fast pace.

I knew right away they were Lakota. There was nothing welcoming about them at all. They thundered towards us, raising their spears and whooping.



Jughead surveyed the scene with interest. He even raised his muzzle and nickered, as though he wanted to get acquainted.

There was no time to figure out what I needed to do. I just slapped myself in the saddle and drove my spurs deep into his sides. Jughead took off like a bat out of hell, but straight towards the hostiles, at a speed that belied the looks of him.

Then he came to a sliding halt as though he realized he'd made a mistake. He blew out heavy through his nostrils and heaved his chest, then pivoted so fast I almost lost my seat.

We took off in the opposite direction, but the Indians were closer now, shrieking like a coyote might when calling the moon in for the night. I hunched over Jughead's neck, shoulders raised, bracing for an arrow in my back. One flew by like an angry hornet and Jughead put a bit more speed in his step. I hung on like a burr and prayed there were no prairie dog holes in the meadow, because then there'd be no help for us at all.

Panicking, I felt for my old pistol digging into my belly, the holster rising with the bile in my throat as we galloped. I had some bullets, but not enough to fend off the braves. They sensed victory, their cries more jubilant as they rode closer. Then, with the lackluster performance of a loser who gives up, Jughead slowed beneath me. I raked him again and again with my spurs, but he only snorted and shook his head, slowing to an easy lope.

We were headin' straight towards a river. It looked like a thick brown snake cutting through the prairie, the steep bank a good twenty feet high. It might mean certain death to try to reach the river, but why not take a chance tumbling down the cliff instead of being scalped? Maybe we could make it, but it was doubtful. I tapped my spurs and leaned back to take my weight off his shoulders.

Jughead gathered his powerful haunches, but instead of scrambling down the bank, he simply decided to fly. For a second, it was like nothing I had ever felt before. Man and horse, poised in the air like some sort of God who came down from the stars, just to dance around a little with gravity.

Then we hit the water so hard my head snapped back and I bit through my tongue. I kept my seat, even though the river covered all but Jughead's neck, and polished the saddle until it was like riding a slick fish. Frantic, I grabbed the horn as the swirling eddies washed us downstream. Old Jughead tried to swim, his hooves touching a wayward boulder from time to time, then veering off and going back into the frothing current.

I dared to look behind. The Indians were picking their way down the steep incline, and I smirked. At least we hadn't been as dainty as they were. Their ponies snorted and stumbled. A small avalanche of rocks and dirt tumbled into the water. The Lakota turned and rode back up to solid ground.





I breathed a sigh of relief. They gave up. I even let out a little war whoop myself. Only, at second glance, I saw they weren't quitting yet. They raced along the top of the cliff and loosed a hail of arrows at us like we were ducks in a pond. Jughead veered sideways and snorted. An arrow lodged itself in his side. Blood poured out in a thick stream. He tossed his head and swallowed some of the river.

Just then, the cinch broke. It slapped upwards and hit me in the cheek. The saddle slowly turned sideways, driving me halfway into the water. I had enough wits about me to free my feet from the stirrups, just as it floated right out from under me, and into our wake.

I slid off right behind it. The water was so cold I thought it might stop my heart. Grasping, I caught the end of Jughead's tail and hung on for dear life. Now arrows were flying all around us.

Jughead turned towards the opposite shore and swam out of the current. His mighty chest bellowed and his legs pumped like pistons on an engine. His hooves touched the sandy bottom below, and he shot straight out of the water,

dragging me like a bag of flour. Then he shook me off, climbed the bank and ran away, leaving me alone among the rocks and logs that littered the wet ground.

I hauled myself up the cliff, grasping at roots and shrubs, using my last bit of strength to scale the muddy bank and on to a ledge of grass. I crouched behind a bush and looked across the water.

The Indians stopped on the other side of the river, talking with each other. Then they nudged their ponies down the bank and plunged into the water.

Their horses had other ideas. Shocked by the coldness and the swirling eddies, they lost their footing and bobbed in the rushing current in no direction. But, just like Jughead, they found footing on a shallow bar, and turned towards me.

I had to run. My sodden boots were heavy as anvils. The wind blew through my soaked clothes, lifting my tattered shirt as though it wanted to fly. It wouldn't be long before they'd catch up to me. I figured all I could do was try to find a little shelter and stand my ground.

Reaching down, my hand slid along an empty holster. The pistol had fallen out into the river. All I had now was a knife strapped around my thigh in a leather pouch. I knew if the Indians got close enough for that type of combat, I'd lose my life in the space between ragged breaths.

Just then, old Jughead came galloping back, his square head bobbing up and down with each thundering hoof beat. His massive chest expanded as he let out a boisterous whinny, as though he wanted to make sure the Lakota knew exactly where we were.

Jughead halted in a cloud of dust and turned sideways between the Indians and me, heaving. The arrow was still poking out of his side. Blood dripped and pooled on to the ground.

He took another arrow, then another, into his hide, flinching and snorting as he stood there.

Gasping, I used the last of my energy to pull myself up on to his bare back. He took off like a shot. Jughead galloped low to the ground, his head level with his shoulders. There was little to hold on to but his mane, and I dug into his neck like a tick.

An arrow struck my rib. I have to tell you, I didn't even feel the pain, I was so filled with fear.

Then, like a waking nightmare, Jughead pivoted and ran straight towards them again. We got close enough for me to see the paint on their

faces, then he turned so fast I barely held on and ran parallel to the river.

I didn't have time to say a prayer when he flew off the cliff and back into the water. This time when we landed, he let out a huff and started swimming like demons were after him, and they were. We reached the opposite shore and Jughead lurched back up the bank. His labored breathing echoed in the wind like a prairie storm cutting across the fields.

The Indians shook their spears at us, but didn't bother to cross again.

I couldn't breathe. There was no relief, I feared. We might run right into another pack of those Lakota, and then all this effort would be for nothing.

After a mile or two, Jughead found the trail, and we trotted down the path as slow as going to church. I looked over my shoulder and there was nothing behind us but the wind.

He hung his massive head and breathed in great gulps. I peered around, then slid off. Three arrows pierced his hide. The one in his side was deeply embedded. It had likely stabbed his guts. I didn't want to hurt him further, trying to dig it out. I plucked the other two out of Jughead, then tried to reach the one in my rib. After a painful pull, it came out in my hand and I tossed it on the ground. A moment later, I was bent over with searing pain as blood ran down my side and into my pants.

Jughead seemed to sense we were out of danger. He lowered his muzzle to my neck and the warmth of his breath was oddly comforting.

Night fell, and still we plodded through the prairie, wondering if those damned Lakota were hiding behind each tree or knoll. But the only sounds I heard were a few coyotes on a plateau, calling for their mates. Stars lit the sky so bright I could see Jughead's face clear as day.

Trembling, I reached out and rubbed his neck. The horse saved my life. Here I was, a young man who came out west from Ohio to carve out a life. So far, Nebraska hadn't treated me the way I'd hoped. Guess I never figured the land might try to shake me off of it. I missed my family back home. I missed the warmth of friendship and the delicate touch of a woman. Out here on the prairie, a person could go mad, listening to the sound of their own silence and the rustling in the grass. Sometimes the sky overhead looked so vast, and the prairie so wide, I wondered if I might get swallowed up by the hungry ground itself and never be heard from again.



Ahead in the darkness was a deeper shadow. I knew it was a cottonwood tree on my property, steadfast in the night, to welcome us home from certain death.

Jughead faltered and snorted next to me. He turned his great, square face into mine, and I swear he looked right into my soul as he went down like thunder. Blood trickled out of his nose. He lay on his side, ribs heaving in pain, and let out a sigh.

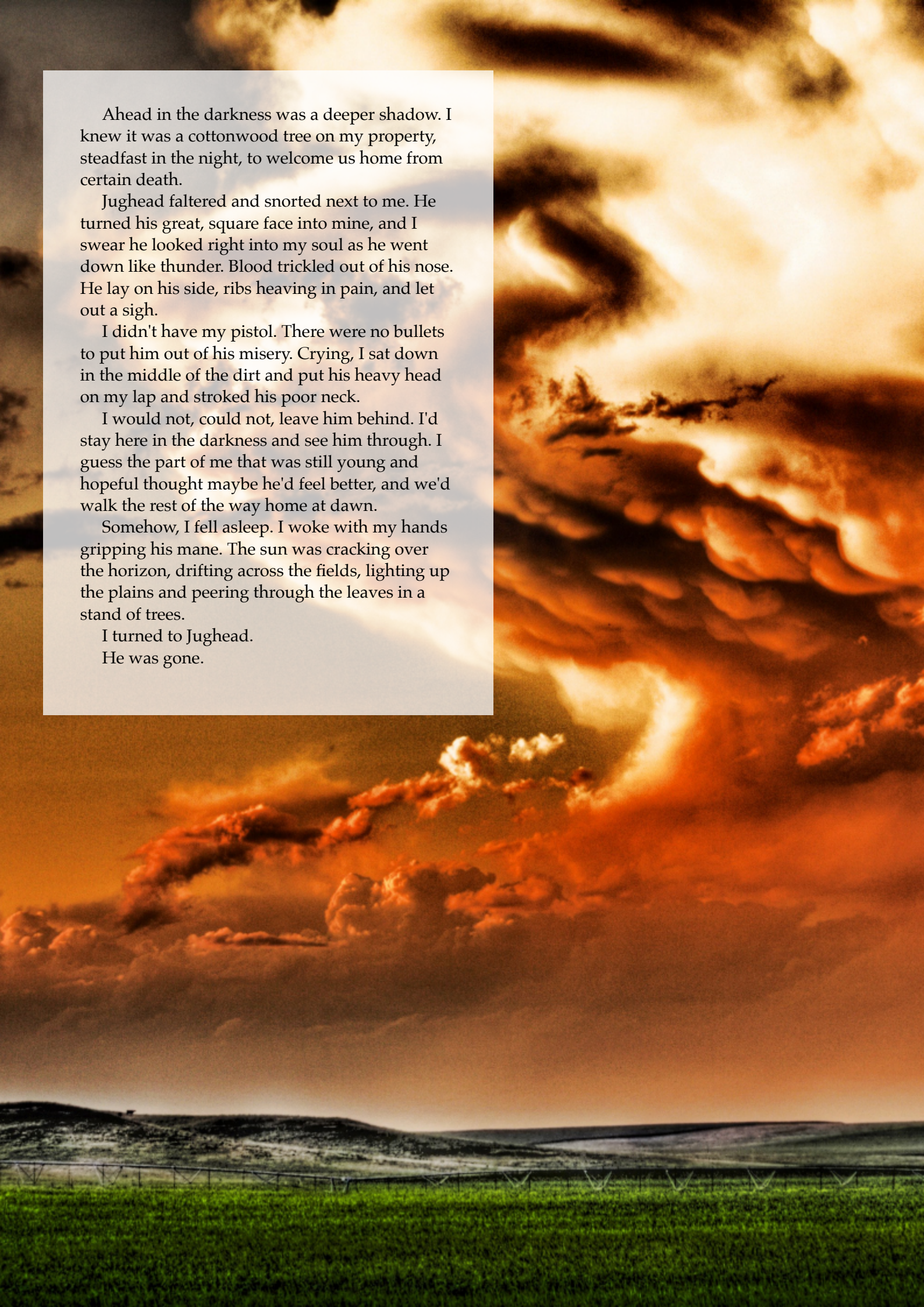
I didn't have my pistol. There were no bullets to put him out of his misery. Crying, I sat down in the middle of the dirt and put his heavy head on my lap and stroked his poor neck.

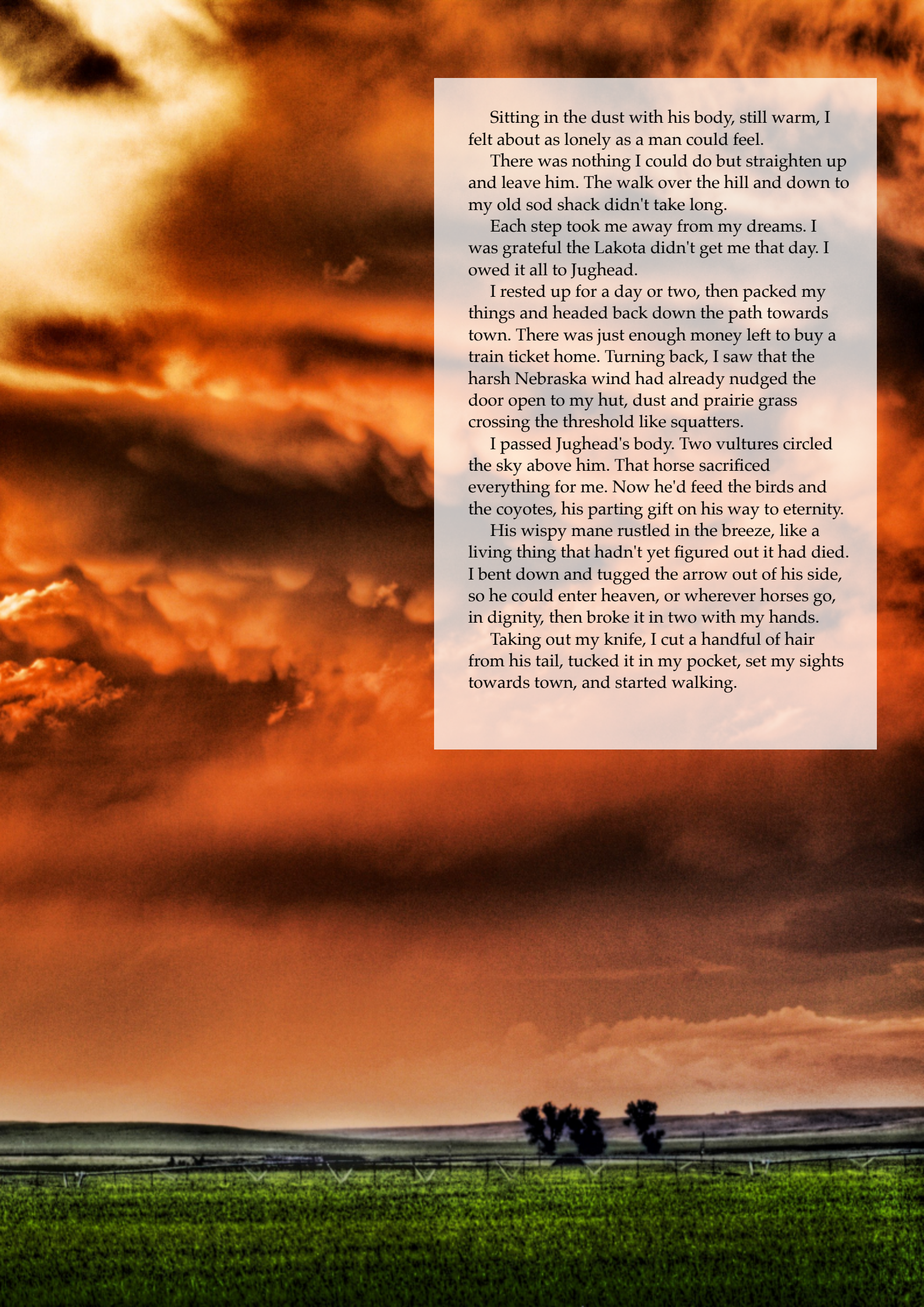
I would not, could not, leave him behind. I'd stay here in the darkness and see him through. I guess the part of me that was still young and hopeful thought maybe he'd feel better, and we'd walk the rest of the way home at dawn.

Somehow, I fell asleep. I woke with my hands gripping his mane. The sun was cracking over the horizon, drifting across the fields, lighting up the plains and peering through the leaves in a stand of trees.

I turned to Jughead.

He was gone.





Sitting in the dust with his body, still warm, I felt about as lonely as a man could feel.

There was nothing I could do but straighten up and leave him. The walk over the hill and down to my old sod shack didn't take long.

Each step took me away from my dreams. I was grateful the Lakota didn't get me that day. I owed it all to Jughead.

I rested up for a day or two, then packed my things and headed back down the path towards town. There was just enough money left to buy a train ticket home. Turning back, I saw that the harsh Nebraska wind had already nudged the door open to my hut, dust and prairie grass crossing the threshold like squatters.

I passed Jughead's body. Two vultures circled the sky above him. That horse sacrificed everything for me. Now he'd feed the birds and the coyotes, his parting gift on his way to eternity.

His wispy mane rustled in the breeze, like a living thing that hadn't yet figured out it had died. I bent down and tugged the arrow out of his side, so he could enter heaven, or wherever horses go, in dignity, then broke it in two with my hands.

Taking out my knife, I cut a handful of hair from his tail, tucked it in my pocket, set my sights towards town, and started walking.

CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR SHARON FRAME GAY



Award winning author Sharon Frame Gay grew up a child of the highway, playing by the side of the road.

Her westerns have been internationally published in anthologies and magazines , including Saddlebag Dispatches, The Writing District, Rope and Wire, Fiction On The Web, Five Star Publishing, Frontier Tales, Owl Hollow Press, Zimbell House, Clarendon House, New Reader Magazine, and others.

The short story "North Star" won a Will Rogers Medallion for Excellence in Western Writing in 2021. "The Actress" won Publication of the Year for Spillwords in 2022. Other westerns have been nominated for the Peacemaker Award and the Pushcart Prize.

www.clarendonhousebooks.com/sharonframegay

CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

R. A. GOLI



UNFETTERED:

A SHORT STORY COLLECTION

'A bird succubus that comes in a storm; a bed-and-breakfast from Hell; secret histories from before fairy tales and myths; an asylum from beyond your darkest nightmares...'



NUN OR NOT?



Gabriella Balcom



Glossary of Slovene Words

Ata -- father; dad

dinar -- early-1900s Slovenian coin

dragi sin -- dear son

Februar -- February

kruh -- bread

Mamica -- mama; mommy

polenta -- porridge

policist -- police

ricet -- thick soup

struklji -- meat- or vegetable-filled dough zganci

-- mush from cornbread or potatoes

3 Februar 1905

"Dragi sin," Marijeta began, but stopped as deep coughs racked her body.

Jakob patted her back. When her coughing subsided, he held a cup of water to her lips.

"Take a sip."

After she drank, she spoke in English instead of their native Slovene. "My heart aches for you. Too many burdens weigh you down."

"Mama, I- "

"My time is limited, so I must speak while I can." Seeing him tighten his lips and shake his head, she knew he rejected the idea of her dying. "From the time I carried you inside me, I knew a great destiny awaited you."

"I know. You've told me before." Dipping a cloth in a basin of cool water, he wrung out the excess and gently wiped her sweaty forehead.

"Not everything." Breathing hurt and she winced. "I loved Stefan. I wanted to be with him more than anything, and I didn't make him wait. Then he left to fight. People spoke harshly to me when they learned I was with child, because I wasn't married. Some said I would burn in hell."

"You didn't become pregnant alone," Jakob's eyes were hard, his voice cold. "I wish I'd been there when they spoke ill of you. Their first words would have been their last."

"I know you would have defended me, dragi. Your father also would have, if he had been here. Some people said I'd chased him, but the opposite was true. They said, 'Let him go. Forget him.' That he was too much a military man to settle down or make a good husband anyway. They insisted it was my duty to marry someone else, but I held out for what I wanted."

"Imagine that." Jakob's eyes twinkled. "Stubbornness doesn't run in our family."

Marijeta laughed, her cheeks creasing into a network of fine wrinkles. "Stefan wanted to be with me as much as I did him, but he also believed he'd make a poor husband. You were born illegitimate, but I knew God would bring your father safely back to me. He returned when the battle ended and I became pregnant again. He married me, acknowledged you as his, and your illegitimacy was removed in the eyes of the church. Some people remained spiteful, but..." She paused. "I didn't say this for sympathy. I need to apologize to you for our choices."

"You and Ata didn't wrong me."

"But we did. After he died, I treated you like an adult and relied on you to help raise your brothers and sisters. And you did, despite being little yourself. Your father didn't have to die. When the war resumed, he could have stayed home. He took advantage of your nature, knowing you'd be here even if he wasn't. Knowing you'd never abandon us like he did."

Jakob's eyes met hers. "Ata wasn't to blame for the war."


"I know, but he would have served even if it hadn't been required."

"The last time I saw him," Jakob said softly, "he went out the door. I ran after him. He stood silhouetted by the sun, but picked me up, and hugged me so tightly I couldn't breathe. Then he said, 'You're the man of the house now,' and to take care of you."

"So he knew he wouldn't return." Marijeta's voice broke. "He didn't warn me."

"Loved ones leaving is always hard on those left behind, Mama, but I would have gone, too." Jakob's voice was soft but firm. "Fighting for our country was right."





Her response was inaudible.

"What did you say?"

"I believe in defending ourselves, but I've missed him all these —"

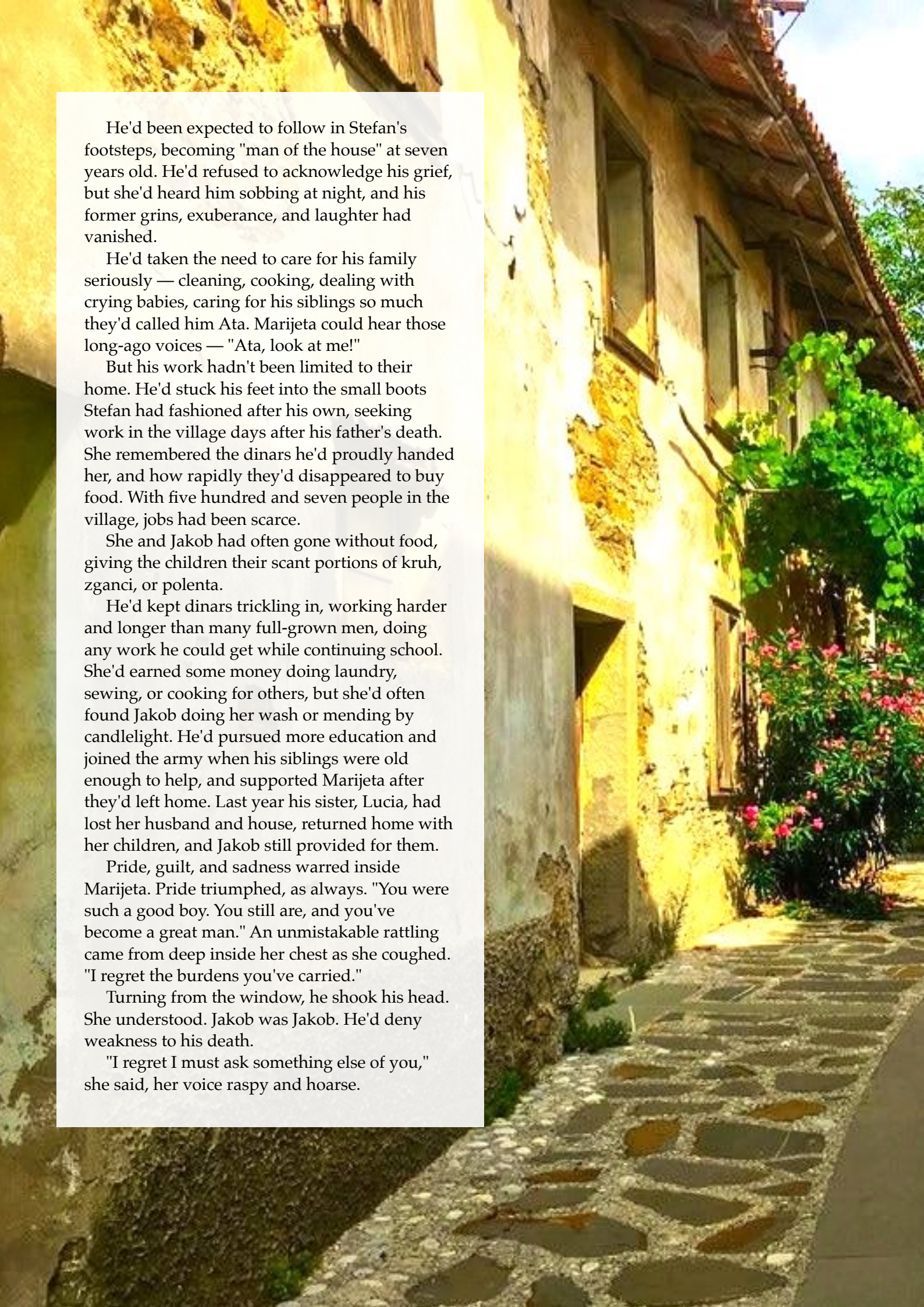
Another coughing fit struck her and she soon gasped for air. When she spoke again, her voice was hoarse. "Stefan was an army man through and through. A gunner like his father, though he held a higher rank. He loved our county. He told me it was the heart beating in his chest, the blood running through his veins. That his blood watered its soil. I knew where his heart lay from the beginning, and I knew he'd always fight." Her son brushed her tears away.

Stefan — the love of her life — had died in the last battle for which he'd left home. In a heartbeat Marijeta had gone from cherished wife to young widow with five small children and a sixth on the way. But Stefan had lived his life with honor and ended it with honor, defending their people and saving lives. He'd received a hero's burial and posthumous medals from Emperor Franz Josef.

"People told me," Marijeta said, "'Be proud of your husband's service. The medals he earned. He was a hero, and you share his good name.' But I would have traded all those medals and more for more time with him."

Jakob gazed out a nearby window, and Marijeta studied him. Standing at attention — chest out, shoulders back — he epitomized a proud soldier. He'd been a Lieutenant-Colonel in the army. Their village, Trnovska Vas, was inhabited by Slovenian people but still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Jakob had served beyond the required time, been promoted, and several medals attested to the kind of man he was — brave and honorable. Chest tight and aching in earnest, Marijeta thought he resembled Stefan.

She desperately longed for more time. She'd already outlived the three years the doctor estimated when he diagnosed her tuberculosis and heart condition. Twelve years had passed since then, but she didn't have the strength to hold on any longer. When she died, Jakob would be all alone — despite already having been alone too long.

A narrow, sunlit alleyway in a village. The buildings are old, with peeling plaster and stone walls. The path is paved with irregular stones. There are some plants and flowers on the right side of the path. The scene is bathed in warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

He'd been expected to follow in Stefan's footsteps, becoming "man of the house" at seven years old. He'd refused to acknowledge his grief, but she'd heard him sobbing at night, and his former grins, exuberance, and laughter had vanished.

He'd taken the need to care for his family seriously — cleaning, cooking, dealing with crying babies, caring for his siblings so much they'd called him Ata. Marijeta could hear those long-ago voices — "Ata, look at me!"

But his work hadn't been limited to their home. He'd stuck his feet into the small boots Stefan had fashioned after his own, seeking work in the village days after his father's death. She remembered the dinars he'd proudly handed her, and how rapidly they'd disappeared to buy food. With five hundred and seven people in the village, jobs had been scarce.

She and Jakob had often gone without food, giving the children their scant portions of kruh, zganci, or polenta.

He'd kept dinars trickling in, working harder and longer than many full-grown men, doing any work he could get while continuing school. She'd earned some money doing laundry, sewing, or cooking for others, but she'd often found Jakob doing her wash or mending by candlelight. He'd pursued more education and joined the army when his siblings were old enough to help, and supported Marijeta after they'd left home. Last year his sister, Lucia, had lost her husband and house, returned home with her children, and Jakob still provided for them.

Pride, guilt, and sadness warred inside Marijeta. Pride triumphed, as always. "You were such a good boy. You still are, and you've become a great man." An unmistakable rattling came from deep inside her chest as she coughed. "I regret the burdens you've carried."

Turning from the window, he shook his head. She understood. Jakob was Jakob. He'd deny weakness to his death.

"I regret I must ask something else of you," she said, her voice raspy and hoarse.



Jakob relaxed his rigid stance and knelt at his mother's bedside, taking her trembling hands in his. Wrinkled and spotted with age, her veins stood out from years of labor. She'd deteriorated and regained her strength repeatedly, but not this time. He studied her deeply-lined face. Considered the most beautiful woman in Trnovka once, she'd aged beyond her sixty-four years but remained beautiful to him. She was the only true love he'd ever known. She'd never let him down. Always been proud. He could lose her any moment, so how could he deny her anything?

"Yes, Mamica. Anything."

Deep hacking robbed her of breath, and she pressed a hand to her chest. He helped her up, patted her back gently, and helped her drink. When she breathed easier, he relaxed but stiffened as he listened. His lips and jaw tightened ominously.

If the men formerly under his command had been there, they would've known to be very careful what they did next.

Marijeta finished speaking, sagged, and her head fell to the side.

Jakob gasped. A soundless scream echoed in his mind. Laying fingers against her throat, he checked for life the same way he'd done on the battlefield. Feeling a pulse, he released his breath. She'd dozed off. Carefully easing onto the bed beside her, he cradled her to his chest and kissed her grey hair.

Lucia walked into the room and surveyed the two sleepers — Mama and Jakob, who'd always be "Ata" in her thoughts.

Asleep, he looked younger, life's cares not weighing him down as heavily. She wondered when he'd last slept. Going for water during the night, she'd found him toiling over ledgers. She'd never met a harder worker or more determined man, but if he didn't take care of himself... Frowning, she couldn't bear the thought of losing him. Mama's illness was bad enough.

Glancing at Jakob again, she froze. His eyes — brown, green, and gold like Mama's but shuttered — studied her silently, and he eased off the bed. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to wake you." He needed rest. If anything happened to Ata...

"You should rest." Following him, she watched him sit at the kitchen table and reach for ledgers. "I'll bring you ricet and struklji." He waved her off with his customary "later, I'm-busy" hand, but she persisted. "Dragi, you must eat. I insist." As his irritated eyes met hers, she quailed inside but stood her ground. "Mama will worry if you don't eat." Lucia wasn't called "canny" for nothing.

He pinned her with knowing eyes. "Fine, but just a little." She hugged him. Sighing, he hugged her back.

Eight days later, Jakob strode toward the front steps of the Ursuline Convent in Ljubljana, briefly studying the six thick columns in the front, and the triangle-shaped gable above with its Gothic arches. The Roman Catholic convent and school had been finished in 1726, remaining open during both World Wars. Stepping inside, he shot wary glances right and left. He had no desire to be here, but a promise was a promise, and he'd never break one to Mamica. He felt as hollow now as when he'd watched her casket being lowered into the cold ground. Remembering she'd always felt chilled in winter, he'd refused to let her casket be closed until he'd wrapped her favorite shawl around her shoulders. She'd knitted both it and the handkerchief in his pocket.

He hadn't come to grips with her death, much less had time to think. He'd been her heir and executor. Tradition dictated the home passed to the eldest male, but she'd put her approval in writing at the solicitor's office, along with saying that Georg — her third son — wasn't allowed in the home. He had a drinking problem, wasted his way through everything he got his hands on, and she hadn't wanted him ransacking her home for things to sell.





Jakob had paid Mama's bills and purchased two more cows, two pigs, and five chickens for Lucia, who sold milk, butter, and eggs for extra money. The animals were due — he pulled his gold pocketwatch from his waistcoat pocket and consulted it — in an hour. The watch had been his father's. Jakob frowned. He'd never had much use for God or religion, but Mama had been a devout Catholic. If she'd been correct in her beliefs, she was with Ata now. For her sake — for both of their sakes — Jakob hoped she'd been right.

Forcing his mind away from the dead, Jakob recalled other things he'd done — bought sufficient coal to get Lucia and her children through the winter, then ordered extra since elderly neighbors Josef and Helena Tovar always ran short; arranged for repairs to Mama's roof, and the elderly Milosevics' since theirs leaked. Mama's hadn't, but he'd noticed worn spots when he'd inspected it. He'd paid for a room to be added on, too. Leo, Georg's oldest boy, had been having trouble with his father and might need a place to stay. In addition, Jakob had promised his sister Maria he'd deal with the rich man pursuing Neza, her fourteen-year-old daughter. Maria's husband remained sick from a recent illness, and they feared angering the other man. Jakob had no such qualms.

He'd paid Mama's customary tithe to Saint Wolfgang, the parish church, and a donation toward repairs from a past bombing. The parish couldn't afford them. He'd visited the businesses his mother frequented, clarifying Lucia — not Georg — was in charge. His actions might've been deemed unusual, but he knew Lucia was frugal like him and Mama, and could be counted on to manage finances wisely.

Overall, everything he'd done had taken longer than expected, but he'd eventually moved on to his next order of business — the convent.

Waiting now for his presence to be acknowledged, Jakob read the Ursuline Creed from a wall plaque. "Every call from God ... an invitation to set foot on a journey ... last a lifetime..." Another script addressed the length of time involved in becoming a nun — two years for the postulancy, two for the novitiate, and five for the temporary vows.

He impatiently tapped his left foot and counted in Slovene, "Ena, dva, tri, stiri..." in French, "Un, deux, trois, quatre-." He switched to German. "Eins, zwei, drei, vier..." then Italian, "Uno, due, tre, quattro —."

Footsteps sounded. A nun approached in the traditional black habit worn by those who'd taken their final vows, wimple tight around her face, and hooded veil falling down her shoulders. "Mr. Jakob Kovac?"

"Doctor." He'd double-majored in mathematics and business.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Kovac. Mother Superior is ready, if you'll follow me —"

"Of course." He regretted his brittle tone, but wouldn't have come if he could have avoided it.


Mother Superior Mary Magdalena stood for her visitor. A military hero deserved respect. A good man did as well, and he was both. He managed a bank in Maribor and was rumored to be on a first name basis with Emperor Franz Joseph.

She had no desire to offend him, although he didn't have a reputation for vindictiveness. He was known for having a mind like a steel trap and dealing with subordinates decisively, sometimes harshly.

He was taller than she was, about six feet, with a wide forehead below short, wavy brown hair. Intelligent brows ridged over brown eyes, which were sharp despite the shadowing underneath hinting at sleeplessness. High cheekbones. A firm mouth which might be kind if softened, but she had no sense that was likely to occur. His face was serious — cold in its remoteness. He could have been a marble statue for all the animation she saw there.

"Please be seated, Dr. Kovac," she said. "You sent a telegram a week ago, saying you intended to take a wife, correct?"



A scenic landscape featuring a river in the foreground, a forested valley, and mountains in the background. The river is calm, reflecting the surrounding greenery and the sky. The mountains are rugged and partially covered in forest. The sky is a clear, pale blue.

His answer was succinct. "Yes."

Jakob's mother had said, "Life can be hard, but it can be good despite hardship. You deserve peace, joy ... a partner who'll cherish you and help shoulder burdens. Please take a wife and have children. I won't live to see them, but I'll imagine them in my remaining time. I don't want you to remain alone." She'd pressed, "Promise me, Jakob," her words conveying fierce love.

Ignoring the sinking feeling in his chest, he'd replied, "I promise, Mamica." She died six hours later.

Revealing her words to Lucia, his sister had said, "Women can look nice outwardly while being ugly inside. Some are ravaging vultures. We need to find you a good woman. Perhaps from church?"

Janez, the oldest after Jakob, had come for the funeral and had offered a different idea. "No. The convent."

"Convent?" Jakob had frowned, drumming his fingers on their table. "Graz has a convent. That's maybe eighty-five kilometers from here."

"No," Janez had said. "I mean the one in Ljubljana."

Guessing Mother Superior was around sixty years old, Jakob waited for her to speak and wondered what his future held. Greatness according to Mama, but she'd voiced uplifting things even while they'd lived in squalor, and she'd had strong faith in God. On the other hand, she'd never lied. She'd only spoken what she'd truly believed. Knowing that, his heart skipped a beat. A wife? For him? A son to carry on his name?

Mother Superior spoke. "Some women choose their direction as young girls, wishing to serve God. A life of contemplation appeals to others. Some have limited options or reject having their own families for various reasons. As I'm sure you realize, women come from a variety of backgrounds. Wealth. Poverty." Lifting a cup from her desk, she glanced to her right.

Jakob flinched when a melodic, female voice sounded from that direction, "Mother Superior, would you like a fresh cup?"

He seldom missed things, but hadn't realized anyone else was in the room.

"Yes, dear, and one for our guest."

"Thank you, but I'm not thirsty," Jakob said, seeing the alcove with bookshelves and a chair to Mother Superior's right.

The nun exiting the room had moved quickly, and he only saw her back, but her voice and walk revealed she was young.

Standing out of respect when she returned, he catalogued her face. Serene. Lovely, with a stubborn cast to her jaw. Cool grey eyes touched his for an instant before looking away. He didn't know why, but her dismissal irked him, and he stepped into her path when she started past, cup in hand. She moved around him smoothly, and a hint of color caught his eye. A small book protruded from her pocket — old with gold lettering. Curious, he plucked it and scanned a page, recognizing Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* in Arabic. A slender hand snatched the book away. Eyebrows rising, his gaze met hers. Her eyes flashed, more blue than grey now.

Recognizing how presumptuous he'd been, he stated, "Pardon me, ma'am. I enjoy reading and —"

"And one should keep one's hands to oneself." Her voice carried a bite, but her face revealed no discomfort at berating him.

He felt like a naughty schoolboy. "You're correct. I apologize."

She surveyed him with eyes which seemed older than nineteen or twenty — his guess at her age.

"I'm Jakob Kovac. What's your name?"

She merely studied him.

Mother Superior said, "This is Sister Aloizija Jakse. She'll be taking her final vows soon."

Excellent at mathematics, Jakob calculated swiftly. Youth went to school until they were fifteen, after which they could do three years of post-secondary school. From what he'd read in the outer vestibule, becoming a nun took nine years. If she came here at fifteen and was twenty now... "You're young to take vows."





Sister Aloizija finally addressed him, "I've been preparing for the last nine years." She must have read his startled expression accurately. "I'm twenty-seven."

Mother Superior volunteered, "Sister Aloizija knew what she wanted to do from a young age and came here after finishing school at fifteen. I urged her to be sure she wanted to devote the rest of her life to God, so she spent three years in college before returning. She excelled at everything." She accepted the cup from the younger nun. "Thank you, dear."

"You're welcome, Mother Superior." Sister Aloizija resumed her former seat.

"Shall we talk about your plans, Dr. Kovac?" Mother Superior asked.

"I was told I need a wife."

"Do you agree?"

"Not really, but I gave my word and I'm ready to proceed."

"Good. Will you take notes, Sister Aloizija?"

"Yes, ma'am," came the quiet reply.

"Dr. Kovac, what do you require in a partner?" Mother Superior asked.

Four eyes considered Jakob. Two were mild, curious and set in an older face. The other two remained cool in a young face. His mind went blank. "Require in a partner?"

"The qualities you're hoping for? Desirable traits or backgrounds, or ones to be avoided?"

He hadn't thought about it. "I don't know what I want."

Sister Aloizija murmured, "She should be alive, I presume?"

Jakob's eyes widened.

Mother Superior chuckled. "You'll have to excuse my protégé, Dr. Kovac. She's been closeted with me for hours and probably needs a break."

He glanced at Sister Aloizija. Was that humor in her voice? Sarcasm?

"Alive, hmm?"

Her cheeks flushed, but her voice was respectful. "I beg your pardon. What I said was uncalled for."

Struck by the absurdity of specifying a living female rather than a dead one, he felt his lips twitch, then shocked himself by laughing aloud — rusty sounds but humor nonetheless.

"Certainly a living woman would be preferable."

Sister Aloizija's face lit up as though with an inward fire. Jakob had thought she was lovely unsmiling, but saw he'd been wrong. She was beautiful. Strangely, the jest had eased his tension and unlocked a tightly-secured area inside him. He said, "I'm a bit thirsty after all."

"Sister Aloizija," Mother Superior directed, "would you get Dr. Kovac a cup?"

"Jakob," he corrected. As the younger woman left, he thought her fluid movements similar to those of someone who'd studied self-defense. No doubt that was from studying dance and deportment. Curious about someone with her looks choosing to become a nun, he asked, "She doesn't seek marriage?"

"Many men have offered, but no."

"I'd never thought of marrying, much less what I'd seek in a wife."

"I'll help you. I also want to say I'm sorry for your loss."

Lips tightening, he said nothing.

"When Sister Aloizija returns with our tea, we'll discuss ideas."

"Tea?" He thought he'd disguised his distaste, but a hint must have shown.

"Sister Aloizija can have coffee brewed instead."

"That's not necessary."

A tap on the door heralded Sister Aloizija holding a cup of tea and saucer with sugar cubes, which she placed in front of him. "I don't know how you take yours, but some people find this type bitter."

Noticing her short fingernails and what looked like a faint scar on her right hand, he concluded she had working hands, not pampered ones. "I usually drink coffee, but I appreciate this."

She nodded, sat down, and she and Mother Superior eyed him.





He delayed by taking a slow sip of tea.

"All right," Mother Superior stated. "We can discuss what you see as desirable traits, or I can choose."

"I don't mind input, but I'll decide." His words carried a sharp finality. He'd gotten used to making life-and-death decisions in the army. Certainly, he disliked the idea of anyone making decisions for him. Thinking about working hands, he remembered Mama's had been battered but strong, prominently veined and wrinkled. "She must be willing to work hard. Not lazy or seeking to be served. I doubt my wife would need to clean out stables but..." He had the impression Sister Aloizija had written more than he'd said. "What did you write?"

"No one lazy or waiting to be served all the time," she recited. "Willing to work hard. Probably won't muck out stables, but should be willing to if necessary." She handed him her paper.

Jakob read the elegant, flowing script. "Your penmanship is excellent."

"Thank you."

Mother Superior glowed. "She frequently goes to help people with writing or copying documents."

His eyebrows rose. "She can leave the convent?"

"Yes, she can," Sister Aloizija interjected. "I'm not a prisoner." Taken aback by the heat in her eyes, he barely heard Mother Superior's explanation of nuns serving the community at times. He had an idea.

"Sister Aloizija, have you ever kept books?"

"Records of money coming in and out?" she questioned.

"Exactly."

"Yes. Why?"

"I'll explain in a moment." He asked Mother Superior, "Does she ever work outside Ljubljana?"

"Sometimes she travels, then returns after completing tasks."

"I could use some help in a couple of days when this wife matter is resolved. One of my clerks writes poorly. Another has shaky hands. I need some ledgers recopied for my bank in Maribor. I've been away from there handling responsibilities but will return soon."

Mother Superior asked Sister Aloizija softly, "Did he say two days?"

"Yes." Sister Aloizija quoted, "In a couple days when this wife matter is resolved."

"Is something wrong?" Jakob asked.

"Two days aren't sufficient," Mother Superior said.

"Really? I have important duties to —"

"Marrying means spending the rest of your life with someone," Sister Aloizija said, voice sharp. "Do you plan to toss a pebble into a crowd and pick whichever woman it hits?"

"No." He frowned at her.

"Shall we line up every female in town, so you can choose one randomly?" She frowned back.

"Of course not!" he snapped. "I don't want just anyone. She should be a good person. Want children. Be kind. Intelligent. A hard worker. Able to cook. Love our country. She should..." Realizing what he was saying, he stopped short. Mama used to say, "The best things take time." Finding quality was very important and would take time. He spoke quietly to Sister Aloizija, "I see your point."

Mother Superior agreed. "Time will be required to choose someone you like and with whom you're compatible. I also formed the impression you wanted Sister Aloizija to help you."

"Yes. Can she?"

"Do you plan to ask me?" Sister Aloizija's voice carried a bite again.

Jakob understood pride was one of his faults and hated admitting errors. However, he knew he'd given offense. He sympathized, since he preferred to make his own decisions, too. "I apologize, Sister Aloizija, for not asking you directly." He extended his right hand for a handshake. "I meant no disrespect."





She looked warily from it to his eyes, then reached for his hand. "All right. Yes, I'm willing to help you."

Noticing another scar on her slim hand, he recalled times he'd administered punishment to men under his command who'd dishonored their uniforms and country, disobeyed orders, or endangered others. Sometimes, he'd squeezed their hands to the point of bleeding or breaking bones. Blood made him think of Mama, who'd coughed it up frequently before dying. He recalled her saying he deserved someone special. Heart aching for her, he felt eyes and frowns directed at him. Realizing he hadn't let go of Sister Aloizija's hand, he squeezed gently, felt her firm squeeze in return, and released it.

He felt light-headed, and his heartrate increased. His stomach hurt, and he figured he needed to eat. In addition, he wondered if his sister's animals had been delivered and decided to send a quick telegram. "My mind wandered, and I apologize. If you don't mind, I need to leave and take care of some things. Could we continue another time?"

Before he left, an appointment was set for 2:00 PM the following day.

After Dr. Kovac left, Mother Superior commented, "Stern and serious. That's how he was described to me. That's accurate, but I think he has hidden depths. What do you think?"

Aloizija considered how to respond. "He's not what I expected."

"You need to eat, dear. You look pale. I wasn't hungry at lunchtime but you didn't have to go without."

"I'll get something now, Mother Superior." Walking toward the kitchens, Aloizija flexed her right hand. It tingled. She wasn't used to touching men.

At 12:30 PM the next day, Jakob stepped into the convent and froze. Children and an agile nun darted around the foyer.

Smiling at their merriment, he remembered years ago when his siblings were little. He was shocked to realize he missed the laughter and light-heartedness.

"Time to calm down, children. Your parents will arrive soon," the nun said. Jakob realized it was Sister Aloizija.

"But I want to play," a boy protested.

"Just for a few minutes," she said.

Jakob watched them slide stones across the floor, seeing who could get theirs closest to the wall. Blue-grey eyes took in his presence when he walked over. A little girl stared up at him, eyes damp. "I can't do it." He picked her up, expertly balancing her on his right hip.

"Of course you can. Don't ever say can't. You can do anything you want."

"Really?" Her eyes widened.

"Really," he promised, setting her down. "Try again."

After the children had been returned to their parents, Sister Aloizija commented, "You're good with children," as she gathered rocks off the floor.

"I have five brothers and sisters. I'm the oldest."

"So you helped a lot. I'm the oldest, too. There were five of us."

He thought she was about to walk away.

"My father died when I was little, and I lost interest in being a child. I had to grow up."

Normally a very private person, he was surprised he'd shared anything.

She studied him. "My parents are alive, but I stopped feeling like a child when I was young."

"What happened?" He sat beside her, disregarding his suit.

"I don't like talking about it." Her voice was flat. "But I have a feeling I should."

"Feeling?"

"A prompting. Do you believe in God? No, your eyes say you don't."

"It's not so much not believing as wondering. If God exists, where was he during the hard times? Why would he take my father and leave Mama to struggle?"

"God is real." Her voice rang with certainty. Sureness blazed in her eyes. "He's always there, even if we don't feel him. I know it as surely as I know who I am, and things happen for a reason."





"I see you believe." He changed the subject. "Will you tell me what happened? Please?"

She sighed. "Soldiers attacked villages not far from ours. They killed many. Some women and children were — savaged."

"Were you hurt?" He already knew this woman was different. The thought of her being harmed brought fury rushing through him.

"No, but Ata knew they might attack us, and began teaching me to defend myself. To fight and use a knife."

"How old were you?" His heart twinged.

"Six, I think."

Again, he thought she was about to go. "Please tell me more."

"I was responsible for getting my brothers and sisters to safety if anything happened to my parents. Taking them to the hiding place Ata prepared under our house. Leading them to the forest. Getting them up a tree if no other options remained. If I couldn't get them away safely, I was to have my brother take them while I stayed and fought — to give them time to get away."

"The soldiers came, didn't they?" He'd seen pain in her eyes.

"Yes. We weren't attacked right away, but it happened a year later." Her voice lowered. "They set homes on fire. People were screaming. Bleeding on the ground. Trying to crawl away or get to their loved ones. They were shot. Stabbed. I saw men raping a girl about my age. They tried to rape Mama. Ata's big and fought like he'd lost his mind, but they were all over him. He'd already been stabbed." She drew a shuddering breath. Jakob saw her eyes were damp and handed her his mother's handkerchief. Wiping her face, she handed it back and sniffed. "Do you smell roses? Or is that spruce trees?"

Shrugging, she continued her story. "I was supposed to be gone, but I loved my parents. I couldn't just leave them to die."

Somehow, Jakob knew what had happened. "So you fought."

"I sent my brother to the forest with the others. I begged God to save my family or give me strength to, even if I died trying. Then I ran at the men hurting Ata. He got free, killed the men, and saved Mama. Many died, but we survived."

"Was that the first time you'd hurt someone?"
She nodded.

He imagined a small child facing violent adults, and his lips tightened. Then he thought of his siblings as children. "That was a lot for a little girl to handle."

Her eyes flashed, and she squared her shoulders. "Girls are just as capable as boys. I managed."

Studying her, he saw strength. Pride. A refusal to back down, no matter what. "I agree. Sometimes girls are more capable. You rose to what was required of you with determination and courage. You would have made an excellent soldier."

Her eyes widened. "I didn't expect you to agree. You keep surprising me."

"Is that a good thing?"

She didn't reply but began to rise.

He remembered her hand. "Learning to fight. Using a knife. Defending your family. That's how you got the scars, isn't it?"

"Yes." She slid her hands into her pockets, but gasped when he immediately pulled one out. Examining both sides of her hand, he traced silvery scars, some two or three inches long. Having seen battle, hand-to-hand combat, and countless injuries, he could guess how she'd gotten them.

"You earned these protecting your family because you loved them. Because you were brave." He squeezed her hand, and his voice rasped. "You have nothing to be ashamed of. You can be proud of your battle scars. They're beautiful, you know. Your hands and the scars."

She pulled her hand away but smiled. "I never thought of them that way before. Thank you."

"No. Thank you for trusting me."



"I believe you trusted me as well. It's almost time for your appointment." She rose. "I must attend to some things first, but I'll be there."

Watching her walk away, he still felt the heat of her hand and her heartbeat. She was small, but that slender body held great strength.

At 1:50 PM, he sat in Mother Superior's office. When attributes for a mate were broached, he stated, "I want to marry an intelligent woman. I have little patience and I'd probably bite someone who bored me too much." Hearing a faint snicker, he saw Sister Aloizija concealing a smile behind her hand.

Mother Superior chuckled. "Biting might not be the best response. You said intelligent. Would you like her to be a talented artist? An accomplished pianist or singer?"

"I'd like her to be able to carry on an intelligent conversation. And be a reader."

"A reader — of sermons? Poetry?"

"A reader of everything, not an empty-headed fool."

"Some people believe excessive reading gives women ideas."

"I hope they form ideas and opinions."

A pained expression crossed Mother Superior's face.

His voice became steel. "I will not budge on this. I would prefer a brilliant female arguing with me than a dunce agreeing with my every word." Seeing a faint smile on Sister Aloizija's face made him feel better. At least someone approved.

"And talents? Should she be an artist? Know another language?"

Knowing languages demonstrated intelligence. "Other languages, yes."

"Would you have her beautiful? Or plain and less likely to favor vain self-interest?"

Mind flashing to a stunning face, he blinked. "What?" Looks hadn't occurred to him till recently. "I'd like her to like children. I want any born to us guided into becoming good citizens."

"And loved?"

Seeing irritation in Dr. Kovac's eyes, Mother Superior reminded herself he was a busy man. Important. She thought of the unrest in nearby countries and knew war might return. If it did, more of their people would bleed. This man would probably be recalled to service. Rumor had it, he'd once angered Emperor Franz Joseph himself. Dr. Kovac had gone behind enemy lines to rescue two men, ran out of ammunition, and survived using only his bare hands. He'd been awarded medals for bravery but rejected them, saying he'd only done what was right. He'd finally accepted the medals — reluctantly — giving them to the rescued men. Studying the fierce eyes pinning her down, she believed the story.

"My wife should be loyal," Jakob stated.

Mother Superior nodded to Sister Aloizija. "Loyal to Dr. Kovac."

He corrected her. "No. Loyal to our nation. If she's loyal to it, loyalty to me will follow because I love our land. It's part of me, and I'm part of it. And I want someone who wants to marry, not someone who concedes but carries resentment. I'd rather not lie down at night, wondering if I'll be stabbed." Sister Aloizija's blue-grey eyes twinkled and he was sure she was trying not to laugh.

Recalling his family's struggles to survive, he considered how scarce money had been. "She should be disciplined. Able to manage money and get a lot for it."

"Pinch a dinar till it squeals," Sister Aloizija murmured.

"Or runs away crying," he agreed, bursting into laughter. It bemused him to hear the sound coming from his own mouth.

His brownish-green eyes met Sister Aloizija's blue-gray ones.

She asked, "Shall I read that back?"

He shook his head. "We got it, I think."

Mother Superior's voice was wry. "Yes. Have the ability to torture dinars."

Jakob shared another idea. "She should be strong of spirit. I believe I'd break a lesser woman."





Mother Superior pursed her lips. "Not respectful? Obedient?"

"Why break a spirit that's more loyal and stronger untamed?" He said to Sister Aloizija, "You're strong."

Mother Superior sniffed. "Sweet, loving, utterly committed and devoted to our dear Lord, and stubborn as the most recalcitrant donkey."

He grinned at Sister Aloizija. The warmth of her smile hit him like a blast of heat from a furnace.

Jakob's head pounded as he entered the convent six days later. His stomach ached. Not sleeping could explain his throbbing temple, but what about his stomach? That's when he remembered he hadn't eaten in a while.

He'd headed to a village near Trnovska Vas after meeting with Mother Superior, and confronted the lecher stalking his niece. Infuriated by the man's lack of remorse and bribery attempt — followed by a threat — Jakob hadn't bothered to take the louse into the woods. He'd beaten the lecher soundly in his own front yard. Neighbors and the policist had gathered, but no one intervened.

Jakob had gone to his bank in Maribor afterward. The assistant manager had reported problems. A customer had complained his balance wasn't correct, and an error had been found in Mirko's books — small, but Jakob worried others might exist. With one thing or another, he'd stayed busy and still hadn't completed all his tasks. Food hadn't been on his mind.

Today he was to meet a marital candidate, and he dreaded it. Consulting his pocketwatch now, he saw she was late.

"She wanted to look her best," Mother Superior explained.

"Hmm." Discipline or a lack thereof was reflected in a person's behavior. He felt like bellowing, "Front and center!"

A statuesque, twenty-six-year-old brunette, Sister Radmilla arrived two minutes later. When Jakob shook her hand — which hung like a dead fish — he rapidly let go. Gritting his teeth, he forced a smile and hoped it wasn't actually a grimace. If he could deal with subordinates in the army and bank, he could cope with two nuns. Three nuns. Aloizija didn't take notes today. A Sister Ana had taken her place.

Mother Superior guided the conversation from the weather to Moliere's works. Jakob was fine with her taking charge, since he wouldn't have known what to say. Sharing he'd beaten a lecher wouldn't make a good impression. Aloizija might've approved, but not the present company. A snicker escaped his lips, but he concealed it by coughing. His guns wouldn't interest them, either.

Sister Radmilla, eloquently describing tea's health benefits, poured them some. He tuned her out and missed his guns.

Conversation stopped. Eyes turned to him. He adopted a thoughtful look. "Hmm." Apparently, that was sufficient, because talk resumed. Sister Radmilla pontificated that coffee was unhealthy and should be eradicated. Since Jakob loved it and it sometimes was the mainstay of his diet, he thought, "No."

The following afternoon, Jakob met twenty-two-year-old Sister Marija. Although he admired her blonde hair (some had escaped her wimple or been strategically left out), green eyes, and slimness, the rest of her didn't impress him. Mother Superior acted as if she'd picked a saint, but Jakob noticed Sister Marija's comments about the economy, neighboring countries, and literature were shallow. Her responses to his pointed questions revealed she didn't know much or simply didn't care. This disturbed him, since he preferred to be informed and cared deeply. He didn't care for her pride, either. If she'd felt some in their country, he would have agreed, but hers seemed aimed at herself alone.





Listening to her brag, Jakob's patience ran out. He asked Sister Ana, "May I see your notes?" Her writing wasn't as nice as Aloizija's, and he wondered when she'd changed from Sister Aloizija to Aloizija in his mind. He pointed to the only mistake he'd found. "What's this? And you left things out." While Sister Ana made corrections, he told Mother Superior, "If we're going to make the best use of time, I suggest that other nun take notes. What's her name?"

Mother Superior sent for Aloizija and explained, "Dr. Kovac found some problems in Sister Ana's notes."

Aloizija scanned the notes, after which her eyes — narrowed ever so slightly — honed in on him. He studied the ceiling.

Sister Marija's continued bragging covered the wonders of being naturally blonde and adored. Jakob saw Aloizija wince and felt no guilt. Why should he suffer alone?

Mother Superior exuded pride after Sister Marija left. "She's perfect, isn't she?"

Jakob had tallied fifty-three torturous minutes and told the truth, "Maybe for someone, but not me."

Sister Marinka came as a pleasant surprise the next day. The lovely, dark-haired nun had green eyes, a slender build, and seemed genuinely glad to see him. Mother Superior went into a discussion of Kierkegaard in Danish. Aloizija took notes. Jakob was irked at her. She hadn't bothered to return his greeting. Well, you're stuck like me, he thought.

With a pleasing voice, Sister Marinka spoke intelligently and glanced Jakob's way often. He assumed she was trying to gauge the impact of her words on him. She said men should lead the home and mentioned a famous general and Dostoyevsky. Appreciating her efforts, he still looked beneath the surface. She mainly quoted from authors. Testing a theory, he pounced on a quote she made from Edgar Allen Poe's "The Telltale Heart." As he'd expected, she merely agreed with all his comments but had nothing original to say. He misquoted the story just to see if she noticed. She didn't. Neither did Mother Superior, but Aloizija cast him a baleful look.

Careful to remain expressionless, he asked, "Sister Aloizija, have you read Poe?"

"Some." If he were a tree and Aloizija had an axe, he thought she would've felled him on the spot.

Mother Superior volunteered, "I have some of his works. Do you see them, dear?"

Aloizija darted Jakob a glance of distaste before plucking two books from a shelf.

"If you don't mind, would you read the passage aloud?" Jakob stifled a laugh when blue-grey eyes blasted him, but he noted she found the selection within seconds and quoted without referring to it.

At the end of the visit, he wished Sister Marinka heartfelt good wishes, but told Mother Superior, "She's a lovely woman who'll make a fine wife, but —"

"Not for you."

Over the next two weeks, Jakob's head swam. Tall Sister Lucia, blonde and blue-eyed, wanted only one child so pregnancy wouldn't "destroy" her figure. Short, dark-haired Sister Marta was plump and too pleasing. She'd wanted to do whatever her husband wanted, but he didn't want to wipe his feet on anyone. Red-headed Sister Nada was funny, loved children, and the smartest nun he'd met — of those available. He hadn't been able to explain his rejection of Sister Nada to Mother Superior, only that she wasn't right.

Beautiful Sister Helena was gifted at the piano and harp, spoke five languages, but said, "I won't dirty my hands again... I never wanted children. Oh, I'll probably have one, but —." She'd grown up poor, helped with younger siblings, and hated it.

Mother Superior had hastily interjected, "You'll feel differently with your first baby."

Sister Helena's reply, "Of course," had been lackluster.

He'd asked her, "How would you handle cooking? Cleaning? Children?"

She'd responded, "We'll hire someone. You have money, don't you?"





Cute and intelligent, Sister Svetlana's interests had revolved around food. She'd lost her parents young, been raised by an orphanage, and had an attitude of sitting back and finding fault with seemingly everything while taking no personal action. Poverty Jakob understood. Complacency — no.

Sister Ana (not the note-taker) had met his stipulations regarding children, work, reading, and knowledge. She'd argued with him about their economy despite Mother Superior's attempts to shush her. He'd greatly appreciated her forthrightness and eloquence, but admitted to Mother Superior she'd lacked some vital something.

He'd met others, but their names and faces had run together in his mind.

Two days later, a telegram was delivered to Jakob during his meeting with Mother Superior and a nun whose name he'd already forgotten. A long-standing bank customer had aired grievances, demanding to see Jakob.

He'd returned to Ljubljana from Maribor with ledgers only yesterday. Planning to copy them himself, he hadn't felt like doing anything. His head had ached. He'd felt restless. Sleep might have helped, but he hadn't wanted to sleep.

Unsettled, he'd roamed Ljubljana, ending up outside the convent.

Now he explained, "An important matter has arisen, and I must go to my bank." He asked the silent Aloizija, "Sister Aloizija, I could use your help. I told you about my books, which need to be recopied. I planned to start myself but haven't, and they still need to be done. Is there any way you could come to Maribor? I thought I'd be there two or three days, but I think I'll remain a week. That would be sufficient for the two most important ledgers to be copied." He tensed, expecting a refusal.

When she uttered a quiet, "Very well," he instantly relaxed.

Mother Superior stated, "I mean no disrespect, Dr. Kovac, but it wouldn't be proper for you to be alone together. I'll send another sister along. The convent will cover their expenses."

"No, I will. There's a small hotel two blocks from the bank. I'll arrange two rooms."

"They can share one. I'll pay for it."

He capitulated. "All right." He'd just make his own arrangements anyway.

Driving toward Maribor with Aloizija and Sister Marta two hours later, he shared, "That's my uncle Janez Radic's home over there. The one with all the rose bushes. I planted those, and they're still growing."

"I like roses," Aloizija replied. "Pink and red ones, but red the most."

"Roses were my mother's favorite flower." Jakob smiled. "My father loved spruce and pine trees."

"I love the smell of spruce."

Throughout the trip, they discussed literature and took to quoting famous works so the other could guess the author. Sister Marta napped between them.

Jakob spotted Aloizija sitting on a bench outside the Adriatic Bank of Maribor the next morning at 6:30 AM. She was thirty minutes early. He greatly approved of the responsibility and trustworthiness this denoted. Questioning her companion's absence, he learned Sister Marta had stomach pains but would arrive soon.

Unlocking the bank, Jakob ushered Aloizija into an empty office, and brought her two ledgers — one full, one empty. "If you'll copy entries into the new book, I'd appreciate it. We've had trouble reading some. That impacts accounts. If you can't decipher something, I'll try to figure it out."

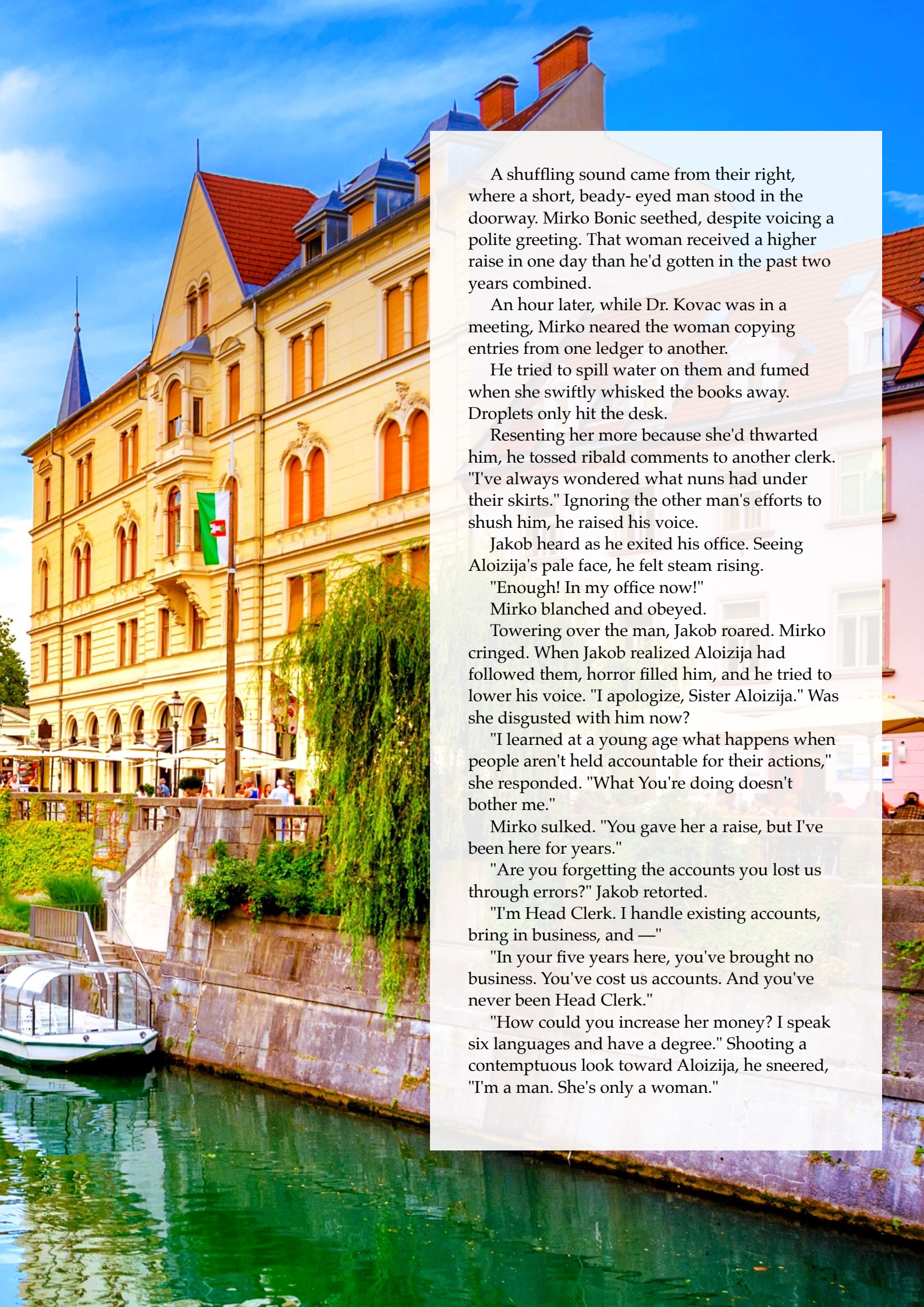
She knocked on his door nineteen minutes later, and pointed to a number. "I believe this is wrong."

He calculated in his head. "It's off by 627 dinars. Tomas Rozic was upset two weeks ago, saying he should have more money. He was right." Making a split-second decision, he added, "I'm raising your pay by forty-four dinars a day."

"There's no need."

"This discovery alone is worth it. Tomas has been with us for years. He manages several businesses. I'd hate to lose his patronage."





A shuffling sound came from their right, where a short, beady-eyed man stood in the doorway. Mirko Bonic seethed, despite voicing a polite greeting. That woman received a higher raise in one day than he'd gotten in the past two years combined.

An hour later, while Dr. Kovac was in a meeting, Mirko neared the woman copying entries from one ledger to another.

He tried to spill water on them and fumed when she swiftly whisked the books away. Droplets only hit the desk.

Resenting her more because she'd thwarted him, he tossed ribald comments to another clerk. "I've always wondered what nuns had under their skirts." Ignoring the other man's efforts to shush him, he raised his voice.

Jakob heard as he exited his office. Seeing Aloizija's pale face, he felt steam rising.

"Enough! In my office now!"

Mirko blanched and obeyed.

Towering over the man, Jakob roared. Mirko cringed. When Jakob realized Aloizija had followed them, horror filled him, and he tried to lower his voice. "I apologize, Sister Aloizija." Was she disgusted with him now?

"I learned at a young age what happens when people aren't held accountable for their actions," she responded. "What You're doing doesn't bother me."

Mirko sulked. "You gave her a raise, but I've been here for years."

"Are you forgetting the accounts you lost us through errors?" Jakob retorted.

"I'm Head Clerk. I handle existing accounts, bring in business, and —"

"In your five years here, you've brought no business. You've cost us accounts. And you've never been Head Clerk."

"How could you increase her money? I speak six languages and have a degree." Shooting a contemptuous look toward Aloizija, he sneered, "I'm a man. She's only a woman."

Jakob was tempted to separate this man's head from his shoulders or knock his teeth out. "So was my mother." He bared his teeth. "You speak six languages, do you? My mother spoke eight without higher education. I speak thirty-three." He saw the militant gleam in Aloizija's eyes, and remembered Sun Tzu. "Sister Aloizija, how many languages do you speak?"

"Seventeen," she replied quietly. Mirko flinched.

Dealing with this human garbage was a waste of his time. Jakob pointed at the entrance. "Out!"

Scuttling for the door, Mirko deliberately stopped to shove Aloizija, then gasped.

Jakob had lunged for him, but stopped. Aloizija had whipped a knife out of a pocket, and had the point to Mirko's throat. "You'll hit the jugular easier if you raise that an inch," Jakob said.

"Never come near me again!" Aloizija snapped at Mirko before removing the blade and stepping away.

"I'm glad you lost accounts," Mirko yelled at Jakob. "A bitch doesn't belong in a bank!"

Jakob grabbed Mirko by his back of his jacket and waist band, and threw him out the front door. As Mirko gaped, the other employees applauded. He fled when Jakob started toward him. Still contemplating violence, Jakob spoke to Aloizija grimly. "That I won't apologize for."

"No need."

He didn't expect her grin.

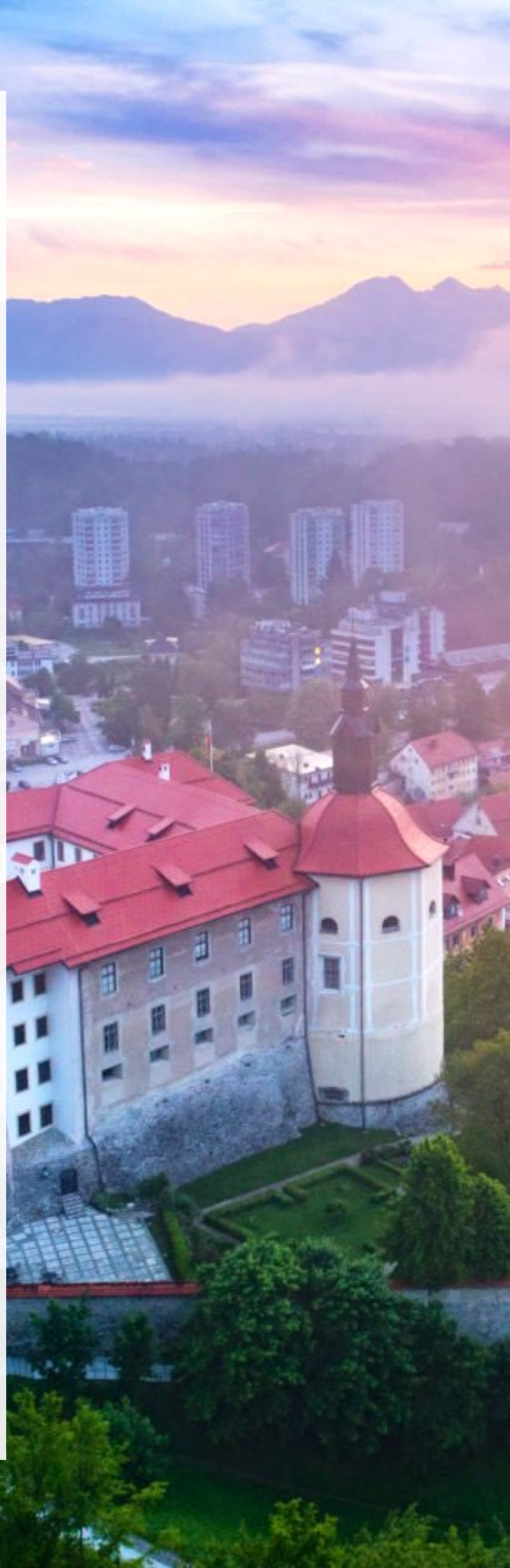
Two days later, Aloizija brought Jakob a ledger with more errors. Sister Marta had left for the hotel after falling asleep sitting up. Looking down columns, Jakob reviewed figures. "This is Mirko's writing. You're right. The mistakes are for 179 dinars and 723." He glared at the book. "He messed up more accounts!" Standing, he felt dizzy and grabbed the table.

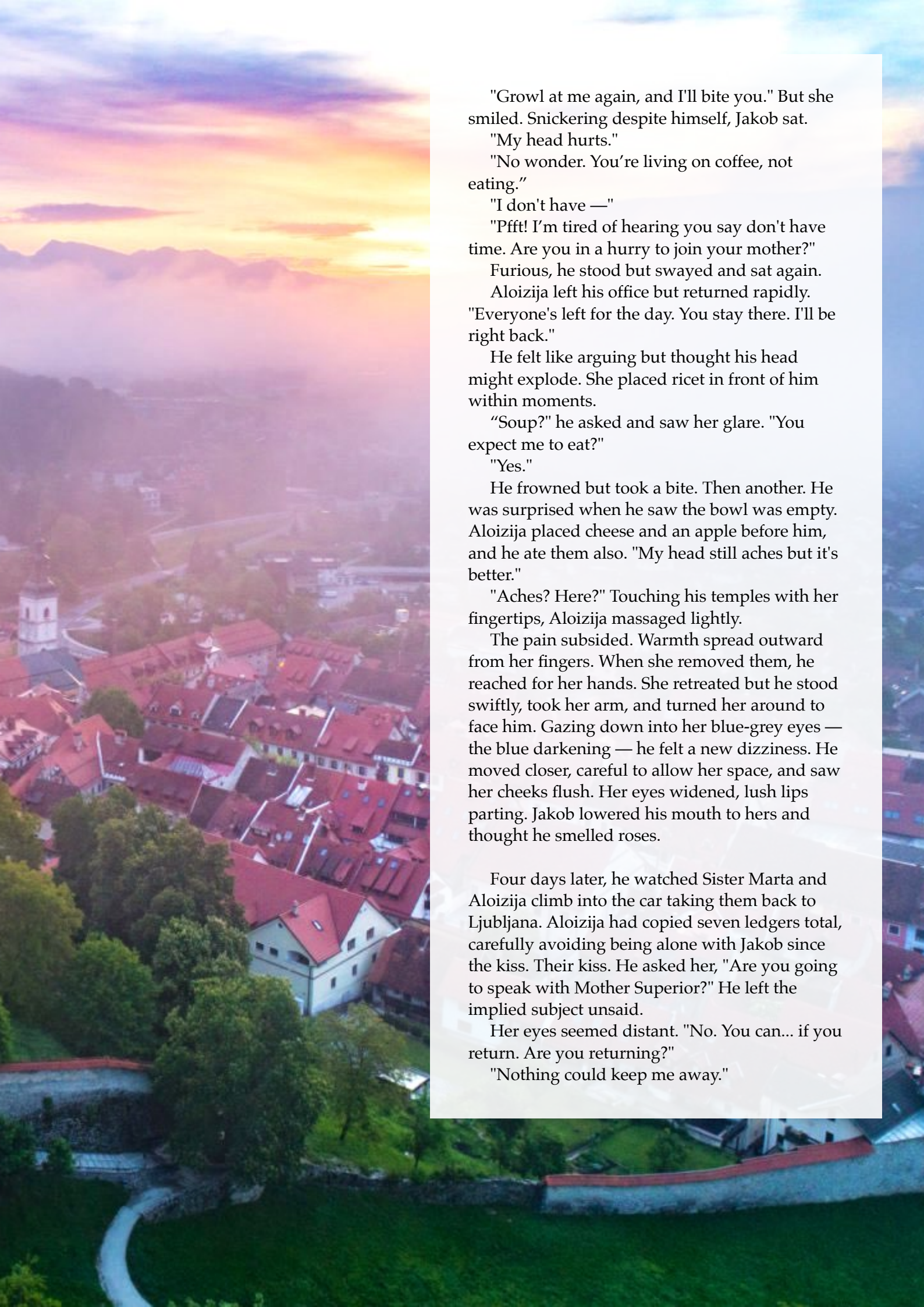
Aloizija was at his side immediately. "Sit down."

"I'm fine."

"You're anything but fine."

"I have too much to do!" he snapped.



An aerial photograph of a town with red-tiled roofs and a church spire, set against a backdrop of mountains and a sunset sky with soft, colorful clouds. The scene is viewed from an elevated perspective, looking down on the town and across a valley.

"Growl at me again, and I'll bite you." But she smiled. Snickering despite himself, Jakob sat.

"My head hurts."

"No wonder. You're living on coffee, not eating."

"I don't have —"

"Pfft! I'm tired of hearing you say don't have time. Are you in a hurry to join your mother?"

Furious, he stood but swayed and sat again.

Aloizija left his office but returned rapidly.

"Everyone's left for the day. You stay there. I'll be right back."

He felt like arguing but thought his head might explode. She placed ricet in front of him within moments.

"Soup?" he asked and saw her glare. "You expect me to eat?"

"Yes."

He frowned but took a bite. Then another. He was surprised when he saw the bowl was empty. Aloizija placed cheese and an apple before him, and he ate them also. "My head still aches but it's better."

"Aches? Here?" Touching his temples with her fingertips, Aloizija massaged lightly.

The pain subsided. Warmth spread outward from her fingers. When she removed them, he reached for her hands. She retreated but he stood swiftly, took her arm, and turned her around to face him. Gazing down into her blue-grey eyes — the blue darkening — he felt a new dizziness. He moved closer, careful to allow her space, and saw her cheeks flush. Her eyes widened, lush lips parting. Jakob lowered his mouth to hers and thought he smelled roses.

Four days later, he watched Sister Marta and Aloizija climb into the car taking them back to Ljubljana. Aloizija had copied seven ledgers total, carefully avoiding being alone with Jakob since the kiss. Their kiss. He asked her, "Are you going to speak with Mother Superior?" He left the implied subject unsaid.

Her eyes seemed distant. "No. You can... if you return. Are you returning?"

"Nothing could keep me away."

Jakob drove faster than he should have. Two days had passed since Aloizija had left Maribor. His sense of unease had grown astronomically. That's why he was returning to Ljubljana.

Parking the car, he strode into the convent, heading for Mother Superior's office. A passing nun said, "She's busy with the ceremony."

"Ceremony?"

She beamed. "Some sisters are taking their final vows."

Shock flooded through him — horror. He charged toward the chapel, holding nothing back. He shoved the doors open and ran inside.

People stared at him. The only one he cared about knelt fully robed, with her back to him. She glanced over her shoulder, eye flashing, but she looked away again.

"No!" he yelled.

Mother Superior stepped away from a tall, large man and short, slightly plump woman — poor farmers, judging from their attire. "Dr. Kovac, is something wrong?"

"Yes!"

"No," Aloizija responded, her voice cool. She remained kneeling.

"You aren't going to be a nun!" he barked.

"Who decided that?" Jumping to her feet, she stalked toward him.

"Me."

"Who the devil are you?" The large man Jakob had dismissed walked toward him.

Mother Superior said, "Darko, this is Dr. Kovac. Dr. Kovac, this is Darko Jakse, Sister Aloizija's father. Her mother Josefina is also here." In a split second, Jakob understood these were the people who'd taught Aloizija to be strong — the man who'd given her the skills to survive. "I'm honored to meet you," he said, "but right now, I have business with your daughter." The man exuded anger, scowling with a reddening face, but Jakob didn't care.

Aloizija pushed past her parents. "You barge in here and think you can tell me what to do?"

"Yes!" He wanted — needed — to talk with her. But more people walked toward them now.

Mere inches away, Aloizija glared at him. "I make my decisions, not you!"

"Aloizija?" Her father's eyes traveled from her to Jakob.





Jakob sighed. "I'm sorry. No, I'm not." Grabbing Aloizija, he hoisted her into his arms and raced for the door, ignoring bellows behind him. Kicking it open, he dashed down a different hallway then toward the convent's outer doors.

"My father will hunt you down," Aloizija stated calmly.

"Not if he can't find me!" Running outside, Jakob saw a horse tethered to a post, set Aloizija down, freed the reins, and slapped the horse's rump hard. Its hooves clattered loudly as it galloped down the street. Returning to Aloizija, Jakob scooped her up and fled around the side of the convent.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Trying to talk to you! You could have cooperated."

"With being kidnapped?"

"You weren't kidnapped, you stubborn woman! I want to talk!"

"Why?"

"Because you can't be a nun. You're going to be a wife. Mine."

"You're deciding for me? Saying I have no rights to choose anything? My childhood dream or you!"

"Yes." Nose-to-nose now, he read fury in her eyes. And hurt.

Considering his words and her, his anger deflated. "I was terrified of losing you," he admitted. "I'm sorry. I'm not commanding anything." Dropping to one knee, he took her hands, and tears filled his eyes. "I'm begging you."

She bit her lip but snatched her hands away. "What if I don't want children?"

"Then we won't have any. Or we'll raise orphans."

"What if I can't cook?"

"I want you, not your cooking. I'll hire someone. Or cook myself."

"You cook?"

"Yes. When a soldier's fighting, his mother isn't there to care for him."

"What if I want to handle the money?"

He snorted. "You'd have a fight on your hands, because I'm excellent with money. But we can handle it together."

A tear ran down her face. "What if I lose all my hair?"

"I guess I'll have a bald wife."

"You have your choice of women," she spat out. "Why me?" Standing, he cupped her cheeks.

"Because you're you. I like your irritation. You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Anger only enhances your beauty. I admire your intelligence. I appreciate that you're not afraid of me. That you argue. But more than anything, I love you, Aloizija. I can't wait to see you each day, even if you won't talk to me. I can't wait to hear your voice. To hear your thoughts. I can't imagine life without you. I love you."

"And I love you!" Bursting into tears, she flung her arms around his neck. He kissed her lingeringly, and she admitted, "From the day we met, I couldn't get you off my mind. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry or hit you. I can't imagine life without you either."

Behind them, Mother Superior cleared her throat. "I see I've lost a nun."

Aloizija's father Darko stood beside her, grimacing but no longer exuding murderous fury. "The horse," he said in a dangerous tone, "was clever." Putting a hand on Jakob's back, he propelled him to the side. "If my daughter didn't love you —"

"You'd kill me," Jakob said.

"If you ever hurt her —"

"You'll kill me," Jakob finished.

Remembering dealing with Neza's stalker and similar talks he had had with other men pursuing his sisters, he laughed, ignoring Darko's bewilderment. When his future father-in-law grabbed his hand and squeezed it hard, he squeezed back. Just enough to make Darko wince without actually harming him. "I understand your concerns, sir. I really do. You don't know me, but I swear I'll never harm Aloizija."





Mother Superior spoke to Aloizija's parents and the other nuns in excited tones. "Why wait? If we get to work now, we can have the ceremony... How long would it take to find...?"

The voices faded into the background as Jakob looked into Aloizija's eyes. He wished his parents could have lived to meet her. They would have adored her. When the scent of roses reached his nose, followed by spruce and pine, tears welled in his eyes. Maybe they did love her.

Hugging Aloizija tightly, Jakob kissed her forehead and whispered, "I'll never let you go."

With her fingers she traced the line of his right cheek and jaw, then placed kisses there. "Nor I you, beloved."

GABRIELLA BALCOM



On the wings of ideas

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

www.clarendonhousebooks.com/gabriella-balcom

CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

ALEXANDER MARSHALL

ALEXANDER MARSHALL Selected Writings Volume 1

You'll be taken on fast-paced trips to the stars; you'll see distant futures; you'll journey to alternate realities. You'll meet larger-than-life as well as ordinary heroes and heroines; you'll travel to the past and into fantastic forests full of the strangest things; you'll get to know people who might be real as well as people who are decidedly not. But, perhaps more significantly, you'll start to wonder about the boundary between fact and fiction, stories and truth, reality and illusion. 'Metafiction' is defined in the dictionary as 'fiction in which the author self-consciously alludes to the artificiality or literariness of a work by parodying or departing from novelistic conventions and traditional narrative techniques.' But in practice there can be a bit more to it, as you will find out, if you read on. Or you can put the book back on the shelf and never know...

—Grant P. Hudson, Editor



CLARENDON HOUSE
PUBLICATIONS

NOW IN ONE GIANT VOLUME

'From the fertile mind of Alexander Marshall comes a complex world of Gods, legends, dragons, ancient evil and unlikely heroes... I predict that in years to come, The Sword Sundergost will be hailed as a classic.'

-David Bowmore, author of *The Magic of Deben Market*

The Sword SUNDERGOST



ALEXANDER MARSHALL

www.clarendonhousebooks.com/alexander-marshall

CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHORS

ANDREW and HELEN BIRCH



Space Truckers



Follow the adventures of the Emerald Queen, an old green CX19 cargo dropship with a colourful history; meet characters who will linger with you long after you've finished reading; be drawn into a whole universe of planets, spaceships, companies, corruption, tricky decisions, passions and tragedies.

Each one of these interwoven stories is a gem, blending human emotions and situations into a rich and textured science fiction background.

Andrew and Helen Birch have created something special here: exciting genre fiction with literary qualities.

www.clarendonhousebooks.com/andrew-and-helen-birch



Get published.
Build a career.
Contribute to creating a better world.

Become a PROFESSIONAL AUTHOR COURSE

Write Stories That Work
and Sell Them Effectively

The Become a Professional Author Course

- 14 modules
- instantly downloadable onto almost any device
- full-colour
- fully illustrated with diagrams and maxims

- the complete text of the book **Become a Professional Author**
- a **step by step guide** through the book, with course exercises and major assignments

with **BONUS DOWNLOADS** including

- an e-copy of the best-selling **How Stories Really Work: Exploring the Physics of Fiction**
- an e-copy of **The Story Creation Handbook**, containing templates for 1,000s of stories
- an e-copy of the book **Myth & the 'Now'** which voyages into the depths of fiction

PLUS

Students of the course are entitled to **massive discounts** on Clarendon House editing and other author services, including **unique** workshops and consultancies!

Sign up for the course

Only **£47.00** for the first
50 students
(after which the price is
£470.00)



www.clarendonhousebooks.com/course



'Our little ICWG family is certainly a wonderful group full of kindness and encouragement. It's wonderful to see the growth of so many writers from the help and guidance they've received from this group alone.'
- E. Montague,
author

The Inner Circle Writers' Group is the social arm of Clarendon House Publications.

ProWritingAid recently listed us as one of the best groups for writers on Facebook:

'Everyone loves Grant, the founder of The Inner Circle Writers' Group, almost as much as they love the warm, supportive environment that always stays professional and on-topic. The members are encouraging, and the moderators keep abusive non-writers to a minimum. Several professional writers call The Inner Circle Writers'

Group "home." Join the group and get ready for lots of interaction and engagement in a friendly, family atmosphere. Everyone shares and celebrates each other's successes, and many feel spurred to become and do better.'

This group is for writers interested in the craft and practice of writing and everything connected with that. Members are entitled to exclusive services from Clarendon House and are offered multiple submission opportunities.

It's completely free and fun.

[Learn more](#)

What people have said about

CLARENDON HOUSE PUBLICATIONS

J. McCulloch, Author

Clarendon House has what the majority of other publishers lack; the personal touch. Grant Hudson draws people into his cosy library (also known as the Inner Circle Writers' Group), sits them down and works his magic. Many new writers lack confidence in their ability, so Grant fine tunes their perspective, boosts their morale and sets them up to win. I have been humbled by his untiring efforts to help us all. We are his people. He is our mentor, our eccentric English professor and our much valued friend.

D. Taylor, Author

As I was scrolling fb, and seeing all these ads from people claiming to help authors do this and do that, I thought to myself, Grant Hudson is the genuine mentor. Thanks for your solid advice.

P. O'Neil, Author

Grant is the model mentor for this new age of writing.

A. Delf, Author

The world is better with all this beautiful work seen at last.

M. Ahmed, Author

A place where good literature is nurtured.

Brandy Metheney Bonifas, Author

Clarendon House Publications is everything publishing should be. Grant Hudson is a caring editor and mentor who works closely with authors to produce top quality publications, and his writing community, The Inner Circle Writers' Group, is a safe and encouraging environment where established authors share their expertise and new writers are nurtured to spread their wings. I highly recommend!

[Learn more](#)

Look out for the next instalment of

The **Clarendon House
Short Story Magazine**

Satisfying Fiction from Clarendon House Publications

**Free to download
wherever you are**

The next issue will be announced in
the



**INNER
CIRCLE
WRITERS'
GROUP**

www.facebook.com/groups/innercirclewritersgroup

CLARENDON HOUSE PUBLICATIONS

© 2023 by Grant P. Hudson.
Clarendon House Publications,
76 Coal Pit Lane, Sheffield, South Yorkshire,
United Kingdom S36 1AW
www.clarendonhousebooks.com
Email: grant@clarendonhousebooks.com