

Ante Tomić

THE MAGNIFICENT POSKOKS

Translated from the Croatian by Mirna Čubranić

Under the Third Mortgage

At the end of April, just as it seemed winter was behind us, a cold front swept down from north-western Europe, and it rained almost non-stop across Croatia for a week. In Gorski Kotar it even snowed, and the road between Oštovica and Kikovica was closed to lorries with trailers. On that dreary, damp, and despondent Sunday evening, a handful of people found themselves on Ban Jelačić Square, but none of them noticed a man in a threadbare green jacket and brown corduroy cap, hunched under a broken black umbrella. He could have been a beggar, a collector of plastic bottles, an ex-con, or a patient recently discharged from a psychiatric ward, one of those wandering the rain-slick city pavements carrying their own cross. A few passers-by were getting on the brightly lit trams, and no one noticed, or found it strange, when the man glanced briefly left and right after the junction with Praška Street and slipped underground, down the steps of a public toilet shut down long ago. No one was around to see him unlock the padlock on the chain, push open the iron door, and step into a black puddle and rubbish.

He shut the door behind and flicked on a torch. Its weak beam revealed a pitiful, unclean toilet foyer, rotten, sagging doors hanging off their hinges and walls covered in filth and vulgar graffiti. Wading carefully through the puddle, he entered the urinal area and from there a cubicle on the left. He raised the torchlight and counted the tiles from the ceiling down, whispering to himself. When he reached the seventh ceramic square, the one where some anonymous lecher had scrawled a crude comment about the sexual habits of a certain Mladenka, he pressed its left edge with the tips of his fingers, about half a centimetre into the wall, and let go. The tile popped out like a little hatch, revealing a shallow niche with a keypad. The man typed in a seven-digit code, and something clicked three times deep in the concrete. A second or two later, the back wall of the cubicle slid aside with a faint whine, revealing a room utterly unlike the filthy darkness of the lavatory – a vast underground hall with walnut-panelled walls, polished parquet inlaid with marquetry, and in the centre, beneath rows of ornate crystal chandeliers, a long conference table surrounded by plush leather armchairs. At the far end of the table, beneath a large round skylight – the only source of natural light in the room – someone was already sitting. He lowered his newspaper and peered over his glasses at the newcomer.

“You’re early too,” said Cardinal Valentin Lovrić, Archbishop of Zagreb, as Tomislav Poskok shook out his umbrella, hung up his jacket, and closed the door behind him.

“I’ve just read your son’s dating a singer, what’s-her-name...”

“Please don’t mention either of them to me,” groaned Poskok, settling into the armchair opposite the Archbishop.

“Luna,” said the church dignitary, having found the name in the paper. “Not that it’s any of my business, he’s your son, but he could have found a nice local girl instead.”

“Well, she *is* local, actually. Her real name’s Dragica, Luna is just... you know, a stage name,” Poskok said peevishly.

“And your son?” Lovrić went on. “What is he now, thirty?”

“Thirty-two.”

“Why haven’t you married him off already?”

“Why don’t you marry off yours?” snapped Poskok.

“Mine’s just graduated,” countered the Archbishop.

The two men fell awkwardly silent for a few moments. Tomislav Poskok, the richest man in the country who owned dairies, butcheries, slaughterhouses, water bottling plants, and endless hectares of farmland, the man whose last name loomed over the entrances of hundreds of stores, turned his gaze to a row of oil portraits covering one wall of the conference chamber hosting the most powerful men in Croatia for over two centuries. Directly opposite, above his distant successor Lovrić, deemed worthless and undeserving by Poskok, hung the painting of His Eminence Maksimiljan Vrhovac, draped in a purple robe with a great cross on his chest. This was the man who, at the end of the eighteenth century, had commissioned the construction of this chamber beneath Zagreb’s central square. Legend has it that once the work was completed, every builder involved, from the master mason to the lowliest carpenter’s apprentice, had their tongues cut out.

The Great Chamber of the Brotherhood of the Croatian Covenant is connected by tunnels to Kaptol¹ and the Banski Dvori². In the latter half of the twentieth century, an emergency exit was added in the form of a concealed doorway to the public toilet. For generations now, an Upper Town family of impeccable reputation, unwavering patriotism, and unshakeable Catholic faith has been looking after this chamber, repairing furniture, repainting the walls, and maintaining cleanliness, ventilation, and heating with oak logs fed to a wide stone fireplace. The secret of its existence has been passed down from father to the eldest son on the patriarch’s deathbed.

Though only a handful of people know of this place, it is from here that the course of our nation’s history is steered, for better or worse. The Great Chamber of the Brotherhood of the Croatian Covenant saw the drafting of the final version of the Croatian-Hungarian Settlement and the foundation of the Illyrian Movement. Here we chose the sides in the world wars, and here we united and divorced with the Serbs. Here Vlatko Maček received his final instructions before signing the agreement with Dragiša Cvetković. Here the decision was made that Nazor should join the Partisans, and that Krleža should take the helm of the renewed Institute of Lexicography. The production of our first atomic bomb in a secret facility of Petrokemija in Kutina, the construction of New Zagreb, the Declaration on the Name and Status of the Croatian Literary Language, the Croatian Spring, the crushing of the Croatian Spring, the currency devaluation programmes, enterprise privatisation, motorway routes, public-private partnerships, literary prize winners, new lead singers of the group Magazin, Dinamo winning the football championships... it was all determined in this room.

¹ Translator’s note: seat of the Catholic Church in Croatia.

² Translator’s note: seat of the Croatian government.

Pensioners pacing the length of the square while discussing the state of the nation, newspaper hawkers shouting headlines, lovers meeting by the statue of the great statesman and military leader, street performers and pretzel vendors – none one of them has the slightest inkling that everything truly important in Croatia has been happening under their very feet by the will of twenty-odd political, economic, cultural, judicial, and ecclesiastical figures who gather there once a month. Passers-by who stop to rest by the Manduševac fountain would never in their wildest dreams imagine that its bottom is transparent and that they are sitting directly above the skylight of the Great Chamber, where their fate is being decided, perhaps in this very moment.

On the April Sunday when our story begins, Tomislav Poskok was there to meet with the Archbishop and the Prime Minister outside the Brotherhood's regular meeting schedule. He was there to seek financial support in purchasing a majority stake in the largest Slovenian retail chain. A risky venture which, if successful, would help stabilise his business empire, seriously shaken by the global financial crisis.

"Hey, you two," said the Prime Minister Meter when he arrived just before eight. "Apologies, but I wanted to catch the start of the news."

"What are they saying?" asked Poskok.

"They want to arrest me, again."

"God willing, they'll get lucky one day."

The Prime Minister gave him a cheerful wink and added:

"Your aunt says to give her a ring."

Luka Meter and Tomislav Poskok were cousins, sons of two sisters from a rocky, impoverished village in the Dalmatian hinterland.

"You wouldn't leave this much in the church," grumbled the Archbishop leaning back and watching through the skylight as someone tossed a coin into the clear water of the fountain above. For a few moments, the three dignitaries stared curiously at the dark circles of coins scattered across the blue glazed bottom overhead.

"Did someone just toss in a five-kuna coin?" said Poskok.

"Where?"

"There, look," he pointed his finger, "far right, by the edge."

"Upon my soul, it *is* a fiver," confirmed Lovrić.

"And they say people have no money," scoffed the Prime Minister.

"People?" snapped the Archbishop. "People are scum. However badly you treat them, they deserve worse."

"I don't think I can be any worse than I already am," quipped the Prime Minister, and Tomislav Poskok thought to himself that it was not entirely untrue.

"I often ask myself, why did God punish me by making me born among Croats," the Archbishop went on disconsolately. "Sometimes, when I'm in Rome, I look at the cardinals from other countries, what they have, where they live, the cars they drive, and I honestly feel ashamed of my origins."

“Valentin, my friend,” said the Prime Minister, “if you weren’t from Croatia, you’d never become a priest in the first place. If you’d been born anywhere else, they’d probably have banned you from entering a church. They’d put your mugshot on the entrance with a warning: ‘This man is banned from all sacred buildings in the nation.’”

“Lame joke,” said the Archbishop, offended.

“Oh come on, it’s not that bad,” said the Prime Minister, then turned to Poskok to get down to the business at hand. “Anyway, Tomo, look, about that thing of yours. Don’t get angry, but I can’t do it. Neither can Lovrić. Not under your terms. The assets you’re offering as collateral for the loan... well, fuck it, they’re bollocks.”

“Luka, how can you say that?” said Poskok, “There’s two hundred thousand square metres there.”

“Under mortgage,” the Archbishop Lovrić pointed out.

“Three mortgages, one on top of the other,” added Meter. “We’d probably be the sixteenth in line to collect on that land if you go under. If a bitch in heat showed up at the pound, she wouldn’t attract as many mongrels as you’ve got creditors circling those two hundred thousand square metres of the warehouse on the outskirts. And that other stuff you’re offering, let’s be honest, you know it too, if it were any worth, you’d get the money from the bank and not come begging from us.”

Tomislav Poskok pursed his lips, brooding.

“You can’t do this to me,” he said. “After everything I’ve done for you. It’s just not fair, lads. Luka, for God’s sake, you know how much I’ve invested in you and the party. Don’t you know how much your last campaign cost me? Have you heard,” he turned to the Archbishop, “the story about the honey?”

The Archbishop raised his eyebrows and shook his head. Meter gave a nervous smile.

“Five million little jars of honey I had made,” began Poskok. “You know those little jars, like the ones you get for breakfast in a hotel? Well, I had five million of them made for him,” he pointed to the Prime Minister. “He begged me to do it. Five million mini packs of honey with his picture and the slogan “For Croatia, I shall work like a bee”. That was meant to be his official campaign slogan: “For Croatia, I shall work like a bee.” On the first campaign day, he was supposed to launch this slogan and then hand out the jars as he canvassed the country for a month. And do you know what he did? The idiot stood before the press and said, “For Croatia, I shall work like a horse.” I was thunderstruck.”

“Fuck’s sake, it was a slip of the tongue in the heat of the moment,” grinned Meter.

“Yeah, I know,” Poskok agreed. “A slip of the tongue. And what about the honey? What was I supposed to do with twelve lorries of honey after you said, “For Croatia, I shall work like a horse,” you bloody horse-brained idiot? You’ve cost me millions, and I’m still footing the bill. Without me, you’d never have got the second term as PM. You’d never have secured the majority in the Parliament, if I hadn’t bribed those two morons from the People’s Party to enter coalition with you. One got a brand-new Passat, and the other – remember what he asked for? The bell!”

“He promised the parish priest a bell,” confirmed the Prime Minister.

“The bell that the honourable MP donated to the church, engraved with his own name. And now it tolls for his soul in some God-forsaken backwater of his, and I... I was the one who commissioned and paid for its casting and mounting. What do you think, Your Eminence,” the businessman turned to the cleric, “does the good Lord in heaven see that it’s not really his bell?”

“He sees everything,” replied the theological authority.

“Of course he does,” said Tomislav Poskok. “He sees everything. So He’ll surely see that little pregnant Benedictine, that former nun, now a single mother, whom you sent to me to give her a job.”

The Archbishop turned crimson and fell silent.

“You really have a thing for nuns,” Poskok went on, watching him with malicious amusement. “That was your third. And why always the Benedictines? Isn’t there a decent pussy among the Carmelites?”

“Tomo, please,” Meter intervened. “Leave the man alone. We’d like to help you, like we’ve always helped. We’re family, for God’s sake, but what you’re asking for, this kind of money... It’s a lot, brother. You’re asking too much, and your collateral is worthless. If you offered something else, something more solid... I don’t know...”

“Give us the shares,” blurted out Lovrić nervously.

Poskok turned to the church leader in surprise, noticing that Prime Minister Meter flinched. His grimace told him this was something the two of them had arranged in advance, but Lovrić had jumped the gun and revealed the plan too soon.

“Give you what? Shares in my company?” the businessman snapped at the Archbishop. “I’ll give you my cock, so you can poke your eye out with it.”

“Come on, Tomo, he didn’t mean it like that,” said his cousin, the Prime Minister, to calm him down. “No one’s asking you to give up your life’s work, to hand over your child to someone else, to part with something you built with your own ten fingers and earned with your blood and sweat...”

“Luka, for fuck’s sake,” Poskok cut him off, “we’re not at a rally.”

“Sorry,” Meter apologised, then paused, looked seriously at Poskok and said plainly, without sugar-coating it: “Pledge a part of the company.”

“Oh, you whores!” Tomislav Poskok swore bitterly.

“No, no, hear me out. I’ve thought about it, and I believe Lovrić will agree with me...”

The Archbishop nodded quickly in agreement.

“You’re asking for a huge amount of money. We have to protect ourselves. We’re offering you a fiduciary loan against a stake in the company. Leave us the shares as collateral. Just as collateral! No transfer of ownership, everything stays yours,” Meter went on, “and you get it back fair and square once you repay the loan in full.”

Poskok gave a wary look, first at the Prime Minister and then at the Archbishop.

“Alright, you wise guys,” he said at last, “how big a share did you have in mind?”

“Fifty per cent plus one share,” said Meter.

“Not a chance!”

“Sorry, but we can’t go lower than that.”

“Luka, there’s no way I’m giving you half my company. You can’t ask me to do that. Half my company, you know as well as I do, is worth far more than what I’m asking from you.”

“But we’re not buying it,” the Archbishop chimed in.

“Exactly,” said the Prime Minister. “If you were selling fifty per cent plus one share, of course you’d be entitled to far more than that, but the ownership does not change here. Like we said, it’s a pledge. The value of the pledge is always greater than the value of the loan.”

“Oh, you bastards...!” Tomo Poskok sighed, slumping into his chair and leaning his head back in thought, while the Prime Minister continued explaining that the operation would be carried out through a Liechtenstein offshore company he and the Archbishop would establish, in equal shares and in the utmost secrecy, of course, since neither the Church nor the Government could officially be involved in any of this...

The founder and owner of Poskok International Holding PLC was not as surprised by the Prime Minister’s and the Archbishop’s proposal as they seemed to think. He appeared more taken aback and offended than he truly was, just as he always had been, in every deal he ever struck, even the most lucrative ones, playing the part of the wronged pauper, a hapless soul reluctantly agreeing to something that would bring him nothing but loss and worry.

Still, not all of this was an act. Despite his wealth, Tomislav Poskok had always been genuinely burdened by a sense that his efforts were never justly rewarded, and nothing he had acquired could rid him of the gnawing feeling that he had been brazenly short-changed and cheated by ne’er-do-wells who had invested, worked, and risked far less than he had.

That enduring dissatisfaction had only deepened in recent years. It had become more oppressive since the great global crisis shook the world and dried up the channels through which money once greased the wheels of his business. The banks had turned more cautious than ever, ruthlessly demanding guarantees in their insatiable pursuit of profit. Or else they simply closed down shop, retreating into their shells like turtles, while the vital growth and expansion of his company slowed day by day, inch by inch, and at last ground to a halt. Bogged down in place, burdened with debts far exceeding the value of his assets, with revenues visibly dwindling – in a word, fucked – Poskok had come to these two seeking help. It was, he believed, their duty. Something greater, more lasting and more solid than the three of them was at stake. To stand behind the largest Croatian company, to breathe new strength into it by expanding into neighbouring markets, that was a matter of national interest, something each of them had once sworn to uphold. ‘Still doth Croatia stand while we live,’ old Gaj wrote, and anyone could go and see those very verses, framed and glazed on the wall beside the fireplace, penned in Gaj’s own hand many years ago, right there in the Great Chamber of the Brotherhood of the Croatian Covenant.

The Archbishop and the Prime Minister, it seemed, did not share his patriotic fervour but nor did they entirely disappoint. Tomo Poskok had already had the honour of witnessing what a greedy little grub His Eminence Lovrić was, and he knew his cousin Luka to be a shameless swindler. All things considered, he had not fared worse than he expected. What remained was

the same old bitter taste of betrayal, but he knew he would have felt the same even if he had been more successful negotiating. In fact, in solitary, private moments, he would bring himself to admit that this bitter feeling which had always driven him forward lay at the root of all his cravings. The stores, the factories, the farmlands, the dairies, and the slaughterhouses, everything he owned he owed in no small part to a persistent, incurable spiritual ache: the sense that fate was unjust towards him.

“You no longer invite me to join you in boar hunting,” the Prime Minister said at parting, with a hint of reproach.

“Luka, last time you shot the gamekeeper.”

“Well, shit happens. Hunting accidents and so forth...” Meter began to apologise.

“That happened in the car park,” Poskok reminded him, zipping up his jacket. “We hadn’t even reached the hunting grounds.”

“Is he all right?”

“The gamekeeper? He’s in a wheelchair, turned to drink, his wife’s left him, his kids hate him, the neighbours won’t talk to him. Only the dog’s stuck by him.”

“What remarkable creatures, dogs” said the Prime Minister.

Later, driving home along the wet, winding road over the slopes of Mt Medvednica, Tomislav Poskok nearly skidded into a ditch when he came round a bend and was blinded by the headlights of a vehicle so large that for a second he thought it was a lorry. He didn’t even need to look to know who was behind the wheel of the hulking four-by-four. He just swore and shook his head. He left the Mercedes in the garage and took the lift to the second floor of his empty, silent house. He went to the kitchen and kissed his wife on the crown of her head. She was watching a Kevin Costner film on a little TV perched on the fridge and nibbling wholegrain biscuits.

“All right?” she asked absently.

“Yeah,” he replied, taking the lid off a silver tray and scowling at the pink roast beef delivered from a fancy Zagreb restaurant, its edges carefully decorated with cherry tomatoes and pickled onions. He loathed Sunday evenings, because the staff had the day off, and he had to eat catered rubbish.

“Sorry,” he muttered, opening the fridge and taking out winter salami and Emmental cheese, while she shifted slightly to the side to keep the screen in view.

“What kind of car is Zdeslav driving these days?” he asked as he made the sandwich.

“A Hummer.”

“When did he buy a Hummer?”

“I bought it for him,” his wife said plainly, and her husband just gaped, forgetting the sandwich midway to his mouth. The few moments of silence that followed made her realise this might not have been the kind of decision one makes on a daily basis and probably called for an explanation, so she tore her gaze from the TV set.

“You know how I always worry when he goes out at night and I can’t sleep until I hear him come in. There are all sorts of lunatics on the road, and he and his lot tend to drink a little or he could be tired...”

“And that’s why you bought him a two-tonne off-roader?”

“If he crashes, isn’t it better that the other one gets killed?” Marija Poskok reasoned.

“Mothers, eh,” he said, and finally took a bite.

Look at us, he thought a little later. Just the two of us nestled in the kitchen of a two-thousand-square-metre house. But the thought did not make him unhappy. On the contrary, among the hundreds, perhaps thousands of things, human beings, and phenomena that wore down Tomislav Poskok’s nerves and digestion day in, day out, these quiet evenings with his wife were rare moments of utter peace and happiness. He had married once and had not given it a second thought. Well, not in earnest, anyway. He liked sex but was not, how to put it, into acrobatics. In that department he was conservative and stern, ascetically chaste. At board meetings he did not allow lewd jokes. Once, he even sacked an executive whose mind was constantly on boobs and bums; he simply could no longer listen to the man’s shameless giggling. Behaving like a proper plonker, for God’s sake!

He found it immature and could not bring himself to trust anyone with such a pathetic weakness. He would recoil if a business partner turned up for dinner with a mistress in tow. The barely legal girl in a tight dress, Poskok believed, utterly ruined the man’s professional credibility. And if she happened to have fake boobs – one of the worst things humankind had ever invented besides value-added tax – the meeting was doomed to fail. He could not talk about business, margins, percentages, or transport costs, about anything, really. He would lose appetite and put down cutlery the moment a pair of taut, silicone half-moons perched above his table.

Speaking of, Zdeslav’s girlfriend – Dragica, Luna, whatever her name is – she’s got the implants. Tomo Poskok had never commented on it, not even to his wife, but he strongly disapproved of his son’s relationship with the singer. Truth be told, there were many things he disapproved of when it came to his only son. He had appointed him to the board, made him marketing director, but the boy was sloppy and irresponsible, and if he had not been his own flesh and blood, he would have shown him the door long ago. Take this Luna business. He was furious but said nothing when he discovered that Poskok International Holding had footed the bill for her latest album. The final straw came when Zdeslav wanted to use one of her songs – a forgettable little radio ditty called ‘Take a Taste of Me’ – for a crisps advert and to pay her a sum that would have covered the entire annual expenses – wages, rent, utilities – of a small shop. Tomislav tore up the contract and waited for his son to come and ask why it had not been signed. Luckily, the boy had enough sense to stay away.

Tomo ate his sandwich, drank half a litre of yoghurt, and watched a bit of the film, trying to catch up with the plot. Kevin Costner was a shipbuilder, and the blonde woman... he couldn’t quite make sense of her.

“Is he a widower?”

“His wife drowned, and he wrote letters to her, put them in a bottle, and threw into the sea.”

“Oh dear,” Tomo sympathised.

“This woman found the letters, and that’s how they met.”

Interesting, thought Tomislav. Pity he had not watched from the beginning. But romances were not his cup of tea anyway. Especially the ones with widowers. He was aware that these were the best kind, though, as there was no real romance unless the hero’s wife was either dead or about to die.

“Good night.”

“Good night.”

He paused at the door, meaning to say something else, but the thought had vanished, and she had already turned back to the screen. He closed the door and went upstairs, into his study, and from there into another, smaller room, to which only he had the key. The room had only two pieces of furniture: a heavy metal safe with his most valuable papers and a cabinet for his hunting rifles. He pulled on a pair of clean white gloves, opened the cabinet, and took out a gleaming walnut chest. Inside there lay the baby of his collection, the most precious artefact of all, a unique work of art crafted by the Swedish master Viggo Olsson and his son Ulf. He felt the tension melt away. All his worries and anxieties seemed to drain like wastewater as he gently polished the beautiful black rifle with soft white cloths.

After tonight’s conversation, he knew one thing for certain; he would no longer support Luka Meter, even if the man were his cousin a hundred times over. In fact, he would do everything he could, spare no expense, to bring him down. The Archbishop, unfortunately, was a more complicated issue. Still, something could be done. “If there’s one thing in this life that’s certain, if history has taught us anything, it’s that you can kill anyone,” Tomislav Poskok recalled the line from *The Godfather: Part II*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola.

The grandfather clock in the drawing room downstairs struck midnight just as he finished, and the oiled bolt of the rifle clicked smoothly into place.

On Blowing on the First Date

He waited idly as she was getting ready to go out, flicking through television channels and thumbing through the pile of tabloids scattered across the coffee table, all the gossip rags in the country, which his sweetheart was buying without fail. Eventually, he wandered into the bathroom. She had just stepped out of the shower and was beginning to apply her makeup, wrapped in a large towel.

He could not resist the sight – he never could. Stepping up behind her, he placed one hand on her bottom and grabbed her boob with the other.

“Don’t, we haven’t got the time,” she warned, lining her eyes with a black pencil.

“Oh, now we haven’t got time?” Zdeslav objected. “I’ve been waiting for over half an hour.”

His fingers traced the damp insides of her thighs, and before she could protest, he had parted her labia covered in short curly hair and slipped the middle finger inside, prompting a small gasp of shock that made her smudge her eyeliner on the cheek.

“You moron, I could’ve poked my eye out,” she scolded him.

But he was not discouraged by that horrifying scenario. Instead, he dropped his trousers and pants around his ankles, adjusted himself, and started fucking. Luna finally put down the eyeliner and the cotton pad soaked in cleansing milk she was using to wipe the smudge beneath her eye, and leaned forward meekly, checking her reflection in the mirror.

She sucked in her cheeks, pouted her meaty lips, angled her head, looked at herself through a lock of hair, eyelids half closed, and eventually tossed back her head like she was laughing heartily. Zdeslav recognised the poses from the photos of a recent interview she had for a magazine and was not quite sure what to make of it. On the one hand, it was not exactly arousing to see her striking photoshoot poses mid-fuck. On the other, she *did* look stunning.

“What is life without you, dear...” she hummed absently and then remembered he was behind her.

“Step it up a little,” she urged, slapping her buttocks against him.

“I can’t, give me a second.”

“Oh, Zdeslav!” she cried out, and he smiled. This was what he had been waiting for.

“You beast! What are you doing to me! You’re wrecking me! Ram me! Ram me! Ram me with your rod! It’s coming out of my mouth, that’s how big it is! Aaaaah! Aaaaah! Look at you riding me! Man, what a ride! What a power ride! What a fucking ride!” Luna chanted wildly, twisting and grinding against him. Zdeslav shut his eyes, ready to cum, when a message alert chirped from the phone on the shelf under the mirror, and all her passion evaporated in an instant.

“Marcelo wants to know if we’re picking him up or he should take a taxi,” she read aloud from the screen, her tone suddenly sober.

“Tell him to be outside in half an hour.”

“Hang on, I can’t type like this,” she said as he started thrusting again. Zdeslav paused, catching sight of his flushed face in the mirror.

“Right, go on then,” said Luna as she hit send. “Come on, you beast!” she growled with lust. “Wreck me! Wreck me with your cock!”

But Zdeslav was no longer in the mood.

“Fuck this,” he muttered, pulling up his pants. She wiped herself between the legs with the towel that had slipped to the floor and picked up her eyeliner.

Why does that little arsehole always have to come with us, Zdeslav wondered, tapping the steering wheel impatiently. Of course, Marcelo was not waiting outside the building, even though it had been more than an hour since Luna texted him. He was never on time, yet always looked busy and harried. Even on that Sunday evening, when he finally appeared, he bounced theatrically towards the Hummer with his arms raised, lobbed a giant leather bag onto the seat beside him and – mwah! mwah! – air-kissed both of Luna’s cheeks.

“Hey, Lav,” he then greeted Zdeslav.

For some reason – possibly to avoid wasting his precious time – this fashion stylist shortened Zdeslav’s name to something no one had ever thought of before, and Zdeslav could not get used to it. It always took him a second or two to realise the guy was talking to him.

“Are we going to *Baudelaire’s*?” he asked from the back seat.

“Yes, baby,” Luna chirped.

“If they still hold our reservation,” Zdeslav added darkly. “We were supposed to be there over an hour ago.”

“He’s grumpy because he didn’t come,’ Luna whispered to Marcelo behind her hand, pretending Zdeslav could not hear. “We were right in the middle of it when your message came through.”

“Oh, my babes,” Marcelo sounded disappointed, “you didn’t need to stop on my account.”

Zdeslav could barely suppress a wild, primal urge to slam on the brakes, leap into the back seat, and pummel the man’s face to a bloody pulp.

“Well, haven’t you noticed anything about me?” Marcelo asked Luna.

“Noticed what?” she said.

“Take a better look, hon.”

Luna turned round and stared at him for a moment.

“Aaaaaah!” she finally shrieked.

“Aaaaaah!” Marcelo shrieked back.

“Aaaaaah!” she shrieked again.

“Aaaaaah!” he shrieked back again.

Alarmed, Zdeslav slammed on the brakes, and the several tonnes of the American military vehicle skidded thirty metres across the wet tarmac before it came to a halt, diagonally, across a wide New Zagreb boulevard.

“What the hell was that?” Zdeslav gasped, his hands trembling.

“Marcelo had his hair highlighted,” said Luna, beaming.

Still rattled and not quite himself when they arrived at the restaurant, Zdeslav ordered a double cognac while they were still handing in their coats. A few months earlier, *Baudelaire’s* was taken over by Lana, a former swimming champion, and her husband Dubravko, an investment adviser who, word had it, had never given a good investment tip in his life. From a booth in the corner Dubravko waved to Zdeslav and shouted that he would be needing something from him in the coming days, and Zdeslav gestured back that they would be in touch. Then he winked at Lana, and Lana winked back. A few years back, the two of them had been an item. Truth be told, among the twenty or so women in the packed restaurant – television reporters, actresses, trainee solicitors, tennis players, and fashion designers – there was hardly a woman who had not been ‘intimate’ with Zdeslav Poskok for a while, as the tabloids so delicately put it.

They settled at a table by the window as the rain poured down and ordered a starter of scallops. Luna and Marcelo kept sneaking glances at the people sitting at nearby tables, whispering behind their hands and giggling. When the scallops arrived, the stylist sniffed at them

suspiciously, and Zdeslav's singer girlfriend watched him tensely, awaiting his judgement like white smoke rising from the Vatican chimney. What should Marcelo know about shellfish, Zdeslav brooded. For God's sake, the man's from Vrbovec!

He could not wrap his head around the power this short, skinny homosexual had, not just over Luna, but over all the women he knew. Their faces would light up if he said something nice about their dress or boots or hair, or they would blush if he threw one of his barbed remarks. Fashion, to Zdeslav, was a mystery, and he had long since decided it was best to leave it that way. Once, at the urging of a previous girlfriend, he had let another self-proclaimed Zagreb stylist pick out a few wardrobe items for him, and it took him just one breakfast to realise it was a complete cock-up. When he came downstairs for breakfast, his mother nearly spurted her tea through the nose. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she laughed at the sight of him in tightly fitted houndstooth trousers that barely reached his ankles. Furious, he stuffed the entire new autumn/winter collection into a massive black bin liner and told Katica to give it away to someone, anyone. The maid had looked into the bag with such disgust, as if her employer had tasked her with disposing of a dead dog.

"Shhh, Luna, don't turn around," Marcelo whispered, and Luna froze.

"Why? Is it him?" she asked in horror.

"Uh-huh."

Her hands started shaking, and her cutlery gave a soft clink against the porcelain plate.

Zdeslav knew who it was, but he turned round anyway. With two mates from Kajzerica in came Milan Grbić, a former national taekwondo champion, now a café owner and loan shark. He and Luna had been in a relationship for years; she had even thanked him tenderly and sworn eternal love on the cover of her second-to-last album. They were engaged to be married, but at their engagement party, for no particular reason – perhaps he had one whisky too many, or perhaps one blow to the head too many over a long and fruitful sports career – Milan had nearly beaten Luna's father to death with a leg of a chair, broken her mother's upper arm, and knocked out four of her front teeth.

That week, *Lucky* magazine ran a photo of grieving Luna on its cover, sacrilegiously taken without a speck of make-up on her face. The headline 'Now he's Gone Too Far' marked the end of her love for the gangster. Milan, to be fair, bitterly regretted his actions, begged for forgiveness, pleaded with the popular singer to take him back, but she remained unyielding. His brutal outburst was a trauma that would likely never heal, she used to say in every interview since, and in recent months that standard line came with the added comment that in Zdeslav she had finally found a caring and sensible man who truly loved her, a boundless source of inspiration, and a rock to lean on.

The man who was now both inspiration and rock in her life and career looked at the man who had beaten his sweetheart's parents. Milan, leaning on the bar, was smirking contemptuously and staring at them with brazen insolence. A wave of unease washed over Zdeslav, and he barely managed to hold the man's challenging gaze. Fortunately, the waiter arrived with their salmon and stepped into the line of fire between the two men, sparing Zdeslav

the humiliation of having to lower his head in shame. At the very beginning of his relationship with Luna, Zdeslav had once gone to his father and asked discretely if there was anyone in Serbia, Bosnia, or maybe Bulgaria who, in the strictest confidence and for a generous fee, might be willing to demonstrate to the former taekwondo champion combat techniques he might not be familiar with. In no subtle terms his father had told him to leave it be and never ask anyone else. Even his father, the fearless Tomo Poskok, was not willing to get involved with maniacs and criminals from Kajzerica.

The evening took a pleasant turn when Milan and his cronies turned out to have stopped in just for a drink, and Luna relaxed again, joking and trading gossip with Marcelo. The fashion stylist knew every gossip in town, even the most outrageous stories, like the one about a well-known lawyer who, one night, confessed to the lead actress of a highly watched local TV series that his marriage was practically over. She took pity on him and gave him a blowjob in a car park in Travno.

“He came in her new Dior scarf,” Marcelo whispered, leaning in.

“Didn’t she swallow?” asked Luna wickedly.

“Not on a first date,” said Marcelo, feigning moral outrage, which sent them both into a muffled giggle.

“Hey, you two, table manners,” protested Zdeslav.

“My dear Zdeslav is squeamish,” Luna explained to Marcelo, patting Zdeslav on the back of his hand. “What can you do, he’s a country boy... Darling, where are you Poskoks from again?”

“Why, Dragica, what’s it to you?” he retorted.

“Ha-ha,” snarled the singer.

A tense silence fell between them. They sized each other up with scorn, and Marcelo, in an effort to restore good mood, began to sing softly:

“Take a taste of me,

trust me, it’s no lie.”

Luna brightened and joined in with gusto:

“Take a taste of me,

And you will be mine

One bite at a time.”

They got so carried away that they stood up and danced a short round, arms raised, gently bumping their hips together before the entire *Baudelaire’s*.

“Wow!” Marcelo sighed, flopping back into his chair, suddenly spent like a ballet soloist who had just performed a premiere at the Bolshoi. Then he frowned, remembering, and Zdeslav froze before he opened his mouth, knowing what was coming.

“Wait a minute,” said the fashion stylist, “did you record that ad to this tune?”

“We haven’t,” the singer replied coldly. “The contract’s still on the CEO’s desk. But he’s going to sign it, isn’t he, Zdeslav? Daddy’s going to sign it.”

“He is,” Zdeslav muttered.

“Darling, trust me,” Marcelo said to Zdeslav with absolute conviction, “you’re mad if you don’t take it. That song was made for a crisp commercial.”

It was sometime after two in the morning when they left the restaurant. Zdeslav was already tired and tipsy and wanted to go home, but the other two were keen to keep the night going, so they headed off to *The Cattle Shed*, a turbo-folk club out in Sesvete. They sat in a corner beneath the speakers, shouting over the noise, and the champagne was certainly not what it was advertised to be. A singer from Serbia – Zdeslav had never heard of her before, though he was clearly alone in that respect – was dancing on their table, and Luna joined her. Together, they crushed shards of glass and squashed canapé sandwiches with high heels.

On one or two occasions, Marcelo and Luna went to the toilet together on some mysterious business, and despite the deafening thump of the bass above his head, Zdeslav managed to fall asleep. He had no idea where he was or what time it was when she woke him up. High on cocaine, she dragged him, still groggy, to a storeroom, among crates and brooms, where she hitched up her mini and pulled down her knickers. He fucked her in a daze, and it felt like it went on for hours. On the way out of the storeroom, he thought he saw the taekwondo champion again in the crowd looking at him with contempt, but perhaps it was just an illusion in the dim and irritatingly flickering light.

At last, after what must have been his tenth ‘Shall we?’, Luna and Marcelo decided to prove they were not entirely heartless. They stepped outside, and Zdeslav, watching the sky blush over the unrendered suburban houses, swore under his breath. He would be sleepy and useless all day again. If only the old bastard did not call the board meeting. And then, as the cherry on top, his girlfriend’s little monkey piped up:

“Guys, I’m hungry.”

“You know what,” said Luna, “I could eat something too.”

A sign reading ‘Poskok’ in blue letters glowed in the cold, misty dawn above the entrance to a recently opened shop in the nearly deserted Maksimirska Street. The shop assistant was taking a crate from a driver delivering bread and pastry.

“What a tight-arse,” Luna muttered to Marcelo as she got out of the car, “taking us to Daddy’s shop so he doesn’t have to treat us.”

“And where am I supposed to take you?!” snapped Zdeslav wearily. “Tell me, where, at this hour? Do you prefer a burek from the bus station?”

“I’m fucking with you, love.”

Zdeslav stayed by the till at the entrance. He picked up a packet of chewing gum, just to buy something, and placed it on the counter, waiting for Luna and Marcelo to finish ordering at the deli section. The cashier, he realised, had recognised him. She didn’t say anything, but the frightened expression on her face left no doubt that she knew he was the owner’s son.

“Thank God the rain’s stopped,” she said timidly.

Zdeslav nodded in agreement. In situations like this, he often felt more uncomfortable than his subordinates.

“Zdeslav!” he heard his singer girlfriend squawk from the other end of the shop. “This cow here won’t make me a sandwich!”

Zdeslav trudged wearily between the aisles, listening to the ensuing argument as he approached.

“If you want ready-made sandwiches, they’re in the fridge over there. What I can do here is slice the salami and cut the roll, and you make the sandwich yourself,” the shop assistant said.

“No, I want *you* to make it for me,” Luna insisted.

“Madam, I just told you, I’m not allowed to do that.”

“What’s the problem?” Zdeslav asked when he reached them.

“She won’t make me a sandwich,” Luna said, lifting her arms in disbelief.

“I’m not allowed to make it,” the shop assistant repeated.

“What do you mean, you’re not allowed?” asked Zdeslav.

“The boss doesn’t allow it.”

“Well, I’m telling you that you are allowed.”

“Well, I’m telling you to fuck off, both of you,” the girl snapped finally, and Marcelo burst into hysterical laughter.

Zdeslav raised his eyebrows. Clearly, the girl at the deli counter had not recognised him.

And indeed she had not. The twenty-six-year-old Koraljka Mlakić had no idea who was standing in front of her. On top of that, she had not slept well. Her flatmate’s boyfriend had come over, and the bedframe had been banging all night against the wall right next to her head. She had listened to their moaning and panting till dawn, and her period was due any day, so she was irritable and lonely and had cried in the dark, punching herself in the head in despair. Her life, generally speaking, was shitty enough without this bleached bimbo in stilettos and ripped nylons and her moronic boyfriend talking down to her and ordering her to do something that was not her job.

“Excuse me, don’t you know who I am?” Zdeslav asked with disdain.

“No, and I don’t care,” she said, failing to notice that Goga at the till was now peering nervously from behind the spice rack, gesturing to her to shut up by pressing the index finger to her lips. But even if she had seen her, Koraljka was past shutting up.

“Koraljka,” Zdeslav read the name off the badge on her coat. “Koraljka,” he repeated patiently, “imagine I’m someone important, someone who can get you sacked. Would you still tell me to fuck off or would you make me the sandwich instead?”

“You know what,” said Koraljka, “you could be God Almighty for all I care, so fuck off.”

Marcelo, that coked-up poof, burst out laughing again, and Zdeslav thrust his hand over the deli counter.

“Fine,” he said, “give me the roll and salami.”

“What about my sandwich?” Luna chimed in again.

“I’ll make you the fucking sandwich, for fuck’s sake!” Zdeslav exploded and then turned to the shop assistant in a calmer tone:

“And you’ll be getting a call from the HR today. Find some time to come and collect your employment record book.”

By the time Zdeslav finally got rid of the two and drove up to Mt Medvednica, the sun had already climbed high over the city, and yesterday’s rain was steaming off the streets. He hoped his father had already left, but he was not that lucky. The old man was sitting at the far end of the long dining table, eating buttered toast and reading the paper. He did not respond to Zdeslav’s ‘Good morning’. Zdeslav told Joža to bring him an omelette and sat down at the opposite end. Through the window, he could hear birds singing up in the tree crowns.

“Can you imagine what happened to me this morning in the shop?” Zdeslav began, knowing his father would be pleased if they talked business. “The assistant refused to make me a sandwich.”

“Of course she did,” his father replied. “It’s a retail shop, not a sandwich bar. Do you know what the fines are if the inspector catches you doing that?”

Zdeslav said nothing. The conversation had clearly taken a wrong turn.

“I can have the Legal send you a copy of the *Official Gazette* with that regulation today,” his father offered without lifting his head.

Then they fell silent again for a short while.

“The shop assistant told me to fuck off,” the son tried once more.

“Good for her,” said Tomislav Poskok. She took the words out from his mouth. By returning home from a night out at seven in the morning on a workday, his only son had it coming anyway. Finally he looked at him.

“Take a shower and dress up. Board meeting’s at half ten.”

Then he left, brisk and upright, surrounded by a cloud of aftershave, while Zdeslav remained staring through bloodshot eyes until his head dropped and thudded against the table.

Bloody Fucking Devious Lie

Summer had arrived, and all our hopes were pinned on the tourist season not flopping. The government must have had a counter somewhere, the final digit flipping up every time a foreigner crossed the border, while the Prime Minister and the cabinet knelt in a semicircle around the device, fingers crossed, murmuring prayers in solemn unison. It was our only salvation, the last thing we still believed in as our national economy was unrelentingly going to hell.

Things at the Poskok International Holding PLC were more dreadful than ever. The season brought a predictable uptick in retail sales, but the income did not nearly suffice to cover expenses, salaries, debts to suppliers, and the instalments on a myriad of loans. While the dairy plant tried to pacify workers frustrated by delayed wages, the slaughterhouse was being blockaded by livestock farmers who had not been paid since September the previous year. Barely had they salvaged a shipment of fruit from rotting at the customs terminal with a last-minute

partial payment, when one bank or another threatened to seize the farmland. There were leaks everywhere. No sooner had they patched up one, another would burst open with unprecedented force. Summer came, and all business partners saw it as the perfect moment to start blackmailing. They knew no wholesaler could afford empty shelves come July and August.

Working in such frustrating circumstances was deeply stressful; people cracked every day. Men shouted and argued, women sobbed despondently. One experienced manager, Lovro – otherwise a calm, sober, quiet man who always did his homework and had the answer ready before he heard the question – stood up in a meeting and began screaming his head off, undoing his tie and shirt.

“What?! What more do you want from me, you greedy bastard?!?” he shouted at the chairman of the board. “Here, take it!” he said, flinging his tie on the desk. “Take this too!” he said, tossing the shirt. “This too!” he shouted again, pulling off his white undershirt. And just as everyone was nervously bracing themselves for the madman to reach for his belt and drop the trousers, Lovro slumped his shoulders, stopped half-naked, and stood there panting. No one dared look at him. Only the boss eyed the tattoo of his favourite football club’s crest above the left nipple.

“For fuck’s sake, Lovro,” said Tomislav Poskok breaking the grave silence, “I never would’ve guessed you’re a Hajduk fan.

Poskok alone kept his cool amidst the hullabaloo. Board meetings were always the conduits of frothing rage, hate, and threats, calmly observed from the head of the table. Sometimes he seemed miles away, lost in thought, but everyone knew he heard and remembered every word and figure better than the minutes taken. And if he chose to, he would catch you out for the smallest inconsistency with something you had said two or three years ago. The only person in the room he trusted implicitly was the man seated beside him, a man who was not even the board member. No one knew his title, his role, or even his full name. They simply called him Jakovljević, and only among themselves, because no one ever spoke to him, and Jakovljević never spoke to them. If this tall, gaunt, dark-haired man had something to say, he would lean in and whisper to the old man, who would listen and nod, brooding over his words.

Word had it that Jakovljević had studied theology and had been ordained priest for a while, serving a parish somewhere in Podravina. Some were convinced he had ties to the intelligence services. Others speculated he had once lived in a jungle, in a skull-shaped cave beside a waterfall, accompanied by his faithful dog named Devil, and that the natives called him the Phantom.

Whoever he was and whatever his function, he made Zdeslav miserable. Never in his life had he got as much of his father’s attention or affection as this Jakovljević bloke did. In recent months, he had felt particularly disregarded. With expenses slashed down, the marketing department lost almost its entire budget, and all his beautifully conceived campaigns, the TV ads, the giant billboards, the prize draws, were shelved indefinitely. All the remaining business could have been run by a slightly brighter, trained chimpanzee: releasing those vulgar, colourful supplements readers threw out of the newspapers, printing hideously designed catalogues

advertising sensational discounts on iceberg lettuce, from 2.99 to 2.49 a kilo. Some time ago, he had decided to play dumb and resubmit the proposal to use the hit by a popular local singer to advertise crisps. Next morning, his secretary relayed a message: he was to report to his father as soon as he got in. The old man was waiting for him by the window of his office on the sixteenth floor, holding the proposal in his hand, and beckoned him over. For a few moments, they looked at the city through the glass.

“Next time you send me something like this, make sure you’ve got a parachute on your back,” his father finally said. “I’ll throw you out this bloody window with my own two hands, so help me God.”

That stupid son of his drove him mad. Nothing infuriated him more than seeing Zdeslav furtively fiddle with his iPhone under the table in the middle of the board meeting about another disaster threatening to sink the entire company. Tomo Poskok loathed the iPhone. He believed all hell broke lose with it and often told people it was no coincidence it was launched on the eve of the global financial crisis. To him that pointless Apple gadget was the epitome of a wanton, decadent civilisation.

Lately, though, he had not had much time for such reflections. Work consumed every minute and every ounce of his attention. He felt as if he was running figures in his sleep only to wake up more exhausted than when he went to bed. The figures never added up. Money was nowhere to be found. The entire country was on the brink of bankruptcy. Eventually, even the state, their biggest debtor, stopped paying. Since May, he had not received a single lipa for the goods delivered to hospitals, schools, nurseries, the army, police, or government offices and departments, just as he had not received a single subsidy promised for his farms and orchards.

Repeatedly, Tomislav Poskok tried to reach his cousin Meter, but the Prime Minister would not take his calls. Instead, he would send messages through his secretary as if the country’s biggest businessman were a nobody. He stopped attending the Brotherhood meetings, stopped showing up in the VIP box at the Maksimir stadium when the national team played football, stopped dining at Dubravkin Put, avoided places where they might run into each other. He even failed to turn up for the opening of the dairy processing plant in Petrinja, one of the few capital investments in the recent years of crisis. Instead, he sent the Minister of Agriculture, the stupidest man Tomo Poskok had ever met.

Yet the Prime Minister had followed through on one promise – he had granted the loan the three of them had agreed on that April Sunday. Poskok signed the fiduciary agreement for half the stocks, carefully drafted by his friend Rudi Justin, with a law firm representing a Liechtenstein-based offshore company. A week later, the funds needed to buy the Slovenian retail chain were transferred to an account in the Czech Republic. He barely resisted the temptation to dip into that pool to quench more immediate, everyday fires.

The acquisition of the Slovenian chain split the company’s board. Half thought it was suicide, the other half saw it as the only logical move left. Of course, Tomo Poskok was aware that, in truth, the majority were against it. At least half of those in favour were saying what they thought he wanted to hear. Yet despite his associates’ disapproval, he placed his trust in his own

business instinct, which told him this was the right thing to do. It had been a long time since he had done anything as risky. For years he had not felt that familiar unease, that blind terror of charging into his own doom, which had been at the core of every major business venture. He would never have reached the top and remained there if he had shied away from that wild surge of adrenaline that truly drove business. Retreating to a fall-back position, playing it safe, selling off assets, and waiting for better days was a sure path to an early grave. Now was the moment to strike, if he wanted to survive.

He had the takeover proposal drafted and revised countless times. For weeks he polished the figures, inflated them here and there but not so much to spot them from a mile away, redacted entire chapters, and changed his mind over and over. And when he was finally done, when the document, bound in blue leather, landed on his desk, he leafed through its pages with a sense of panic.

It looked bad.

It was shit.

Every word, every bit of that business proposal was a bloody fucking devious lie.

Of course, that did not necessarily mean it would not work.

On the contrary, Tomo Poskok boosted his own morale, did not nearly all his greatest achievements start with a bloody fucking devious lie even worse than this one?

Once more he looked at the sum he was prepared to tender. Only a moment ago it seemed too low. Now it seemed too high. He paused, holding the pen mid-air, changed his mind, and closed the folder. Enough! What's done is done. There's no turning back.

In the end, he did not even get a chance to take the proposal out of his briefcase and show it to the Sretenovič brothers.

They were twins, Marko and Janko Sretenovič. Slovenes through and through, of course. The Kekec film character was probably their first cousin. Their business trajectory was not all that different from Poskok's. They had started in the early nineties with a small supermarket in Ljubljana. It was an unpromising backstreet space leased from a wholesale company, yet with a few tricks – really just the basics of the trade which the sluggish socialist managers failed to master – they turned it into the highest-grossing outlet in Slovenia within six months. Four years later, they bought the wholesale company, moved into the offices of their former landlords, and sent those same landlords off to paint carpeting on their holiday cottages.

And they really excelled. Sometimes, after work, Poskok would get in his car and drive all the way to Brežice just to see what their store looked like, check the prices, supplies, shelf arrangements, that sort of thing. He brazenly copied clever ideas, just as they stole ideas from him. In fact, whenever he spotted his brainchild in their store, he was swept by a surge of pride. Later, of course, they got to know each other and maintained decent relations. They competed for companies in Bosnia and Serbia with varying degrees of success, but there was no bad blood between them, no matter who came out on top. Towards foreign suppliers they stood united, presenting a common front whenever someone demanded an outrageously high cut for their

goods. Still, they did not socialise much. The Sretenovič brothers had no interest in hunting, and for the life of him, Tomo Poskok could not understand what they saw in show jumping.

In recent years, things had gone badly for them, even worse than for him. They picked a wrong moment to embark on building a monstrously large, megalomaniac shopping centre on the outskirts of Jesenice. Of course, no career path is a straight line. Poskok too had suffered failure, bit the dust many a time, but that investment was unimaginable. Poskok would have attributed this move to youthful, reckless ambition, had it been the case, but men with such a vast business experience should never have ventured into such a thing. Once, on his trip with Marija to Milan, he made a detour just to see the centre and wandered, aghast, through the vast, partly unfinished structure. Aside from the supermarket, which seemed to be doing all right, only a few ground-floor units had been rented out, but even those would not last much longer, he thought, judging by the bored expressions on the shop assistants' faces. He went upstairs and found abandoned plastic sheeting, scaffolding, and paint buckets with crusted rims – a sure sign that the Sretenovič brothers owed money to the contractors. His heart clenched as if their misery were his own. Then he came to his senses and realised it was an opportunity for him. For the first time, a thought occurred to him that it was time to spread to the neighbouring market.

On a Tuesday in late July, he headed to Ljubljana with only Jakovljević in tow. He even refused to take a driver. A few days earlier, his wife had asked if he would be bringing Zdeslav along, and he just said no. She paused to look at him. Tomo expected her to say something more, but she did not.

When he sat down with the twins to lunch, Poskok decided that the one on his left was Marko and the other on his right Janko, but made sure not to call them by name. Instead, he addressed both as 'friend'. The Sretenovič brothers were so alike you could not tell them apart, which gave rise to plenty of jokes in the Slovenian press, notorious for its wit. They hardly ate. Tomo did not get past the warm starter, and the twins ate even less. Though they were stocky, meaty men, they toyed with their food, pushed it about with forks, and gave the plates to the waiter half full. All three declined dessert – as is customary for serious businessmen in these parts – and ordered coffee instead.

"So, you want to buy us out," said Janko, deciding it was time to move past the polite chitchat about the abominable territorial disputes between their two countries.

"Oh, you've heard about that?"

"Tomo," Marko chimed in, eyebrows raised in reproof.

"All right," Poskok conceded. "It's true. I have a proposal for you. A really good one."

"The balls on him," said Marko, turning to his brother, who gave him a mischievous wink.

"I'm not joking. I'd really like you to take a look. I promise, you won't regret it when you see what I'm offering."

"Please don't," Janko cut him off. "Leave it be."

"You've got someone else? Already closed the deal?" asked Poskok.

Janko shook his head, and Marko explained:

“We haven’t and we’re not selling. We gave it some thought, to be honest, but eventually... It doesn’t make sense. It’s silly. The company’s solid. I mean, as solid as any can be these days.”

“We’ve stabilised,” Janko added. “Got rid of some properties, plugged the biggest holes and...” he knocked on the table for good luck, “I think we’ve got a decent shot at pulling through.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that,” Tomo nodded, then pounced with a question:

“You got rid of properties?”

“Jesenice. You saw the place,” said Marko, and Janko waved his hands gesturing that the problem was solved.

“Oh, come on, who on earth was sucker enough to buy that monstrosity?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“You’re bluffing,” said Tomo, squinting suspiciously.

“No, really, we wouldn’t lie to you,” said Janko.

“I swear on my children, we’re doing fine,” Marko declared, hand to chest.

Poskok paused for a moment. One brother had two daughters; the other could not have children. He and his wife had tried for years to no avail. But which one was which...?

“In fact, we could buy *you* out,” Janko added casually.

“Oh, brilliant,” said Tomo cheerfully. “If only you had the money...”

“Money?” said one of the twins.

“Hah!” said the other.

“We’re loaded, bursting at the seams,” concluded the first.

Then all three smiled at the unbeatable joke.

“All right then, boys,” Tomislav Poskok decided to play along, “I’ll just sit tight and wait for your offer.”

“What if we don’t come to you?” Janko Sretenović said in a more serious tone.

“What if we go to Liechtenstein?” suggested Marko Sretenović with a sly grin.

Blood whooshed in Poskok’s ears, and a trickle of cold sweat ran down the back of his summer shirt. He glanced discreetly at Jakovljević, who was staring ahead cool as a cucumber. If he did notice – and he most certainly did – he did not bat an eye.

“With half of your company owned by someone else, you’re barely keeping your head above water, and now you dare come at us?” said Marko with a mix of indignation and disbelief.

“That thing with Liechtenstein, my friend, is a fiduciary loan, as you well know” said the owner of Poskok International Holding.

“Fiduciary arrangements are a wonderful thing,” Janko nodded.

“If you can keep up with the payments,” Marko added cautiously.

“If business is running smoothly.”

“No problem there,” said Poskok with light-hearted confidence.

“In that case, we’re happy for you...” said Marko.

“... friend,” Janko completed the sentence with a hint of menace.

Poskok leaned against the head rest, closed his eyes, and kept silent until they drove past Trebnje, when he finally opened them and said: “Pull over!”

Jakovljević stopped the car at the side of the road winding gently across rolling green hills. Tomislav Poskok got out and started kicking at the grey pebbles lining the asphalt, while his associate looked around the landscape. A farm with an orchard stood in the distance under a wooded slope, on the edge of a wide, unfenced pasture where, perhaps fifty metres away, a herd of cows was grazing peacefully.

“Fuck this!” Poskok exploded, ruining his handmade Italian loafers. “Shitheads! Fucking traitorous shitheads! May the worms feed on their corpses! They fucked me over, see?”

“Wait, you don’t know that,” Jakovljević tried to calm him down. “Maybe they didn’t...”

“What is it that I don’t know? Don’t be naïve, this was all part of the plan. They set me up. Lovrić and Meter. The pricks set me up,” Poskok repeated, then bent down, grabbed a rock, and flung it across the pasture. The herd raised their heads in mild surprise, and a large black beast – a bull, judging by the build and bearing – separated from the rest and took a few steps in their direction. “It was a trap! They lured me into a trap. Gave me the loan and now are making sure I can’t pay it back!” the boss explained to Jakovljević as he threw another stone. Somewhat alarmed, Jakovljević noticed that the bull had taken a few more steps toward them.

“Why do you think the government hasn’t paid a single invoice in the past three months? They have no intention to pay them, now or in the future. Nor will they go through with the promised agricultural subsidies,” Poskok went on. “Meter is set on running us down. Bleeding us dry with outstanding payments so we can’t settle the loan.”

“But this doesn’t make sense,” Jakovljević pointed out. “He owes you, you owe him.”

“Oh no, no, my dear fellow!” said Poskok and flung a handful of pebbles, prompting the large black beast let out a warning bellow from afar. “It’s not Meter who owes me, it’s the state. And to whom do I owe? To a Liechtenstein offshore company with no obvious connections to him, save for the state guarantees to a Czech bank given under the table. This bastard knows exactly what he’s doing! And have you noticed that the Church has recently cancelled our lease on a dozen premises?”

Jakovljević frowned, visibly confused.

“I didn’t see any red flags either. A dozen leases is hardly a thing. Peanuts. But now, as we were driving, it all came together. The whole conspiracy. They’re squeezing me from both sides, the Archbishop and Meter, trying to weaken me, break me, push me into bankruptcy, and then they take fifty percent plus one share off a silver platter.”

“And sell it to the Sretenovićs,” Jakovljević finally realised.

“To the Sretenovićs, to Lidl, to Interspar – who knows to whom these cunts have offered my head. The twins are the least of the evils...” Poskok gestured back in the direction from which they came. “The Sretenovićs mean no harm. Or have got no money. If they had the money, they’d probably mean harm. Instead, they gave me a discreet heads-up about the shitstorm coming my way. Fuck, what was I thinking? You idiot! You idiot! You idiot!” Tomo cried out, pounding his fists against his head in anguish. Then he remembered, fished the phone from his pocket, and found the Prime Minister’s number on speed dial. “Oh, thank fuck, he’s not picking up... Hey, you poofers! What’s your game, eh?! You set your sights on my blood, my sweat, my work, is

that it, you arsehole?! You cunt! You twat! You piece of shit! You moron!” Poskok shouted abuse into the Prime Minister’s voicemail inbox. Then he paused, stared helplessly at the display, and finally roared ‘aaaaah’ as he hurled the phone across the pasture. Whether that desperate scream made it onto the recording is doubtful.

Either way, Poskok’s final outburst was the last straw for the bull’s patience. Snorting furiously, it charged towards them, hooves thundering, head lowered, horns aimed to gore. But Jakovljević watched every move it made and was ready. He drew a pistol from beneath his suit jacket and fired a warning shot into the grass in front of the beast. The gunshot thundered across the peaceful pre-Alpine landscape. The bull froze, its black eyes wide with terror, then turned tail and bolted in a blind panic.

“Milivoj, what the fuck?!” Poskok whispered, stunned.

Someone emerged from the farmhouse, raising a hand to shield their eyes, and looked in their direction.

“Hit the fucking road!”