Praise for
Slanting Towards the Sea
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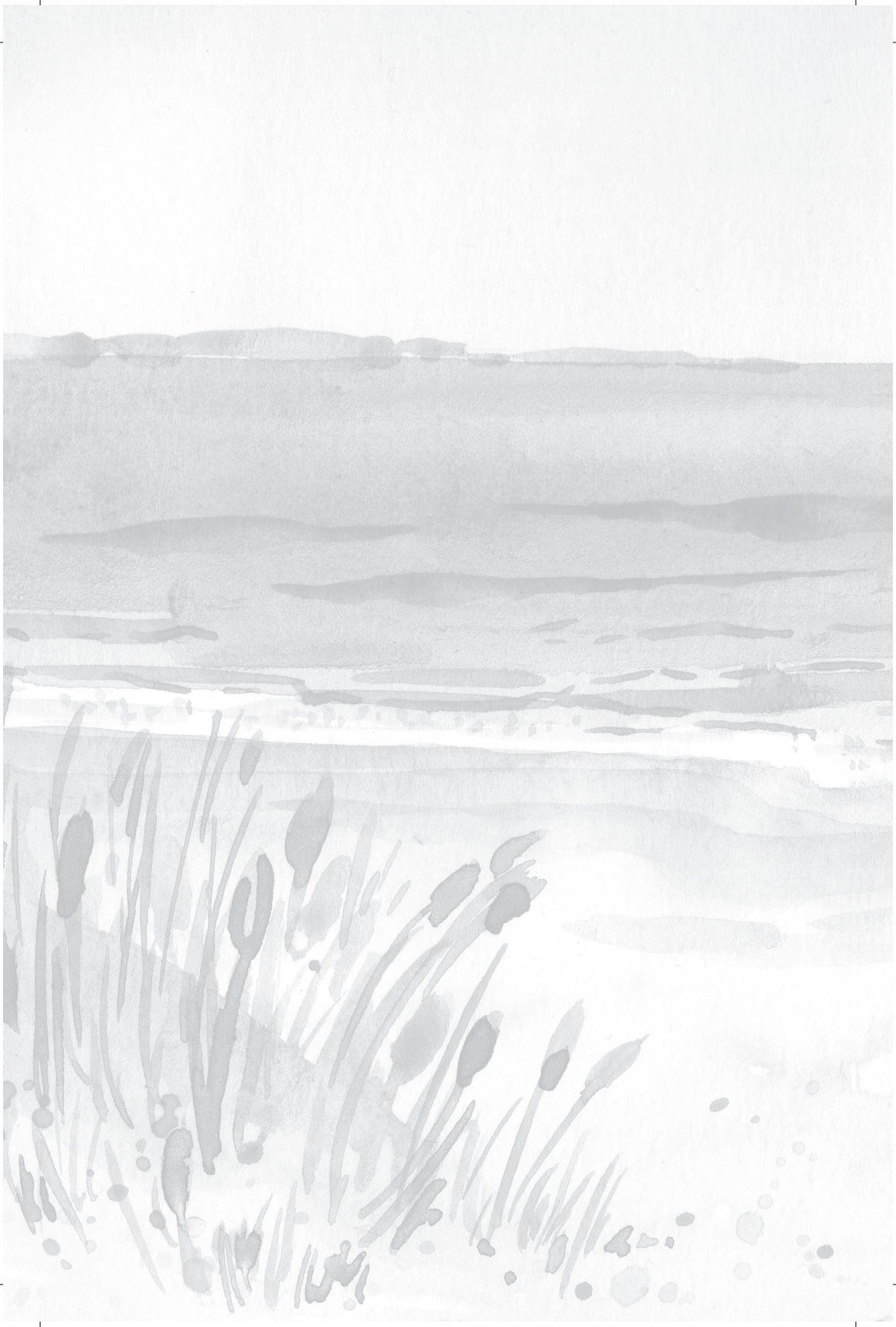

SLANTING TOWARDS THE SEA

A Novel

LIDIJA HILJE

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To Juraj, Jasna, and Iris.
You believed in me, and after a while, so did I.

PART ONE

VLAHO

ONE

SOMETIMES I STALK MY ex-husband.

I open his socials and sift through his photos. I know their sequence like I know the palm of my hand. Better even, because I can never memorize what my palm looks like, how the life line twirls into the love line, how it begins tight and uniform, but then turns ropey. It scares me to look at it, to trace the lines, to see where they might lead me in years to come. But I know Vlaho's photos by heart. They start with the most recent ones, his son, who turns six in a week, frowning at a drawing of imaginary monsters; and his daughter, an angelic creature just short of four, with the kind of wispy hair that slips through your hands like corn silk. His lovely wife, a blonde with an oversized nose but gorgeously high cheekbones, laughing into the air on their sailboat.

Once upon a time, he told me he didn't like blondes. He whispered it in my ear, brushing his fingers through my then long, lush hair. We'd been together for maybe a few months, and I'd asked him what would happen when we broke up. If he would find someone like me, or someone exactly the opposite. "That will never happen," he said. "Besides, I don't like blondes."

Lie.

Lie.

I always get stuck on a single photo. It's not a photo of their wedding day,

or the birth of their first child. In fact, it's probably the least spectacular photo in the album. They're not even the main subject—whoever took it aimed for their daughter, in focus in the foreground. But behind, her mother is looking up as my ex-husband is passing her a glass of juice, and they share *the look*. The one I used to be on the receiving end of. The one that had long ago made me feel like I was a pink diamond carved straight out of a rock. And it's for her.

I remind myself that this was my decision. I let him go, willingly. But despite reason, the image spreads through me like ink in cold water.

———

The first thing I hear in the morning is the clanks of a spoon hitting the side of the džezva, the same coffeepot that's been in our family since I can remember, and then some. Always the same six clanks, in even succession, as my father prepares his Turkish coffee. The sound invades my sleep, and I want to scream, *Could we not do this for one fucking day?*

Six clanks, and then it takes a couple of minutes for the smell of coffee to crawl under my bedroom door. Despite my earlier grumbling, when the aroma reaches me, I'm grateful for it.

Lying sideways, I stare at the shelves and dressers lining the opposite wall. Every morning I tell myself I'll pack the rag dolls, the snow globe, the bright red-and-yellow babuška, and other knickknacks, and store them in the attic. They have no business cluttering a grown woman's room. But they've been there since my childhood, and on some level, I'm afraid that if I remove them something bad will happen. As if more bad things could happen to me. I'm thirty-eight, single, barely employed, and living with my dad. Sleeping in the same room I've been sleeping in since the day I was born, save for the ten years I shared a room with the love of my life.

Vlaho.

Of course I think of him, imagine where he is, what he's doing. It's a compulsion, like being unable to look away from a car wreck. If I still had a therapist, which I probably should, I'm sure she'd tell me I'm slightly obsessed,

but I can't help it, filling my days with thoughts of him the same way I used to fill them with his presence. It's a source of pain that's somehow become pleasurable. The kind that reminds me I'm still alive.

I see him lying on his back, in his boxer shorts because he never wears pajamas, Marina's hand resting on his chest, caressing the place over the heart that once beat for me. Then Tena and Maro jump onto the covers like a baby avalanche, their chubby arms and legs flying every which way until they land in their parents' embrace, the smell of family rising as they lift the covers to tuck themselves in.

In that moment, despite everything, I'm happy for Vlaho. I am.

I focus on the babuška that my grandmother gave me a long time ago, its plump wooden figure, its bright reds and yellows, the typical Slavic ornamentations. In the eighties, before the Homeland War, almost every household in Croatia had one. Now, it's just a relic of old times, a forgotten little figurine on a shelf. It's just a doll, within a doll, within a doll, but there should be two more dolls inside her. I lost them, somewhere, sometime. Now, it's as hollow as I am, and we stare at each other in mutual understanding.

When I make my way into the living room, Dad is already watching the news. "You won't believe this, Ivona. Our finance minister wants to raise taxes again. The parasite."

"Good morning, Dad." I reach for the džezva and pour coffee into my cup, then add a few drops of almond milk. *Bogus milk*, my father calls it.

"Seriously, how much do they think we can take? We're the country with the highest tax rates in the world by now."

I sit at the dining room table instead of next to him on the couch. His ability to get worked up over events he has no control over can be strangling. Mom was different. She couldn't care less about politics. Instead, she obsessed over things on a smaller scale. A tear in the couch upholstery, a mark on the hardwood floor. She and Dad canceled each other out beautifully. She

couldn't understand his fuming over state affairs any more than he could understand her boiling over household ones, their respective fires eventually dwindling to embers. Now that she's gone, there's nothing to stop him from rambling.

Dad turns the TV off, throws the remote on the couch. "Screw the lot of them. They're ruining this country, one tax at a time."

I focus on the garden outside, the bare branches of the hibiscus, and the always green, leafy top of an olive tree swaying in the salty bura wind.

Dad limps around the kitchen counter and pours himself another cup of coffee. It must be his third by now. Per his neurologist, he shouldn't be drinking more than two cups after his stroke, but I've stopped warning him. It falls on deaf ears.

"Where are you off to this morning?" he asks, taking stock of my outfit.

"The bank."

"Because of Lovorun?"

"Yeah, Lovorun." Funny how the taste of a word can change with circumstances. Lovorun used to melt on my tongue like honey, a magical place from my childhood where I spent school holidays with Baba—my maternal grandmother—eating grapes and blackberries straight from vines and brambles. A place where things grew, beautiful and strong. For a while after, it turned salty, like grief. Now it tastes like curdled milk.

A few years after Mom died, Dad made a unilateral decision to turn Baba's old estate into a heritage hotel. "This place has a soul. Tradition and history seep from it," he said, "and tourists will eat that right up." Never mind that the renovation ended up chipping away at the very soul of the place, no matter how careful Dad was to preserve it. Turning a humble peasant abode into a luxurious villa will do that to a place.

"I have a meeting with the personal banker. I'll try to get another extension on our loan," I say, even though I know the effort will be futile. Vlaho told me as much when we talked the other day, and he should know. He works at the bank and knows its policies inside and out.

Dad nods, his right hand trembling as he raises the cup to his mouth. He

steadies it with his left. I avert my gaze, because I know it bothers him when I see all the ways his body is failing him.

Dad used to be a presence one couldn't ignore. One of those people who would change the energy in the room as soon as they entered. It wasn't his physical appearance that made people take notice of him, though he is tall. It was his confidence, the way he took up space, claimed it as his own. When he spoke, people listened with gazes of hypnotized cobras.

I didn't like that aspect of him, the attention he garnered, the opinions he bestowed with little consideration for those opposing ones, but there's always a subtle pang when I notice the absence of that power in him, when I see how his illness has reduced him to a man who can't even control his own shaking.

"Did I ever tell you how rampant insolvency was back in the nineties?" he asks.

Of course, he's told me, not once but so many times we could recite the story in unison. It's such an old people's trait, regurgitating past events to the same unfortunate listener over and over again, and he's not *that* old.

He launches into the familiar tale of how *those banking leeches* asked him to declare bankruptcy when he himself was owed money, how they had a bureaucratic, backward way of looking at business because Croatia had just emerged from communism, and many people and companies were struggling with switching to free market. Not Dad, though. He'd been made for capitalism, and when it finally came to Croatia, he took to it like a lung to breath.

Outside, a single ray of sunlight cuts through a cloud and falls on my hands, folded around the cup in front of me. My father's words blur into the background, and that distinct sense overcomes me, when I'm both inside my body and not there at all, like my skin is a mere husk and I am absent from where I should be inside it. And the thought that always follows: *How did I end up here?*

All those years ago, I blew out into the world like a dandelion seed looking for a place to take root, the horizon ahead immense and unlimited. And then, somehow, cruelly, I landed right back here, being preached to the same way I used to be preached to when I was eight.

"I went in for the meeting at the bank with an Excel sheet on a floppy disk." Dad's words sharpen in my ear. "None of them used a computer regularly and had no clue how to use Excel. I tossed the floppy onto the table and demanded they check out the numbers. It took them half an hour to find a person who could even open the damn document." He chuckles, and drones on about how he persuaded the bankers to give him time until he managed to pocket some money from his own debtors, how he convinced them that great things awaited his company, and how they were swayed, partly because of his imposing personality, and partly because of his, then unparalleled, computer skills.

He puts his cup in the sink. "Have you done your prep work?" he asks.

"Yeah." I run my finger around the rim of my cup, not meeting his eye. Any amount of prep work wouldn't help us now. *Times have changed*, I want to say. *There are policies and structures in place that weren't there in the early years of capitalism.* But I know better than to voice this. Everything was the hardest, toughest, the most difficult when my father had done it.

Which is not without merit, I guess. Dad kept his construction company alive through the war, when no one in their right mind was building anything. He kept it alive through all manner of financial crises that swell like tsunamis here in Croatia, huge waves sent from elsewhere that leave our economy floundering years after all the other countries have recovered. If he hadn't had a stroke, I'm sure he would've found a way to finish the Lovorun project too. Instead, the task of converting my baba's old estate into a hotel fell on me. Then the prices ballooned and the project stalled, and now we owe money, and simultaneously need money to finish the project so we can make money to return what we owe.

Dad walks by me on his way back to the living room where a new bout of television-watching is about to commence. He kisses the top of my head. "You're a smart girl. You'll do fine."

Only I'm not. And I won't.

Potential, people used to say to my parents—teachers, friends, strangers on the street. *The girl has so much potential.* I used to believe that great things awaited me. I was reading before I'd turned four. I could calculate before I was five. I recall this vividly because my brother paid me to do his math homework when he was in first grade. I would do the adding and subtracting in his workbook and he would pay me in small coins, gum, and Snoopy stickers. I'll never forget the day my mother found out about our ploy. Before she started yelling and sent me to my room, there was a moment when she looked at me as if she'd never seen me before.

I understood then that knowledge bore power. It made people take notice.

The story became a part of the family lore, something my mother complain-bragged about to the three neighbors she always had coffee with. And I became ravenous, hoarding words and their meanings, facts, and trivia. I wanted more of that power, more of that sense of self. Striving became a hook in my chest, always lurching me upward.

But I've learned the hard way that book smarts mean nothing here. Neither would street smarts, if I had any. It's a special blend that works here, the bureaucratic smarts, paired with a talent for wielding connections and bending rules. Better yet if it comes with a penis.

I can't remember the last time someone said I had potential. But the thing about potential is that it doesn't go away. If you fail to realize it, you don't simply lose it. Instead, it sediments inside you, like tar or asbestos, slowly releasing its poison.

TWO

ZAGREB WAS AT ITS coldest when Vlaho and I met, on a sleety January night, five months after I'd moved there to study biology. The millennium was still so young that its turn felt like a stake in the ground, a moment that would stabilize the world I'd so often seen slip off its axis.

I was only nineteen, yet the country I had been born in had dissolved, the state I was born in had fought its way back to independence through a bloody war. The currency had changed three times before I turned eleven: Yugoslav dinar to Croatian dinar to Croatian kuna. I had been born into socialism and autocracy and was now living under democracy and capitalism, or as close to it as the transitional economy could get.

On top of that had been the broader changes, those of the world in general. Phones having longer and longer cords, until they had no cords at all; computers being contraptions out of sci-fi movies, until they became cubes perched on our desks, getting thinner and sleeker over the years.

And then, of course, the constant changes at home. My parents operating between their three standard settings: togetherness, indifference, and vile fighting. I never knew when I walked through the door after school if I'd find them threatening divorce or laughing over coffee. Me too, morphing over time, from the dutiful daughter always trying to appease them to a rebellious one,

until, after the yellow boot incident, I turned into a clammed shell, waiting out the last two years I had to live with them.

Those first months after I moved to Zagreb marked a new start. Everything smelled of freedom and possibility, my lungs stretching out for full inhales, my shoulders relaxing.

I went to classes, met new friends, and partied with the few old ones I had. I ate in student cafeterias redolent of fried chicken, kale, and pasta Bolognese, the smells alone making the space feel overcrowded. In these first months it was easy to believe that I could be a different person, one unaffected by my life back home.

But as the winter tightened its cold grip, the newness of Zagreb started to wear off, and I found myself longing for the stone-built walls of the hometown I'd been so eager to leave, for its blue skies and sea, for its familiar pulse and rhythm. The hole I thought I'd left back in Zadar revealed itself again, and between all the coffee dates and loud student parties and crowded college classes, I couldn't find a way to weld it shut.

That night in January, my best friend Tara talked me into going out. It was her birthday, and she was throwing a party in a bar in Zagreb's center. The bar was small and packed with students, Red Hot Chili Peppers pumping through the speakers as we poured cheap beer down our throats. My boyfriend was there, if that's what I could call him. He was someone I'd been seeing for a month, but I could already tell we weren't going anywhere. I sat next to him with eyes glazed over as he and his friend droned on about some video game.

Suddenly, "One Armed Scissor" cut straight through "Californication."

The room jolted to a halt. Everyone stopped talking and looked toward the stereo behind the counter, where a tall guy with dirty blond hair wearing a gray hoodie was pushing buttons, grinning at his own ingeniousness.

The familiar angry voice yelled the staccato verses through the speakers, reigniting the rebellious spirit of my high school days, and before I could control myself, I was on my feet pushing closer to the stereo. It was instinctual. I wasn't moving with a plan. There was just this need to come closer to

the music, to be in the middle of it. Or perhaps to pull it inside me, to fill myself with it.

When I reached the bar, he was still there, the tall guy in the gray hoodie, his back turned to me. I lifted my voice at the refrain. His voice joined mine as he turned to face me.

The moment condensed.

His face was incandescent, as though it were lit from the inside. The room was otherwise dim and filled with cigarette smoke, and of course people don't glow, but that's how he looked to me. There was something in his eyes that offered itself to me. It was so immediate, so intense, it felt almost like voyeurism.

Like I could see more than I was supposed to, looking into his eyes.

Like I was allowing him to see more than he should, as he looked back into mine.

Time snapped back into place, and we were back in the room, at the party, people and music pulsing around us.

"You know At the Drive-In?" he leaned in to say in my ear over the loud riffs.

"Do I know them? I fucking love them," I said, the alcohol making me bolder than I was, the profane word moving something in me, him being so close.

"You may have just become my favorite girl," he said, his words dragging in a singsong accent. I couldn't pinpoint if it was from Herzegovina, or Neretva Valley, or Dubrovnik. All I could tell was that he was from the south, where tangerines and watermelons grow, where beaches are pebbled, and the sea is turquoise blue. "Vlaho." He offered me his hand.

Dubrovnik then, I thought, the name of its patron saint typically given only to boys from that region. We shook hands. Skin against skin, the grip lasting too long but not long enough. "Ivona."

"Do you want to get a beer or something?" he asked, a patch of red igniting his left cheek. I'd never seen someone blush in this particular way.

The song ended. A man, presumably the manager, because he had a

pissed-off expression and was mumbling expletives, pushed his way behind Vlaho and turned Red Hot Chili Peppers back on.

"I'd love to," I said, glancing behind my back to the guy I was dating, who was draining his beer in dull light, and I regretted the words before I even spoke them, "But my boyfriend's waiting for me."

Vlaho's lips turned into a lopsided smile, the electricity of the moment frizzing away with my admission. I turned and walked over to my seat, Vlaho's stare trailing me like an echo following a sound.

That mistake would haunt me for days. I should've gone straight back to my boyfriend and told him we were over. But I waited until we were alone, later that night, to do it properly. To be considerate, polite. It was still in me, then, that need to appease, to not cause commotion or harm. Not that he cared. He just shrugged at my "I don't think this is working," and said, "Yeah, I agree."

That small courtesy might've cost me my only chance with Vlaho, and that's all I could think about a week later, as I was mustering the courage to send him a text. I deleted the fifteenth version of "hi, this is ivona, the at the drive-in girl from last friday," and before I could challenge myself, I wrote, "send transmission from the one-armed scissor," and hit send.

The same lyrics we'd sung together that night.

I envisioned the text traveling over Zagreb's rooftops, through its grimy smog, and into his dorm room. He lived in Cvjetno, Tara had told me when she'd gotten me his number; he was twenty, and studying economics. That was all the intel she'd had, given that he'd been a friend of her friend, not hers.

The minutes passed. I got up, circled my studio like a frantic cockroach in sudden light. I turned the TV on. The Mexican soap opera that always rolled after the noon news filled the room with heated words that made me feel less alone.

I picked up my Cellular and Molecular Biology textbook, but the words

were too fuzzy to read. I checked my phone every twenty seconds even though I'd made sure I'd turned the sound on.

Minutes distended into hours.

I got creative, coming up with excuses for why he hadn't replied. Maybe I had the wrong number. Maybe he didn't have any money on his phone card. Maybe he was in class and he'd left his phone at the dorm. Maybe someone had stolen his phone.

And then the more agonizing reasons. Maybe he didn't remember me. Or maybe he did, and he was choosing not to respond. Maybe he read the text and laughed at my audacity, at the thought of the two of us together.

I went back to that night, dissecting it in detail. That moment, when it had all stilled between us, was it real?

I couldn't tell. I had no idea how that was supposed to feel.

Just a year before, in my senior year in high school, our Croatian teacher had tasked the class with writing an essay on the topic of Shakespeare's quote "To thine own self be true." The quote dug into the pain that had lain dormant throughout my teen years, that duality of life I had embraced—the armor offered up to the world, and the gentle essence it was meant to shield. How I'd learned to hide the soft parts of myself, like a crustacean. Writing that essay, I didn't censor myself. I couldn't bother to; it was our last high school essay, and the teacher only proofread them anyway. It was not like she would dwell on the meaning behind the words. But when she returned the notebooks to us, there was a note inside mine, right under the grade:

> *Feeling in constant pain is actually quite common, among highly intelligent people.*

I laid the notebook on my thighs under the desk, ripped the page with her note off, and folded it in a small square to store in my wallet. I excused myself to go to the bathroom, holding my breath as my legs carried me down the corridor. After locking myself in a stall, I pressed my forehead against the cold tiles and struggled not to cry.

I had been hiding for so long I didn't believe it possible that someone could see me. But someone had. And that felt even worse.

But this had been a coincidental sighting. There was an intentionality to how Vlaho looked at me that night. A curiosity. So much of seeing is in that willingness to look. And, more importantly, it came paired with a feeling that under the careless, messy hair, and tattered Nirvana T-shirt, and love of angry music, he too was someone surprised, maybe even eager, to be seen.

But maybe he'd only been buzzed, and that's what had glinted in his eyes. Only now I couldn't unknow how much I wanted it, to find someone like him.

Three hours after hitting send, the hope grew so oppressive, so overwrought in my chest, that I let it out in low, humming sobs. I didn't cry for Vlaho, not really. I didn't know him yet. I cried because I was only nineteen and I was already so tired of carrying around that jagged grain of loneliness on the inside that always threatened to cut me if I made a wrong turn. I cried because I had all this love inside me, and it had nowhere to go.

The text sounded. "what do you think it even means?"

Then, another one. "i mean, to send a transmission from a one-armed scissor. what is a one-armed scissor anyway? how does it differ from a two-armed scissor?"

I stared at the message through wet eyes. Then I typed, fingers still trembling, "i don't think even at the drive in know what it means. but still, in a weird way, it makes sense, right?"

"i like the part about dissecting a trillion sighs," he wrote.

"and writing to remember," I wrote back.

The phone started ringing then, his name filling the screen. I turned the TV off, cleared my throat. "Hi."

"Hey," he said, and I could see him smiling, pulling fingers through his hair, the way he'd done that night. "I thought this would be easier. Given that each text costs twenty lipa and there are a lot of lines in that song."

"Smart thinking. True economist talking."

He laughed. "You've done your research, I see. I'm at a disadvantage."

"That's a bummer," I said. "That you didn't ask about me."

"Not because I didn't want to know. But I have this policy of not messing with girls who are . . . spoken for."

"Well . . . not anymore."

A beat of electrifying silence. "Want to grab a cup of coffee?" he asked, his words swaying in his southern accent. Relief coursed through me, the first layer of nacre coating that grain of loneliness inside me, smoothing its barbed edges.

THREE

I PARK ACROSS THE street from the bank's main entrance and stare at the large, glass-windowed building as if it's about to swallow me whole. Maybe it is. My thumb rubs the edge of the yellow folder containing all the relevant documents for today's meeting: the original mortgage paperwork, the paperwork on the loan extension, expiring next month. The state of our hefty debt, with zero means to pay it back.

Dad has always been a person of grandiose ambitions, a lover of all things luxurious and extravagant. Soon after Mom died, he tracked Baba's distant cousins, bought them out, and turned Lovorun into a huge building site. It was his way of dealing with Mom's death, I guess, his homage to her. Or maybe it was the fact that her death had reminded him of his own mortality, that his time on Earth was limited too, and if he ever wanted to do something grand, now would be the time. If he restored the ruins and made a heritage hotel out of them, he would've left his mark on the world. His life wouldn't have been for nothing.

I understood where he was coming from.

Lovorun was my grief project too.

In my darkest hour, the olive grove there offered me a way to put one foot

in front of the other, even while I was losing Vlaho, even as my whole future was slipping through my fingers bit by bit, like grains of fine sand.

But the documents in my hand are a sure sign we're losing it all.

My phone dings on the passenger seat with Vlaho's message. "ready for the meeting?"

"as ready as i'll ever be," I text back.

"meet you outside the personal banker's office."

I look up at the building, focusing on the place where I know Vlaho's office is, and wonder if he's looking out the window. He works in internal audit and has nothing to do with mortgage handling, but I was relieved when he offered to accompany me to the meeting. I may be out of my depth, but at least he'll be there to help.

At least I'll get to see him today.

I turn the collar of my raincoat up before I step outside the car and into the February cold, and hurry to the bank entrance, where the security guard greets me with a knowing nod. It's the same guard who's been monitoring the entrance since Vlaho got a job here when we moved to Zadar after graduation. I worked as a substitute teacher in the nearby elementary school for a brief period, and Vlaho and I met for lunch in the bank's cafeteria between my morning and afternoon shifts. It was the happiest we ever were in Zadar.

I wonder how much of our story the guard knows. If he's aware that we're divorced now. If Marina had to explain things the first time she came to visit Vlaho at work. Does she ever come? Do they have lunch together like we used to? Neither of them has ever mentioned it, and of course, I've never asked.

As I enter the main building through a revolving door, the dry air gives me the urge to cough. I wave to the receptionist behind the counter, an older lady whose grandkids we always talked about. They'll be finishing elementary school by now. She opens her mouth to say something, probably to kindle some sort of conversation—we haven't seen each other in so long—but I hurry toward the elevator, relieved that it opens as soon as I press the button. Once I'm in, I give her an apologetic shrug. I can't bear asking her about her

grandkids anymore, not when the questions on her side have long subsided. *When will you have kids, Mrs. Oberan?* she'd ask. *You and your husband would make such great parents.*

I'm not Mrs. Oberan anymore, but I take comfort in the fact that Vlaho is the world's most wonderful dad. It's the kind of comfort, though, that pricks at the back of my eyes.

The personal banker's office is on the second floor. As the elevator doors slide apart, Vlaho appears behind them, standing in the shaft of morning light. The scene looks almost like a painting, a huge weeping fig plant towering above him, the same size as the one he gave me on our one-month anniversary has grown to. I had to move it outside my room a couple of years ago, into the high-ceiling hallway where it'll have room to continue to grow. The irony that it's still growing when our love has long withered is not lost on me.

I push myself against the elevator wall and head out.

"Hey." Vlaho kisses my cheek. He smells of mornings, the wisp of a piney aftershave and mint toothpaste, and underneath, the familiar, powdery scent of his skin. We walk side by side through the corridor toward the offices in the back, our footsteps muffled by the gray carpet that's worn in the middle, marking the people's favorite trajectory on it.

"It'll be fine," Vlaho says, sensing my dismay as he always does. He's just saying that to make me feel better. Or maybe he's referring to the grand scheme of things, where, yes, all will be fine, even if you lose everything except, perhaps, your life and health.

This I believe. The worst already happened when I let him go, and I'm still alive. Still drinking coffee in the morning, brushing my teeth and my hair, cooking lunch, then eating it. Food still gets digested, broken into molecules that get into my bloodstream, then travel where they need to, in order to become building blocks for new cells. This is the way life goes on for me. On a cellular level. "I know," I say.

When we exit the office half an hour later, I'm laden with sweat. We don't talk on our way back to the elevator. The personal banker, a beautiful young woman with brown hair gathered in a high ponytail, the kind of woman who would've made me all kinds of insecure if I were still with Vlaho, didn't tell us anything we didn't already know. The loan cannot be extended, the first payment is due next month, and if we forgo paying, we will have defaulted on the debt, and the bank will have to consider means of forced collection.

My gut twists into knots. How can I go home and give this news to my father, who expected me to perform a miracle, the way he had all those years ago with his floppy disk? A father who's ill and powerless to do anything but watch me ruin it all? It doesn't matter that the circumstances have changed since he turned the leadership of the company over to me when he got sick, or that this downfall was in motion long before I took charge. None of it matters. All that matters is that I've failed again.

"Ivona?" Vlaho touches my hand. "Talk to me."

I stop and turn to him. We're in the middle of the dark corridor and the lack of light softens his face. It makes it easier for me to open up. "I have no idea what to do. There won't be enough money no matter what I do. If the bank isn't willing to give us another extension—"

He leans against the gray panel wall behind him, and I do the same on my side. "I hate to say this but . . . maybe you'll have to sell. That way you'll at least have control over the terms and price." He looks down for an instant then back into my eyes. "I'm sorry, I know how much Lovorun means to you." His voice is supple and low. If I closed my eyes, I could imagine us like we were for years, huddling together in our bed at night, talking.

"Dad would never agree to sell." Sometimes it seems like pulling this project off is the only thing keeping him alive.

"I know, but this isn't about your dad anymore." Vlaho's tone is soft but pointed, the kind he used when he wanted to tell me something without putting it into words. It's these small moments of recognition—a specific

inflection of his voice, a particular look on his face, a small gesture no one else might notice—that I live for. Why I swirl in his orbit even at the cost of watching him make a life with someone else.

I reach to squeeze his arm, a touch that will linger on my fingertips for hours. "Thank you for going in with me."

He gives me that look that feels like an intake of breath. An expectation, a wanting. As if his fingers, resting at his sides, are removing a strand of hair off my face. Stroking my cheek.

But a beat longer and the mirage is over. We're back to ourselves, the way we've been for the last nine years. Most of the time, I'm convinced he doesn't even remember the days when we were together. But in moments like this, when silence swallows our words, I wonder.

"It'll be fine." I echo his own words back to him and start walking again. He follows, reluctant.

"Oh yeah," he says, his words dragging slower than his feet. "Before you go. Marina asked if you'll come over for Maro's birthday. It's next Saturday. Nothing fancy, mostly family and some friends. Maro asked if you'd come too."

"Because the little scoundrel knows I buy the best presents," I say to hide how I really feel. Not because it pains me to be in their home, I've grown used to it over time. Not even because Marina's mother will be there, watching me like some sort of tempest, for what could the single ex-wife of her son-in-law be other than an obvious threat to her daughter's marriage?

I dread it because Vlaho's mother will be there. Frana never misses a birthday, christening, or any of her grandchildren's milestones now that she has them. She is the only one who really makes me uncomfortable. The only person who knows the truth behind why I left Vlaho. The only person, besides myself, who I have to blame for it, even though all she had given was a nudge, and the decision was mine, all mine.

"Sure, I'll be there. Just let me know the time," I say, and let the elevator doors squeeze out the image of the man I love.

FOUR

WHILE WE WERE TOGETHER, Vlaho and I joked that we had more anniversaries than Croatia has islands. There was the day we'd met, in that bar on Tara's birthday. There was the day I first texted him, and he asked me out on a date. Then, the date itself, which took place ten days after we first agreed to see each other, because just before we were supposed to go out, Vlaho got the flu.

He basted in a fever for four days, and for the following five, he was too sick and weak to go out. His roommate had gone to stay with friends, so that Vlaho's mother could come take care of him. She had traveled from Cavtat, the small town near Dubrovnik where Vlaho was from. It must have taken her twelve hours to get to Zagreb by bus, because the construction of the A1 highway had only begun.

"She's cooking chicken broth on the hot plate," he messaged me on the third day, in the short intermezzo when the ibuprofen knocked his fever down. "I can barely warm up milk on that thing."

I hadn't been to his dorm room, but I'd been to my friends' plenty of times. Cvjetno was considered one of the better dorms, but it was still dilapidated. Built decades ago, renovated only once since. The furniture dangled off walls, half-ruined by neglect and reckless partying. Each room had two