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MY MEN

a novel

by Victoria Kielland

BABY

SKANDINAVEN NORWEGIAN NEWSPAPER, CHICAGO, 1904–1908

Offer of Matrimony – Farmer, 26, in N. Dakota, Few Acquaintances, seeks to correspond with Scandinavian Girl or Widow. Financial situation not Important. Serious Replies only. Include photo.

Offer of Matrimony – Bachelor, 30, good-looking, Affluent, lives in a City, wishes to correspond with a Girl under 30 who knows how to appreciate the value of a Beautiful Home. Send photo in first Letter.

Offer of Matrimony – Widower, 45, looking to meet a Girl or childless Widow of Norwegian background, between 25 and 40. Strong references available and required. I can provide a good home free of cares since I am in good Financial circumstances. Address available from this Paper.

CITY OF ANGELS, CALIFORNIA, 1915

Tongues of flame in the fireplace flickered hot and silent. Belle needed a window, needed to rest her cheek on it. Cool her skin, glowing red, fresh as dew, calm and hot. These little mustache hairs, she ran her fingers over her lips and heard her murmuring lungs. She lit a cigarette and looked out at the city. The enormous oak tree in the evening sun reached its long gnarled roots along the wall and into the ground; the roots coiled around the fence, crept out under the grass. Clotheslines ran between the branches, sheets and panties flapping gently in the wind.

There are things I can't ever admit, she whispered, *things that are too big, too much*, she could hardly breathe, *that could destroy me*. The words seized her by the throat, Belle didn't know when it was all going to snap but she knew it would. A bullet, an inverted lung, a postscript to a thousand wars, tears ran down her face, *there're too many of you*. She felt her stomach turn, in the darkness, one muscle after the other.

The evening sun was low in the sky, her upper lip had chapped and split right in the middle, she took a deep drag of the cigarette, little words almost a little scream filled her mouth between the smoke and the teeth, tickling her gums, forcing their way out between her slack lips, *no one who loves with their whole self can survive love*.

The waves of the Pacific rolled restlessly up onto the shore, the dark shimmer shone up towards her, and her voice filled the whole room, a truth so huge that it stood in everything else's way. The words reached towards the window, there was something about the little wrinkles around her eyes, her skin's little traces of everything that had happened, of time's furrowed face, of all the problems lying in wait in her lungs, Belle felt it all so clearly, the shimmer, the salt water that almost blinded her, *there're too many of them*.

RØDDE FARM, 1876

Brynhild's head was wrapped in darkness. Brynhild's head was being pushed down face first into the pillow. All the colors piled up, her heart beat hard, a pulsing knot of muscle in the middle of the sunset, throbbing red and glowing hot. Everything she was going to see and feel, face first. Everything she was going to experience. Brynhild slipped back and forth between sweat and dream, floated in darkness as spit dribbled down her open mouth. The bed creaked, she tensed every muscle in her body and raised her head to the window, the tiniest little movement, it took all she had.

Brynhild saw the starry sky prickling, she filled her lungs with air before sinking back down onto the mattress. The dim light of the paraffin candles reached out into the room, covered the walls with flickering shadows. Brynhild saw the outlines of her own body against the wall, intermittent, layered, she felt him on top of her, breath on the back of her neck, tongue drawing new lines there.

Brynhild had taken her clothes off so fast, seventeen years old, so gentle and good, so ready for the world, she'd been ready since the second she saw him, when she straddled his lap, *I know you want me*. The desires erupted from nowhere, glowing, sudden, the candlelight fluttered in the windowframe and just then and there they were floating in the flame, a fire and flowing. This was love. No one could tell her otherwise. God was here, so close, and a black oily light filled the bedroom. A thick sauce of something manmade tossed and turned on the mattress. He was so taut and bright, his worthless beautiful body, there was no doubt, she loved this man. She felt it in her bones, the gnawing in her belly, the colors diluting themselves on their own, one sensation slipping unresistant into the other no beginning no end all there in one big pool of sweaty muscles and blurry passings back and forth. Brynhild had undone her braid and her hair streamed down over her shoulders, and he'd looked at her

sitting on top of him with her starry blue eyes in that milk-white face, those plum-red cheeks and pale freckles, brown hair everywhere, she had bloomed and opened like a dark flower. The anticipation in two strange eyes, that color palette, all that softness and innocence laid so bare. And the sky had really fallen down to earth that night, pressing down on the house, it had pricked against Brynhild's skin and she'd felt the stars on her eyes, they stung and burned all together, there was so much hope, endless hope, in a dark blue sky.

A new canvas had been stretched onto the frame, the black dirty love-sweat had scattered its seed, the rich farmer's son from Selbu had walked straight into the attic room straight between her two half-open lips, straight into her open mouth. He'd taken her into his arms and she'd leaned into him and he'd seduced her with both hands. A touch that made her melt, rocking hips, she took, he gave, spasmodic, bit by bit, she lay there for days, shoved into the darkness. That's how it happened, she'd been raised up in the name of love and now she was vibrating, she couldn't stop trembling. A gentle breeze drifted through the curtains, *I can die now*, Brynhild thought, but she didn't die, she was breathing, she panted like a wet little dog, glowing with the morning sun right in her face.

Young Brynhild quivered against the sheets, all alone, she was so far from home, from Mother and Father and the sheep up on the hill, she could feel it down in her bones, the fumbling, all the uncertainty, everything her eyes had seen the night before. It was a fairy tale, red like the dawn, sheets soaked and stained in a hundred different shapes. Brynhild traced the outlines of the stains with her finger, the spots clearly drawn in the sharp morning light, she wiped her hand off on her thigh. Everything she'd seen the night before, everything that had no words, the intense eyes resting on her. Broiling sunbeams pierced the window, thoughts sat in the middle of her head, her ears were listening for the least little movement, the thread of life was stretched tight.

Primogeniture came back, a huge mass of skin and a wide white smile, so loving and strict, so strong and so addicted to his own desire. This man with pale hair and the smell of dirt and soft leather, boots that squeaked and scratched against the bedframe. Brynhild's body felt the benediction, the weight in the darkness, the golden shimmer in the heart, it all went from soft to hard so fast she didn't realize what had happened. The dark passion when there was no more daylight, hands that could so suddenly ball into fists. Everything that changed as soon as she wasn't looking. Little negotiations every single time. All the colors up against her eyes. The forever-warm body. Her head pushed down into the pillow every night. Mouth open wide until it poured and she had to swallow. The twitches ran through her like shivers black as night through the room.

Brynhild lay sunk into the mattress. She lay there with the farmholder class on top of her, a defenseless condition, totally naked, totally unprotected with her whole melting little bud sticking out into the room, a glowing little fuse pointing straight out into the world. The sky blurred above them, thinner and thinner the closer morning came, with spit and drooping eyelids as butterflies thronged between ears of corn and horses ran in circles out in the paddock as if the hooves striking the ground, the gentle light were weaving them into the landscape of dreams. Brynhild just sank deeper into the mattress while the light melted between the treetops and spanned the windowframe. The thin hours disappeared without her noticing, the blink of an eye, the seconds, they were impossible to keep up with, the traitorous soft skin, everywhere unresisting. The creek burbled far away, flies bounced off the windowpane. She heard reins snapping somewhere in front of the house as harnesses were tightened under horses' warm bellies. The days always began like this, all by themselves, hot and sweaty and alone with a sound from the farthest corner of the world. The sound got louder and louder and before she knew it she had to get up and make breakfast and coffee for the masters. Brynhild did it all, so quiet, seventeen,

glowing, no one would realize what she'd done in the late hours of the night. She wiped down the kitchen counter as fast as she could, gave the floor a quick sweep, put the coffee on, took out cups and plates, and set out sausage and eggs, cheese and bread. Her stomach lurched. She was filled with this melting hot world. The dishwasher burning hot between her fingers, everything so smooth and scalding on her skin. Seventeen years old with a hot mouth open wide in the middle of the nothingness, seventeen and in a total panic, Brynhild blinked but the colors only pushed deeper into her eyes. Every cell in her body wanted him back. There was no doubt, happiness and heat filled every crack in her body, Brynhild felt almost drunk as she stood there at the kitchen counter, pulse pounding and rebounding off the walls. She looked out at the pasture. Butterflies flickered low to the ground. She tracked the wings with her eyes, she tried to count the wing beats but the fluttering was too fast. Time was a heavy pulse behind her eyes. Everything piled up in layer on layer behind her eyes, their skinny little legs stabbing right through her irises. It was a mess. Brynhild was seventeen, face first, all the way inside her was burst open.

These nights and these mornings, the transitions, the thin blue hours. The sunlight always followed the frame and warmed her face before finding its way to all the small details. Every time she opened her eyes it was just as brutal—the wet panties on the floor, the pale skin alongside her upper arms, his open mouth, the sap trickling from the woodwork. It was almost grotesque. She lay totally still, this yearning from the depths, hand on her heart. She didn't understand where it came from. All the blurry passings back and forth, the aquatic light every single time. Eternal shimmer in the twilight. Brynhild started to understand, this hard and soft were just two sides of the same thing, the shadows and the longings went hand in hand, she just had to turn the other cheek and stay alert, light a candle when night came. The wet panties on the floor, in the end what was the difference between them and a burning heart? The flame of the paraffin candle flickered, Brynhild felt it with perfect clarity, her heart

beating so hard that she could hardly breathe, the darkness was exactly the same as the light, equally sinful and pure.

The days rose up to meet her with a kind of looming silence. God's creation in its entirety, this butter-yellow light, the shadows on the mattress jabbing into her eyes, this dripping life, the inside and outside of a human life sticking to her fingers. She sat up and looked out the window. The wind was pulling the clouds along and shadows slid across the mattress like looming reminders of everything she'd done the night before. Like they were tapping their fingers on the sheets and saying *Look at this!* An encapsulation of all the nights, all the movements that had been forced out of her, she felt with her whole body the twitching in her body, how he came, with his whole self. The new smell clambered into her nostrils, semen and orgasm following the same path as sun and his wide white smile. Straight from the sun. Straight from God. Straight into her eye.

Brynhild waited in the story and that's what this was all about. Everything that crowded around making everything so difficult, all of that too, all of that in addition to her and Primogeniture and the warm mattress, to his body, to light and sky, air and soil, flame and paraffin. In addition to everything she already had and was. So many times she'd been told that she had to know her place, know where she stood, accept her fate. And yet there really was something pushing Brynhild backward and forward at the same time, and she really did stay as still as she could but something was making its way through the guts and inner organs, between what she saw and felt in her brain and what she had stuck in her body, between the glass she drank from and what she served everyone else. It was perfectly clear, she saw it with her own two eyes, everything that came between Primogeniture and her, between the visible and the invisible, between rich and poor, between where her skin was thickest and where it was thinnest, where it was soft and smooth and almost everything was too much. It all was jammed into the spaces in between, it settled into the hollow of her neck and

melted into her skin and turned into a gentle rocking of the hips, a quiet movement that made it impossible for Brynhild, no matter how hard she tried, to stand perfectly still.

In church Brynhild felt the warmth from the pew radiating into her thighs, the butter-yellow light burned in her throat and she prayed as hard as she could every night. She felt it, she saw it in the mirror, the little shadow under her chin when she lowered her head, the space between her hands when she clasped her fingers together. She felt it most in her face. She had so much to give but it was like her eyes were now full and she couldn't tell anything apart anymore, the shadows were everywhere and her breath couldn't find a way out. She performed her tasks, sloppy, shaking, constantly drying her hands on her apron. She felt only this, all of it gathering in her clasped hands, all of it rocking inside her, the beseeching prayers.

Brynhild was a little harp and all her strings were vibrating at once. She brushed her lips with her fingers as much as she could, it turned out her heart-shaped little face was capable of everything you can imagine, and the weight in her spine radiated out into her body. The enormous pressure inside her was too much, she had no chance, everything trying to hold it back strained with all its might. Everything weighed down on her, got dammed up. Her hair stuck to her skin, lines drawn onto her cheekbones and pale freckles, her beautiful skull, everything so clear and so strong as if rising up to the surface inside of her face and looking to show off its delicate structures. Everything, all there is in a human life. Brynhild's large blue eyes sat sunk in their sockets. She watched every single movement so carefully, she worked so hard at not ending up in a defensive position, not staying alone, but the truth is her time ran out, both in dreams and in reality.

Seventeen years old, exploding with hormones. A rich man's sweat and her head all the way down in the pillow. A soft kneeling act. Brynhild took it, Brynhild wept, *This is all I am, this is all I have*, it was a realization that could fill any small human

heart with dark stains. Her small face tried its best to hold tight. She tried to think her way through life, count up everything that had happened until this point, but everything was right at the top of her eyes, she stood there so timidly, milk-white, dawn-red, like a little child, shimmering tears pouring down into her lap like summer rain. She feverishly wiped her face dry with her apron but her hands were always ice-cold, always red and always wet, and there was always more dirty laundry to wash.

Brynhild had been given this whole life, she was supposed to manage it all, but she stood there with her fissure and her arms and life's wild feelings. All left up to her. She scrubbed the floors and fetched water from the well but no matter how many tablecloths she ironed or hens she deboned this was very different from what someone like her was permitted to do. And this longing, this dripping love-sweat stuck to everything she did, these glands in her armpits never stopped stinking. This yearning, this big gaping body. How was she supposed to survive it, the pain and the joy, all living side by side? It fizzed under her tongue and it whirled in her breast, these ice-cold hands. Any second now she might lose her grip. She was so scared, so scared of ruining everything. Just the thought that from one moment to the next he might not invite himself in anymore, might not dependably lie down in her bed, might not hold her and kiss her and squeeze her and make her laugh. She'd be all alone, naked, with a long series of useless moments, and then it would be better if they were discovered and punished. These nerves, the constant uneasiness, the colors inside her, these ridiculous things inside her, instincts feelings and thoughts sitting like cysts in her body, the big pictures being painted inside her, they were so huge.

Brynhild was happy, and she cried, this was the paradox she had to live with. Her eyes lay like deep lakes in the middle of her face, two light-blue dreams that overflowed and laid down thin stripes on her cheeks. These meaningless bright days, this anguished unhappy face, was this the future? Tender feelings escalated inside her, a rising fever-curve, everything she had to endure, everything flowing in her. What

was shameful and intimate was on the edge at all times, teetering, all the way out on the edge at every second. She whispered to herself *If God wills it*. This must be God's love, the darkest kind, the hottest kind. She had to have faith in it, her breath sat trapped in her chest and paralyzing silence lurked in every last corner.

Brynhild welcomed it all, she always opened the door with a big smile and everything came right in, lightning-fast. The times when Primogeniture put his hands on her throat lightning shot through her. *Get on your knees* he'd said, and she knew it wasn't about evening prayer. His body was so big, mercy didn't exist, her thoughts shone scarlet fire, and when he told her what he wanted to do to her new mazes of plum juice and fruit pulp unfolded. Seventeen and glowing. All the motions that were so fast they were invisible. Impossible to keep up with them. Primogeniture found the way to a million magic moments in that attic room. The infinity of these moments eddied through her like newborn galaxies. She couldn't think of a word to say. This simple naked experience, so easily hurt, so smoldering and intense. Expanses of skin, every single morning, stinking shame, endlessly hot skin, fear tightening its grip around her neck.

Brynhild couldn't picture any of it without feeling his hand, his big flat hand. Corpse-white, gigantic. And every time Brynhild smiled in the doorway he might ask her to be quiet even though she wasn't saying anything, and he could hold her so tight that it almost hurt, and Brynhild thought every time *this can't go on* but every time it did go on. He let her go just in time and was nice again and she could feel that she loved him even more. Her heart was so excited. She ran her fingers over her lips, none of this could stand the daylight, it all had grown too big much too fast, Primogeniture kept holding her and the light shrank and went all the way up to the edge while sweat sparkled before her eyes. This was life-threatening. Primogeniture took her head in his hands, *you're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen*. He peered into the deep lakes in the center of her face, Brynhild felt it, how deep he was sinking, how far he wanted to go,

how truly hard she had to work to hold back. Tears silently ran down her cheeks, *oh, little Brynhild, what's wrong?* He pulled her close and put his arms around her holding as hard as he could now that he'd turned so soft.

The sadness in Brynhild moved over to Primogeniture, she could see it in him. There was something in her that he couldn't put into words but it was transparent, something he wanted to get to the bottom of. She saw it so clearly, he wanted to go as far into her as he could. *This is all I am, this is all I have*, she'd said, but Primogeniture interrupted her, the corpse-white hand caressed her cheek, she'd really lost control now. *Big Little B*. She saw it in him, there was no doubt, it was both loving and hard, implacable. But the deeper he forced his way into her the more she disappeared, and when he lowered his big body down onto her she vanished completely. Big Little B floated, soared, completely gone, completely shining with love, the blue hour, the floating soaring nothingness. This was love, this was the purest thing in the world. She was one with creation. She had opened her heart, she was at the pinnacle.

His suntanned skin, strong arms, big hairy chest, she practically knew his movements by heart, every last little twitch that passed through his body, he would eventually leave her all alone, she could see it in him. The silence, the gentle rocking, the total uncertainty and danger of the situation. Clouds hung low over the hills as if trying to tell her that something had gone wrong, something had changed course. The love had gone deep, that was obvious, it clung tight with its claws as it had done for a while. Thin and shiny it covered her tongue. She lay there feeling for it, she pulled the covers up to her chin, she just wanted to let big heavy sleepiness drag her off to the next best possibility, the pale sticky daylight. Brynhild squeezed her eyes shut as hard as she could. But something had turned utterly impossible, the abyss rose up before her hot and golden behind her eyelids. Time had taken hold inside her, it was growing fingers and toes, a brain, inner organs. She was pregnant. Nothing could save her now.

A muffled scream butted against her belly, the little light inside her that was going to get bigger and bigger until it made its way out of her all by itself, this was something visible, hard, and terrifying. It would come with nails and cartilage and blood. Brynhild tried to breathe and think and get dressed at the same time, but the taste of his mouth inside hers grew and grew, the endlessly hot skin, a baby, nothing came closer. She felt it in every inch of herself, his gigantic body, a new course had been charted. She sat on the edge of the bed soaking wet with terror. She smoothed down her wool skirt, pinned back a lock of her hair. Her face turned completely soft at the thought of this primogenital seed sown inside her. Little explosions all the way up to her collarbone, a craving in her stomach. She could barely breathe. This was love. God's creation. Brynhild looked at the hollow in the mattress, the warm sheets, his impression, the little shadow. Stars poured out of both her arms, her shining little snake coiled inside her, the purest thing there is between a man and a woman. Nausea filled her to the brim, silent rocking between the visible and the invisible.

Brynhild stood in the middle of the room and looked out the window at the farmhouse, she made sure to stand far enough inside the room that he wouldn't be able to see her if he came walking across the yard. This had something to do with the transparency of everything, the brutality of the sticky spring light, the secret she was carrying. She saw her reflection in the windowpane, he had gone so far inside, gone looking for what was deepest in her and hadn't stopped till he found it. It had been so easy to surrender herself, the butter-yellow light had lodged like a layer of fat in her throat, the taste of it had blinded her, it was mostly good, not mostly bad. Brynhild shut her eyes and there he was clear as daylight on the backs of her eyelids. She had something inside her that no one else could see and it was going to strike back at her twice as hard. Silence crowded round her, blood rushed to her cheeks, the furrow between her eyebrows lay like a weight on the rest of her pale face. Brynhild moved

an inch or two farther from the window so that she wouldn't have to see the reflection of her terrified face.

Brynhild stood between the dresser and the bed and wiped away the troubles running down her cheeks. She would have to tell him soon. She would have to stand in front of him and hold out her arms and tell him that she loved him, that she would carry on the lineage. Brynhild's hands shook. Every hour standing at the kitchen counter helping the family with breakfast, every second with her fingers in butter and ham and dry bread. Brynhild held her breath, her body so cold, her joints so stiff, she was dizzy. Every night she folded her hands together. Fear clutched at her heart, every hour it grew bigger and bigger inside her, *dear God*, Brynhild was floating somewhere deep inside of her at the very end of the thread of life.

Brynhild didn't know how it was supposed to feel to be her. Who was she if she wasn't hoping for something better? She picked little flowers and placed them under her pillow, she tried to hold tight to beauty, gentleness, surprises, life's cunning capricious twists. She let the cold morning air fill the room and aired out the smell of her gaping body. The nausea rose, how could something so natural be so frightening, she placed a corpse-white hand on her stomach, if I can't have this what can I have? The wind blew through the trees, so gentle, *if God wills it*. How could creation be so frightening.

There was something about simple movements, how Big Little B gradually turned into someone else, how she rubbed her belly, how she shifted her weight from side to side, how she had to hold the armrests when she wanted to stand up. She had almost gotten used to it, her body's invisible new changes, her belly's slight curve, her fumbling hands. Every night she sat by herself and listened for everything outside, for a glimmer, an outline, the scope of this story. Listened for everything's lightning-fast maneuvers, everything she had no control over, everything that disappeared over the edge so fast. The details, when he was there and when he wasn't, what was always

lingering around his mouth waiting for her, a predator's movements, Brynhild sat patiently in her room with her hands on her belly, she listened with her back. The horses restlessly stomped and pawed at the ground while getting unsaddled. The sky spread out so big and melting, like a soft piece of blue-black silk, much too soft, utterly unbearable. *Dear God*, she placed a hand carefully over her belly button and spread her fingers wide, a whole little world heritage and inheritance, her hand sticking to her dress, *all this is mine*. And *Lord*, her fingers curled around the edge of her apron, *have mercy on me*.

Brynhild pressed her belly into the mattress but it didn't get any flatter. Her jaw creaked, her cheeks shone sweaty in the dark. She'd just gone along with it and everything stayed still and everything changed at the same time, everything that had been and would be. It was like walking in mud. Everything went into the story, she felt a pressing against her chest, the smell of the baby's little head, the sum total of everything, the sacred power, all movements recapitulated in one. The fire in the hips, the gentle rocking. *Lord, have mercy on me*, but the story kept tightening around her, there was less and less room for her insides, tender feelings and the baby curled up in slow desperate pain, shining bloodthirsty snake, wet little warmth in the belly. Just after that, terror would creep out between her shoulder blades.

Fear and love lay like pulsating lines in the landscape, they danced in the white morning mist all the way into her eyes, like sunspots. Birds gathered in flocks and flew in the sky above her, they soared, big and scared, in wide curves before disappearing into the low clouds. It was hard to breathe, lips thick, mouth big, the saliva she woke up to every morning. All the things almost everything was too much for. The dawn-red, the milk-white. The jabbing into her eyes, in her ears, she just had to endure it, stinging her mouth, burning her fingers. She knew it all so well, it shaped her mouth every day, forced it open and got it ready for what was to come, looking down at the floor, screaming into her neck. The prayer from the pew. A simple movement

pushing farther. Her eyes bulging at everything around her, these rules that filled her throat. Brynhild pressed her lips together but it spilled out on both sides, *was this some kind of punishment? Had she not shown enough respect?* Everything pushed up into her throat, flaming. Where was the dignity in this? Stomach bulging, pulsating from the inside, *please*, Brynhild slapped her hand over her mouth, forced her lips together, *what kind of a person are you, really?* Eyes shining in the mirror. This was an intimacy no one had asked for. She had just gone along with it and he'd tempted her all the way out, with both hands. There was no way back.

The day of the party finally came, Brynhild had been looking forward to it for so long, she was going to open her arms and invite him in, a simple gesture, with a bright pretty dress and everything. Seventeen years old with her heart in her throat. She was so gentle, so good. Everything was ready, folded, neatly stacked up in her breast, the evening light was tangled in her hair and the quivering in her head tickled behind her eyes, up and down the bone of her nose. Everything that had ever pushed into her, into her heart, fought to come out at the same time, she stood there with everything she had experienced glittering right there in the middle of her face. She was so beautiful there in the summer night, every inch of her right to the edges was full with herself, as if she'd never done anything else, and precisely then and there with her skin and her hair and her whole glowing self she was the sum total of everything, the purest of them all. There was not a single dirty thought left in her mind. She looked at Primogeniture and felt a single long breath move through her body. Sucking, huge. She looked at him, eager expectant eyes. Primogeniture with his big blond curls and squeaking boots, with hands that always knew where they wanted to go. He took a step closer, warm spit flowed along her gums, and he leaned towards her, slowly, with his big soft mouth. Primogeniture laughed and Big Little B held her breath. She closed her eyes, balancing with both feet, she searched herself all the way to the edge of her tongue, that shiny little fatty frontier. Her whole face prickled, *keep*

an open heart, she whispered, *please*. He breathed heavily in her ear, *Big Little B*, but he looked right through her, at the treetops behind her. The wind blew a warning but she didn't hear anything except a sighing in the branches. There was no contact, he wasn't there. Unease scrambling up her throat, she smelled liquor on his breath, landowning, rich, irascible. He was really so addicted to his own desire. She looked at the two open buttons on his shirt, her lust was obvious, throbbing, milk-white, dawn-red, while his eyes were swimming in booze. Big Little B held onto her courage and brought forth what had lain hidden so long in the darkness. As the words slipped across her lips her voice shook, *I'm going to have a baby*. Her heart pounded like in a nightmare, she felt it perfectly clearly, there is nothing left after this.

Primogeniture had been standing looking at her for a while, somehow absently, and now he turned his whole body towards her. Something was wrong, she heard the beating of birds' wings, deadly fear in the lingering silence. His look was perfectly flat, absent, streaked black. The slanting movement, the spots of light, the depths in them both, she couldn't take it back. The distance between them was perfect, he had tensed his body from stomach to shoulder and from the thigh down. He put all his strength into one simple movement. Everything was transparent, she saw it in him, this was the horrible moment before her body hit the ground. His foot hit her stomach, the leather boot hit the target. Then and there the world collapsed, lightning flashed through her, it was as if she had never existed.

The darkness opened like a drop of ink in a glass of water, it spread silently, filling her all the way up to the edge of her eyelids until not a single thought was left. Primogeniture had walked away, just left her lying there with the taste of dirt in her mouth. Brynhild, so gentle and good, so good and so alone that Primogeniture had taken a chance, she'd either survive or she wouldn't, what did he know. He had gone as deep as he could, there was nothing left, one silent moment and he'd crushed her. The summer breeze slipped through the branches and warmly caressed her face, it

pushed her head down into the dirt, all while whispering gently, discreetly, *now you can die.*

Wet tears filled every fracture inside her, speechlessness lay in every fold. But Brynhild wasn't dead, she heard the river cry, the ground left marks on her cheek. She'd lost feeling in her arms and legs. He had stood right next to her, utterly implacable, he had taken what he wanted. She couldn't stand up, she lay there with her crater, exposed to the bone. A painful kneeling ceremony. The silent shriek filled the air around her, her face had changed, trying to find its way back to itself. It was a dying movement, a scornful face in static tension. The moon came out from behind the clouds and settled in between the trees where she was lying with what remained of a rich man's sweat in her hands, the corpse-white reflection of a life that had started and ended at the same time. Big Little B lay there in the dusk with moonlight on her face, and the blue hour settled in under her skin like vicious bruises. The warm wind that had made her blood fizz and roar before lingered up in the treetops, gazing calmly down at her.