

The Crow's Throne

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456 pages

Part 1

The Ice

I thought I saw Finn yesterday. I was outside the store when he passed right in front of me on his way out. A tall man with white hair and thick-rimmed glasses, he had broad shoulders and a straight back, his coat lapels flapping as he walked. I automatically looked in another direction, my whole body immediately on full alert, blood pounding rhythmically in my ears. I forced myself to take a few steps, then stopped and turned around, because I couldn't help it. He'd gotten into the driver's seat of a car, I watched him slam the door and start the engine, then I guess he noticed me staring because he glanced over at me quickly before his gaze moved on. The car started moving, almost silently, and a few seconds later, he was gone. I went into the store. Someone kick-started a moped behind me — it sounded like a crow's caw.

It wasn't Finn. Of course it wasn't.

Bergljot woke to a thud. It sounded like a bird had hit the window. She lay there with her eyes open, struggling for a few seconds to fall into place; she'd fallen asleep after dinner and woke up feeling disoriented. The darkness that surrounded her was dense and tangible, like a concrete substance, not just the absence of light. She'd already forgotten the thud that had woken her when she heard another. The sound was closer this time. She sat up and heard Ulf stomping quickly across the floor downstairs, threw the covers aside, went into the hallway, called his name. No answer.

She splashed some cold water on her face in the bathroom, still struggling to get her bearings, to find her way back to herself after that deep, interrupted sleep. Out in the hallway, she stood for a few seconds with her gaze on the portrait of her and her sister that

had been painted when they were children, one of the few things she'd taken from her childhood home. It hung above the stairs, an inconsequential placement, but she looked at it every day. Two sisters, one light and one dark. She was the oldest, with braids like an Indian and a shadowy face, while her sister was light as an angel. She had always liked her own portrait best, even though she knew perfectly well that her sister was in the light and she was in the shadows. The only thing she heard as she headed down the stairs was the sound of her slippers against the steps. The light wasn't on in the hallway, the living room was empty. Ulf's coffee cup was still on the table, the newspaper open to the crossword with letters scribbled in a few of the boxes. A weak shout sounded from outside, a high voice, probably from down by the lake. There were always kids messing around there, and she'd had to go down to chase them off several times. Once, she had even followed a boy all the way home to his parents after she spotted him and a few others hopping between the ice floes. She had scolded his father, could still picture the round, terrified eyes on both father's and son's faces. For a few seconds, she stood there, sort of balancing in the moment, and it was then that she noticed the side door was ajar. There were deep tracks in the snow outside. Ulf must have gone out this way. She shoved the door open, leaned out, and shouted his name, but still didn't get any answer, so she closed it, turned the handle, and locked it. Her unease had increased; his absence was suddenly so visible. His phone was lying on the table and she tapped the screen — no missed calls or unread texts. As she stood there and looked down at his phone, she became aware of something on the living room window. She registered it in the corner of her eye, both saw it and didn't see it, something was moving, sliding slowly down the windowpane, yellow and slimy. She took a step closer. It looked like egg.

It was still quiet out front as she swept her gaze across the gravelled front yard. Her whole body was pounding now. The lamp on the barn lit up the yard, the tractor, and the cars, but Ulf was nowhere to be seen. His boots were gone. She went back inside, locked the door, got a bucket from the bathroom as she tried to control her breathing, took the bucket into the kitchen, and turned on the warm water, feeling the sticky darkness like a light pressure against her body. She squirted some ammonium chloride into the bucket, the smell pungent

in her nose, pulled out the bottom drawer, found a rag. A rush of cold air hit her when she opened the window. She leaned out and wiped the rag over the yellow slime, suddenly feeling nauseous, telling herself it was just egg. She thought she heard another shout from down by the lake, more muffled this time, and it struck her that it didn't sound like a human, but more like an animal. She stood there listening for a few seconds, the rag in her hand, then she pulled the window shut.

Some time passed before Ulf came back. She heard someone tug at the locked front door, then she heard a knock. She checked that it was him through the window before opening the door. When he came in, his face was flushed, and there were red marks on his cheeks. She stepped to the side, and when he pulled off his boots, she saw they were full of coarse-grained snow.

"Where have you been?" she asked. He didn't respond, just strode past her into the living room, staring at the freshly-cleaned window. Then he turned and stared at her blankly.

"Those hoodlums were throwing eggs at our windows," he said hoarsely.

"Who? Who did that?"

He didn't respond, just walked over to the kitchen and turned on the tap. She could hear him opening the cupboard and taking out a glass. She stood in the doorway and looked at him, his breathing was rapid and uneven.

"Why were you out there for so long? What were you doing?" she asked.

He stood with his back to her without replying. She didn't give up, though.

"Were you down by the lake?"

He drained his glass and set it down on the counter with a light clatter. Suddenly, she saw he had blood on his right hand.

"What is that?" she exclaimed, and then, as if he spotted it himself, he thrust his hand under the faucet.

"I caught one of them."

"One of them?"

"A girl. She bit me," he said, nodding at the hand he was rinsing. It felt like something was being shoved down her throat.

"What did you do?" she mumbled. He turned to face her. There was no warmth in the space between them, a total absence of closeness.

"I got bitten," he said, his tone sounding like she was the one who'd bitten him.

“But why? What happened?”

He shook his head and kept rinsing his hand. She came closer.

“Why did she bite you?” she repeated. He turned off the tap.

“They were throwing eggs at our window!”

“They?”

“There were two. I caught one of them.”

She grabbed his arm, felt the synthetic fibers of his fleece jacket against her fingers.

“What did you do?” she whispered.

“I was holding her arm, like this,” he said and turned, took hold of her just like he’d done so many times, held her, pressed her against him. She felt a sudden urge to give in and lean against him, but pushed back.

“What have you done? Are you a total idiot? That’s assault! You can be charged for that!”

He let go of her and turned away. She looked down at his hand, which had stopped bleeding. She grabbed it, held it with both hands.

“Maybe you should go to the doctor? Human bites can be dangerous.”

He didn’t respond, just blinked.

“I’ll find some disinfectant,” she said. She went upstairs to the second floor, into the bathroom, opened the medicine cabinet, took out the bottle of antiseptic, found a bag of cotton swabs under the sink. When she stood up, she felt dizzy and had to lean against the counter.

He was sitting at the living room table when she came back. The crossword puzzle lay in front of him with the words he’d written in the boxes.

“Give me your hand,” she said, but he didn’t move. He suddenly looked confused, and she found herself thinking, as she had so many times before: someday, I’ll have to look after him. Take care of him like a baby. He’s going to need it.

He pointed at the window.

“What are those lights out there?” he said.

When she was young, Bergljot's sole aim in life was to give herself to a man. That was her only plan for the future, and that was exactly what she'd done. When she got together with Ulf, they were students. They met at a party: he was sitting at a table playing the guitar, not that he was that good, neither at playing nor singing, but there was something about his voice, he sang alone, she remembered the lyrics to the chorus, dark and insistent, almost coercive. She was standing at the other side of the room with a glass in her hand, no one else was really listening to him, her friends were yelling and carrying on around her, transparent somehow, everything else in the room was light and volatile, frivolous, the only thing that had any weight, that was present and finite, was him, at that table over there, and the words he sang: follow me, follow me. That was almost forty years ago. And she'd done that ever since.

Now, she was following him once again. She stuck her feet in the slightly-too-large rubber boots that were always sitting in the hallway with a little bit of sand and dust at the bottom, pulled on her down jacket, and slammed the front door shut behind her. The blue lights were vibrating over there. She saw Ulf's back just ahead, still in his fleece jacket. Fear stuttered through her, and the only thing she thought was: just don't let it be that.

There was an ambulance. It was parked at the end of the farm road, all the way down by the lake, a place many used for swimming in the summer. People were always parking their cars there without seeming to care that it was a private road. The back doors were open and a young girl was sitting there, almost a child, really, wrapped up in a thermal blanket. Bergljot stared at her, hypnotized. The girl must have noticed it; she slowly turned her head toward her. They stared straight at each other for a second, an incomprehensible darkness in the girl's eyes. The blue lights flickered around the car like a rhythmic halo. Then sirens sounded behind them. Bergljot turned and saw a police car appearing at the top of the hill. She looked for Ulf, but he'd gone over to one of the EMTs. She followed, heard her own voice — what happened? The EMT motioned for them to wait. He was on the phone, then hung up and put it in his pocket.

"Do you folks live on the farm?" he asked.

"Yes. Ulf Os, and this is my wife," Ulf said.

The EMT looked at them for a few seconds, the blue lights falling on his young face.

"We believe someone's gone through the ice. It's best if you keep your distance. So the first responders have room."

Ulf took Bergljot's arm and pulled her with him, away from the road, their boots sinking into the snow. The police car had stopped behind the ambulance. Not long after, a firetruck came into view at the top of the farm road. A floodlight was turned on, opening a cone of white light over the lake. Then, a tall, imposing policewoman came toward Bergljot and Ulf. "Incident commander" was written on her yellow vest. Bergljot knew who she was — Vigdis Malmstrøm. She'd moved to Nordbygda a few years ago, had been sheriff somewhere or other before. Her face shone in the floodlight, her long hair that stuck out from beneath her beanie so it looked like she'd simply pulled it on in a hurry. She asked for their names, but when Bergljot started to answer, her voice stopped in her throat — there was a physical barrier there, she couldn't get anything out.

"Ulf and Bergljot Os," Ulf said. "We live on the farm."

The policewoman glanced quickly at Bergljot before addressing Ulf.

"It's best if you go back home now, then we'll come up afterwards for a chat. Right now, we need room to do our jobs," she said.

Ulf nodded, but didn't move.

"This is our property, you can't stop us from being here," he mumbled when the policewoman turned away. Then he did something unexpected: he put his arm around Bergljot as if marking his territory, showing everyone he belonged to her, and she to him, just like the farm, the woods, the lakes, the marshes and the fields belonged to him and her, and she felt how this brought them together, she felt the resistance loosen within her. But they didn't go home. They were still standing there when a diver from the fire department went out into the lake, massive and heavy in a dry suit and diving gear, breaking through the ice with every step until he disappeared beneath the surface. And they were standing there when the helicopter came, she heard the clattering sound first, then everything was sort of set in motion, fluttering around them. A rescue worker was lowered down from the sky in the blinding light of the floodlight, the diver was still down in the lake, he attached something to the line and was hoisted up, it lasted both an instant and an eternity. What Bergljot remembered best afterward was the flickering sound, the blue flashes of light, how they tore through the darkness, and Ulf's firm hold around her shoulder.

The last traces of winter lingered. Snow lay in patches on the mountain, heavy with animal tracks and bits of vegetation. It was compact and easy to move across; the sun had melted the top layer, making it soft so her cross-country skis could get a good grip. Vigdis Malmstrøm flew over the patches of snow and simply stepped onto the heather with her skis where it was bare. She was between two seasons, it was like skiing over a partly undressed body. The heather lay newly awakened on the south-facing slopes, warm and fragrant, while marsh grass pushed up through the snow like pubic hair.

She ate an orange before starting the descent. The fruit was sour and reluctant to be unpeeled, but she pried it off with her nails and shoved the peel into the pocket of her anorak. Then she flew down the snow crust on the north-facing hills and cleared her head. She took every opportunity she had to drive up here, like today, before she had the evening shift. As she crossed over the frozen lakes on her way back to the car, she felt a deep, genuine joy.

She was reviewing some interrogation reports alone in the office she shared with colleagues Naima Saleem and William Lund when the operations commander called. His voice was metallic in her ear when she picked up.

“Hi, Vigdis. I saw you were on duty. Do you have anyone to send out now? I have an urgent dispatch. Someone might’ve gone through the ice.”

She stood up and was already heading across the room while the operations commander continued:

“We don’t know the details, but the caller can’t make contact with the missing person. It’s at Osvannet in Nordbygda. Patrol is tied up, there’s been tons of truck rollovers and smaller accidents tonight, so I don’t have anyone to send out right now. This is being treated as a serious incident.”

Vigdis took her down jacket off the hook. It was covered in duct tape that stopped the down from coming out, and the arms were dirty after she’d put chains on her car tires.

“I can go,” she said.

“Great. Stop by the desk office and grab someone to take with you,” the operations commander said as she headed out the door.

It was dark when she got into the police van with a young colleague beside her, heading down the highway at top speed. The colleague drove while Vigdis sat in the passenger seat. She watched the cars slide to the side ahead of them while she rang operations headquarters for an update.

“The information we have is that one person is believed to have gone through the ice. There is still no contact with the individual,” the operations commander said. “An ambulance has arrived and is attending to the caller. The fire department is on its way with a frogman. We’ve requested a rescue helicopter. Should be there in about fifteen.”

Vigdis had to concentrate to take in all the information. The sirens echoed in her ear canals, the blue lights illuminated the snow along the road.

“I’m putting you down as temporary incident commander, Vigdis, then you’ll be relieved as soon as possible,” the operations commander said, his voice crackling on the radio. She could barely hear it through the sirens and the roar of the engine when the car accelerated. It had been a long time since she’d been on an emergency response. Her thoughts raced through her head and she tried to visualize the mission, to map out a loose plan as she stared at the two cones of light from the headlights illuminating the snow along the road, the white in the darkness.

The colleague who was driving had both hands on the steering wheel, and his gaze was fixed stiffly far ahead. When he made a sharp turn off the highway onto a farm road, Vigdis was flung to the side, and for a few seconds she hung in the seat belt, almost weightless. The road went through a grove and several fields, and they could see the farm from a distance, where the lights were on in the main house. Os Gård, one of the biggest farms in the region. They passed through even more woods for the last bit, and she spotted the blue lights from the ambulance through the trees. Her colleague turned off the sirens as they drove over the front yard and said:

“Isn’t this where the mayor lives?”

“The mayor?” Vigdis repeated. Her gaze wandered over the windows of the main house as they passed beneath the barn ramp and headed over the final stretch, where the terrain sloped gently downward toward an opening in the woods. There was a lake there — she could just make out the ice like a glowing white field in the darkness.

It wasn't until they were back inside that Bergljot realized how cold she was after standing in deep snow in her thin rubber boots. Ulf had gone to the bathroom. She stood in the hallway thinking about her bed, about how she'd been lying there just over an hour ago, lying there and thinking about things she considered problems. All she wanted was to take a hot shower and go back to bed, find her way back to the place she'd been before all this happened. She was on her way up the stairs when she heard a knock at the door. She stood there for a few moments, balancing on one foot like on a slackline, realizing this wasn't over after all.

Vigdis Malmstrøm was standing outside. She had taken off the yellow vest and was wearing a puffer jacket. Bergljot noticed there were pieces of black tape on the arms.

"Now we can have a chat," Malmstrøm said.

In the kitchen, Bergljot walked mechanically over to the counter, took the pot from the coffee maker, and started filling it with water.

"None for me, thanks," said the policewoman. She'd kept her jacket on but taken off her beanie and stuffed it in a pocket. Her hair was gathered in a loose ponytail and she pushed a few loose strands aside, there were traces of pink lipstick on her lips. Ulf was still in the bathroom. Bergljot heard him flush and caught sight of the bucket that was still out, the rag she'd washed the window with. Why hadn't she put it away? Her fingers were shaking so badly as she was opening the coffee box that she couldn't get the lid off at first. She had no idea how many spoons of coffee she put in the filter.

Vigdis Malmstrøm had taken out a notebook and sat down at the kitchen table, saying something about what rights and duties they had as witnesses. Ulf came in, stopping suddenly when he saw the policewoman sitting there, then he went over to the sink and washed his hands.

"Do you know who went through the ice?" he asked, his back to them.

Vigdis Malmstrøm looked over at him with cool, grey eyes.

"We think it's a local girl," was all she said.

"Oh," Bergljot let slip. She looked at Ulf, who'd turned off the tap. His eyes looked bigger than usual.

"How is she doing? She'll be okay, right?"

"We don't know yet. Now, I'd like for you to tell me what you might've seen or heard."

Bergljot sank down into a chair.

"I heard shouts," she blurted out.

"From where?"

"From down by the lake."

"When was that?"

"I don't know, Ulf was out," Bergljot said then stopped abruptly, glanced over at Ulf, remembering his firm grip around her shoulders.

"He needed to fix something in the garage," she said quickly. Vigdis Malmstrøm looked up from her notes.

"You heard shouting. When was that?"

"I don't know. I was napping for half an hour or so, so I was a little groggy. Maybe around 7:30?" she said, forcing herself to meet the investigator's gaze.

"What did the shouts sound like?"

"Like an animal," she said without thinking, because it was true. Vigdis Malmstrøm gave her a sharp look.

"You thought you'd heard an animal?"

"No, I knew it was a person. But it sounded like an animal. I thought it was some kids. They hang out down there sometimes."

"Down there?"

"Down by the lake."

Vigdis Malmstrøm turned toward Ulf.

"And you were out. Where were you?"

Ulf was still standing at the sink, his big shoulders stooped inside the fiber fabric of his fleece.

"In the garage," he said, like an echo of what Bergljot had told the policewoman. She swallowed the saliva in her mouth. He walked across the room and grabbed the hand towel off the hook.

"I was taking a look at the snowmobile. It's been acting up lately, so I was testing the engine."

"Did you hear or see anything then?" Malmstrøm asked.

Ulf had let go of the hand towel, shook his head.

"No shouts?"

“No,” he mumbled, just as Vigdis Malmstrøm’s phone rang. She stood up and strode quickly across the room, shutting the door to the hallway behind her, but it wouldn’t close, both Bergljot and Ulf knew that, it slid back open and they heard her answer, she said “yes, understood, then it’s decided.” They didn’t look at each other while she was in the hall, because Ulf *had* been in the garage, he *had* been looking at the snowmobile, but that had been earlier that evening, while Bergljot made coffee, before she fell asleep, before the eggs on the window, the shouts from the lake. A new reality was taking form, one that overlapped with the old, they were in it without having to say anything, that’s how well they knew each other; when one said something, the other had just thought the same. She wanted to reach for his hand but didn’t dare, because everything would be interpreted somehow, and even though she was out in the hallway, Bergljot was convinced that Vigdis Malmstrøm picked up on everything.

The door opened and the investigator stood in front of them. She looked like nothing would surprise her, nothing the two of them could come up with, at least. Her puffer jacket was open, and she put her phone in the inner pocket. Her grey eyes swept over Bergljot before stopping on Ulf.

“You’re going to have to take a trip down to the station. A car is waiting outside. We can finish the conversation there.”

The spruces stooped darkly around the yard, the snow was pale between the tree trunks. Bergljot had stepped into her rubber boots again, pulled her jacket back on. She was out on the stairs when a policeman opened the back door of a patrol car that was waiting there, luckily without blue lights. She was shaking so hard her teeth chattered as she watched Ulf get in the back seat, still in his fleece jacket, she wanted to say something to him but couldn’t because the door was closed and the car drove away. She was left standing there with Vigdis Malmstrøm.

“I don’t understand what’s going on. Why are you taking Ulf?” she asked, her voice had several breaks in it, like a shattered spine.

“There’s nothing to worry about, Bergljot. We just want him to explain a few things. We’ll need to have a proper chat with you, too. I’ll get in touch when I have a specific time. So you’re going to need to stay here. Okay?”

She must have nodded, or said yes, because Vigdis Malmstrøm went over to another car. Her phone rang, she picked it up and spoke as she got in, then the lights turned on and the engine started, she turned across the yard and drove off.

Ulf Os cut an impressive figure. He wasn't particularly tall, but he looked like he had been chopped straight out of a mountain, like a boulder that had come loose and still had the force of the mountain with it, compact and full of power. Even though he was close to sixty, there was something about him, a magnetism Vigdis was immediately aware of. When she met his gaze, she snapped to attention; this wasn't someone she could fool. On the contrary, this was someone who might be able to fool her.

Ulf Os wasn't just the mayor's husband, he was also one of the biggest landowners in the village. His farm covered several thousand acres, with cultivated fields, forests, and mountainous areas. Vigdis wasn't quite sure, but she thought he might even own the land where she'd just been skiing.

"I'm going to have to ask you to tell me what happened tonight, Ulf," she said.

Ulf Os sat across from her in the interrogation room. He didn't move.

"I thought I already had," he said brusquely.

"Yes. But now we've gotten some information that doesn't quite fit with what you've told us thus far."

"What information?" Ulf Os asked, clearly on guard. Vigdis didn't respond.

"I'd like you to go through the events of this evening one more time," was all she said.

Ulf Os's eyebrows looked like tussocks in a marsh. He started speaking quietly, his hands resting in his lap. He'd made dinner for his wife, who was tired after a long meeting with the municipal council. They'd eaten around six, had a cup of coffee, and afterwards she'd gone to take a nap, maybe around seven, while he'd worked on a crossword. Then he'd gone out to the garage to look at the snowmobile, which had started sputtering lately. He'd managed to get it going. When he came back in, he had spotted the blue lights down by the lake and gone down there with his wife. They'd witnessed the rescue operation.

Vigdis was fairly good at picking up when someone was lying. Ulf Os looked straight at her, but his eyes strayed, his gaze wasn't quite fixed, and there was something angular, slightly mechanical about his movements. She watched him as he spoke in short, concise sentences. When he finally fell silent, she spoke again:

"Did you hear anything?"

"Nope. But I was in the garage, testing the snowmobile's engine. It makes one hell of a racket."

"I see. Did anything else happen tonight apart from what you've told me so far?"

Ulf looked at her for a few seconds. She could see the wheels turning behind that big, square brow. Some time passed, more than natural, before he finally responded:

"Yes," he said. "Our living room windows were egged."

Vigdis sat motionless, waiting for him to continue.

"Someone threw them from the garden. I heard and saw it happen."

"That doesn't sound very pleasant," Vigdis said, adding a semblance of empathy to her voice. "What did you do then?"

Ulf Os leaned back in his chair.

"I put on my boots and went out to the porch, and then I saw there were people in the garden. So I ran after them and caught one of them. I was pretty pissed, so maybe I grabbed her a little too tightly."

"You grabbed her a little too tightly?" Vigdis repeated, staring at him.

"Yes."

"What happened then?"

Ulf Os shifted in his seat without meeting her gaze.

"She bit my hand and I let go. Then she ran off."

"And what did you do then?" Vigdis asked.

"I took a little walk to collect myself. When I came back in, my wife had woken up, I washed my hand, we talked a bit, and after a while we spotted the blue lights down by the lake."

Ulf Os looked ten years older now. He was hunched over in his chair, his shoulders collapsed as though his back could no longer hold his heavy body upright.

“Can I see your hand?” Vigdis asked. He held out his hand without replying and she took it between her own, turned it over, looked at it. The back of his hand was swollen and had clear, red bite marks.

“You should probably have a doctor take a look at that,” she said.

Ulf pulled his hand back.

“That’s what my wife said, too,” he mumbled.

Vigdis studied him for a few seconds.

“Why didn’t you tell us this earlier, Ulf?”

“I’m telling you now,” he said wearily, the resistance gone from him. Vigdis looked at her watch. It was almost eleven.

“Nearly two hours have passed since I spoke with you and Bergljot at home. Neither of you said anything about these incidents.”

Ulf Os looked up.

“Please keep my wife out of this,” he said.

Vigdis shook her head.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that. She told the same story you did. You both said you were in the garage looking at the snowmobile. Then you came back in, you saw the blue lights, and went down to the lake. Neither of you said anything about the egging, the people in the garden, that you caught one of them. You only told us about that later. And it’s obviously very important information. So now I’m wondering: why did you keep this from us?”

Ulf sighed heavily. He peered past Vigdis, as though something were happening behind her.

“It just happened. I’m sorry.”

Vigdis leaned toward him.

“You grabbed one of the girls, she bit your hand, you let her go. What did she do after that?”

Ulf looked like he was thinking.

“She ran toward the woods,” he said.

“Toward the lake?”

“No, in the opposite direction. Toward the highway. I thought she took off.”

“And what did you do?”

He had stood there and listened. His hand ached. Stars were scattered above him, the sky was clear and dark. He was still angry, and the pain from his hand sent shivers down his fingers and through his body. At the same time, he was relieved, in a way. Relieved that she'd gotten away. That nothing had happened. He hadn't done anything.

He went back through the garden, the snow crust crunching beneath his feet. There were tracks in the snow where he assumed the other girl had run, heading toward the lake. He stopped and listened, and while he stood there, the living room window opened. He saw Bergljot standing inside. She looked at the mess on the window, then she pulled out a rag. She didn't realize he was there. He felt the adrenaline rising in his body again over the fact that she had to stand there and clean up the mess. Rage shot out into his arms, the crests of pain razor-sharp. He didn't say anything, just heard his own breath in the quiet evening.

"Did you hear anything?" Vigdis Malmstrøm's voice broke through from the other side of the table. He barely turned his head, looked over at her. He might've once said she was pretty. Now, the lines around her mouth were deep, her beauty was sort of worn away, like the glaze on a well-used porcelain cup, yet there were still more than just traces. She was still tall and athletic. In a brush of a moment, he imagined bending her over onto the bed, sort of breaking that long body in two, he imagined the dark light in her eyes. Then he blinked it away.

Bergljot watched the darkness spread across the sky from the kitchen window. The treetops slowly faded away until they were completely erased. She hadn't turned on the lights inside, just stood and looked out over the front yard — there was the tractor, his car and hers, things were in their proper places, every possession belonged somewhere. Now she could barely see the tops of the spruces anymore, stars appeared in the sky. She tried to imagine life without Ulf, something she'd longed for so many times before, she'd even wished he might get in an accident and die, but at the same time, it was what she feared above all else. Why do people long for the things they fear? A simple, silly longing for freedom.

It was almost 11:30 when a patrol car drove onto the yard, she could see the lights coming from a distance. Her throat was dry, she hadn't even had a glass of water since Vigdis Malmstrøm left, because if she just stood there without moving, everything would continue

like before, Ulf would come back, she just had to exist in this, persevere, wait until it was over and done with. The police car stopped outside and she ran into the hallway, flung open the door just in time to see a young man with curly hair come out, another person was behind the wheel with the engine running — but no Ulf. The sight nearly brought her to her knees.

The young man came toward her, holding out an ID card. She didn't look at it.

"Bergljot Os?" he said.

"Yes?"

"I need to ask you to come with me to the police station."

"Why?"

"We'd like to talk with you."

She looked at the police car again.

"Where's Ulf?" she asked weakly.

"Ulf is still down at the station," said the young policeman.

"Why?" Bergljot said again, filled with the sense that none of this was actually happening. She was somewhere else, somewhere not in the reality she knew. The policeman didn't seem to notice.

"We'll fill you in at the station," was all he said.

The sense that none of this was real continued to grow as she approached the patrol car. The policeman opened the door for her, she felt the light touch of his palm against the back of her head as she leaned in, just like in the movies, before he went around the car and got in beside her. She couldn't buckle her seatbelt, her hands were shaking too much, so he did it for her. To keep from being swallowed by a wave of panic, she focused on breathing the way she'd learned, starting at the bottom of her stomach and thinking of her lungs like an elevator moving up through her body. She shut her eyes when they started driving but was always aware of where they were; she knew every stone in this landscape, the little swing where the farm road met the highway, how she tilted to the side as the car turned, the acceleration on the long stretch where the river sometimes went over the banks in the spring thaw, the pressure on the brakes before the turn, then another braking down toward the bridge over the waterfall, she heard the humming of the water before the descent down to Sørbygda. She saw the straight neck of the policewoman in the driver's seat diagonally in front of her — she'd seen this kind of view on TV countless times, a sort of well-known

tableau, but now she was in it. She thought: soon, this will be over. Soon, I'll be back home, and Ulf will be back home, and we can keep going on like before. Then she thought for one ice-cold moment: but what if it doesn't end? What if this is the new beginning? And then she started rattling again, almost losing control over her breath. When the car pulled over in front of the police station, she was sitting there with her eyes closed again.

Vigdis Malmstrøm was standing in one of the doorways in the hall when Bergljot came into the station. She'd taken off her threadbare puffer jacket and her lipstick had been reapplied. Bergljot noticed her sharp, grey gaze and thought about how she needed to be on guard with such a woman. Now, she took Bergljot into a room and shut the door behind them. No one else was in the room, just a table with chairs and a camera on the wall — someone was watching them. "Take a seat," Vigdis Malmstrøm said. Bergljot did as she was told, focusing on her breath, the unbroken line from her pelvis and up. That was how she'd breathed when she gave birth to her children, and it had helped her; the second time, the midwife had said in amazement, "You don't look like you're in labor, you look like you're sleeping."

She was going to sleep through this and wake up afterward, and everything would be like it was before. She'd been through worse, she'd slept through so much, with eyes wide open. If they only knew. She wanted to reach for the glass of water, her mouth was so dry, but realized too late that that was a mistake because her hand was shaking so violently. Vigdis Malmstrøm pulled another chair over to the table and set a laptop in front of her.

"We spoke with both you and your husband earlier tonight. But we later found out that something in your explanation didn't add up. On the basis of this, we have now changed your husband's status," she said, opening the laptop.

For a fraction of a second, Bergljot hoped she'd misheard or misunderstood.

"Changed his status?" she managed to press out through her lips. She saw Vigdis Malmstrøm's mouth moving, but it took some time before the words made their way inside her, they had to force their way through several layers.

"He is now a suspect, while you're still considered a witness. Since you're married, you are not obligated to testify about him as a suspect. But if you choose to give a statement, you are obligated to tell the truth," she said.

Bergljot heard the blood pounding in her ears like a loud rushing. Without realizing it, she'd grabbed hold of the table.

“Suspect, I don’t understand, for what?”

“We suspect Ulf was involved with the events by the lake. First and foremost, we need to get to the bottom of what happened so that we can exclude him from the investigation.”

“What investigation? What are you talking about?”

“There are some uncertainties surrounding the accident at Osvannet where a young woman went through the ice, so I’d like you to take me through what happened tonight one more time,” Vigdis Malmstrøm said, seemingly patient.

Bergljot felt her palms opening and closing around the table, like the gills of a dying fish.

“But why? I’ve already told you everything!”

“It would be of great help if you could answer my questions, Bergljot,” said Vigdis Malmstrøm. Bergljot didn’t like how she used her first name. She was forcing an intimacy by being on a first-name basis like that, pushing herself on her, it was borderline abuse.

She started talking. Told the same story. They’d eaten dinner at six. Afterward, they’d had coffee, then she’d taken a nap, it must’ve been around seven, and she slept for around half an hour, maybe longer, she was tired after having led a municipal council meeting earlier.

“Where did you sleep?” Vigdis Malmstrøm interrupted.

Bergljot felt the impatience flare up. Soon, she’d probably be asked whether she went to the bathroom first, and what she was wearing.

“In the bedroom,” she mumbled.

“What woke you up?”

Bergljot hesitated for a moment. She remembered the thud against the window and shook her head faintly, her arms felt like sandbags.

“Nothing special. I just woke up.”

“What did you do then?”

“I got up. When I came down, Ulf was in the garage working on the snowmobile.”

“Yes, you said that earlier today. How did you know he was there?”

“He said it when we were eating dinner. That he was going to take a look at it after. Something about the engine. I asked if he didn’t want to wait until it was light out.”

“I see. Did you see or hear that he was there?”

“No. But he’d said it,” Bergljot said weakly.

Vigdis Malmstrøm nodded.

“So you assumed. What did you do while he was out there?”

Bergljot met her gaze, shrugged casually. That had saved her when she’d been in trouble before — shrugging, not remembering, playing dumb.

“When did you clean the windows?” Vigdis Malmstrøm asked. She was slicing a knife through the imprecision, adding a cold fact, an observation of the bucket that had been left out in the kitchen, wet steaks on the windows, the faint scent of ammonia. Bergljot found a point on the wall and stared at it.

“When I woke up,” she said.

“Why did you clean the windows?”

“Why does anybody? Because they were dirty,” Bergljot snapped.

“Okay. So if I have this right, you ate dinner, then you took a nap around seven. When you woke up, your husband was outside, and you cleaned the windows. Did you see or hear anything unusual?”

Bergljot didn’t respond right away. Then she said what she was thinking:

“I don’t understand where you’re going with this.”

Vigdis Malmstrøm looked at her coolly.

“Then I’ll explain it to you,” she said. “The police received a call from a young woman at 7:45. She called dispatch and said her friend had gone through the ice. We responded. When the woman who called us was questioned, she told us that before her friend went out on the ice, the two of them had been up in your garden.”

Bergljot didn’t reply. She let go of the edge of the table. There was no point in hanging onto it anymore, it wasn’t going to help anyway.

They had come in the dark. Sofie Annesdatter Hansen and Åsa Amundsen. Sofie drove her mom’s electric car, parked it along the farm road in a pull-off between the trees. Åsa was nervous, her hands were already cold while they sat in the car, and when she crouched down to pee after they parked, her sneakers sank into the snow and got wet right away. She was wearing jeans and a thin jacket, an anorak from the Salvation Army’s used store, but she

had a wool sweater beneath it. Sofie was similarly dressed in an old pea coat, jeans, and sneakers. The sky was a deep blue over the treetops, it was like the stars were moving, almost drawing circles, and Åsa had a strange thought, she thought: it's written in the stars, everything is predetermined. She didn't say that to Sofie as they walked up the farm road, she knew Sofie didn't care about things like fate or religion. The woods ended, and they walked through the fields, the snow glowing white against the dark earth. Sofie went first, walking with determined steps, self-assured and in shape, her backpack dancing on her back. Åsa practically had to run to keep up with her on the hills. There were more trees for the last stretch, then they passed an old wooden storehouse at the turn before they stepped onto the yard where the road flattened out. The yard was quiet, and lights shone from the windows of the main house. Several cars and a tractor were parked in front of the barn, including Ulf Os' enormous diesel Range Rover, which they recognized. They snuck behind the cars, kept close to the barn wall, stayed out of the light from the outdoor lamps as they shot across the yard, crept around the corner, and came down on the lower side of the main house. There was a porch and a big, illuminated living room window with potted plants on the sill. Madame Mayor probably watered her flowers there while she planned out her next pathetic speech, more of the absurdly hollow words she brought herself to say, and afterward she polished her mayoral chain, buffed it until it shone, then she probably rubbed Ulf Os' cock afterward until it was just as shiny. That was the sort of thing they could say to each other and laugh about, shocked at each other's crassness.

The garden was covered in snow. The light from the window cast a square onto the ground and they kept away from the square, hid themselves in the darkness. Sofie pulled off her backpack. The egg carton was at the bottom, she carefully lifted it out and opened the lid — six brown eggs — and handed one of them to Åsa. She felt the egg in her hand, the thin, fragile shell, the coarse smoothness. Sofie took one too, she threw first but missed the window, the egg hit the wall beneath it, then she looked at Åsa: now it was her turn. Åsa lifted her arm, hadn't thought she'd be able to hit it, but she did. The egg smashed against the windowpane and its contents ran down the glass. It was like they'd crossed a line now, a wild feeling of having hit the mark. Sofie threw again, and this time she hit it too. At the same time they saw a figure inside, someone came closer and peered out — it was Ulf Os. Åsa had another egg in her hand, she no longer hesitated, flung it at the window, watched how the yellow slime slid down the window right in front of his face.

They'd planned which way they would run afterward, from the garden toward the grove, through the woods, out onto the farm road and back to the car, without having to cross the yard. But there was so much snow and the garden was much bigger than they'd thought, so they were still in the middle of it when the porch door flew open and Ulf Os came out. "Let's turn around," Sofie whispered, but Åsa saw the edge of the garden ahead of her and kept going, the trees would hide her if she could just make it over there. Ulf Os came down the porch stairs as she floundered through the snow, sinking deep with every step and he was faster because he was walking on a trodden path, she registered him getting closer, the big man loomed behind her like a shadow, she heard his hoarse breathing and it made her nauseous, she was almost at the stone fence by the forest when she fell and scraped her hands on the hard snow crust, he caught up to her as she got to her feet and sort of fell over her, grabbed her and took hold of her upper body, she thought she might throw up as it happened, she lashed out in a panic and felt a blow land, she heard him mumble: "You stupid little..." but he didn't finish, he just tightened his grip around both of her wrists, the panic teemed inside her, she had to get away from there, she lowered her head and bit one of his hands, bit as hard as she could into the thick knuckles, so hard he screamed and let go, and then she ran. She was out of the garden shortly after, over the fence and into the woods where the trees closed around her, she continued through the brush, tripped and got back up, her feet felt like icicles in her wet shoes and she sank into the snow with every step but kept going anyway, maybe she was running in the wrong direction because the woods never seemed to end, then she stopped, because what if he went after Sofie, he'd never be able to catch her, but what if he tried, she couldn't leave Sofie, she stood and listened with her heart pounding, that was when she heard the shouts.

Åsa sat in her parents' living room, warming her hands around a cup of tea she wasn't drinking, hearing herself speaking in a slow, monotone voice. If she had turned toward the window, she would have gotten a glimpse of her own face, with round cheeks, medium-long, blonde hair that was dyed blue, the roots showing, but she didn't turn, she stared straight ahead. Her parents sat next to her, one on each side. Criminal investigator Naima Saleem sat on the other side of the table, listening intently and taking notes as Åsa told her how she'd heard shouts when she was in the woods and realized they must have been coming from Sofie. So she turned around. She tried to find her tracks back to the garden and heard more

shouts on her way through the woods, but when she got to the stone wall, it was completely silent. Åsa was scared, she didn't dare make any noise. She saw neither Ulf Os nor his wife, but the lights were still on in the windows of the main house, making the snow crust glitter like tiny diamonds. She climbed over the fence and back into the garden, following her tracks. There was a lake below the farm. Could Sofie have gone out onto the ice? It might have been a shortcut, she might have thought she could get to the car faster, but it wasn't safe, the ice wasn't thick enough, and Sofie knew that. Åsa made her way down to the water and started running along the shore, breaking through the ice with every step, freezing-cold water seeping into her shoes so she couldn't feel her feet anymore, and that was when she heard another shout. She stopped. The shout came from the ice, where she saw a dark opening. The woods were dense all around her, as if they were watching, pressing helplessly in. Åsa screamed. She screamed for help, it didn't sound like her, and she only did it once, she'd been frightened by her own voice. There wasn't a sound around her, nobody to hear. She fumbled for her phone in her pocket, her hands shaking when she typed in the code so she had to try several times, and she started crying, because who should she call, what should she do, so she called 911, hearing the ringing as if from far away, a voice answered quickly. She could barely speak, it was like her voice had been used up, only detached words remained and she had to strain to push them out. She stared at the dark opening in the ice. There weren't any more shouts coming from there.

That was Åsa Amundsen's statement. Naima wrote it down, and when she came back to the office, she repeated the statement to Vigdis, who brought it with her to the interrogation of Bergljot Os.

Bergljot Os was deathly pale. She looked like the queen in a deck of cards, one with thick powder, a starched collar and an expressionless face, her features sort of painted on. She had deep lines around her mouth and sat there, petrified yet terror-stricken at the same time, as though her whole life was being spelled out in front of her in terrifying and incomprehensible letters.

"The witness went back," Vigdis said to her. "She heard her friend's shouts. The shouts you also heard."

“The shouts I heard,” Bergljot said flatly.

“You said you heard shouts from down at the lake when you were cleaning the windows. You thought it was an animal at first,” Vigdis said, keeping a close eye on Bergljot’s face. A wide, level line had appeared on her forehead, a horizontal line, deep and clear, that hadn’t been there earlier.

“Was the window open when you were cleaning it?” Vigdis asked.

Bergljot shifted slightly without changing her expression.

“Yes, of course.”

Vigdis scrutinized the woman in front of her, saw how the wide line in her forehead got even deeper when she said:

“The shouts you heard were from a young woman who was shouting for help because she’d gone through the ice.”

Bergljot sat there, pale and motionless, as Vigdis continued:

“For some reason or other, she went out on the ice, even though it was clearly unsafe. But she took the chance, or maybe it was something, or someone, who made her do it.”

Bergljot didn’t respond. The sound of her inhaling through her nose was audible. Vigdis stared into the pale queen’s face.

“Where was Ulf at this point?” she asked.

Bergljot slightly moved her stiff lips without saying anything. Vigdis continued:

“You see, Ulf has changed his statement. And the information I first received from the two of you doesn’t match up with what he has told me now. That’s why I’d like you to explain. You said you were washing windows when you heard shouts. But where was Ulf then?”

No answer. Bergljot’s mouth was a straight dash, parallel to the line across her forehead.

“We have forensic technicians,” Vigdis continued. “And they’re going to check the tracks in the garden. The tracks belonging to the two women and the ones belonging to Ulf. They’re going to find out what happened. That’s why I’m asking: what did you hear and what did you see, both when you were cleaning the windows, and afterward?”

Bergljot Os looked at her again, her eyes tiny in that white face, pupils black and constricted. Her voice was almost completely gone when she responded:

“I’d like to speak to a lawyer.”

Naima was waiting in the hallway when Vigdis came out of the interrogation room. Her face was grave, and she motioned that they should go to their shared office.

“We just got word from the hospital,” she said, shutting the door behind them.

Vigdis sank down onto a chair and waited for her to continue, even though she already saw it on Naima’s face, in the dark shine in her eyes.

“Sofie Annesdatter Hansen’s death has been confirmed. She was declared dead twenty minutes ago,” Naima said.

Vigdis rubbed her face with her hands, mostly to hide the fact that she felt a sharp jab in her stomach. Sofie was around the same age as her son. She wanted to call Joachim, hear his voice.

“Has the family been notified?” she mumbled.

“Yes. They’re on their way to the hospital, the mother and stepfather,” Naima said.

Vigdis gave a faint shake of her head. She thought of Bergljot’s masklike face, and Ulf Os, motionless as a mountain.

“They let her die up there,” she said quietly.

“Who?” Naima said, still standing in the middle of the room. Vigdis turned toward her.

“The mayor and her husband. Something happened up there. I can’t figure out what it is. But they’re hiding something. They’ve given us some information, but they’re holding something back, and I haven’t been able to account for all their movements.”

“What could they be hiding?” Naima asked, her arms crossed.

“They’ve withheld information. They didn’t tell us about the egging, they didn’t say Ulf Os caught one of the girls, that she bit his hand. They heard shouts, but didn’t go to check who was shouting. They did absolutely nothing to help Sofie. Why not? And why on earth did she go out on that ice when she knew it wasn’t safe?”

Naima’s arms fell to her sides.

“It was probably to take a shortcut to the car,” she said. “But you’re right that it might have been a situation that escalated.”

“We have a timeline here,” said Vigdis. “How many minutes passed from when Åsa ran from Ulf to when she turned around and went back? What could have happened to Sofie in the meantime?”

“It’s unclear. I asked Åsa, but she couldn’t pinpoint it. She had trouble finding her way in the dark. We should take that into account. There must be tracks in the snow from everyone who was present.”

Vigdis straightened up. It was late, and she felt how tired, hungry, and thirsty she was. Her lungs ached when she breathed, as if she could physically feel what had happened, an unexpected intrusion into time, a senseless death.

“We have to charge them,” she said suddenly.

Naima simply stared at her while she fiddled with the small gold charm she wore around her neck.

“Ulf Os and the wife. Both of them. There’s a risk of evidence tampering,” Vigdis continued. “And we need a search warrant.”

“She’s the mayor,” Naima said, letting go of the necklace. Vigdis already had her phone in her hand. She found the prosecutor’s name in the contact list, brought the phone to her ear, and looked over at Naima. It felt like everything had been going so slowly, but now things were suddenly in motion, going somewhere.

“Call Bård and ask him to come in. I’ll talk to Elin Hammer.”

Even though it was late, Elin Hammer picked up as soon as Vigdis called. She sat in the office and stared at the light filtering through the blinds in thin strips every time a car passed. She could hear that she was out of breath, her sentences were short and hectic as she told the prosecutor that a young woman was dead in a drowning accident and that there were several inconsistencies around the death.

“We’ve interviewed witnesses who we believe have withheld information, and we need to clarify what happened here,” she said as she looked at Naima, who had gotten hold of crime scene investigator Bård Jensen on the phone and was filling him in on the case.

Vigdis continued:

“Now we have to act on fresh leads. They’ll close up soon, and we’re concerned about evidence tampering. We need a search warrant, and in that case, we need to make a charge.”

“Charge who?” Elin Hammer said a bit stiffly.

“Ulf and Bergljot Os. The couple who live on the farm,” Vigdis replied, leaving out the fact that the two suspects were the mayor and her husband.

“And what do you want to charge them for?”

“Withholding key information. They obstructed the investigation. At worst, they might be involved in a murder. The point is, we need access to search the property. And here, we have a window of time that will disappear if we don’t do something right now,” Vigdis said, grabbing a pen from the table and starting to click it in and out.

Elin Hammer was silent for a few seconds.

“We’ve been on paper-thin ice before, but this tops the list,” she said.

Vigdis shuddered when she heard the metaphor. She pictured the ice on Osvannet, the dark opening they’d pulled Sofie from, the helicopter hovering above the lake like an enormous insect.

“Have I ever given you a reason not to trust me?” was all she said. After a short pause, Elin Hammer replied:

“Okay. We can charge them with making a false statement and negligent homicide. Then we’ll bring them before a judge tomorrow morning. You’ll need to inform them of the charges against them.”

Vigdis let go of the pen.

“Of course,” she said, and looked at the clock. It was almost midnight.

“I’ll take care of the formalities,” Elin Hammer said. “And then you need to do your part of the job. I’m trusting you now, Vigdis. You need to handle this properly. You and your people have got to find something we can work with.”

“Fine. I’ll send over the case number,” Vigdis said, catching Naima’s eye from across the room.

When Vigdis Malmstrøm came back, Bergljot knew it was all over. She knew it instinctively — this was the end. Over the course of a single evening, she was done as a politician. She had fought so hard to hang on, but now she could let go. She’d said to herself

that the day that happened, even if it wasn't what she wanted, she would feel a sense of relief, joy, even. But all she felt at the sight of Vigdis Malmstrøm's face was bottomless terror.

Malmstrøm was calm as she took a seat on the other side of the table and said that tonight's events at Osvannet had unfortunately had the worst possible outcome. They had just been informed that the accident had ended in a death.

Bergljot looked down at her own hand. There it lay, on the table. A rhythmic rushing had started pulsating in her head. She sat silently, listening as the investigator continued. She said that Bergljot was being charged in connection with the death on the ice. That she couldn't go home tonight. That a lawyer had been contacted.

Bergljot kept staring at her hand. Now, it was the simple things that mattered. She had to stick to the concrete, to the facts, then everything would be okay, and she would get out of this room alive. When she heard her voice, it was surprisingly calm. It sounded about the same as when she spoke from the lectern in the municipal council chambers.

"What am I being charged with?"

"For now, making a false statement."

Bergljot met the investigator's grey gaze.

"But I haven't made a false statement."

Vigdis Malmstrøm didn't answer that, she just continued.

"The police are conducting an investigation of the crime scene to get clarity on what took place on your property tonight. That's why you'll need to stay here. Your lawyer will call you tomorrow morning."

Bergljot's voice shook as she spoke:

"What about Ulf?"

Vigdis Malmstrøm looked her in the eye:

"Yes, what about him?"

"Is he also being charged?"

The police investigator suddenly became evasive, shutting the laptop she had in front of her.

"Ulf will also be spending the night here," was all she said.

Bergljot didn't say anything else. She thought about what power was. About having it and losing it. As a member of the governing side, the only one with a casting vote, she was used to getting her way, making decisions she thought were right, or at least the lesser evil.

Pushing a resolution through with the gavel. It was democratic, granted by the people, but it was still undeniably power. She reflected on the incomprehensible yet indisputable fact that the woman in front of her had the power and authority to decide that she wouldn't be going home tonight, that she couldn't go home, lie in her own bed where she'd lain earlier, with the blankets still in disarray after she woke suddenly to a thud against the window. Instead, she would soon be led out of this interrogation room and into the naked corridor, down the stairs to the basement with the holding cells where a custody officer stood outside an open door, she would be guided through that door, into a bare cell, she would feel the panic in her throat when she saw how small the room was with its square walls and ceiling, only a plastic-covered mattress on the floor and a hole in the floor where she would later throw up, everything smelled old, musty, metallic, the concrete walls would press in around her, the door had rust stains, it would slam behind her with a dull bang.