

Carved by Love

Buried by Generations of Lies

The Dala Horse Daughters

A Novel





Becca Baisch

The Dala Horse Daughters

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Published by

Next Draft Publishing

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Paperback ISBN: 979-8-9970297-0-8

Hardcover ISBN: 979-8-9970297-2-2

eBook ISBN: 979-8-9970297-1-5

Cover design by Jet Purdie

Dala Horse art design by SusanFernArt

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First Edition

Printed in the United States of America

For John

The Dala Horse Daughters



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Part I

No longer in the heart of flesh
but in the heart of your people
Carved by love
to endure forevermore.

Chapter One

Minneapolis, Minnesota
April 2017

Linnea

His criminal record made it easy for Linnea to locate him.

She gripped her purse that contained the information about Peter Johansson from the private investigator she'd hired, along with a copy of an old transaction involving a Swedish heirloom. Seeing Peter face-to-face, even after three decades, nauseated Linnea as much as her most recent dose of chemotherapy. She sat rigid in the heated passenger seat of her SUV outside his sprawling brick apartment complex in suburban Minneapolis.

Her son, Taylor, killed the ignition, silencing the blasting heat. Spring snow splat on the windshield in fat, wet flakes and smeared down. "Can you finally tell me why we're here?" he asked.

Linnea met his eyes. Eyes that had left her spellbound since the day she became his mother at eighteen. Their green color would spark with his determination, his gumption. Everything she never possessed. She gave him a slight shake of her head.

He sighed.

She had pondered calling Peter to arrange this visit, but he might have hung up. Or she'd have been the one to hang up, unable to speak from the

nerves strangling her. A late Sunday morning seemed the best chance to corner him, unless he was religious now.

Thank God he was still alive.

"Mom." Taylor's voice was curt, interrupting her tangled thoughts. Her son wasn't supposed to be here. They were both surprised when he'd appeared unannounced this morning on her doorstep while she awaited the Lyft. Usually a quick text reply placated his distressed check-ins over her health status. Had her son read the duplicity in her response? Was it her uncharacteristic exclamation mark on *Fine!* that sent him investigating? He asked questions. She said, "No time to answer" and relented to his chauffeuring.

Linnea relaxed her clutch on the purse, ready to make a move, until her guts rebelled again. She felt Taylor's gaze zero in on her mittened fists, and his tone was softer when he said, "Please—"

His hospital pager cut him off. He cursed and unclipped it from his scrub pants.

"I'm sorry, Tay, this won't take long."

He rubbed his bleary eyes and read the message.

"You said you had the day off?" she inquired.

"Yes," he grumbled, "I forgot to forward my pages." He took out his phone and tapped the numbers. That brief pause with his phone irritated her. She'd wasted decades of her now-weakened life, comfortably letting other people take charge. No more.

Linnea sucked a breath, opened the door, and stepped out.

"Wait." He brought the cell to his ear. "Whatever you're doing, you're not doing it alone."

"I have to," she whispered, the snow dissolving her words.

"Would you just—" he protested as he unclicked his seat belt, then abruptly shifted to his doctor tone. "It's Barnes. I got paged?"

Linnea seized her chance and closed the door. Her black rain boots slopped along the concrete. Cold flakes licked her face. She framed the furry hood of her parka around her white cheeks and trekked toward the building.

Taylor scurried after her, talking on his phone. She tripped on the curb of the pathway. He grabbed and straightened her. "Mom, is this really necessary? Hold on—" He swerved the phone away from his mouth.

“I’m fine. I’m *fine*,” Linnea said, though she wanted to puke, and not just from the chemo nausea. She was heading to a threshold she had no confidence she could cross.

He wedged the phone between his shoulder and ear and finished speaking with the calm authority of a seasoned physician, rather than one still in residency. She absorbed a speck of comfort in listening to him. Pride renewed her energy. How had she birthed such a capable human, when her entire life she felt anything but?

Taylor pocketed the phone and faced Linnea.

She offered a conceding grimace. “Okay. You can come, but if the person I need to talk with is home, you’ll have to wait outside.”

He plucked snowflakes from his long eyelashes. “Does this have to do with Everett?” he said, referring to his father, her ex-husband.

“No.” *Not exactly*.

Taylor shook his head in what appeared to be annoyed resignation, and he helped her walk again.

Once inside the building’s foyer, a set of secured glass doors blocked further entrance. Linnea scanned the numbers on the mailboxes until she landed on 212. Written in a faint scrawl, she made out *P. Johansson.*

She pressed the button to ring him.

She waited. Nothing. Would she have to come back? When? She was scheduled for another round of chemotherapy next week. The disappointment joined her anxiety, blending with the sickness.

Taylor huffed.

Linnea tried again. And again.

“Mom.”

One last time. The long drone went unanswered. “Dammit!” she said through clamped teeth.

Her son was now cautious with her. “Why don’t we go back to the car?”

She slumped against the door streaked with melted snow and pushed it open with her weak shoulder. *Was it time to call Everett for help?* God, she could only imagine what her ex-husband was going to say.

A loud buzz droned, followed by a click.

She whirled and caught her stomach. Taylor lunged and yanked the inner door open, holding it for her to pass through.

Linnea mounted the stained, carpeted stairs that summoned marijuana funk, a smell that dredged up her childhood, and found apartment 212. The

door looked heavy, its white paint chipped. She knocked and glanced at Taylor's challenging look.

"I'll tell you everything soon," she promised, "but it's pointless if he—"

The door opened with a loud screech and a squall of warmth, as if the heater inside was broken and spewing fire and cigar smoke.

Peter was barefoot. He wore loose jeans and a white t-shirt. At eighty years of age, he was still ruggedly handsome, a Robert Redford look-alike, and he had retained most of his hair. Instead of gold, it was now dusted with silver, and it grew past his ears. He examined Linnea, up and down, ratcheting up her pulse and freezing her voice. He squinted, clearly not registering anything familiar. "Sure you were buzzing the right person?"

Relief nearly floored Linnea. "I'm so sorry to bother you, Mr. Johansson. I only need a minute of your time."

Peter looked past her shoulder to Taylor.

Linnea followed his gaze. "My son. He can wait out here. I need to speak with you alone."

Peter sized them up. "Jehovah's Witnesses?"

"No," answered Linnea and Taylor in tandem.

His gaze drew a slow, scrutinizing circle around Linnea's face, long enough for her to fear he'd slam the door on them, but his posture relaxed, and he gestured inside. "By all means."

Stunned initially at Peter's indifference, Linnea summoned strength to press by him, entering before he changed his mind.

"Sure you don't want to barge in, too?" he asked Taylor.

"Following orders," he replied, "but leave the door unlocked."

"This better be good." Peter screeched the door shut, and she followed him, taking off her mittens and working to unzip her coat. The heat intensified her nausea. *I need to talk fast*. If she could talk at all. Words, the lack of them, were Linnea's perpetual nemesis. A short hallway led directly to a tiny bathroom and bedroom. A cramped living area held meager furniture. She flapped her coat lapels to fan her face but made no move to sit. Peter walked past her into the galley kitchen.

"I—I have a few questions to ask," she said, opening her purse and retrieving an envelope, "and I'm begging you to answer truthfully. I promise you'll never hear from me again."

"Too bad. Not every day I get woken up by a pretty stranger." Peter grabbed a carton of orange juice from the fridge and a glass from the drying

rack in the sink. “Want some?”

“No, thank you.” Her heart was slamming. *Should I have brought money to bribe him*? A lump expanded her throat, and she forced out the vital question: “Are you Ulla Bergstrom’s father?” *Ulla*. How long had it been since Linnea had spoken her name aloud? She plunged into the longing, the shame. She grabbed her chest as if she could lift herself above it.

Peter paused, the edge of the glass on his lips. He caught his breath and set it down. “Where is she?”

Linnea stared at the dingy, beige carpet. “I don’t know.”

“Is she okay?” His voice was thick.

“I haven’t seen her since 2005.”

“What was she doing in 2005? That wasn’t too long ago. At least not for me.”

Shit. Linnea wasn’t prepared for reverse interrogation. “Ulla and I . . . we were . . . we grew up together. In Mora. We were—close. Before you moved there, and she gave me this—” She undid the flap of the envelope, retrieved the document inside, and unfolded the picture of a Swedish horse figurine. For a beat, Linnea rested into the familiarity of that sweet horse Ulla had given her when they were girls. Its vermillion shine, the rare jewels dotting its harness.

When Peter saw it, he leaned back and cursed. “You have the Dalahäst?” he gasped, referring to it in Swedish.

She shook her head. “No,” she released the pained lament. “No. Not anymore. My ex, he sold it. What do you know about it?”

“Your ex *sold* it?” His gaze roamed along her designer apparel.

She looked to the heavens, unprepared to explain the role Everett Barnes had had in the betrayal of Ulla. But then Peter laughed, derisively at first, shaking his head as if in disbelief. His eyes filled with—*tears*? “Why do you care who Ulla’s father is?”

Linnea’s hopes plummeted, and she repeated herself, “Are you?”

Peter eyed her and said nothing. He snatched the picture of the Dala horse and seemed to get lost in the photograph.

“Listen,” she pressed, before the sorrow collapsed her shaking voice. “All Ulla wanted in this world was to know her father. If you’re not, then I think this horse is the key to finding him. Please just tell me anything you know. *Anything*.”

“Why?” he challenged again.

Linnea hesitated. “Be-because it’s my fault her mother died.” There, she said it. “I know thirty years is a long time to make it up to her, but I . . . ”

Peter’s face changed at the mention of Ulla’s mother. “I loved Ronja,” he whispered. He gave her a sharp look. “If you believe you caused her death, then you owe me a name now.”

She really hadn’t thought this conversation through. *Chemo brain?* Peter was a convicted felon. An old man, but still. Of course he’d want her name. “Linnea. My maiden name is Larsson.”

Peter studied her, as if drawing back in time, and seemed to find her there. “I know who you are.”

“Did Ulla ever say anything about me?” Linnea couldn’t help herself.

“You were a bitch.”

Her quick breath came out as a squeak. Linnea nodded. What else was she expecting?

“You definitely deserve her hatred.” Peter connected his eyes to hers, but she found no hatred in his.

There was a knock on the door. Taylor.

“Time’s up?” Peter asked.

She held her stomach, the hope of Peter’s truth keeping her sickness at bay, and went to open the door.

Taylor’s face was tight. “Mom.”

“I’m fine. Give me ten more minutes.” Linnea pecked his cheek and closed the door on his worry. She returned to Peter and licked her chapped lips, praying the nausea would behave itself. “Tell me?”

Peter, absorbed in the paper, didn’t answer, and she noted a slight tremor in the hand holding it. With the other, he wiped his lips. Apparently, she’d opened something inside him. His eyes were not that of a criminal, and the odd connection she felt toward him stung her chest. That look of horrific guilt. He’d carried it as long as she had. She made a small sound to remind him of her presence.

Peter slowly peeled his eyes from the picture. “Do you want to know how I met her?”

“Who? Ronja?” What was she supposed to say? *No, Peter, cut to the chase?* She’d not planned for a senior citizen listening session. She flicked her eyes to the door. Taylor would have his timer set. Besides, Linnea didn’t want to talk about Ronja. Not because she didn’t love or care about Ronja

but precisely because she did. Ulla's mother had served as Linnea's mother, too, in the time of her life when she needed one most. She was dizzy now. Not the normal dizziness. Is this what happens from shoving the worst of your memories into all the nooks and crannies of your body? One poke, and it floods your veins? "Can I sit down?" she whispered.

"Of course." Peter motioned to the couch. "I'm sorry, it's not the most comfortable."

She waved off his apology and sat, grateful for his contemplative silence until the edges of her vision cleared.

He sat on the opposite side of the couch, returned his attention to the picture, and said, "She was on the *Finnlines* from Germany back to Sweden, and only what, eighteen? I was returning from a . . . business trip. That would've been, I don't know, 1963, maybe four? She was—" He cut his sentence with a sigh, a pained nostalgic sigh, like he'd replayed this moment countless times, knew it by heart but not by words. "She was so sad, had been searching for her family. And I knew," he caught Linnea's gaze, "I knew I couldn't live without her."

Did Ulla know this? Linnea felt horrible for wanting him to speed up the story, the part where Ronja gained possession of the Dala horse, the part where Ronja and Peter had sex and conceived Ulla, because that seemed to be the most logical, albeit disappointing conclusion. Ronja had always insisted Peter was not Ulla's biological father. And Linnea recalled a disjointed timeline of events as told by Ulla once, where Peter had been a part of their lives, then wasn't.

Peter must have sensed Linnea's urgency. "We were a family, that's what matters. I *was* Ulla's father."

Linnea said nothing, waiting for more and then ventured, "Depends on what you define as a father?"

His expression closed, and he stood, handing her the picture. "What you're doing is pointless."

Linnea limply accepted it, mustering the resolve to stand. She muscled down the humiliation at the fact that he was right. This was a stupid endeavor.

He must have noticed her struggle because he lunged to help, and she swatted him away. "I'm sorry I bothered you." She didn't care to hide the bitterness, though her voice was strained and small.

“Linnea,” he said in a soft tone, pausing her. “You’re not wrong. The only way to Ulla’s father is if you find that Dalahäst.”

Cautious hope surged. “You said this was pointless.”

Peter nodded yet said, “But I didn’t say you shouldn’t try.”

Chapter Two

Two Weeks Later

Linnea

Seated at a coffee shop table in Minneapolis on Washington Avenue, Linnea regarded the 3x5 pictures of the tiny bejeweled Dala horse. Before she could even begin the search for Ulla, for redemption, she needed that horse. The one Ulla had given to Linnea in an act of great love that she had recklessly squandered.

After her visit with Peter Johansson, the desperation to find Ulla escalated. If only it hadn't taken a death sentence to revive Linnea to the fact she still loved her. The cancer seemed to be consuming all but her emotions around Ulla, especially the guilt. Oh, the guilt. Why couldn't the cancer have eaten that up?

Her only hope of finding the Dala horse now lay unfortunately in the hands of her ex-husband, Everett, who would be arriving any minute. He was more likely to ridicule than help. Especially when it came to Ulla.

When she had called and asked Everett to meet, he suggested coming over—never a good idea. He always harped about the divorce judge giving her the house, the cars, and the ongoing alimony.

So she wrestled her fatigue to meet him somewhere else. Everett would notice the silk scarf covering her patchy dark hair. Probably crack an inappropriate joke.

She saw him through the tall windows outside on the brick walkway and slipped the photographs into her purse. He entered the coffee shop that was a modern mix of rustic and industrial. “Ev!” She lifted her hand but doubted he heard her above the espresso machine’s hiss and acoustic guitar music from overhead. He scratched his close-shaved, peppered beard, scanning the faces. His once-skinny frame had finally caught up to his late forties.

Everett spotted her, but his eyes shifted, as if checking to make sure it was her.

He approached in his leather oxfords that she knew were soft from the years she spent buying them for him. The Italian wool coat was casually open in the still-cool but promising April weather. It revealed a navy sweater vest. He and Taylor shared the same taste in expensive fashion. But God forbid she ever point that out to Taylor.

Everett kissed her on the cheek, surprising her. There was a foreign tenderness when he said, “Hey, Lin.”

He didn’t sit, rather pulled out his billfold. “I’m getting coffee. Want your usual? Chamomile, two honeys?”

My usual? She nodded. *Who are you?* Seven years post-divorce had either mellowed his narcissism, or she’d forgotten how charming he could be when he wanted something.

He returned with concerned eyes and touched her scarf. “New look?”

She ignored his comment, thanking him for the tea, and added the honey packets to the hot water.

“How’s Taylor?” He took off his coat. “Isn’t he done with residency by now?”

“Almost, he was named chief resident.”

“Isn’t he married to what’s-her-face? Jessica—”

“Jennifer.”

“Right.”

“No,” said Linnea, “she broke off the engagement over Christmas.”

He settled into his seat. “What the hell for?”

“I asked her. Apparently she wasted six years trying to change him and couldn’t marry an emotionally unavailable workaholic.”

“That’s rich. Not that I was holding my breath for a wedding invite.” Everett leaned back, studying her for several moments. “You look skinny.”

“Cancer will do that to you.” She slurped a hesitant sip of the steamy tea.

Everett slowly set down his coffee and slid his forearms onto the table. “Jesus, Linney. Why didn’t you tell me?”

She shrugged and went for her purse, pulling out the pictures of the Dala horse and its transaction.

“Are you going to *elaborate*?” he insisted. “Is this why you called me out of the blue?”

“I just finished my last chemo round. I’ll wait to see what the test results say.” She unfolded the document and the worn photographs. “And this is why I called you.”

He wiped his lips and shook his head, ignoring the documents. “I can’t believe this. You’re not even fifty. Don’t people start getting cancer in their fifties?”

She slid the contents over. “I need your help locating this. You were the one who sold it after all.”

“Can I do anything for you?”

She gestured emphatically at the papers.

He sighed heavily and looked down. “Where’d you find this?”

“Just tell me how I can get it back.”

“No, seriously, where’d you get it?”

She rolled her eyes. “As if I didn’t keep track of every financial document we owned?”

“Could’ve used the divorce money to go to college like you always wanted.”

Linnea pulled an annoyed face. This was the Everett she knew well. She directed her eyes to his Breitling watch. “Clearly you have suffered.”

His lips quirked, and then his gaze softened. “I never thought you’d divorce me. Please tell me you’re gonna be okay.”

Linnea tapped the pictures. “Focus.”

He reluctantly concentrated on them. “This was Ulla Bergstrom’s horse,” he mumbled, then shook his head and slid the paper and photos across. “The client I sold it to was a private collector. There’s no way he’ll sell it.”

“What? You told me you pawned it.”

“Do you see the name of a pawn shop anywhere on that sheet of paper?”

“Then who is *Gambel Gunnarsson*? I googled him and the closest I got was a pro hockey player.”

Everett shrugged. “Probably a fake name. Selling this horse was the shadiest business deal I ever made.”

“Why do I find that hard to believe?” she griped and huffed back in her seat, crossing her arms.

“I never told you this, but my dad brokered stolen artwork. It’s why we moved to New York when I was a kid. I didn’t realize it was stolen art at the time. He introduced me to his contacts when I was a teenager before he died. I don’t know if he thought I’d take over someday, or what, but when I saw that horse in your belongings, I knew there could be something to it. I contacted his former clients with pictures thinking they’d laugh at me. Instead, they called with questions. Lots of questions.”

Linnea’s heart sped up.

“This is going to take some serious digging to figure out,” he said. “Especially if the horse was stolen. Not surprised if it was, considering Ulla and her mom.”

Linnea whispered a curse and cradled her forehead as hopelessness closed in. “Please, I’m begging. You’re the savvy one, not me.”

He looked at her with both apprehension and skepticism. “Why do you need it so badly?”

“I just want her back.” She stared into her lap as the memories pricked her, waiting for Everett’s snide remark about Ulla to come.

He didn’t disappoint. “You’re talking about Ulla? The same crazy bitch we grew up with, who called us—what—murdering narcissists? And then filed an order of protection against Taylor for apparently abusing her *daughter*—what was her name—?”

“Analise,” Linnea said quietly.

“*That* Ulla?”

She rapidly blinked away the freight of emotions and shook her head. “Are you going to help me or not?”

Everett’s gaze went to her headscarf. He studied her for what felt to be an intense, protracted moment, and finally reached across the table to take her hand. The sympathetic gesture was so unlike him. “I’ll help you,” he said. “But think about what you’re doing. What this might mean for Taylor if you drag up the past.”

Linnea snapped her hand from his. “You think I *haven’t*? And you only ever cared about Taylor’s achievements so you could brag to all your colleagues as if you had any part in it. You never cared about his happiness.”

Everett linked his hands on the tabletop, the creases deepening on his perturbed brow. “You know what you and our son have in common?” he said with a headshake. “You never know when to let go.”

“That’s not true.” Linnea stared at the picture of the Dala horse. “Maybe he and I know when to hold on.”

Chapter Three

October 2017
Six Months Later

Linnea

Everett had called her an hour ago, sounding slightly paranoid. “I’ll meet you at the house,” he’d said. “I need to tell you something in person.”

So do I, Linnea had lamented silently but replied, “Okay.” She’d hung up and glanced out the bedroom window. The full moon danced on a choppy Lake Minnetonka. She labored to her feet, the room swaying, and rested on the bed, allowing her brain to align itself. Her purse was on the nightstand, and she opened it, taking out the test results that she’d initially thrown in the trashcan earlier that afternoon. She hated her blood for telling the truth. Her oncologist had printed the lab work, knowing Linnea needed tangible proof. Not for herself, but for her doctor-son. All the way home in her medical transportation, she saw the familiar streets that looked foreign now, like seeing them for the first time.

A complete hystersalpingo-oophorectomy had not curbed the cancer’s aggression. Neither had the three rounds of chemotherapy that poisoned the entirety of her still-healthy cells. *You need to prepare*, her doctor said. *Tell your family because you might go quickly*.

My family. She heard a car pull up in the driveway, the slam of a door, and Taylor enter the house. “Mom?” His voice echoed in the entryway.

She left the bedroom, leaned onto the railing down the stairs and saw him before he noticed her. Dressed in dark gray slacks and a blue oxford shirt, he also wore his casual soccer shoes. He couldn't seem to wear anything on his feet non-soccer related. He would have come from his outpatient clinic, the only time he didn't wear scrubs, meaning he wasn't on a hospital ward rotation or violating his residency program's strict eighty-hour workweek by moonlighting. Linnea knew he didn't do it for the money.

Taylor turned and saw her. "I'm sorry I couldn't come to your appointment." He drew close when she reached the bottom step, seeing her tears. He cussed softly and wrapped her in a hug. She cried harder. It was Mother's Day of Taylor's eighth-grade year when she was no longer the one to bend over for an embrace; he'd finally surpassed her height. He'd been a late bloomer but shot past six feet when he was a junior in high school, though he never reached his father's gangly six-foot-four.

Taylor let her go when the front door opened, and his tenderness changed to a scowl when his father entered. "What are you doing here?"

The sudden hostility in the air cut her tears. Everett frowned. "Unlike some people, your mother can still find a way to be civil."

Taylor muttered a curse and went to the kitchen. Linnea closed her eyes and massaged a temple. Everett touched her shoulder. She gently brushed it off. She was about to go find Taylor but noticed Everett wasn't empty-handed.

Her eyes moved to a locked, metal carrier in his grip, stunting her breath. "Ev," she whispered, and her legs caved from astonishment. The bottom stair caught her. "You really have it?"

Everett went to her and set the carrier down. He shrugged his sport coat off, lobbing it on the banister, a mundane gesture from their shared past. She always hated putting it away for him. What wouldn't she give to have silly irritations as the worst part of her day?

"How did you get it here?" she asked him.

"I drove twelve hundred miles, wasn't going to risk getting on a plane. I made some phone calls on the way. I found someone who can get us in contact with the horse's original owner." He crouched at her level with worry, and she saw he looked tired, not exactly triumphant. Linnea hadn't fathomed the literal cost to obtain Ulla's horse: two private investigators, three trips to New York, mortgaging all his East Coast properties,

auctioning vacation condos, and a private loan that he wrote off using his M&A firm as a cover. There were other things he'd done these past months, too. He texted daily, asked what she needed. His sister, older by seven years and living in St. Paul, someone whom Linnea and Everett didn't connect with much except for the annual Christmas cards, set up a meal chain and stopped by regularly to visit. Funny how death could bring out the best in people.

He helped Linnea to her feet. Together, with the metal carrier in his hand, they found their son hunched with his forearms on the kitchen island, head bowed, eyes closed, as if working to stay awake.

Taylor lifted his face, aiming a watchful gaze at them. Everett set the case next to him, worked a lock combination, and clicked it open.

The tiny wooden horse rested in firm black foam, allowing its opulence to shine.

"What is that?" Taylor straightened, looking thoroughly confused.

Linnea, with awe, touched the horse, checking its authenticity. She searched for the minuscule chip in its left rear hoof. A blemish only she knew the intimate and gutting origins of. Yes, it was there. "Thank you," she cried, pressing her face into Everett's button-down, inhaling Calvin Klein's *Obsession*, a fragrance he hadn't worn since they were teenagers, and, over the years Linnea had grown to hate. But what did she feel now?

She leaned out from his arms and admired the Dala horse once more.

Everett checked to make sure she was satisfied, then slowly closed the lid, and re-locked the case.

"Mom?" Taylor questioned, sparing his father a glance. "Seriously, what is going on?"

"I'm sorry, I just need a moment." Fatigued, Linnea sank into the leather ottoman at the base of its matching chair. She looked to her ex-husband, her son. When she saw Taylor's face contort, as if pleading for her not to say it, she broke down.

Everett looked to Taylor as if offering first dibs at consoling.

Instead, Taylor tensed his shoulders. "I can get you to a better doctor. We can go to Mayo or Sloan Kettering."

"He's right, Lin," said Everett.

Taylor scoffed at his dad. "Like you care."

Linnea intervened, "Let it go, your dad is all you're going to have left."

She watched her son dam his emotions, and he said evenly, “If you die I have no one.”

“C’mon,” started Everett, “what am I supposed to do when you block my number—”

“Ha! Try it. I’ve had it unblocked for a year.”

“You can’t call me—?”

“Who never gave a single shit about being a dad?”

“Cut the drama, you’re a grown man. I was a kid when I had you.”

Taylor flapped his hand in a bored, dismissive fashion. “Go fuck yourself.”

“*Stop*.” Linnea’s sob silenced their bickering.

Taylor went to the window and stared out the large windows, his back facing them.

Everett’s jaw hardened, and he planted his hands on his hips before finally tossing them up. “I’m *always* the one who tries.” He seemed to hesitate, and then quickly pecked her on the forehead. “I’ll be back in the morning, hopefully with more good news. Call if you need me.”

Taylor glowered at his father’s retreating form and mumbled, “It took him all of—what—three seconds to pull the victim card?”

Linnea’s body spasmed. “Why do you do that?” she implored. “Stop fighting with him.”

Taylor went to her, meeting at eye level. “He only shows up to care now that you’re dying?”

She shook her head, touching his dark blond facial scruff. It blended with the tan skin he inherited from Everett. “Sometimes it takes dying to wake people up. Trust me. Give him a chance. Listen, I have something I need to confess.”

He nodded to the case with the Dala horse inside. “Does it have to do with Everett’s cloak and dagger act?” He plucked a Kleenex from the metallic gold tissue box on the coffee table. Linnea accepted it, smudging her tears and nose. “In my hometown, Mora, there’s a giant statue of a Dala horse,” she rambled. “That particular horse . . . ” Her voice waffled. “Don’t get upset, you have to hear me out.” She chose her next words carefully. “Ulla Bergstrom gave me that horse, and your father sold it to a private collector thirty years ago—”

“Wait. Whoa. Ulla *Bergstrom*? Are you talking about Ulla *Berglund*?” Taylor straightened to a rigid posture, and his breath hitched.

"Well, she had at least three different last names."

"We're talking about the same Ulla that hates me, hates *us*?" His face drained.

"Yes."

He clenched his forehead with a hand.

"Are you all right?" she whispered.

"Keep going," he said in a controlled voice.

She rubbed her chest. "I told you that Ulla was unstable and made up all sorts of lies, but she wasn't lying," she cried. "I was the liar. She wanted you and Analise as far apart from one another because *I* was the horrible one, and it was *my* fault Ronja died."

Taylor gaped at her, and she watched his mind hurl back to that awful December night in 2005. "Ronja . . . her mother? What Ulla said was *true*?"

"I'm trying to make things right for Ulla, and maybe for you, too. I have to find her and return that horse. I can't bring Ronja back, but Ulla was always desperate to know her father. The horse might have belonged to him."

"Her father?"

"Peter Johansson. Do you remember when we went to see him?"

"*He's* her dad?"

"No, no, unless he was lying, but look, none of what your dad and I discovered matters if I don't find Ulla."

His drowned pain resurfaced, and his voice quailed. "You know where she is?"

She braced herself for his response when she confessed, "I think I've always known."

Taylor's restraint collapsed, and he backed away with gritted teeth as if caging a myriad of curses. "You *think* so? For how long! You knew how badly I needed to find her."

Linnea couldn't bear this. She fixated on a framed picture on the mantel. The two of them, from twelve years ago, when Taylor won the state high school soccer championship as a senior. Two months before Analise, Ulla's daughter, was ripped from his arms. That elusive light radiating from his photographed smile, she knew it wasn't from winning. Only moments before it was taken, she'd spied him kissing Analise and not being very discreet about it. Had he wanted her to confront him about his forbidden love, to say something? *Say something . . . say something, Linnea.* "I'm

sorry.” Such a flimsy word—*sorry*—if it had no legs to move, to repair. Linnea accepted Taylor’s accusatory eyes.

“If you find Ulla,” he said, “she’ll know where Isa is.”

Isa. His name for Analise. “I hope so,” Linnea replied, “but I’m scared. There must be a reason she never contacted you.”

“You think *one* day goes by where I don’t ask myself that?”

Linnea looked to the ceiling, swallowing the tears.

Taylor released a tired curse. “Tell me what you did, Mom.”

Linnea shredded the Kleenex in her hand. “I’ll explain everything on the way to Mora.”

“Mora?”

“That’s where Ulla has to be.”

“Why Mora?”

“Because she’d want to be close to the memory of Ronja.”

Taylor went to the carrier. “And you believe this horse will fix everything?”

The horse’s significance had never been lost on Linnea. Not when Ulla had pressed it into her hands—*my mother said it’s magical*—not when it shed a light during the darkest time in her life. But it wasn’t until Peter confessed how it came into Ronja’s possession that Linnea truly felt its worth, like the deep pulse in her body, still fighting to stay alive. “Yes.”

Part II

He watches slyly around you:
Impulsive, blame yourself,
If his flare in the dance crackles
On your spider-sparse tulle

When you hurry in the quadrille,
Yester, butterfly-light and warm,
His presumptuous arrows are aimed
Violently at your open heart.

— Anna Maria Lenngren, *"Dansen,"* lines 17–24

Chapter Four

STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN
May 1968

Ronja

Ronja needed the Dalahäst. *Now*. Safe in her hands.

Damn you, Peter.

She dangled a bare leg over the side of the damp hospital bed. She touched the base of her skull and winced. Bandages and crusted pieces of hair. *Dried blood*. She looked at her clipped fingernails with their familiar sheen of black grease that may as well have been tattooed on. A draft from behind tickled her skin. She wore a thin, blue hospital gown, open in the back, a contrast to the battered cocktail dress she'd arrived in. *Where did that go*? Ronja drew her eyes tight, angered she'd passed out. Or was it the painkiller from the nurse that had knocked her unconscious?

What is the time! She needed to get out of here.

A hospital stint was not part of her original escape plan.

But she couldn't flee without the horse. Ronja had connived its safekeeping into the hands of an American tourist situated in the adjacent hospital bed, lest Peter was hot on her trail. She cursed him again and feverishly examined the surroundings. Enclosed by curtains and a wall of seafoam green tiles, Ronja glanced up and flinched at a large, alien beam of light.

She planted her naked feet on the cold floor and ventured beyond the curtain into the unfolding scene: shuffling papers, clacking instruments on metal trolleys, a huddle of men in white coats, nurses with clipboards circling them. Orderlies in masks and hair caps bustled to and fro. A gurney squeaked by carrying a grimacing elderly man, rolling past two police officers in their long navy tailcoats and embossed caps, heads bent in conversation over a photograph.

What if it's me? Short-winded, she slinked behind the nearest curtain.

"You're awake!" A feminine voice, speaking English, spun Ronja.

The American! In rapid Swedish, she commanded the woman, "I need my belongings! I gave them to you, remember?"

"Sorry, my Swedish is terrible. You spoke English last night. I'm Molly. You never told me your name. I did what you asked, kept your things safe before you conked out." She struggled to sit up. Her arm was in a cast. "I stuffed them at the bottom of my tote underneath my clothes." She pressed a conspiratorial finger to her lips and said quietly, "But I kept the horse under my blankets."

Ronja's heart jumped to her throat, momentarily blocking her voice. "Hor—horse. The horse, my things. Fast. *Please*."

Molly reached under the bed covers and emerged with a fisted object. She opened her palm flat, like a magician revealing a trick. "It's a Dala horse, isn't it? But I've never seen one like this. Not this fancy or pretty."

Sentiment and relief flooding her, Ronja snatched it. With its bright red paint, it could pass for a simple child's toy. Yet no child's toy would ever bear such a harness of rare stones.

"It must be very special," Molly whispered. "Glad I could help."

"Thank you," Ronja said in earnest, and then added in Swedish, "for being a gullible American."

Molly laughed. "I didn't catch that."

"Time. What is the *time*?" Ronja's eyes flew askance to the police officers between the curtain's opening.

Molly displayed her casted arm with a chagrined smile. "No wristwatch. My husband has it, I'm assuming." She puffed a humorless laugh. "That's the last time I try horseback riding on vacation. There must be a clock out there." Molly reached for the curtain with her good arm to pull it aside. Ronja blocked it. "*Nej*."

Molly's eyes paused on Ronja.

Heavy steps drew toward the curtain, yanking it aside.

A hardy nurse stared at them. Her white stockings matched the cap pinned in her dark hair. Her brusque words forced Ronja backward. “You’re awake, finally! Get in your own bed, so I can fetch the doctor.” She snapped her attention to Molly and said in Swedish, “Your husband is here. An orderly will take you to a different ward.”

Molly cringed at Ronja. “Can you translate that for me?”

The nurse continued guiding Ronja to her partition. Ronja resisted. So did Molly, who said, “Tell her to wait! Oh, darn.” She snapped her fingers, frustrated, and then cried in rough Swedish, “*Förlåta*!”

The nurse turned to Molly and said, “*Ja*?”

Molly frantically pointed under her bed and said in English, “It’s hers. The bag.” She spoke to Ronja, “Tell her your bag is under my bed.”

Ronja told the nurse in Swedish, “My things.” She gripped the horse tight and crouched low, finding a khaki, hand-stitched tote. An orderly came to Molly, unlocked the brakes of the gurney, and began wheeling her. “No wait, wait!” Ronja said, digging through the contents.

“Keep it!” Molly called out. “You might need it more than I do!”

Ronja started after her, shaking her head, but the room swerved. The nurse took Ronja’s elbow and swung her back. “Sit down, I need to check your color. You came in looking like a drowned rat in a fancy dress and pearls, but no family with you. Why is that?”

Ronja touched her neck. She indeed still wore the pearls Peter had given her. She ran her hands over them, unearthing the events from last night, and clamped the memories. *I can’t.*

The nurse fussed about her head wound. “Cat got your tongue? Ah, now, only six stitches. I can get a fresh bandage, but goodness, your hair is a mess. Such pretty hair.”

Ronja burrowed through the bag to check her belongings, but the nurse interfered, taking her chin. “Look at me.” She twisted Ronja’s face back and forth. “Does that hurt?”

Ronja grimaced. “*Ja*?”

“I’ll get the doctor.” She left.

Ronja stuffed the horse into the tote and slid off the bed. Checking her surroundings, she ran to the nearest exit, finding a clock at the nurse’s station on the way. *I still have time.*

The light outside was blinding and split her head, but the fresh air tempered her disorientation. Ronja hugged the outer walls of the building along the sidewalk. Springtime foliage of peaking sprigs and buds decorated the hospital's perimeter. The sleepy gray sky, painted with reds and blues at the horizon, hinted dawn. Her attention narrowed to what she loved. Cars. Every colorful make and model lining curbs, zooming on the street. *Freedom.* A Porsche caught her eye and stabbed her with longing. *Focus.* Ronja ducked and hid between a parked VW bus and a blue Saab. She rifled through the tote, overcome with gratitude at Molly's generosity. She discovered the woman's clothes and shoved her arms and head through a navy wool sweater, then foisted on a pair of fitted plaid trousers, sucking in her stomach to button them. The navy flats were a little snug, but they would do. Ronja found a receptacle near a bus stop, balled the hospital gown, and tossed it.

She dove back into the tote, pausing to touch the Dalahäst, her tangible courage, and rummaged until finding her black satin clutch and a coin purse. *Oh, no*. This was Molly's coin purse. Ronja opened it and found an abundance of Swedish and American currency, perhaps upwards of two hundred kronor and who-knows how many dollars. She contemplated returning to Molly, but she couldn't risk it.

Ronja popped the clasp of her evening clutch. Her pulse skidded to a stop. *It's still here. All of it.* But were the documents ruined? She handled the American passport, airline tickets, and another sheet of paper with a grid of dated stamps that read: VACCINE. Ronja examined the passport. The face in the photograph was hers. The name was not:

Sarah Ann Thomason

The documents were damp but not entirely damaged, as she'd feared. Ronja examined the airline ticket information in smeared ink. She separated the thin sheets of the red and blue booklet. *SAS Scandinavian Airlines.* Destination New York. The United States. The flight time was set for noon. The second booklet listed another destination and a different airline: *Northwest Orient*. New York to Minneapolis. This was for the following day, early morning.

Ronja glanced about. A red and white bus charged by, sending a motorized scooter careening onto the sidewalk, nearly colliding with a

woman in an orange peacoat. She stuffed the contents into the tote and dashed to the bus.

Ronja transferred buses several times en route to Stockholm Arlanda Airport. After enduring several alarmed glances from strangers at her condition, she bought a scarf to cover her bloodied hair and a pair of dark sunglasses from a vendor.

At the airport, Ronja swiveled her head, walking cautiously to the ticket counter to check in for the flight.

The local time was 8:00 a.m. The unease scraped her chest as she homed in on every man behind a newspaper. *Peter would stop at nothing to find me*. She feigned interest in the various headlines written in Swedish—Student Revolution. War. Apartheid. Assassination—awaiting a glance at the strangers' faces when they turned the pages.

She went to a café vendor where a stout gentleman was slumped alone, drinking a screwdriver. She lifted her sunglasses and held his glance for a moment, then ordered a croissant. "Actually, two please." She made a show of digging into her purse. "*Å nej*," she said softly, and with false panic, "*Nej nej*," louder now, summoning fake tears. "I forgot my wallet, or it dropped out, no, no . . . "

"Here, let me." The gentleman reached inside his suit coat.

Ronja gasped and touched her forehead. "I'll be fine, I need to retrace my steps."

"It's no bother, ma'am." His chest inflated while opening his billfold. To the vendor, he said, "Give her whatever she wants."

Ronja swiped a tear. "*Tack snälla du*!" She thanked him, adding an apple and banana to her order. She took a few hungry bites of the pastry, eyeing the pocket he slid his billfold into. She spread her arms at the stranger. "I must," she insisted. "You've made this awful day bearable." Upon the embrace, she grazed a hand over his rear and then was gone, dropping his wallet into her tote as she left.

Within the hour, she had six wallets—a total of eight hundred kronor—and thus far no *Peter* in sight. Anger boiled her stomach and throbbed her head. She had far less money than what she had planned to withdraw from the bank that morning.

Ronja waited behind a telephone booth to be the last passenger ascending the narrow steps of the Swedish Airline, scrutinizing every person that preceded. It was a massive plane under the glowing, noon sunshine. The stewardess, in her navy skirt and gold-buttoned blazer, greeted Ronja with shiny teeth and a robotic, "Welcome aboard." She tipped her matching navy cap.

Ronja stepped inside the cabin and held her breath, completing another sweep of the occupants. *He's not here*. She exhaled the anxiety. But when it came to Peter Johansson, Ronja wouldn't be satisfied she'd outsmarted him until she was on American soil.

A mixture of fuel exhaust and strong coffee wafted about. The cushioned seats and carpet were matching rust colors, and the flowered curtains were drawn on the windows, leaving the cabin dim.

She settled into the window seat next to a gray-suited man. He fired a cigarette and offered one to Ronja. She scrunched her nose. "*Nej tack*," she said, declining his offer.

"Swedish, eh?" he mumbled with the cigarette dangling on his lip. "Speak any English?"

Ronja played confused, hoping he had no interest in practicing Swedish for the next fifteen hours. The chipper stewardess sauntered by, offering pillows. Ronja held up her hand, accepted one, and lodged it against the window. She closed her eyes.

Her sleep was fitful. The jets roared, and the passengers jabbered. Clouds of cigarette smoke curled into her nostrils and reactivated her headache. Stewardesses inquired repeatedly about her comfort, offering alcohol, even lobster and *foie gras,* all of which nauseated her. Water was all she wanted.

When the pilots announced the descent into JFK International Airport, Ronja marveled at the scene below. Grids of light appeared through clouds. Glittering skyscrapers and spires reached to the plane. Bridges crisscrossed the black water. Dots of light—cars—appeared to be slow-moving, glowing

ants, but grew larger and faster as the plane approached, hitting the concrete with a jolting lurch. The stewardess announced in Swedish, “Welcome to New York City, New York, the local time is one o’ five in the morning.”

The plane taxied, and the aircraft doors opened. Ronja tottered down the steps onto the tarmac. Wisps of gray clouds traveled across the hazy sky that blotted the stars. A light breeze perked up her gritty eyes.

She followed the throng of passengers into a crowded baggage claim hall with rows of conveyor belts next to customs officers. Voices echoed and bounced off the high rafters affixed with artificial lights. An American flag hung from glass-paneled windows. Behind them, people waved, seeking to grab the attention of loved ones hustling to clear customs. She had no luggage. And she had no loved ones. Ronja remembered the second set of airline tickets. The flight to Minneapolis was six hours away.

The customs routine was not new. Peter had taken her to London, *to practice your English, min lilla fågel*, he’d said, and they proceeded to blow all their money on luxury hotels, dinners, and jewelry she never wore. But that had been over a year ago. She reached inside the tote and wrapped her fingers around the Dalahäst. Her nerves crumbled at the thought of it being taken.

To calm herself, Ronja mouthed the words of a childhood prayer, *Engel Kommen.* It summoned the warmth and protection of her godmother, Melia, who raised Ronja in Germany, in the latter half of her childhood.

It was her turn. She removed her sunglasses. The customs officer peered under the visor of his cap and asked how she was feeling in English. She touched her clammy face. “I . . . feel good.”

He stared at her. “Your bags?” She gave him the tote. “Your other bags?” He motioned with his hand.

All she heard was “bags.” Ronja shook her head.

He frowned. “What was your business in . . . ” he looked at her ticket, “Stockholm?”

“Family.”

He grunted and continued his search, handling the Dalahäst with overt concentration. “Did you declare this?”

“What?” She shifted and squeezed her thighs. Her pulse thumped in her ears; it dulled the sounds echoing around her. “It, no . . . it is mine. My family.”

The officer squinted and held up the passport as if to examine the photograph. “Huh. When is your birthday?”

Beads of sweat trickled from her armpits. Yet looking him straight on, Ronja coolly recited the date she had painstakingly altered on the passport she’d stolen, having changed the *6* to an *8*. “April 4th, 1928.”

“Hmpf, you don’t look a day over twenty. Lucky.” He placed the horse into the tote. “Looks like an heirloom. I won’t bother you if you have no more items.” His gaze flitted from the passport to Ronja, then back to the passport, as if looking for any sign of deviance or illness. Finally, he stamped his approval and waved her on. A deluge of relief nearly buckled her. She replaced her sunglasses.

Someone bumped into her, and another couple sidestepped her. Porters in navy uniforms pushed silver carts piled high with hard-covered suitcases, boxes, and garment bags. Ronja realized she was an aggravating roadblock. As she moved along, she saw a small beacon of hope. A display of various flags with English lettering: CURRENCY EXCHANGE. She searched the tote and emerged with the coin purse of kronor. She’d already used some on the ride to the airport, a vending machine snack, and the headscarf and sunglasses. The exchange rate would hopefully fetch her a decent amount in dollars.

Once she had a fresh stack of green American bills and various coins in her hand, she followed the flight check-in signs. Her ticket to Minnesota said *Northwest Orient*. Ronja took the stairs and paused. Fuzzy stars in her periphery slowed her progress. She had an urge to pee. She clutched the tote, hunted for restroom signage, and hurried into one.

The toilets cost money to use. She allowed another woman behind her to go first, to see which coin was needed. Ronja searched for one amongst her new currency and was successful. She examined her reflection in a mirror while she waited and lowered the sunglasses to peer at herself.

She saw her blue eyes, wide with apprehension. She scrunched her nose. The body odor was hers. Ronja studied the other women’s clothing. Polyester and paisley. She compared their coiffed, shellacked hair, bright lipstick, and powdered noses to her own straw-colored curls and natural face. Her fingers trembled when she touched the bruise on her cheekbone. Once the bruise faded, so would her vivid recollection of Peter’s knuckles planting it there. Same with the head wound covered by the green and blue scarf she’d tightly arranged. How would she get the stitches out?

She glanced at a newspaper someone had discarded on the counter. *The New York Times.* Several headlines and black and white pictures were scattered over the pages.

"Columbia University Closes Campus Among Student-Led War Protests"
"President Continues Plea for Peace Amongst Civil Unrest"

Ronja studied herself in the mirror once more.

No wonder the customs officer had scoffed at the age imprinted upon the passport.

Chapter Five

Ronja

The long flight to Minneapolis felt to be only minutes compared to the haul from Stockholm. No need to clear customs. *I'm free*. She only had to follow the signs, but halted, needing to recoup her strategy. Ronja reached inside the tote, ran her fingers over the horse's jewels, and silently recited her German prayer.

I can do this. She would find a taxi, a hotel, and a new life.

Outside, springtime in Minneapolis appeared similar to Stockholm: crisp. A noisy roadway directly above her blocked the sunlight, but the shade was a welcome relief against another blossoming headache. Jumping through time zones had done her no favors. Ronja inhaled the brisk air and cough-inducing exhaust of cars, taxis, and buses. Travelers bustled. Officers and porters dictated traffic and schlepped luggage.

The instinct for shelter and sleep was powerful. But so was nourishment. Her vision blackened, and sounds muffled as a strange, pungent odor germinated within her nostrils, along with a gorge in her throat.

Ronja ran to a trashcan and heaved.

She wiped the acid from her lips. She stumbled away and slumped against a concrete pillar in relieved sorrow over the enormity of what she'd accomplished. Escaped to a place where Peter could never find her.

"Miss, are you all right?" A porter stopped and hunched over.

Ronja nodded, accepting the man's hand. "Taxi?" she said.

His white, relieved smile shone against the rich dark skin she was unaccustomed to seeing in Sweden. “Right this way. Do you have any bags?” He extended his other hand toward her tote.

Ronja gripped it tightly, shaking her head. Engines chugged on the road as he guided her, horns beeped, and flight calls boomed overhead. “*First call, Delta Flight 299 . . .”* All these sounds collided, yet her vision sharpened once she focused on the cars. *So many cars*. She recognized the make of a green Volvo. *Nineteen-sixty-one P1800, probably with a B18B engine*.

He brought her to an idling, yellow cab, and opened the back passenger door. “Where to?”

“Hotel, Minneapolis,” she said, nodding to a driver wearing a pageboy cap pulled over curly hair.

“Well, which one!” He chuckled.

She forced a flighty response, “The . . . biggest one?”

The two men exchanged more chuckles as she settled onto the vinyl seat. The porter began to close the door, but Ronja said, “Wait,” and foraged through her tote. She handed him a five-dollar bill. He blinked wide, and she blew him a kiss, then shut the door.

Ronja adjusted her sunglasses and looked out the window, watching the landscape careen. On the other side of the highway, a massive, arched bridge spanned a sparkling river. Green forestry lined the steep banks. She knotted the tote’s handles around her wrist. Her eyes grew heavy as the car purred along. Her skull pulsated.

The driver clicked the radio on. “Do you like American music?” Deep base and jarring guitar chords filled the interior.

Ronja thought of the last song she’d heard in Stockholm before she’d arrived at the hospital. Before everything she’d plotted went awry. A live string quartet had serenaded her with *Musetta’s Waltz*.

While she danced with Peter.

The cabbie jostled Ronja awake. “Goodness, ma’am, I was ‘bout to call an ambulance. That’s some impressive jet lag.”

Reality inundated her senses. She fluttered her eyelids, caught the glint of a silver tooth in the driver’s smile, and smelled his bubblegum. “Pick-

Nicollet Hotel," he said. "Biggest we got downtown."

Ronja's eyes cut to the tote cinching her wrist.

The driver reached to help, and she accepted his thick, hairy arm around her waist, gently hoisting her. She clocked her vision around the scenery. A red brick monstrosity loomed twelve stories high, obstructing the sun. It looked a bit weary though, like her. Well, she didn't ask for the fanciest hotel.

Slightly rejuvenated from her brief nap, Ronja paid the driver and tread carefully, not trusting her senses were at full capacity. She entered the double doors, lifting her sunglasses, and went past a couple engaged in a spat next to their stacked luggage. Just beyond the long reception desk was an opening to a restaurant: Waikiki Room. It was endless green booths, straw huts and chairs, people chattering, glasses clinking. It looked busy. Lunchtime perhaps?

She set her sight on the receptionist. The woman talked on a phone sandwiched between her shoulder and ear, writing in a ledger.

Ronja swiveled her attention to the bickering couple. She swiftly bent down, allowing the sunglasses to topple to the carpet, and unclasped the hooks of a baby blue suitcase. The couple paused their fighting, and Ronja retrieved the glasses, casually waving them as if signaling, *Ah! There they are*! She went toward the desk. And waited.

Soon there came a soft *clunk* and a collective gasp. The couple's arguing reached a sudden crescendo. "How did that happen!" yelled the woman. "You didn't *close* it?" She dove to the carpet where clothes and undergarments were scattered.

The receptionist dashed over to help.

Ronja darted behind the desk counter and worked fast. She grabbed the blue ballpoint pen, scanned the reservations, crossed one off, and scrawled her alias on it, matching the script.

Hotel key in hand, Ronja exited the elevators, whisking through the hallway. She found room 705 on the brass plate.

Ronja inserted the key and opened the door.

She cried in relief upon seeing the two full beds covered in polyester, candy-apple spreads. *Sleep!* More appetizing than food, more quenching

than water. Ronja collapsed into one. It smelled of smoke and cursed her stomach, but she didn't care as she unwound the scarf from her long, matted curls, releasing the metallic stench of blood.

She was unclasping her bra when knocking sounded on the door. A voice cried in Swedish for her to open. "*Ronja, snälla, öppna dörren.*"

A wash of dread covered Ronja. *Peter!* Her eyes shot to the doorknob turning. Her scrambled brain had forgotten to lock it! Ronja sprang to action but only managed to stumble and slam the door into his foot.

Peter cursed. He was too strong, and he forced himself inside.

She curled into a ball next to the teak desk, digging her fingernails into her knees. Perhaps the heat radiating off her would melt her into the carpet. *Should I scream for help*? Except she had no energy to scream.

He fell to his knees at her, touched a strand of her bloodied hair. "I thought you were *dead*."

Ronja slapped his hand away, too weak to move. Where could she go anyway? Why even be angry now? He'd won. Tracked her across the globe. One step ahead, no less. How had she *missed* him?

Peter answered her silent question. "I knew your plan all along. My plane landed in Minneapolis before yours, and I waited, praying you were alive, that somehow—Ronja, I'm—" He paused, likely sensing the useless apology would only fan her infuriation with him.

Of course he must have discovered the airline tickets. But when? She mentally chastised her heedlessness, wondering if he was mocking her, gloating in his victory. Why hadn't he tried to stop her if he knew what she was plotting?

Ronja neutralized her face, though surely he could feel her invisible flames emanating, and she lifted her gaze.

"Are you all right?" A mist encroached the corners of his piercing yet haggard eyes, and his Adam's apple bobbed as if he were forcefully swallowing the gathering emotion. No, he did not appear to be mocking her at all.

They stared at one another, and he entreated her again. She looked away.

Peter rose with a defeated sigh and tucked his hands into the pockets of his black pants, causing the sleeves of his wrinkled dress shirt to tighten against his biceps. He removed a hand and reached toward Ronja again but then slid it back into the pocket.

She kept her tone even, speaking in Swedish, “Leave before I call the police.”

With a heavy, disbelieving exhale, he replied, “I have a contact in Chicago. His name is Gabby. He said we can stay with his nephew here.” He paused. “Ronja, you have nothing. I can give you what you wanted.”

“I wanted an *honest life*,” she fumed.

Peter’s remorse turned into a sardonic, closed-mouthed laugh. “Honest? How much money have you already stolen? That was a clever distraction in the lobby. You didn’t want to take the chance they wouldn’t have an open room?” Peter crouched at her level again, resting his forearms on his knees.

Why isn’t he asking about the horse? Ronja slid her eyes to the tote concealing the Dalahäst, lying carelessly on the wrinkled bed.

“Following you wasn’t enough to prove I’m serious?”

Her head began to spin again. Ronja pushed stifling breaths through her nose and used the desk to support herself, climbing to her feet.

“Ronja?”

Her legs betrayed her; she tripped, and he steadied her, but she swiped him away. She went to the bed and scraped her clothes into a heap, balling the tote into the pile. “I need to take a bath.”

“You need to see a doctor. You look like a ghost.”

“Maybe I am,” she quipped.

He dragged a hand through his short, blonde waves, leaving it disheveled, allowing Ronja to fully digest his appearance. His clear lack of sleep. He placed his hands on his hips, clenched his eyes, and tipped his head to the ceiling. “You have no idea what you put me through.” His countenance broke.

She hated the way it broke her, too. And she wouldn’t dare let him see it.

Peter exhaled laboriously and placed his intensity back on her. “What happened to us?”

Unable to tolerate his gaze, Ronja fought the familiar ache to fall into his arms and wobbled toward the bathroom.

He snagged her arm. “Would you be logical about this?”

“I was being logical until you fucked everything up,” she said coldly, and wrenched her arm free, striding to the bathroom. This time she made sure to lock the door.

Ronja ran the tub. The fall of the water muted Peter's voice on the other side of the door, but he wasn't talking to her, probably on the phone. She filled a tumbler with tap water and chugged, studying herself in the gilded mirror. Peter was right. She appeared ghastly, making the bruise on her cheek and her stained hair even more disturbing. She cautiously touched the stitches at the base of her skull. Fury arose once more from the bottom of her gut, and she turned her attention to the tote. She pulled out the horse, pressing it to her lips, and the fury coalesced into grief, flooding her with images of her final days in Sweden.

Chapter Six

Ronja

Ronja emerged from the bathroom, her hair in damp waves, and she noticed food on a tray: a club sandwich with potato chips and fruit. So, he'd ordered room service.

The late afternoon sunlight poking through the opening of the striped curtains rested on Peter's face. He was asleep on the bed, dressed in his undershirt, sans socks and shoes, and not pretending either; he breathed heavily through his nose when he was truly zonked. Ronja wrestled with the juxtaposition of wanting to injure him and wanting to make love to him. This is why she had run, of course.

She glanced at her tote. The Dalahäst was wrapped in her underwear and stuffed inside the coin purse. How would she ever keep it hidden from Peter? But it couldn't leave her sight. She went for the door. Run! *But I'm so tired*. Defeat expanded inside her. Whatever Peter was up to, she'd play along. For now.

Ronja brought the tray of food to the bed and sat cross-legged, nibbling at it, testing the strength of her stomach. Peter groaned awake and rubbed his face, blinking at her. He gave her a half-smile. "You're still here."

"You probably have minions to catch me if I run."

Peter stayed quiet. He rose impassively from the bed, went to his dress shirt draped across the desk chair, and put it on.

She watched him button it, tuck it into his pants, and sit down to work on socks and shoes. "There's a clinic not far from the neighborhood where

we've been offered an apartment. I'll help with the rent. It's cheaper than a hotel, until we find our own place."

"Peter—"

"We'll stop by and meet the renters after the doctor's visit—"

"I don't—"

"Trust me." He stood and extended his hand.

Fine. Ronja set her half-eaten sandwich aside. *Let him do his thing.* But she didn't take his hand. She brushed the chip crumbs off her pants and went to find her shoes.

Upon making it out of the hotel and inside the taxicab, Peter chatted with the driver, who gave them an unofficial tour of "Nordeast" on their way to Northeast Family Clinic after deducing they were foreigners, though Peter's accent was more difficult to detect than Ronja's. Like her, Peter was fluent in Swedish and German. Unlike her, his English was far superior. He'd never given her a straight answer as to how he knew the language so well. Even after practicing it with him for several years, she remained proficient, but not fluent.

They drove past concrete giants labeled Grainbelt Brewery and Gluek Brewery, with their smokestacks abutting the Mississippi River. Upon arriving at the clinic, she handed her forged passport to the secretary to start a file, filled out paperwork, and sat with Peter in the waiting area. Ronja picked up a *Good Housekeeping* magazine with a headline, "Why Doesn't God Just Strike Me Dead?: THE DIARY OF AN UNWED MOTHER." She slapped it face down.

A nurse approached them. "Mrs. Thomason? Come with me," and, gesturing toward Peter, she said, "Your husband can join, too."

"No, he cannot," Ronja replied, raising a defiant brow at Peter, who didn't object, simply crossed a leg over one knee and squeaked further into the plastic seat.

After the nurse took her vital signs, the doctor entered. He appeared young, with his smooth white skin and brown mustache. He examined her and frowned after studying the head wound. "Good stitches. Should heal up, but what happened?"

She waited a beat. "Accident."

He finished the history and physical, told her she'd need to come back in a week, and had her pee in a cup. The nurse wrote a phone number on letterhead while Ronja finished dressing, and she followed her out to the

waiting area where Peter flipped through a *Reader's Digest*. The nurse handed the paper to Peter. To Ronja, she said casually, "We'll call you with the results of your pregnancy test, but, if you don't hear back in a few days, give us a ring."

Peter's wide eyes locked onto Ronja's.

He silently held the passenger door of the taxicab for her, making Ronja duck underneath his outstretched arm. He settled in but kept a fair distance while she hugged the opposite end. He'd said nothing about the nurse's faux pas, but she felt him mentally snap the pieces into place, working out the answer. The possibilities. There was no need for a test to confirm the pregnancy. When she absentmindedly put a hand to her stomach, Ronja felt his eyes land there as well. She removed it, tucked a curl behind her ear. She pressed her forehead against the warm glass, heated by the afternoon sun, and closed her eyes to cage the tears.

Ronja opened them when the car came to a full stop, and the driver shifted into park. Red and tan brick buildings were stacked next to one another. A white sign ran across a window: Mike's Groceries and Meats. On the corner: Adam's Dry Cleaning. Next door: Lucky's Liquors.

Peter paid the driver, got out, and opened Ronja's door. She welcomed the help from him this time. Her stomach was fighting her again. She bit down the sourness and blinked her eyes rapidly to refocus her drifting head.

As if sensing her weakness, Peter circled his arm around her waist and walked them into a building that appeared to be a set of apartments.

They mounted a threadbare, carpeted staircase. Each step summoned ghostly fumes of fiber-embedded cigarette smoke. "Where are we?" she asked in Swedish, knotting her fingers through her tote.

"You'll see."

They walked down a dank hallway past the first door. Faint music with scratchy guitar chords came from underneath the crack, along with someone belting, "*The answer my friend . . . is blowin' in the wind . . .* " They stopped at the second door, and Peter knocked.

Weighty footsteps made a slow climax toward the entry. A man's deep voice rumbled from the other side, "You forget your key again?" A chain

rattled, and a deadbolt clicked. It opened to reveal a large, bald man. His light, tawny skin was wrinkle-free, he wore a gold earring in one lobe, and a tattoo covered the entire left side of his skinned head. It looked like a lizard, or maybe a dragon inked in black, with initials. Ronja leaned into Peter.

The man's eyes went first to Ronja, then rested on Peter. "You're not Bridget." His deep baritone laugh was as enormous as he was. Ronja felt its vibrations in her chest.

"You must be Peter." He extended his massive hand. "I'm Leo. My Uncle Gabby told me about you. *Parla italiano*?"

"*Alquanto*," Peter replied in rudimentary Italian, accepting the handshake, and the two men shared a laugh like old chums. In English, Peter introduced Ronja.

"Ron-*ya*! Ha, that's how you say it? Welcome to your new home, Ronja," Leo said boisterously.

Strange. Peter rarely introduced either of them using their real first names. This was the second time in a row now, if she counted a couple of nights ago in Stockholm.

From behind, dainty footsteps skittered toward them. "Leo, look what I found for our new friends!"

Leo spread his arms. "There's my girl!"

Ronja turned to see a petite, fleshy woman in a low-cut striped jumper, holding a six-pack of beer in one hand and a bottle of Captain Morgan in the other. Her mouth worked a wad of gum as she smiled and raked her eyes over Peter.

The sight of alcohol triggered Ronja's gag reflex. The walls narrowed in on her, and though her stomach was nearly empty, it erupted. She slammed a hand over her mouth.

Peter cursed, grabbed Ronja, and hauled her inside, dragging her over to the kitchen sink.

She retched into it. Bridget swore, and Leo delivered a few soft cuss words, but he patted Ronja's shoulder in sympathy, and, with Peter's help, gently guided her to sit on the linoleum floor. Bridget ran the tap and kneeled in front with a dishrag, her short brown ringlets falling over her pale forehead. A strong perfume wafted toward Ronja, threatening more vomit.

"Does she need a doctor?" Leo asked as Bridget patted Ronja's lips.

Ronja's vision cleared for a moment onto Peter's disconcerted eyes. She gazed past him into a living room with stained beige carpeting. A television sat opposite a couch with holes left by cigarette burns, and next to it, a worn-out armchair. On the television screen, a western show played on low volume.

Bridget popped her fruity-scented gum and said to Ronja, "So what is it, honey? Sick? Or pregnant?"

They placed Ronja into a bedroom, and she rested on a scratchy patchwork quilt that smelled of cedar. The light in the room was muted by the heavy, flowery curtains that were drawn. A foreign anxiety rippled through her limbs. *Pregnant*. Would Peter insist on an abortion? Was it legal in America? He set down a green box of crackers and a glass of water and crouched at eye level. He gently removed a tress from her forehead.

"I hate you," she whispered to him, and they spoke to one another in Swedish.

"I know," he conceded. "But I can take care of you." He placed a tentative hand on her stomach. "Both of you." And there was her answer.

She forced his hand away. "I don't need you."

"I never said you did."

Ronja shifted her focus to the open door where she heard Leo and Bridget in conversation, the television sounds blending with their words. "Who are they?" Ronja asked Peter.

"Harmless."

"What are you going to do to them?"

"Nothing. They're a means to an end."

"You want me to *live* here?" she hissed, raising her head slightly. "With them, with you? How did you arrange this? This place is tiny. And I'm—" The avalanche of questions she had was too much, and she dropped her head onto the pillow. What was she doing? Entertaining the idea of another one of Peter's schemes? His global network was a web he'd created and maintained with great precision, allowing him to hop from one identity to the next, keeping tabs on anyone. She'd known this—and still thought she could get away with disappearing.

Laughable, really. Easier than crying. Easier than dwelling on it.

“I’m going to work for Leo’s uncle,” he continued, “get us a home. We’ll be regular Americans in no time.”

“You do whatever—I want no part in it.”

Bridget appeared and knocked on the doorframe. “How’s it going, roomie?” She had a beer in her hand and sauntered over, crouching next to Peter. She seemed to lap in his appearance briefly before smiling at Ronja. “You two want this bedroom? I can sleep with Leo, although he and I aren’t really together.” *Together* was aimed directly at Peter.

Ronja shook her head, “No, Peter and I, we—”

Peter interjected, “I’ll take the couch.”

Bridget’s face expanded. “Oh,” she touched his arm, “are you sure?” She gave him a squeeze and stood. “I’m dying to hear how you know Gabby.”

“Yes, Peter. Me too,” Ronja goaded in Swedish as Bridget sashayed out.

Peter answered, “I grew up in Chicago. Swedish parents. Went to school with his younger brothers.” He cocked his Cheshire grin. “You always wanted to know why my English was so good.”

“That’s one I’ve never heard before,” she said.

“I have no reason to lie.”

“Except that’s all you do.”

“You’re not giving me a chance.”

“You had your chance, and you blew it.”

His silence convicted him, but he finally responded, “I’ll have to convince you to give me a second one.”

She stared past him, distracted by a comforting noise outside the window: the gunning acceleration of a V-6 engine.

“C’mon,” Peter whispered in Swedish, his eyes softening. “Let me back in.”

Ronja thought of the Dalahäst hidden inside the tote next to her. She closed her eyes and turned away from him.

Chapter Seven

Ronja

Ronja awoke to Bridget flinging aside the curtains with a merry, “Ready to go shopping, sleeping beauty?” She squinted at the garish light, heard and smelled sizzling bacon, which tossed her insides. It was her first night in this dreaded living arrangement. She’d changed into one of Bridget’s gauzy nighties that was on par with sleeping naked. The headache and nausea from—how many hours ago?—had subsided, but she still felt a low-level queasiness. She massaged her stomach and patted the pillowcase, feeling the horse inside.

Ronja pressed a smile at Bridget. “Hmm?” she said sleepily. “Where is Peter? Leo?”

“Work stuff.” Bridget sat on the bed in her fitted white top and jeans and touched Ronja’s forehead. She pulled out a wad of cash and fanned herself. “When the cats are away, the mice get to play.”

Dressed in the same clothes she’d been wearing for the past three days, Ronja sniffed her armpits and adjusted her sunglasses as she followed Bridget outside to a parking lot. They stopped at a pea-green muscle car. Bridget unlocked the passenger door and helped her inside. “Here,” she

motioned for the tote in Ronja's grasp, "I'll take that." Ronja snapped it into her chest like protecting a child.

Bridget looked taken aback but laughed. "I'm only trying to help. You barely touched your breakfast, you wilting flower."

Ronja slid onto the tan plastic seats and hugged the tote. Her eyes cruised over the flat mahogany dashboard on the driver's side. On her own side, emblazoned on the glove box in silver lettering, were three letters: GTO. Bridget crossed to the other side of the vehicle and climbed in. She pushed in the clutch and turned over the engine. "It's Leo's. Nice, isn't it?" She placed her hand on the black ball of the stick shift, cranked it, and backed out.

"You know how to drive?" she asked Ronja.

In the department stores with Bridget, Ronja gravitated toward flowy dresses and garments that left room to gain weight. The word *pregnant* kept rolling through her brain. Inside her newly purchased faux leather purse was a zippered compartment where she'd transferred the Dalahäst, and where she would place the map she'd purchased at Woolworth's while Bridget swiped on lipstick samples. "What's the map for?" Bridget asked, smacking her lips.

Ronja had the map outstretched in her arms, searching the legend of cities. She shrugged.

"You sure don't talk much. You do know English, right?" She capped the lipstick.

Ronja found it: *Mora, Minnesota*. Mora! A petal of her wounded heart opened, welcoming hope back inside. Over the map, she spied Bridget. Could it be that easy to leave? To say she was going for a walk, stuffed with her new essentials, but not overly so. She'd go to the bus stop. *Poof*—gone. She wondered if Peter was secretly paying Bridget to watch her. She folded the map.

Their next stop was hot dogs at a vendor outside the Nicollet shopping mall, and Ronja ate only the bread. She'd managed not to vomit today but was still wary of eating much. They sat at an outdoor table. Ronja snagged a napkin about to fly away.

“Are you and Peter together?” Bridget asked, fingering the corners of her mouth from ketchup. “Is he available?”

Available? “Peter and I . . . we were business partners.”

“What kind of business?”

“Sales,” clipped Ronja, watching a bus pull alongside the curb. “I need a job,” she said to Bridget. “Can you help me?”

Bridget lowered her sunglasses. Her eyes clearly delighted at the prospect. “Me too! You could work at the restaurant Leo opened. It’s a chain of his family’s. Maybe waitress? Leo lets me do a little hosting because I’m terrible at waitressing. But I need something else. I wanna move out.” She proceeded to tell Ronja about her abusive ex. “Leo took me in after I ran away. Met him at a *bar* of all places. One owned by his massive Italian family—I swear he has family *everywhere*—we went on two dates, but he’s terrible in bed. Don’t tell him that. But last year he said he was moving to Minneapolis to open a new bar and asked if I wanted to come. Can’t believe he lets me live here without sleeping with him. I still give him head once in a while.” She said all this half-heartedly and then, with renewed vigor, flattened her palms on the table. “I’m bored outta my mind, know what I’m saying?”

Ronja nodded, bonding to Bridget’s story, eager to declare, *I want to be independent.* And not rely on Peter—on anyone. She smoothed her stomach in small circles.

On their way home, Ronja watched the neighborhood float by, past a movie theater that said RITZ in lights and posters that read: *Project X, Tarzan and The Jungle Boy,* and *The Odd Couple*.

A building came into view when Bridget downshifted around a corner.

It was a shining beacon, with its forest green garage doors, bright red roof, and white lettering: 5th Street Auto Repair Shop.

That next day, Ronja strolled through the neighborhood to 5th Street Auto Repair Shop.

Thomas, an older white gentleman with grease imprinted into his wrinkles, walked out from working on a bright blue Cadillac and asked if she was lost.

Ronja said, “No, I like cars.”

“Where’s the accent from?”

“Sweden.”

“*S-veden*.” He snuffed a laugh and said he didn’t mind a pretty woman watching him work all day, but he wasn’t going to let her near a car.

“I can do some things my uncle taught me, but what does he know?” She loitered, asking questions she already knew the answers to, masked her grimace and shrank her voice when she said, “Do you really want to pull that bolt out?”

Every morning, after Peter and Leo left, and while Bridget circled job ads, Ronja frequented 5th Street Auto and carried on with the same clueless act for weeks, boosting Thomas’ ego that he was a *really good teacher,* until he finally allowed her to don a pair of coveralls and get her fingertips black. And day by day, Ronja felt herself come alive again with the oxygen of gas and motor oil fumes. He started cutting her some money. She opened a bank account.

And finally, a safe deposit box for her Dalahäst.

She came home early one July evening from the repair shop, and Peter took notice of her blackened hands. He sniffed her hair. His breath was so close to her skin, sending a frisson throughout her body. He stared at Ronja, as if longing, but quickly smirked. She must’ve left a gray streak when she massaged her forehead because he licked his thumb, silently reached out, and rubbed it clean.

Chapter Eight

September – November 1968
Two Months Later

Ronja

Ronja didn't announce her pregnancy until September when she was nearly at the halfway mark. Bridget and Leo broke their eyes from the baseball game on the television and stared at her dumbfounded, both Pabsts halfway to their mouths. Their eyes beelined to Peter.

"No," Ronja said. "He's not the father." And her heart pinched when she saw the relief on Bridget's face.

"All right . . . " Leo blew out a heavy breath. "It's me, isn't it?"

Laughter exploded, even Peter joined in the merriness, and Bridget sprayed beer through her nose, swiping it.

Humorous tears pricked Ronja's eyes, but when she connected with Peter, they rolled into sobs. She sprang to her feet and went to the bathroom, locking herself inside. Stunned at her outburst, she blasted the faucet to muffle her grief.

Ronja allowed Peter to accompany her to the prenatal appointments, giving in to the insistence he would keep strangers from her on bus rides. She rolled her eyes at this. For all his faults, he'd never treated her like a damsel in distress. But for reasons she feared to analyze, she didn't say no. He'd stand in the bus aisle instead of sitting next to her, balancing with the ceiling handhold. He spoke very little, and, when he did, it was in English instead of their usual Swedish. Occasionally he'd drop a glance to her mouth, then onto her growing stomach.

She hated that she craved his presence, those fleeting looks of his that curled her insides with desire. *I miss you—I miss you*, Ronja's pulse beat out in response to Peter's absence when he didn't return until long after she was asleep. And when he was home, Ronja found herself lingering. If he was in the kitchen, she slowed her efforts at scrubbing the fridge in hopes he'd brush her arm when reaching for a beer. He'd caught her staring at him instead of *Hawaii Five-O* on the television when the four would gather around it in the late evenings.

She didn't correct the doctor in calling Peter, "Dad," and they both shot one another amused glances every time the nurse or physician would comment, "My goodness, tell me your secret to looking so young? How can this be your first pregnancy?" The stolen passport made her forty years old instead of twenty-three.

It left her unsettled when, on the way home from her six-month checkup, Peter said quietly, "Are you scared?" He stared out the bus window at the large snowflakes hitting it.

"Of what?"

Peter floated his gaze to her hands resting on her popped-out stomach through the unzipped parka he'd bought for her. "Ronja—"

"I'm not scared," she lied. "I'm going to be fine on my own." She said this knowing full well it wasn't Peter she was trying to deceive.

Ronja thought perhaps Thomas would've overlooked her growing belly, but, by the time Thanksgiving had rolled around, he asked her not to return until after she had the baby. She busied herself with the less-than-fulfilling duties of washing Leo's dirty underwear, scrubbing the perpetual linoleum residue, cleaning the dishes—twice, in case she missed a spot—dusting the

windowsills and vacuuming cracker crumbs from the couch cushions. But by noon, she always ran out of tasks.

While the four of them ate dinner, Bridget said, “Ronnie, why in the world do you want to work as a grease monkey anyway?”

Leo circled a finger in the direction of Ronja’s stomach. “Won’t doing all that car stuff, you know, hurt the baby?”

Bridget clacked the fork onto the table. “She’s pregnant, Leo, not crippled. For God’s sake, would you get with the times?” Bridget directed her next question to Ronja. “You’re not freaking out that you’re going to be a single mom?”

Leo piggy-backed, “What are you going to tell the kiddo about its dad?”

Ronja said, “Nothing. He—”

Peter slammed his knife onto the plate. He stared at the potato wedges he’d stopped eating.

They finished dinner in silence.

Chapter Nine

December 1968

Ronja

The day before Christmas Eve, Bridget made an announcement as she skidded through the door. “I finally found a *real* job!”

Apparently, the past three hadn’t counted: barber shop sweeper (the smell of cigars and flatulence made her ill), stocker at Woolworths (third shift only), sales clerk at JCPenney (didn’t like the boss—*total chauvinist*).

This one was at Mike’s Groceries and Meats, their neighborhood market. A cashier. Bridget whined that she’d have to leave at 5:30 every morning. “Better than *going* to bed at 5:30,” she said brightly, but the excitement in her eyes dimmed when they landed on Peter, who was helping Ronja with dinner, chopping the lettuce. “You’re home early again,” she commented to him with a biting edge.

“You can have the bedroom all to yourself, Bridget,” Ronja said, wiping her hands on a towel. “I’m moving out after Christmas.”

Peter stopped. He set the blade down and splayed both hands on the cutting board as if holding himself upright. Ronja felt her heart’s wild pounding. “I—I spoke with my doctor. They have programs for new moms and babies. They can help me look for a place to live.”

“Why?” said Peter in Swedish, staring at the vegetables. His jaw was rigid.

"*Det räcker*," she replied in kind. "Enough already. Let me go."

Peter, unmoving, still persisted in their native Swedish, "We're not staying here much longer."

Bridget made a sound of annoyance. "English. Please?" To Ronja, she said, "You and I could move in together."

Ronja ignored her, but avoided Peter's eyes when she continued, "Nothing has changed."

"Sure about that?" he branded the question into her.

Ronja stared at the meatloaf cooling on the stovetop.

Bridget touched her shoulder. "You look like you're about to cry. Geez, Peter, what did you say to her?"

Ronja stole to the bedroom, but doing so did nothing to shake Peter from her skin.

On Christmas Eve, Leo returned to the apartment with a plastic drugstore bag of scant holiday decorations, carryout from the neighborhood Thai restaurant, and two bottles of Smirnoff. He gently tapped Ronja's belly with the glass bottle and spoke loudly at it. "Just because you can't have any fun, little bambino, doesn't mean we can't! Ha!"

Ronja hugged the oversized cardigan over her mumu dress. She'd spent all day cleaning and re-cleaning the bathroom, re-organizing the cupboards, and packing her belongings. The frenzied chores kept her from stopping to think. Stopping to cry. "Where are Peter and Bridget?"

"Don't know," said Leo.

Ronja made herself useful by fetching a few spotless dishes for the food, along with various shot glasses in painted logos of sports teams. Leo bypassed the food and poured himself a shot. He tossed it back with a satisfied cringe and smacked, "Ahhh!" He rubbed his shiny, tattooed head and asked Ronja, "So tell me. Is the dad ever coming back into the picture or what?"

Ronja blocked his question from taking a foothold in her mind, to keep the sorrow from tearing out her heart. She sat at the cardboard foldout table and caressed her stomach. Right where she imagined the baby's head to be. And though she could picture holding a baby, nursing a baby, and changing a diaper, it never solidified as something that would *actually* come to pass.

The birth of her baby, like her own death, was inevitable, a force she could not prevent, yet could not wrap her mind around.

Bridget had treated the pregnancy as a fun accessory to their friendship. *We'll live together! Take turns playing with the baby!* But there was a visible crack in her bond with Bridget: *Peter*. Ronja noticed Bridget's cheeks color when Peter was near. She found ways to sidle next to him, laugh out of proportion at his comments. Ronja despised her simmer of jealousy over Bridget and Peter still gone—together.

Leo poured another shot. "No answer? Why do you always keep things so mysterious?"

"Can I eat?" Ronja asked, trying to generate enthusiasm for the Thai food that was losing its appeal.

"*Mangia*. Eat, eat!" He flapped his hand in the direction of the rising, curried steam.

Ronja savored the food. Anything that wasn't pre-packaged or thawed was heavenly. Everything in America seemed to come in a can. Or a box. Still, it didn't poison her.

There didn't seem to be enough food for four people, so she made a concerted effort to slow down.

But Leo only seemed interested in his drink. When he got drunk, he was harmless and only grew more enamored with his jokes that veered into *a Pole, a Jew, and a Blonde*. The alcohol tonight must have gone straight to his head, though, because he confessed, "I only ask about your baby's dad because Peter won't like the competition. He's got a little crush on you." Then in a loud whisper, "Don't tell Bridge'. She's got a nasty temper."

She heard Bridget's high-pitched giggle before the door opened. Bridget walked through with Peter, hefting presents, beaming at him. He held a small fake Christmas tree under one arm like a football. In the other he balanced three large boxes. Bridget had bits of silver tinsel in her hair, and she was svelte in high-heeled boots and a leather jacket. Her lips shimmered. Ronja touched her own naked, chapped lips and stared at her fat belly and swollen ankles. She pushed the food away and headed for the bathroom.

"What's with Ronnie?" she heard Bridget murmur, and then louder so Ronja could hear, "You're gonna love the presents we picked for you! Hurry up!"

Ronja examined herself in the mirror, the puffy face and untamed waves that were escaping her loose braid. She interrogated her reflection. *What are you doing with your life?* She palmed the glass as if keeping her past—with its confusion and heartbreak—from pushing through. She thought of the Dalahäst safe at the bank and wanted it in her hands. To feel its comfort and courage.

There was a knock on the door. It was Bridget. "Ronnie, everything okay? You're not having the baby yet, are you?"

Ronja inhaled a full breath through her nose and opened the door with a wide smile. "I did not know we were having presents," she said in her still-thick accent. Most of her Christmas traditions were German. The past years with Peter, they'd blended their own traditions, mostly consisting of drinking rum and eating decadent chocolates for twenty-four days straight.

Bridget had shed her coat to reveal an exposed-shoulder sweater, and her full wine glass dangled in her manicured hand. She tilted her head. "Peter insisted. He's so sweet. He even taught me to say *God Jul*."

"Hm," Ronja replied, zapped of any Christmas spirit this year, and followed Bridget. Her body hummed when she saw Peter placing large packages around the small tree. His blue oxford stretched across his muscular back. When he turned around, his expression was boyish and apprehensive.

Leo held up the box of Thai food he was eating from and said with a mouthful, "Eat up, kids!"

After the meal, Ronja discovered most of the presents weren't for her. She opened miniature clothes, hats, blankets, and a small bassinet that required assembling. With each present, she felt a tug grounding her to where she was, and yet there was guilt. What kind of mother was she going to be, having not yet bought any clothes for her own baby? In the middle of winter? Ronja looked at Peter as Leo and Bridget did shots by the kitchen sink. "Where is your family?" she asked him.

He cast his eyes to the mounds of crumpled wrapping paper. The longer he remained silent, the more her hope for an answer—a *real* answer—caved.

Peter finally said, "Car crash. The Midwest is not so forgiving in the winter."

She didn't believe him. He'd told vague stories over the years. But her sadness for him—for herself, too, at their lack of family—had always

tethered them. The thought of having a family with Peter—she tried to stop the warmth from ensnaring her.

Leo and Bridget moved on to drinking till near blackout. They sang awful Christmas carols and laughed over the fact they were laughing.

"Hey, Peter, don' miss out on the fun jus' 'cause Ronnie has ta!" Bridget tossed a shot and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Leo kept her upright.

Peter showed no emotion at Bridget's invitation. He turned on the television to a Christmas special. Two women clad in skimpy Santa outfits clung to either arm of a handsome gentleman in a tuxedo. Bridget squealed, "Dean Martin!" and flopped onto the couch with a flourish. Leo joined her. They both unceremoniously took up the entire length, entangled with one another.

Ronja sat on the floor and arranged her baby's new items into a pile. Peter balled the wrapping, and the sound crinkled throughout the tiny apartment. He worked slowly, as did Ronja, and they kept their eyes trained on Leo and Bridget. Their laughter eventually grew less gregarious and lazier and finally gave way to heavy eyelids.

Peter cleaned the kitchen, and Ronja sank into the recliner, tracing its brown threads. A commercial for a Porsche 911L appeared. *A Neunelfer.* She watched it hug mountainous curves. Fast and free. It summoned the thought of her baby's father and lanced her with pangs of intolerable longing. She sucked down a cry.

Peter returned, and he touched her hair. It made her shiver. He leaned over the back of the recliner and in Swedish, whispered in her ear, "Come with me?"

Ronja glanced at Bridget and Leo, both halfway off the couch and passed out.

When she held his hand, Ronja felt a current through her body, and Leo's comment from earlier—*he's got a little crush on you*—drew her closer to Peter's naked, hunting eyes.

He led her to the bedroom and closed the door, locking it behind.

She couldn't say who kissed whom first. It didn't feel like a kiss as much as a feral release. A sensual paradox of desperation and gentleness. They made love without hesitation or question. When she lay spent in his arms, with his hands cradling her belly, he spoke first. "I didn't give you my

present yet." He kissed her below her ear and sent her wanting all over again.

"You gave me plenty of presents," she whispered.

"No, those were for the baby. I bought you a house."

Ronja shifted to meet his gaze. "Peter, no."

His eyes filled, as if he knew she'd reject his offer. "Don't leave, Ronja. Don't leave me again. *Stay*."

Chapter Ten

January – March 1969
One Month Later

Ronja

Peter and Ronja said nothing of their affair to Leo and Bridget.“They’ll know soon enough when we move,” he’d said. It was late January, three days past Ronja’s due date, and they lay next to one another, their sated respirations slowing after making love.

“Are you sure it’s not because Bridget has a crush on you?” Ronja replied, testing him.

With a mix of smugness and humor on his face, Peter only shook his head. “Do you want to come,” he asked, “when I close on the house tomorrow?”

Ronja wiped a sheen of sweat from his temple and braved the question she’d been avoiding, pretending not to care about. “How did you buy a house so soon?”

Peter left the bed, his absence chilling her. He pulled his pants on, and said with his back facing her, “I helped Gabby develop some clinics, like spas, and I have investments. I’m good with money. You’ve known this. Why ask?”

She studied his tense muscles and spoke the words circling her mind. The very same words she’d once delivered in their Stockholm apartment.

“Because the only life worth living is an honest one. Don’t you think?”

He turned to her with a loaded gaze. “You and I both know we’d rather live with lies if it meant we could hold onto love.”

Love? Ronja tore her eyes away. She struggled to sit up. Her belly contracted. It had been doing that often, but the doctor said they were *practice contractions* and not to worry.

They both startled at the sound of the front lock jiggling. Ronja moved quickly to dress, but Peter remained. Perhaps it was Leo coming home, but his weight made the floorboards groan, not creak. “Ronnie? You home?” Bridget called out. “I have some good news!”

Peter tugged on his t-shirt and left the bedroom. Nausea hit Ronja. Bridget’s voice rose to a false happiness. “Is Ronnie okay?”

“She’s taking a nap,” said Peter.

Ronja worked her underwear and dress on. Her movements were as coordinated as a beached whale.

The “Ohhh,” from Bridget said she wasn’t convinced. “Were . . . you checking on her?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

Ronja’s belly contracted again, and this time it hijacked her breath. Her mouth watered with acid and her gut rose. She gritted her teeth, waddled to the bathroom sink, and vomited.

Bridget and Peter appeared, alarmed, and asking questions. He held her loose hair and whispered tender endearments in Swedish.

“Are you in labor?” Bridget asked.

“I don’t know,” cried Ronja, running the tap. She skirted her gaze between Peter and Bridget.

“Let’s go to the hospital,” said Peter. He returned to the bedroom briefly and emerged fully dressed with his coat.

“I guess my news can wait,” Bridget murmured, and the three of them left.

Ronja sat in the waiting area of the County Medical Center, a converging planet of races and cultures, but she observed this as if underwater, looking up. Her back muscles became increasing sources of torture. She threw up three more times, and in between each episode of vomiting, Peter yelled at

the triage receptionist. Bridget held Ronja's hair back, comforting her. Her mind grew shrouded by ever-intensifying waves of what felt to be an invisible vise, crushing her body.

During a contraction, hospital staff appeared with a wheelchair. They expected her to move?

Sweating and crying, Ronja was transferred to a brightly lit room that reminded her of the emergency room in Stockholm. She was alone with strangers. Peter and Bridget were gone. They tried to gas her *for the pain*, but she chucked the mask onto the floor, determined that pain was the sole vehicle through which she would finally be reunited with her heart's joy.

At last, a writhing, squalling human, sticky with blood and vernix was placed on her chest. Fascination overtook her relief from the cessation of pain. This new human sharply divided the past from the future. Ronja's mistakes, her indiscretions—*before*. And now? The searching, curious eyes of her baby tucked Ronja's world inside them. With a cry, she greeted her daughter, "*Hej, hej*, Ulla," and kissed her forehead.

When Peter and Bridget joined Ronja and Ulla, Bridget squealed, "We can bring Ulla home to the new apartment I found. That was my good news!" Bridget kissed Ronja's cheek, and Ronja connected eyes with Peter. He cleared his throat. "Ronja is moving in with me. I bought a house in Kenwood."

Bridget slowly straightened, and her gaze darted between Peter and Ronja. Her voice was tight. "That's *it*?"

"I don't know why you're upset," Peter said. Ulla began to whimper.

"You two had a *thing* going," Bridget snapped, "even *before*. Didn't you? I bet you are Ulla's dad. It's why you don't want me."

"Bridget—" said Peter.

Her eyes shot to Ronja. "He kissed me. Said he'd always be there for me."

Ronja's heart stalled.

Peter didn't flinch. Rather, he looked annoyed. "The kiss was on the cheek. And I was being kind, offering to help you with finances. We both know you're not the best with money."

Ulla's cries grew to an inconsolable pitch. Ronja began to cry as well. She didn't know how to comfort Ulla.

"You didn't think to tell me this?" she asked Ronja. But Ronja, too consumed with Ulla, didn't answer.

"Enjoy your life together," Bridget said and whisked herself out, past a nurse entering.

The nurse extended her arms as if to take Ulla. Ronja cried harder and shook her head.

"No, no, dear, she's hungry. Give me your boob."

Ronja allowed the nurse to fondle her nipple and shove it into Ulla's mouth. "There. How does that feel?"

With her daughter satisfied, Ronja's heart settled, and she closed her eyes.

"Ronja," Peter said quietly.

Her mind rewound to her original plan for America. *To live in Mora*. The map she'd bought all those months ago—where was it now? Ronja sensed Peter's presence close in. She smelled his aftershave and felt his breath on her cheek. "Well, that confirms her misunderstanding," he said.

Ronja opened her eyes, masking her voice with indifference. "Do what you want with her, with any woman, I don't care."

Peter said with force, "Don't you?"

Ronja lowered her eyes to Ulla.

"*Min lilla fågel*, will I never be able to hold onto you?" he whispered in a constricted voice.

My little bird. Something shifted inside of Ronja.

"Let's be a real family." He lowered a kiss onto Ulla's head and then gently pressed his lips on Ronja's cheek. "Stay with me, and I promise you'll never have to tell another lie as long as you live."

She felt the electricity of his mouth near hers. "And what about you?"

"I believe everything I say."

"Pet—" His deep kiss silenced her protest. Ronja felt Ulla nestled comfortably between them, still latched to her breast, releasing a tiny, contented grunt.

The hospital nurses taught Ronja how to breastfeed and change a diaper. So why did she feel useless at caring for an infant?

And what about the pain? When Ulla nursed that first week, Ronja sobbed in agony. It felt as if she were having labor contractions again when her milk let down. The only thing that would keep Ulla quiet was to nurse her. And nurse her evermore.

The bassinet Peter had bought and assembled sat unused in the apartment that Bridget had vacated, leaving Ronja with two men. Ronja held Ulla day and night. As long as she remained in Ronja's arms, then surely nothing terrible would befall her. Peter and Leo tried helping, but Ulla would squawk once away from Ronja. And what if the men dropped her! So in Ronja's arms, Ulla stayed. Ronja, therefore, persisted in a sleep-deprived haze between waking and lucid dreaming, besieged with despair that she might never be able to take a shower.

A hospital nurse told Ronja she'd eventually stop bleeding, but Ronja thought maybe she was hemorrhaging to death. Then who would take care of Ulla? She called the nurses' line several times to make sure. Finally, a home nurse came and commanded Ronja to nap while she, the nurse, watched the baby. Ronja, with bloodshot eyes and greasy hair, surrendered.

It was Peter who gently nudged Ronja awake and asked if she wanted to take a bath. Ronja bolted upright. The room was dark. How long had she slept? Her breasts ached and were swollen to her armpits, leaking milk. "Where's Ulla?"

He smiled, put a finger to his lips, and lowered his gaze to the swaddled bundle that fit in the crook of his arm. Ronja saw Ulla's perfect face and puckered lips in blissful serenity. Peter whispered with a wink, "She might smell you and wake up. Hurry."

Every hour at night, when Ronja awoke and nursed Ulla in bed, she'd look over and find Peter sleeping next to them. He left for work these days later and came home earlier. She grew re-accustomed to the scent of his cologne on the linens.

Six weeks passed, and Ronja, nursing Ulla in the passenger seat of Peter's new Ford Falcon on a frigid day, watched as he drove past ornately crafted houses with multiple wraparound porches and detailed turrets. He parked in front of a modest yet no-less-opulent brownstone. It was nestled high on the bluffs overlooking the valley near the Walker Art Museum.

She hugged Ulla to her breast, buttoned inside her oversized wool coat, as Peter led them inside. He toured each room, detailing its function, what he envisioned, and which room was perfect for Ulla. There was even a servant staircase and a dumbwaiter. It had sparse furnishings, save for a scratched dining room ensemble. "I thought you could decorate," he said.

Ronja laughed. "You know the only part of the house I care for is outside."

Peter cocked a knowing grin. "I saved the best for last." *The garage*. It matched the brick and stone of the home. She gasped. "We could fit two cars in here!" Her delightful giggles spewed puffs into the February air.

Peter beamed and rubbed her shoulders with his gloved hands. "Our neighbor has a T-bird that's sitting damaged in his driveway. He's had the best mechanics come look it over, even put in a new engine, and it won't run. I asked if I could buy it because my wife would know how to fix it."

"Seriously?" She landed a playful slug into his stomach over his thick coat. "And don't call me your wife."

Peter's grin briefly slipped before he recovered. "That's not the best part."

"What is it?"

His chest swelled. "He didn't believe me. Said if he saw with his own two eyes that a woman could fix a car, he'd give it to you for free."

Winter lifted its shackles in March and so did Ronja's new-mother anxiety. During the first weeks in their home, delivery men waded in with plush upholstered couches and chairs, a console television, four-poster beds, antique hutches, rugs, oil paintings, dishes, a crib for Ulla—that Ronja doubted she'd ever use—and a blue Gendron baby stroller with thin large wheels. That, she might use. Unlike the apartment with Bridget and Leo, where every amenity was within a few blocks, it was at least two miles to the nearest grocery store and another three to the library. The only other

hindrance to the stroller was the melting snow piled on curbs that she'd have to muscle through.

But if it was certain to be at least forty degrees, Ronja bundled Ulla in mounds of blankets and went to the library, making the hour's walk to and from. She dallied amongst the book aisles, mostly the children's section. She read from piles until Ulla fell asleep on her chest, or until Ronja's breasts screamed and leaked. She learned to time library outings with feedings. But in those moments when Ulla was content and dozing, Ronja would continue reading from the stack of children's literature: *Charlotte's Web, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, James and the Giant Peach, The Little Prince*.

On one occasion, a mother entered with her baby wrapped to her chest in an elaborate configuration of fabric, allowing freedom of both hands. A rare, bittersweet memory sprouted: Ronja, at seven years of age, her mother wearing her baby sister. She shook the memory free, but not the opportunity, and struck up a conversation with the woman because Ronja's biceps were lopsided, the left one meatier from always holding Ulla while her dominant right attended to daily tasks. The woman wrapped Ulla into Ronja and told her to keep the *bärsele*, she had another at home.

Overwhelmed at the generosity, and feeling confident with Ulla secured to her body, Ronja took the city bus to the bank. She presented her information and signature to the worker who then handed over the safe deposit box. Ronja checked her surroundings, never satisfied that Peter's shadow was far, and went into a tiny room with Ulla. When she opened the box, the horse gleamed back. It pierced her heart and swelled her eyes. She spoke to Ulla in Swedish, running her infant daughter's fingers over the jewels on the horse's saddle. "This is going to be all yours someday, *min lilla älskling*."

Ronja left the bank that day buoyed by the Dala horse's safety. Yet despite her lavish surroundings, daily walks, and city bus trips, she pined for independence, unconvinced of Peter's promises. She thought of the damaged baby blue T-bird in the neighbor's driveway. She walked by it every day, neglected with heaps of snow on top, and showing a hint of rust on the tire rims.

Ronja bundled Ulla in the wrap and marched toward the neighbor's, determined to make the car hers.

Chapter Eleven

July 1969 – January 1970
Three Months Later

Ronja

Ulla was six months old when Ronja resumed working at Thomas' Autobody. She promised to never get pregnant again. She didn't point out the stupid irony that Thomas had kicked her out with a large pregnant belly but now allowed her to strap Ulla onto her body or plop her into a playpen while she fixed cars. What men would make into dirty mysteries!

She did indeed fix the neighbor's T-bird. It was not hard. It only needed a timing belt from an alternative car manufacturer that no one but Ronja bothered to hunt down. Surprisingly true to his word, the neighbor handed over the title and keys. The first time she drove it with Ulla in her lap, Ronja almost made it to Mora, then pulled over and wept, unable to complete the drive. Who was she kidding? Apart from driving to and from the auto body shop, the car was used for errands, trips to the bank, groceries. What any housewife would do with the luxury of her own car.

She could drive now to pediatrician visits, too. The pediatrician raised concern for Ulla who still exclusively consumed breastmilk but could not argue with the scale or Ulla's cherub cheeks and plump belly. He frowned at the wrap used to carry Ulla. She would never learn to walk, he said. But Ulla cruised along the furniture as they watched the first man step on the

moon and officially walked at nine months on the library's alphabet-patterned rug. He next insisted Ronja speak English only and not confuse Ulla. Ulla could say *mother, milk, more*, and *book* in two languages. His last chastisement: no sleeping together. Ulla would fall out of bed or suffocate. Except, whenever Ronja disrupted the harmony of their synchronous sleep-wake cycles and set Ulla in the crib next door to her and Peter's bedroom, they were cranky the next day.

Peter announced in December he was throwing a party for Ulla's first birthday in January.

"Birthday party?" She laughed. "You really were serious about wanting to be Americans. Who would we even invite?" she asked from her seat at the vanity, brushing her hair, while Ulla sat in her lap, nursing. Reflected in the large mirror, Peter shrugged on a sport coat over a sweater vest. "Co-workers, maybe Leo and Bridget. We *were* friends once. I'm sure Bridget's over the jealousy. You miss her, no? And you should meet Gabby and his wife, too."

"What kind of co-workers?"

His eyes clouded.

Ronja paused her brushing and met his stare in the mirror. "Peter—"

"I know a lot of people now, okay? People that actually call me by my real name. Yours, too. Why ask questions?"

Ronja looked at herself in the mirror and then at Ulla, her thoughts a conglomeration of guilt and gratitude. She was dependent upon Peter, a notion she abhorred, one of the reasons she fled from him eighteen months ago. But he also whisked Ulla from Ronja's tired arms and chapped nipples at the end of the day, slept on the floor when Ulla turned perpendicular on their bed, adjusted his work schedule to allow Ronja uninterrupted time at the auto shop, returning every two hours with a sun-kissed, grass-stained Ulla ready to breastfeed.

This was never what Ronja wanted. Yet it was somehow better than what she ever imagined.

Her eyes went to his, but he looked away and left the house.

On the evening of the birthday party, Ronja had been caught late working at the auto shop. She unbuckled Ulla from the makeshift car seat Peter had

assembled in the T-bird. “Come, Ulla baby,” she crooned in Swedish, closed the garage, and plodded up the icy brick stairs of the back patio porch into the servant entrance.

Hired staff were busy in the kitchen with caviar, spreads of gourmet cheese, pâté, fruit, and a full cache of wine, beer, and Peter’s favorite imported scotch. And, of course, enough *aquavit* to make it the most inappropriate birthday party for a one-year-old.

She took the narrow, cherry-oak stairs two by two and found Peter in their bedroom. He stood next to their dresser, adjusting the cuff links on his starched blue dress shirt. Her favorite. The one that made his eyes electric. The collar was turned up and hugged his ears. He was freshly shaven and showered, his hair still damp. But she smelled the mousse. It mixed with his cologne and aftershave, sending a carnal ache between her legs.

He turned and dazzled her with his smile, but he immediately directed it at Ulla and held his arms to her. Ulla squealed Peter’s name and dove from Ronja’s arms, slippery in her snowsuit. Peter caught Ulla and bounced her in the air, then caught her again, swung her low, and blew raspberries on her rosy cheek, causing Ulla’s belly giggle to emerge. “Pappa,” he said laughing at Ulla with tenderness, “*Stumpan,* when are you going to call me Pappa?” He set Ulla down, took off her hat, and unzipped her coat. He glanced up at Ronja. “Is she going to call me Peter for the rest of her life?”

Ronja began stripping. “I’m sorry,” she said, breathless and stumbling from her heavy cargo pants. “I can’t seem to shift my brain when I talk about you to her. Can you find her dress in her closet? The blue and silver one you bought.” She paused and eyed Peter lifting a happy Ulla once more, tickling her.

Anyone would think he was her father.

Ronja smiled, unbuttoning her shirt. “I saw the workers downstairs. Is all this necessary? She’s only one.”

Peter swept by Ronja and kissed the sweet spot below her ear. “My family is worth it.” He left the room with Ulla and closed the door.

Ronja piled her hair underneath a shower cap and rinsed off her grime. Though she could never quite scrape the black from underneath her fingernails, she’d remembered to polish them in red last night, and now only had to touch up the chipped spots.

The laughing chatter, music, and clink of glassware traveled up from downstairs. She hopped into her black thigh-high pantyhose and clipped

them to her garter belt. Hot rollers tamed her natural curls. She swiped the mascara wand over her lashes.

She was foisting on a strap of her black lace bra, fumbling with the front clasp, when Peter walked in. “My boobs hurt,” she whined, squeezing them, wishing she’d nursed Ulla before the party started.

Peter’s eyes were full of mirth. “You always say that.” They darkened when he approached her. He trailed his fingers over her collarbone. “You’re missing something,” he said, replacing his touch with his mouth. He flicked his tongue across her pulse.

“Where’s Ulla?” she said, catching her breath.

“Entertaining her guests.” He walked over to the dresser, tugged open the top drawer, and reached inside to pull out a small velvet box.

Ronja parted her lips in surprise.

Peter opened it. Inside, rested a simple gold band, and, before she could protest, he said, “*Moderskap*.” Motherhood. He was gifting her a traditional Swedish motherhood ring. Emotions crowded her throat and eyes.

He touched her lips. “That’s not all.” He returned to the dresser, this time emerging with a flat long box that matched the velvet of the other. Peter popped it open, revealing a string of diamonds. He walked behind her and fastened it around her neck. They looked at one another in the mirror. Her gaze dropped to his arm tightening around her stomach. Ronja slid her hand up his neck. “You’re not making it easy for me to hurry,” she moaned, accepting his hungry kiss.

“Who said anything about hurrying?” He lifted her onto the vanity and spread her knees apart.

Ulla was indeed entertaining her guests when Ronja, still weak-kneed and drunk from Peter’s touch, allowed him to guide her down the stairs in her black stilettos.

Ronja watched the scenery unfold with each step. *Co-workers* was an understatement. There must have been a hundred people dressed in cocktail attire. A jazz tune played from the record player, and cigar smoke clouded the ambiance. She sobered immediately upon seeing Ulla smothered by a group of women. They were feeding her a lollipop.

Ronja let go of Peter and inserted herself into the circle of women. Ulla reached for Ronja, babbling, “Mamma, mamma, mmm . . . ” She took her baby into her arms, kissed her cheeks and nuzzled her, inhaling the scent of motor oil. She really should’ve given Ulla a bath, but at least her hair was shiny in soft yellow curls around her heart-shaped face.

Ulla, clearly mesmerized by Ronja’s diamonds, immediately took to the necklace.

“Oh my goodness,” said one of the women to Ronja. “Now we know why she’s the most beautiful little girl we’ve ever seen!”

“Peter,” one of the women called. Ronja felt him behind her and smelled the familiar scotch. He dropped a glass of chardonnay into her free hand and kissed her cheek. “Yes?” he replied.

“How did you and your wife meet?” she asked.

Peter slid a firm hand around Ronja’s waist, and she felt his words drip down her neck. “Once upon a time.”

The women laughed. Ronja didn’t correct her for saying *wife*.

A bubbly, yet masculine, voice called to Peter. “My God! No wonder you lock her away from the rest of the world.”

A portly bald man with cherry cheeks eyed Ronja. “I’m Gabby, Peter’s boss.” He thrust a hand in greeting, but hers were occupied with wine and Ulla.

“He’d like to think.” Peter chuckled and took a sip of the whiskey.

“Gabby,” Ronja repeated. “Leo’s uncle?”

Gabby laughed heartily. “Indeed.” He took a swig from his tumbler and slapped the air. “The name’s really Donatello, but people say I don’t shut up. So Gabby it is! Ha!” He waved someone over, “Eh, right, Leonardo?”

Ronja spotted Leo. She would’ve missed him at first glance. He was dressed uncharacteristically in a tight black suit, walking like someone had kicked him in the groin. Leo brightened when he saw Ronja and Ulla, but he first hugged his uncle, kissing his cheeks in a very un-Minnesotan, very Italian gesture.

“My favorite nephew!” Gabby exclaimed. “With the best hair, eh!” He rubbed Leo’s tattooed head and wheezed at his own joke.

Leo waved at Ulla who tucked her face into Ronja’s neck.

“Is Bridget here?” Ronja asked him.

Before Leo could respond, Gabby pointed at Ronja’s motherhood ring. “Peter, you need to upgrade that to a real rock!” He ribbed him with his

elbow.

Ronja adjusted Ulla on her hip and tried to force a soft, dismissive laugh, but Peter drew her gaze into his own, instantly enfolding her inside his words when he said, almost achingly, “I would if she’d let me.”

More guests crowded them, breaking their eye contact. They were joined by two large men. One towered several inches over Peter and, much like Leo, wore a too-small suit that squeezed his shoulders. The other, shorter but just as muscular, with a thick neck, lobbed an arm around one of the women and undressed Ronja with his eyes.

“Peter, you keep the best ones for yourself, eh?” said Thick-neck.

The comment sickened Ronja. *What was that supposed to mean*? She watched Peter’s response. His eyes glowered at the man behind the rim of his whiskey that he threw back. He let go of Ronja, projected his voice over the noise of the party and music, and said brightly, “I think the birthday girl wants to open her presents!” He gave his glass to a server and clapped his hands at Ulla, saying in Swedish, “Come here, *min lilla stumpa*.”

Ulla easily went to him and patted his cheeks. He kissed her nose. “Ready to be spoiled?” The gaggle of women clutched their hearts and formed a circle by the couch. A mountain of presents rested in a corner by the leather wingback chair and Tiffany floor lamp. Peter passed Ronja’s wine to a server, guiding her to the forest-green sofa. She sat on its soft velvet. He kept Ulla on his lap, playing peek-a-boo, covering his eyes with her hands.

The presents were wrapped in gold, silver, and white with elaborate ribbon and tissue paper that Ulla put in her mouth, making it apparent she was not of age to care about presents. One by one, Ronja politely accepted the gifts: silver photo frames, a rattle embedded with cubic zirconias, the latest in car safety for children—a Tot-Guard, a squeaky metal tricycle, dresses made of taffeta and tulle and silk, patent baby shoes in white, pink, and black with rhinestone buckles, cashmere blankets, and hats. Someone at least gifted children’s books. The most confusing gift was an Olympus-Pen handheld camera. Was the camera for Ronja? She tried to get her daughter to feign some interest in her new, extravagant items. Peter did, too, but wound up on the floor with Ulla, entertaining her while Ronja finished opening the last of them. He balanced Ulla on his legs and then suddenly bounced her. Ulla shrieked with delightful terror. “Don’t fall!” He laughed and pretended to let go, then snatched her up.

The final gift was a porcelain doll with gold ringlets and alabaster skin. At least Ulla seemed drawn to it. "*Gillar du bebisen*?" Ronja waved the doll in front of Ulla. "Baby."

"Ba-by," repeated Ulla.

"*Bra gumman*!" Ronja laughed proudly.

"*Mitt lilla hjärta*!" Peter lightly shook Ulla, calling her *my heart*, and showered her cheeks in prideful kisses.

"What language are you speaking to her?" a woman asked.

"Our language," Ronja said, her gaze caressing Peter's handsome face before sinking into the blue pools of Ulla's eyes.

A snide voice sliced through the merriment. "I'll tell you what they're saying."

Ronja snapped her attention to Bridget who stood wobbling in her heels. Her purple dress was lopsided on her shoulder, and a lipstick-smeared flute of Dom Perignon hung between her fingers. She belched unapologetically and bent over, revealing her cleavage. She cooed at Ulla, "They're saying, aren't you just the little princess? You know what, princess Ulla, you can tell all these people to go to hell."

Ronja scrambled to her feet. She was quicker than Peter, who was indisposed with Ulla on his lap. Ronja faked a laugh. "You're so funny, Bridge', come with me."

Ronja dragged Bridget, too inebriated to resist, through the party guests, past the stairs, and into the kitchen. There were servers in black and white apparel, re-stocking trays, cutting vegetables, and washing dishes. She made a sharp turn into the pantry, and Bridget dropped the champagne glass. It shattered onto the terracotta floor, galvanizing the help. One of them hurried over as Ronja pushed Bridget inside amongst the wooden shelves stocked with boxes of pasta, canned goods, onions, packs of beer, and jars of baby food that Ulla had yet to taste.

"You are jealous and rude!" Ronja hissed at Bridget. English wasn't coming fast enough to Ronja's enraged mind, so she resorted to Swedish insults, until Bridget spat back, "Both of you are sick, selfish people!" She yanked on Ronja's necklace. "With your fancy diamonds. What kind of assholes invite a bunch of prostitutes to a baby's birthday party!"

It would've hurt less if Bridget had slugged Ronja. Regardless, the wind left her lungs. *Prostitute*. Her mind raced to the snapshot of the party. Had Peter thrown this party for Ulla as a farce? An excuse to gather clients?

Denial was Ronja's first instinct. A savage impulse to protect the spell Peter had cast. "You are being *ridiculous*," Ronja choked, but she could hardly convince herself with those words, let alone Bridget.

Frantic footsteps distracted them, followed by Peter's curse when he crunched on broken glass. He flung the pantry door wider, his timorous eyes searching Ronja's. "Is everything okay?" His calm voice betrayed his rapid breaths.

Ronja averted her gaze to the ground at Peter's shiny loafers. "Where's Ulla?"

"Gabby's wife."

Bridget cocked her head and sneered at Peter, her words loose and slippery. "Does Ronnie know how you got all this fancy shit, Peter—?"

"You're drunk and immature—"

"You promised to help me out—"

"— because you can't hold a job."

"Then where's my money!"

"How much do you want, goddammit!" Peter shouted.

"I don't want your fucking money, you pig." Bridget shoved past both of them.

Ronja clutched her stomach as blood drained from her, pooling around her heart, drowning it in humiliation. She followed after Bridget and slipped on a shard of glass. Peter caught her and held her up against the wall. His hands were rough, clenching her bare arms. Not in anger. But in desperation. He spoke in Swedish, "She's clearly jealous. And drunk. Whatever she said, don't believe it. *Please*, Ronja. I can explain."

She didn't understand her conflict. Peter was dishonest and always would be. It was his nature, resting solid and deep within his bones. Ronja closed her eyes. Shouldn't it be easy not to love someone who lies? *Do I love you, Peter?*

Everything cleared, and her pulse slowed. For the first time, in a very long time, she slipped into an old, familiar skin.

Ronja softened under Peter's grip. She opened her eyes to see the emotion still steeped inside of his. She narrowed the distance between their lips. "Tell me later. Let me go nurse Ulla and put her to bed. Take your time with the guests."

Peter cradled her face and examined her eyes, but he'd find no trace of what she was hiding, how she was plotting to undo him. She left him in

search of her daughter.

Part III

[Translated from German]

May 12th, 1968
Stockholm

Dear Melia,

It's been over five years since you've heard from me, and you may think I'm dead. I miss you every day. I want nothing more than to return, but I can't. I have much to atone for, and it is too dangerous for me to come, to drag you into my shameful mistakes.

However, this is my feeble and cowardly plea. Should you find yourself in America, please don't stop looking for me. I plan to make a fresh, new life for myself in Minnesota. I'm leaving on May 30 th, and I don't know yet where I will be living. There is a town called Mora. Perhaps there.

I hope our hearts find their way back to one another.

Your loving niece,
Ronja

Chapter Twelve

Minneapolis, Minnesota
February 1976

Ulla

Ulla picked up the Dala horse from the nightstand and whispered to it, "Will I see Mamma today?" The horse's name was Beskyddaren. *Protector*. She glanced from the horse to her dim surroundings. This wasn't her nightstand. Nor her bedroom. She was brought here last night. The Social Service lady had said she was taking Ulla to "a place for mommies and children that need a bed to sleep in." This bedroom was opposite of the fancy one she'd known for the first seven years of her life.

The beds here were arranged a few feet apart, but she was given the corner one, lodged and crouching underneath the sole window, as if hiding. The sheets were slippery and released a gross odor that Ulla knew did not belong to her. She tucked the scratchy blanket around her chin. Nothing like the plush, ivory spread she'd known from better days.

She set Beskyddaren on the nightstand next to her doll, Baby. *A dumb name*. But like Beskyddaren, Baby had kept watch over Ulla and her mother this past awful week, when her mother told her to stay in the car and, "keep your head down!" Baby had blue glass eyes perpetually alert for danger and framed with spidery black eyelashes. Ulla hated when strangers commented, "She looks just like you!" *I'm not a doll.*

Ulla shifted her eyes from Beskyddaren and Baby onto the nightstand scarred with what appeared to be claw and cup marks and a carving of the initials KS. To lull herself to sleep last night, Ulla imagined names: *Karen Sandberg, Karly Strand, Kimmie Svensson* . . . The nightstand's sticky drawers held a change of too-small clothing the Social Service lady had given her in a paper bag: a purple sweatshirt, a Bugs Bunny t-shirt, faded black leggings, and some dumb Strawberry Shortcake underwear.

Ulla took Baby into her arms. Sometimes she heard men call her mother *Baby* at the parties thrown in her home. Who would call a grown woman *Baby*? Ulla didn't remember naming the porcelain doll, for she would've chosen *Ebba*, or *Harriet*. She didn't remember how Baby—or Beskyddaren—came into her life. They were both just there. Always. Like her mother.

And Peter.

Ulla slammed her hands over her ears to quiet her mother's sudden scream inside her head. *Spring, Ulla! Skynda! Du måste skaffa hjälp*!

The men who attacked her mother yesterday didn't know she was demanding, *Ulla! Run, get help*! Only she and her mother—and Peter—spoke Swedish. Ulla had wanted to run to find Peter. Peter could save her mother. Except she hadn't seen Peter since she and Mamma fled in the middle of the night. On Ulla's birthday. And her mother refused to talk about him. *If something happens to me, you can't go to Peter. I'm sorry, min lilla älskling. Go to the police*.

Ulla snatched Baby and spoke low, "It's okay, Baby. Everything will be okay." Then she whispered the German prayer she said every night with her mother, even though she didn't know what it meant.

Her stomach gurgled with hunger pangs. It was not morning yet. No trace of light from the window, and the rest of her roommates were still fast asleep.

Ulla sat up and hugged her knees. She reached for the Coca-Cola she was saving on the nightstand and took a sip, then unpeeled the wrapping on the half-sucked cherry Dum-Dum from the Social Service lady last night.

Ulla had chomped down more packaged candy yesterday in one sitting than she could remember. Except for when Peter would give her candy: Pixy Stix, Necco Wafers, Now and Laters, and Wax Lips that she and Peter would shove sneakily into their mouths before kissing her mother. Peter knew Ulla's favorite was Hershey's chocolate bars. Like velvet on her tongue. If it were any other time except *Lördagsgodis*—Saturday Candy—

her mother would scowl and slap away Peter's handfuls as if she were angry. But Ulla knew her mother was never angry. Not when she'd kiss Peter with soft eyes and call him *sweetheart* in Swedish.

Last night, Ulla sat on the squeaky chairs in the police station. The Social Service lady waved the Dum Dum sucker in front of Ulla like a fairy wand and offered the Coca-Cola like a magic scepter. The silver and gold bracelets on the lady's wrist tinkled. In Swedish, Ulla asked the Social Service lady where her mother was.

The lady crinkled her brown eyes in confusion. The policeman brushed her shoulder. "The little pixie doll doesn't speak a lick of English. We have no idea what her name is."

"What do you think she speaks?" The Social Service lady tossed her head of chocolate curls at the police officer, sending a whiff of Aquanet hairspray into the air. It was the same kind her mother used before a big party.

"Look at her," said the policeman. "I'm guessing Polish. They picked her up somewhere in *Nordeast*. Smashed their window with a rock and made them chase her!" He tossed back a cup of Styrofoam coffee. The police officers had been jolly, giving Ulla candy in red wrappers that made her tongue burn with delight, while the gold candies melted like butter. He also gave Ulla what she thought to be a runny milkshake. She spat it out, and he laughed. "No coffee for you, eh?"

The Social Service lady thunked her tan plastic purse onto the tiled floor and knelt so that her eyes were just below Ulla's. "You're such a pretty little girl," she cooed. "I think I heard you say, 'Momma.' You want to know where your Momma is?"

Ulla nodded, but slowly, furrowing her brow.

"What—is—your—name?" the Social Service lady blasted.

"She's not deaf, for crying out loud," said the police officer.

The Social Service lady sighed and pointed at herself. "Kellee." She held up two fingers. "With two E's." Then she touched Ulla's chest. "Name?"

Ulla lowered her chin to look at Kellee's hot pink fingernail and then tilted her eyes up.

Kellee repeated the action. Saying her own name, then poking Ulla.

Ulla finally whispered, "Ulla."

Kellee tossed another helpless look at the police officer.

He scrunched his face and then honked a laugh. “Oo-la? Is that some Scanda-hoovian name?”

Ulla lowered her face to hide her suppressed grin. People she’d meet in the grocery store, the library, and the service garage where her mother had worked often asked her to repeat her name as if they’d misheard. She never did. Because her mother would remind Ulla if she wanted to be like Harriet the Spy and Nancy Drew, she had to pretend she didn’t know English.

“People reveal all *sorts* of secrets when they think I don’t understand,” her mother had said on a cold night in the car, when breathing the air was like swallowing needles. “You know what’s more powerful than money, Ulla?” She tapped the steering wheel of their baby blue 1964 Ford T-bird and repeated, “Secrets.” She smudged her tears, leaving black streaks in their place. “*Secrets*,” she hissed the word as if it were venom. Venom that could be stored up and used to strike an enemy when cornered.

Kellee moistened her thin, strawberry lips, seemingly at a loss, tossing her face upwards. Ulla noticed Kellee’s skin tone, orangish on her face and white on her neck. She spoke again, elongating and enunciating each word. “Your . . . Momma . . . is . . . in . . . the . . . hos-pi-tal.”

Ulla bit her cheek hard and gulped the tears.

Kellee sighed and shrugged. “Sweetie, when your momma’s all better, you’ll see her again. But in the meantime, I’m going to take you to a shelter.” She kept calling Ulla *Sweetie*. The same men at the same parties called her mother that, too.

“Where’s the kid’s dad?” the police officer asked.

“Good question,” Kellee said.

Kellee tucked Ulla in at the shelter with promises to check on her in the morning.

Good question. Ulla now sucked down a throb of emotion. From inside the shelter’s room, she returned to the letters K and S on the nightstand while awaiting the light to come: *Kärlek.* That meant Love in Swedish, what her mother called Beskyddaren when she stuffed the horse into Ulla’s coat pocket and zipped it up. *Keep Safe*. And *Stumpan*. What Peter called her with his big, twirling hugs.

The room began to take on different shades of blue until a thread of light dipped down and touched Ulla. When the rays eventually landed on Beskyddaren’s bejeweled back, they bounced onto the ceiling in a dancing array of colors.

Beskyddaren held magical powers, her mother had assured her. *Beskyddaren knows the person you love most in your heart. If you are ever separated, he will bring you back together.*

Ulla stifled a sob and kissed Beskyddaren. He was no bigger than her hand, painted bright red with yellow hooves and a green saddle. She sneaked him under the flat, plastic pillow that came with the bed. She was sad to watch the dancing lights go, but she didn't want the other children to want Beskyddaren for themselves.

People in the room stirred. Like the switch of a light, the noise of irritable children, and weary, grumbling mothers filled the quiet space. They largely ignored Ulla until one of the mothers approached her with a small child, smaller than Ulla. "I'm taking Hattie to the bathroom. Would you like to come with us?"

Ulla looked at Baby. Beskyddaren was safely concealed, but Baby couldn't stop the snooping fingers of the other children. She rattled her head and shrank back.

The mother pressed a hand to her chest as if she'd been wounded. "Oh, I'm so sorry, honey, I didn't mean to scare you." She took Hattie and left.

Ulla clenched her knees and counted the scratches in the nightstand, waited for the entire room to empty before she snatched Beskyddaren, hiked him under her sweatshirt, and scuttled to the bathroom.

Chapter Thirteen

Ulla

Kellee arrived after breakfast had been served in the basement cafeteria. Lumpy, lukewarm oatmeal. At least it came with brown sugar.

She slid into the seat next to Ulla. Hairspray fumes coated the air, and she wore the same bangle bracelets from last night. The bracelets clacked against the table. “Sweetie, I found you a home to stay in. Can you believe it? First thing this morning, the name of a nice couple landed on my desk,” she snapped her fingers, “almost like magic. Turns out there’s some sort of family connection. Do you happen to have an aunt and uncle here in Minneapolis?”

This time, Ulla didn’t need to fake confusion. Her mother and Peter were her only family. Her mother wouldn’t lie to her, would she?

Kellee twisted her lips and pawed through her purse. She emerged with a checkbook, the same kind Ulla had seen her mother rip sheets from, hand over to tellers at different banks, and use to walk out with a stack of cash. Kellee clicked a blue ballpoint pen. She flipped to the back pages and drew a box with a triangle on top.

“A house.” Kellee laughed. “Oh dear, I am a terrible artist.” She scribbled in the windows and a door. “This is where I’m taking you.” She drew KELLEE and pointed at herself. “My name is Kellee—Kell-ee.” She then pointed to Ulla.

Ulla dropped her shoulders. She really wanted Kellee to stop calling her *sweetie*. “Ulla,” she said loud and clear.

Kellee frowned in disappointment but then brightened. “Wait. Did you say . . . Ul-la?”

Ulla nodded.

“You did understand me last night! I can’t believe . . . ” Kellee shone with excitement. She clapped her hands together. “Ulla. Wow. Ulla? Huh. Can you write it?” She gestured emphatically with her pen next to her name.

Ulla puffed audibly in annoyance. She crossed her arms.

Kellee’s excitement deflated, but she still popped to her feet and beckoned Ulla. “Come, sweetie—I mean, Ulla.”

Ulla clutched her brown grocery bag. Baby and Beskyddaren were safe inside. She followed Kellee outside to a forest-colored Dodge Colt parked in the alleyway behind the shelter. Ulla remembered the first time her mother pointed out a Dodge Colt: “They have four eyes, like their cylinders, you see, and their body is shorter.”

Kellee helped Ulla into the cold, vinyl passenger seat.

Once comfortable in the driver’s side, she asked Ulla, “Music?” She revved the engine and turned a dial on the dashboard. From the speakers came a scratchy, peppy tune with high-pitched vocals.

“Love the Bee Gees.” Kellee hummed along and bobbed her stiff hair.

They drove through streets filled with gas stations and car repair shops, the only places that mattered to Ulla because they fueled Tina, her mother’s T-bird, who’d also been their mobile home these past days when they weren’t at different motels overnight. When she sensed her mother’s distress, the urgency, how she bit her lip and darted her head at their surroundings while jiggling the motel key. During the daytime there were secret appointments to attend, people she’d meet inside grocery stores, serious-looking men in brown coats and hats. Her mother passed envelopes to them.

Because, Ulla thought to herself with pride, *my mother is a spy*.

Kellee brought the Colt to a stop in the middle of a busy street with large houses barricaded by chain-link fences and dilapidated shingles. Many of them had signs staked in the lawns. The majority of them were green with white lettering. Ulla recognized the word PRESIDENT.

They exited the car and walked toward a house. It wasn’t nearly as beautiful as Ulla’s former home. The lone tree in the yard was naked, and

shriveled leaves poked out from the snow on the lawn. A gust of wind sent them running. Ulla hugged her jacket around her body.

Kellee unfastened the fence's latch, and they clipped along the concrete walkway and up wooden porch stairs. Their footsteps sounded dull and creaky. Kellee rang the doorbell and they waited. Ulla eyed the porch's green chipped paint, leaving a sad gray color underneath. It matched the sad gray sky that had taken over the world. That had taken over Ulla's heart.

When the door opened, though, Ulla was transported to a world that was not sad nor gray. Sunshine spilled out in the form of a woman, her fluorescent nails, red lipstick, and shimmering black hair that framed her smooth white skin. She radiated warmth and flowery perfume. When she crouched low and smiled, it sparkled from her eyes.

"I'm Melia," she said with a thick accent that sounded like music. Like the German prayer her mother taught her. Melia touched Ulla's cheek. "*Liebchen*, *komm.*" She gently took Ulla's hand, taking her into a home that smelled of hot steaming sugar and butter. Ulla's tummy growled.

The home was as colorful as Melia, from striped curtains to orange carpet, to a dining table covered in a white lace tablecloth, all reflecting her light. Melia sat Ulla on a couch with a yellow and green leafy pattern and spread crayons and coloring books onto a coffee table. Then came a bowl of rectangular chocolate mints in green wrapping, a glass of lemonade, and a plate of steaming cake. Melia tapped the plate. "It's *kuchen*, *liebchen*. Eat it."

Melia walked hastily to Kellee, and in her hushed accent by the entryway said, "How is she?"

Kellee patted her helmet hair. "I wouldn't know. Doesn't speak much English. You'd think she would've picked it up in school. She and her mother had been living out of a car. I don't have many details."

Melia touched her chest.

"Her mother was sent to the hospital," continued Kellee, "got the shit beat out of her."

Ulla lowered her chin to cascade her hair. She bunched her face to stop the tears. Hospitals made people better, right? *Come back to me, Mamma*, she pleaded and glanced at the brown bag that held Beskyddaren, then back to her paper. What was she even coloring? She ground the crayon into the bunny on the page. A blue bunny. The crayon broke, ripping the paper, and the sound shot through the room.

Melia gave Ulla a tender, backward glance, ushered Kellee outside, and closed the door. Their voices were unclear now.

Ulla moved to the sheets of blank paper Melia had also provided.

The conversation went on for some time, allowing Ulla to shade in her drawing. She didn't look up when the door closed, or when Melia came over to sit gingerly beside her.

"That is a beautiful car you're drawing. What kind is it?" She drew the words from her mouth like a harp.

Ulla continued without acknowledging Melia.

Melia tapped her manicured nail on it. "This car looks familiar. Like the one in our garage."

Ulla colored the car's doors with a light green Crayola.

Melia sighed. "I suppose we will have to find some way to communicate. German is my first language, but my friends have nieces and nephews that grew up speaking German at home and English outside. You see, *liebchen*—can I call you *liebchen*? The word is like, ah . . . " She tapped her plump lips. "Like *sweetheart* in English."

Ulla stiffened.

"As I was saying, I know something about learning different languages, and Ulla—" She said Ulla's name in a manner that made Ulla pause and obey as though Melia had said it in secret.

The woman smiled wide enough to perhaps swallow all the world's problems. But her eyes caught Ulla's when she took a dark green crayon and whispered, "I promise not to tell anyone that you understand English. I want you to trust me."

Ulla froze a beat too long, making her guilty. She found another blue Crayola and looked at the name. C-E-R-U-L-E-A-N. She began to fill in the sky.

Ulla whispered, "*Liebchen*."

"Hmm?" said Melia, coloring the grass.

"You can call me *liebchen*."

Chapter Fourteen

Ulla

Melia's husband was named Shorty, and he introduced himself later that evening. Shorty was anything but short.

"Do you want to know why they call me Shorty?" He knelt down, but dramatically said, "Wait, wait! I have something stuck up my nose!" He screwed his pointer finger into a nostril up to the hilt, enough to poke his brain. Ulla screamed. Melia cuffed Shorty on the head. He pulled his finger out and apologized. When he displayed his outstretched palms, Ulla noticed the fleshy stump at his knuckle. "Look," he said in German, chuckling, "it's shorter than the other ones!"

He asked Ulla if she liked cars. She didn't need to answer him. Her inflated chest did. He took her to the garage in the alleyway. The sun waned, leaving a soft glow in the chilled air. He hefted the door, cranking it with a squeaky grind.

Ulla gasped a breath cloud at what was inside. She blinked her stunned eyes at Shorty. "Porsche?"

"Look at you, little one. That's right, a *Neunelfer*," he said. "Brought it with us from Germany about five or six years ago, but it was in rough shape from the trek across the ocean. It took us a long while to find the best car mechanic." His eyes glimmered. "Do you know what makes a Porsche special?"

Ulla continued to stare at the car and said, "The engine is in the back which means you don't have to brake when you go around turns."

Shorty gave a hearty chuckle and squeezed her shoulder.

The Porsche had no tires and was propped on a hydraulic lift. It was a green-gold color, like a juicy apple. “This is my mamma’s favorite car,” she whispered to Shorty, feeling her eyes sting. Her mother had once loved a Porsche at Thomas’ auto shop. *This Porsche*. Ulla was certain of it. “I think she fixed this car. Not very long ago.” *Right before we left Peter.*

Ulla thought of the hours she’d spent watching her mother underneath cars, as if she were half-car/half-human. Her mother always knew what a car’s problem was based on the sound of its engine and the way the ignition turned over. She taught Ulla names like carburetor, spark plug, crankshaft, flywheel, mounting rods, and compressor, as if they were common words for a child. She’d accompany her mother every day in their T-bird to 5th Avenue Auto Repair to fix cars. The garage was Ulla’s classroom. Alongside books and puzzles, her shelves held rows of tools she could name and describe.

Peter had given Ulla her very own portable Snap-on-Tool set for her seventh birthday. It came complete with all the bolts and wrenches needed to fix a car. She remembered her mother had sobbed and yelled at him, saying that was a *ridiculous* gift to give a seven-year-old—and then she kissed him. The kind of kiss her mother only gave Peter when she thought Ulla wasn’t looking.

She and her mother had fought terribly that night while Peter slept. Over whether Ulla could drag that toolset with her when they fled. She wondered where the toolset was now. She wondered about Peter. *Does he miss us*?

“Would you like to work on it with me?” Shorty asked.

Ulla’s heart lifted. She made a tent over her mouth to keep the grin from leaping off her face.

Melia and Shorty had no children of their own but plenty of friends that came and went and had been kind to Ulla these past weeks, always slipping her candies. They spoke in the gruff, confident tones of German. “*Guten Tag*” Ulla easily recognized along with “*Auf Wiedersehen.*” Every Sunday, after morning service at their Lutheran church, a group of them would come for dinner. Ulla learned that Germans used the word *dinner* for lunch and

supper for dinner. Wednesday nights were *supper* nights with their friends. The air would fill with the aroma of fried onions and potatoes that mingled with hot sugar. They'd play card games like *Wist* and *Rummy* while Melia cooked *kneophla* and warmed a pan of caramel rolls that she and Ulla would spend weekends baking. This was Ulla's favorite activity apart from working on the Porsche with Shorty. She'd watch Melia push up the sleeves of her shirtdress and flex her sturdy forearms to work the ball of dough into a flat pizza. Ulla would spread butter, brown sugar, and cinnamon, before rolling it up like a sleeping bag. Melia cut the dough into snails, handing them to Ulla. "This is the best part." Ulla would sink them into the gooey caramel filling that coated the pans.

But one Wednesday, no one came to supper. Ulla brushed her teeth, put on her flannel nightgown, and heard voices gather downstairs. Not the familiar voices of German, but voices she did not recognize, accents of strangers. Ulla crept in her socked feet to the top of the stairs to listen.

"Won't take long, ma'am," said one man, his voice deep.

She heard Melia say, "I don't feel right about this."

The deep voice said, "I brought a Swedish translator."

"Oh?" said Melia.

Another man, with a raspy voice said, "We need her to at least try."

"The only way to get answers from Ulla," Melia demanded, "is to give her back to her mother. She misses her terribly."

"Yes, of course she does," said Deep Voice, "but it's safer to keep them apart. The girl's mom may have single-handedly brought down the entire midwest extension of the Chicago outfit. She pissed off some seriously dangerous people. This could take some time—"

Melia interrupted, "How will you keep Ulla safe?"

"That's partly why we're here. She has to change her last name," said Raspy Man. A pause, then a rustling of papers. "She no longer goes by the last name Johansson. It's Bergstrom now. Her mother's last name was changed as well."

Deep Voice said, "We'll keep surveillance on her for some time. She can enroll in school now, but make sure she practices her new name."

Melia's sigh was sharp.

Deep Voice pushed on irritably. "Let's get this over. Sven is paid by the hour, so we don't have much time."

Melia's voice was harsh, she swore in German. "What questions are you going to ask?"

"She's a witness to the—the assault. We can get a conviction for attempted murder if she identifies them."

Ulla covered her ears, shook her head wildly, and ran to her room, slamming the door.

Melia found her underneath the covers, holding Beskyddaren, and she stroked Ulla's hair. "*Liebchen*, there are some gentlemen here to see you. I can tell them to return. But . . . " she continued her caressing, "doing the hardest thing in the world might be less hard if you do it right away, rather than waiting for it to not be so hard." She sifted Ulla's gold curls between her fingers. "I can help you be brave." She took the horse and held it. "Beskyddaren can, too."

Ulla thought of the German prayer, the one she said every night with her mother before bed. When she discovered Melia knew the prayer, it felt a bit like Mamma was inside Melia. "Will you say the prayer with me?" Melia had tucked Ulla's hands inside her own and they recited together, "*Engel kommen sie, machen mich fromm, so das ich zu sie im himmel macht kommen."*

Ulla opened her eyes and had asked, "What does it mean?"

Melia chuckled. "Ah, it is a very old German prayer. German prayers were meant to scare children into being good little boys and girls. It asks for the angels to come and make you obedient, so they will take you to heaven to be with them."

"What if I'm not?"

"They will still take you. I promise."

"And Mamma, too? I don't want to go to heaven if she's not there."

Melia had cupped Ulla's chin in her hand and squeezed her cheeks, drawing her eyes low to grab them with her own. "*Yes*."

Now, Ulla placed her horse into the nightstand drawer, which Baby sat atop. With Melia holding her hand, they went downstairs.

Shorty was there, and he gave her a tight nod of encouragement, but she saw the worry digging into his eyes and wrinkled forehead. With the nub of his pointer finger, he tilted her chin up and whispered a phrase he'd taught her in German, one that meant it'll all be okay: "*Es ist alles in butter*."

Ulla cast her eyes down, away from the visitors. They were shadows in the periphery when her vision landed on five photographs. Ugly

photographs. Neatly arranged on the coffee table. White frowning men.

Two of the photographs shifted and came alive. The men sneered back at her. *Tall-man* and *Neck-man.* That's what her mother had called them. Ulla pounded her fist on those two pictures, smashing the men squarely in their faces. Over and over.

Exactly the same way they'd done to her mother.

Her vision went black. Hands clawed at her wrists. Ulla screamed. She kicked and flailed.

Shorty demanded the men leave, "*Geh raus*!"

Stronger arms held her body. Secure arms. Safe. Familiar. Ulla collapsed at the sound of her voice. "*Liebchen*, shhh . . . shhh . . . " Melia's flowery perfume, mixed with cinnamon and onion, soothed Ulla's senses and grounded her breathing. She buried her nose in the soft skin. She felt Shorty's hands, smelled the motor grease. *Mamma's smell*. She cried harder.

Her body was weightless now, and she was back in her bed. Melia wiped her face and pulled the quilt to her shoulders. She picked a book from a stack on the floor. Books that Melia read every night to Ulla. *The Snowy Day, Where the Wild Things Are, Goodnight Moon, Green Eggs and Ham*. She opened *The Runaway Bunny*, Ulla's favorite because Melia always continued the story after the pages ended, inventing more lines.

She read the book, and her musical voice settled Ulla. Upon saying the last words, Melia closed it, but continued, "If you were to run away to the moon, then I would become a shooting star to land there with you." Melia tucked Ulla's hair behind her ears, retrieved Beskyddaren from the nightstand, and nestled him onto the pillow with Ulla.

Ulla clutched him securely under her chin. She saw Shorty leaning against the doorway with a sad smile. His crinkled eyelids drooped at the corners.

Melia placed a light kiss on her hair. "Rest now."

"Melia?" Ulla whispered.

"Yes?"

Ulla touched the diamonds on Beskyddaren. "Will I ever see her again?"

Melia focused her sapphire eyes onto Ulla's. Eyes that could take all the bad stuff and devour it. She closed her hand over the one holding Beskyddaren. "Tell me about Beskyddaren. Tell me again why he is so special."

Her mother's beautiful face filled Ulla's memory. "She said he can bring us back to the person we love most."

Melia touched Ulla's heart. "Then you already know the answer to your question, *liebchen*." She gazed at Shorty, who walked in and knelt at the bedside. He patted Ulla's cheek. "Do you remember when I told you I was looking for someone to fix the Porsche, and it couldn't be just anyone?"

Ulla nodded.

Melia said, "We were looking for your mother. We came all the way from Germany to find her. But we had no idea about *you*." Her face broke into a tearful smile. "Shorty and I, we never could have our own babies. But then God gave us your mother. Now you. We're *family*. Think of me like the fairy godmother from *Ashenputtel*."

Ulla tightened her hands around Beskyddaren. "But Mamma said we had no family. She said they died in a fire. It's just us." *And Peter*.

"She was afraid for our safety," explained Melia. "Sometimes people lie to protect the ones they love. You mustn't tell your mother we told you this. You can't tell anyone that we're family."

Ulla squinted at them. "Why not?"

Shorty ruffled Ulla's hair. "You'll understand one day. But when we're separated again, you know where to find us if you run into trouble."

Separated? Ulla hated this feeling. The way her chest filled with love—for her mother, Peter—and now Melia and Shorty. Only to have it stabbed when they were taken from her, bursting her open, the sadness spilling out all over. Ulla thought of Melia's last lines from the *Runaway Bunny*. "If you could turn into a shooting star," she asked, "then it means you could find me anywhere in the world?"

Melia kissed the crown on Ulla's head and then Beskyddaren. "*Ja, liebchen*. Anywhere."

Chapter Fifteen

August 1977
Seventeen Months Later

Ulla

Ulla awoke from what she thought was a dream about Tina. One that stung her eyes and socked her in the gut. *Just a dream*? But it grew louder: the unmistakable thrum of Tina's six-cylinder T-bird engine.

The sound she'd been praying to hear for over an *entire* year!

Tina ground to a halt. If the car was still alive, it could only mean one thing! Ulla grabbed Beskyddaren from the nightstand, certain her heart was going to explode from happiness. "Melia, Melia!" she shouted, giggling. Ulla burst into the summer sunshine.

A woman stepped from the car.

Of all the ways Ulla imagined hugging her perfect mother, it wasn't this woman in red clogs walking toward her with a slight drag of her left foot. The mother Ulla knew had gold waves piled on her head, high cheekbones, and eyes like water reflecting the sky. This woman, in enormous jeans and a black Rolling Stones t-shirt beneath a man's heavy coat, looked skinny. Her face hid behind dark sunglasses, and a cap covered her chin-length, colorless hair. The thrill that sprung Ulla onto the front porch slammed to a stop.

As this woman approached, Ulla backed into Melia and Shorty behind her. Melia crouched next to Ulla and held her shoulders securely. “Priceless treasures often hide in battered boxes, *liebchen.*”

Ulla pressed Beskyddaren to her heart.

The woman before Ulla broke into a barely constrained run when she saw her, and she dropped to her knees at Ulla’s unicorn slippers. Tears ran from underneath the sunglasses, and when she licked them from her lips, only one corner of her mouth moved, the other half of her face seemed paralyzed.

This wasn’t her mamma. The world began to break. She clenched the Dalahäst.

The woman lowered the sunglasses. When their eyes met, and when she spoke in a language only Ulla understood, the world closed back together.

Her mother touched Beskyddaren. The sunlight hit the diamonds, dappling her face in light. “He did his job well, did he not?”

Chapter Sixteen

Mora, Minnesota

Ulla

The giant Dala horse loomed in the town center of Mora, Minnesota, when they arrived. Ulla gasped and pointed emphatically, exclaiming in Swedish to her mother that someone made a giant statue of Beskyddaren! And Ulla's mother lowered her shades, her excited eyes matching Ulla's. With a wink she reminded her that Beskyddaren was super-secret, and, look, this big one was not as pretty. The statue didn't sparkle like Beskyddaren, did it?

Ronja stopped Tina at the Marathon gas station. Instead of asking Ulla to fill the tank, she gave her thirty-five cents to get a pop.

Ulla walked to the Coca-Cola vending machine and saw a shadow dart from the corner. Perhaps it had been a trick of the moon, a thumbnail in the sky.

She slipped the quarter and dime into the coin slot and pressed the square box for a Dr. Pepper. The machine tumbled the pop down. She crouched and drove her hand inside the box to grab it, but the bottle was stuck. Ulla yanked and throttled the cold glass. No budging. She let go, huffed, and kicked the red contraption. She cussed in Swedish, hoping her mother wasn't in earshot.

Someone touched her shoulder. Startled, Ulla turned to face a girl her same height. The girl maneuvered her hand into the black hole, jiggled her wrist, and emerged with the Dr. Pepper. She jammed it into the bottle cap opener. With a *pop*, it fizzed, and brown, bubbly liquid dribbled over her skin.

Ulla wasn't interested in the soda pop anymore.

The girl seemed to wait, uncomfortable, for Ulla to take it, but Ulla was too busy studying her features. The girl wore clothes that appeared outdated and three sizes too small. She was all knobby knees and stick arms. But to Ulla, the most beautiful creature she'd ever seen.

Like a fairy elf from a picture book.

The girl's long-lashed eyes were a similar shade of blue to her own, but they glowed against her ghostly skin and shiny black hair that covered her forehead in jagged, overgrown bangs. Her cheeks were streaked, as if maybe she'd been sweaty, or crying, and accidentally smudged dirt on them.

"Keep it." Ulla was pleased she said so because the girl's stunning eyes fully emerged in surprised delight.

Ulla's mother called her name. "Did you find a friend?" she asked in Swedish.

The girl tilted her head in curiosity at the foreign language. Ulla ignored her mother. "I'm Ulla."

With a closed-mouth smile, the girl walked away, treasure in hand, and with a shy wave, disappeared around the building.

Ulla didn't recognize the tiny, pleasant ripple in her stomach.

Their new home was a split-level on the outskirts of Mora with two bedrooms and two bathrooms. A chain-link fence outlined the lawn's perimeter but was sagging, sinking into the earth. By now, Ulla had experienced life in a wealthy neighborhood, a car, and a modest duplex in Minneapolis. But she didn't care where she lived. Because she had her mother. Although, she did ask, "Why can't we live with Melia and Shorty?"

"*Nej, min lilla älskling*. We have to protect them from my past."

Melia and Shorty's fierce hugs would be forever glued upon Ulla's skin. Melia had whispered in her ear, "Remember, I will always find you, but you

also know where to find me, *liebchen*." She pressed a phone number into Ulla's hands. "Memorize it."

"Where's Peter?" Ulla had asked her mother as they drove away.

"Prison," her mother whisper-choked. "Please don't ask me about him. Ever again."

So, Ulla packed Peter away into a corner of her heart where it didn't hurt so much.

Their new home also had a backyard with rustling trees and endless space to spread her arms and free her legs. But more than that? A sparkling lake that held in its depths treasures and creatures untold. Maybe even a sunken car!

When Ulla ran to it, her mother chased her and said, "*Nej, älskling*, it's too dangerous." She took Ulla into her arms that night as they lay on a pile of blankets and told her about *bäckahästen*—a beautiful but deadly creature that hid near bodies of water, circling them, looking for children. "It will take you on its back and dive under the water, drowning and devouring you. It can appear as many different entities, sometimes a handsome prince or a fairy. It sings or plays music to lure you into the water . . . or the ice."

Ulla searched high and low those early days for *bäckahästen*. She set out fruit, dug up shiny rocks, and placed notes on top detailing negotiations. She'd creep outside once her mother was asleep, onto the rotting pine dock and dip a toe in the water.

She and her mother had neighbors visit. They liked to bring cookies and banana bread. Her mother was polite but spoke little and never allowed them inside.

Ulla watched their skeptical faces in the market, the gas station, and the post office. How their heads swiveled in curiosity. None of it should've been threatening, but Ulla listened to her mother's brief hellos, vague introductions, and an occasional shameless lie. "Her father died suddenly of a heart attack. We wanted a slower, quieter pace of life. Yes, yes, very tragic for us."

Once settled after a few weeks, they drove two miles to a junkyard. Behind the cinder block walls was everything Ulla needed to build her own city of cars. *Rows upon rows of them*! Her mother walked to a mobile home on the property and rapped on the door. A dog barked from inside.

Ulla sat on a picnic bench with brick-colored paint and picked at the flecks. A woman opened the door, and a white dog resembling a wolf

barreled out to Ulla, sniffing her legs. Ulla lifted them onto the bench.

"Sugar," came a woman's voice, gruff and low, "*Git* down." Ulla smelled cigarette smoke and looked at the woman. She wore a housecoat and had pink sponge rollers in her hair. The dog obeyed and retreated.

"Ulla," said her mother, "this is Mrs. Lagerquist. She owns this place."

Curler-woman—Curlers. Ulla thought that name was easier to remember than *Mrs. Lagerquist*. Curlers offered her hand and smiled. Her teeth were slightly yellowed, but she appeared friendly. Ulla accepted the handshake.

"Ulla is very good with cars," said her mother.

"Just like your momma, eh?" said Curlers. "Shall we hire both of you?"

That night before bed, her mother sat Ulla down, her face painted in a serious expression, and Ulla went stiff with worry. She asked Ulla to show her Beskyddaren, and when Ulla presented the Dalahäst from her dresser drawer, her mother marveled at the sight, tears pooling, and she said, "*Älskling,* next to you, the only other thing on this earth I love is Beskyddaren, but he's no longer mine. You must protect him with all your heart—even from *me*—all right, hmm, *okej*? Don't tell me, or anyone, where you hide him, *lova mig det*." At demanding this promise, her mother restrained a sob and mouthed an apology.

"Mamma?" she whispered, not understanding, and touched her mother's wet cheek.

But Ulla promised nonetheless.

Chapter Seventeen

September – November 1977
One Month Later

Ulla

Ulla stepped into the third-grade classroom of Mora Elementary alone that autumn, wearing Kmart canvas shoes, jean shorts, a t-shirt, and a zippered sweatshirt. Her backpack had no pictures or cartoon characters on it. Two alligator barrettes kept her blonde hair off her face. Her mother insisted on accompanying her the first day.

"*Nej*," Ulla said. Being new was bad enough. But having your mother drop you off? The teacher came to Ulla and leaned over, suspending a string of large, clacking blue beads around her neck. With bright red lipstick and white skin, she looked like an American flag.

Mrs. America coaxed Ulla further inside, showing her to an individual desk with her name on it. "You can put your supplies in your desk and your backpack on the hooks outside in the hall."

Ulla stood beside her desk. She looked at the other children who squeaked up their desktops, threw in supplies, and then slammed them shut. They whispered and giggled. They all knew one another. A boy looked at Ulla's name tag with distaste. "Uh . . . La . . . Your name is *Ugh*-la?"

At her grade school in Minneapolis, Ulla's name didn't stand out amongst her diverse classmates. She called the boy vulgar names in

Swedish. He stared at her, alarmed, as if she were from outer space.

From behind, Ulla heard a faint, “Ulla,” so soft that Ulla knew it was only meant for her ears. She turned and felt a gush of excitement. It was the fairy elf from the gas station! Ulla looked at the still-skinny girl. Her shiny, too-long bangs partially hid her cerulean eyes like a shaggy dog. Maybe the girl preferred it that way, preferred an excuse not to look someone in the eye. Ulla brushed them away. The girl jerked back and tucked herself into the desk, burying her face in her arms. Ulla read her name: *Linnea*.

“Figures you two would sit next to each other,” the mean boy sniggered.

Mrs. America tried the first week to get Linnea Larsson to talk.

“She doesn’t have a tongue!” called out one boy. “If she opens her mouth, a bunch of flies will come out—bloughh!” He belched, and the children burst into rounds of laughter.

At recess, Ulla sat against the brick of the school building, and with a lime rock drew pictures of carburetors and cylinders on the concrete. She would lift her eyes once in a while and search for Linnea. She could never find her, but when the bell rang, Linnea would suddenly appear in the line.

But as the season changed, and the lilac bush by the recess doors lost its leaves, Linnea was exposed. She switched to the evergreens in front of the building that kept their needles all winter. Ulla worried about Linnea being cold. She’d yet to see anything warmer than her yellow hooded sweatshirt with ripped elbows, broken zipper, and frayed cuffs halfway up her forearms.

Ulla took an extra sweatshirt to school and shoved it into Linnea’s desk when Linnea had gotten up to sharpen a pencil, along with a note that said, *Keep it.*

Hiding spots outside were a challenge, but inside it could be any number of janitor closets, bathrooms, and cupboards. It aggravated Ulla how quickly Linnea could disappear, and, whenever Ulla discovered one hiding spot, Linnea would change it.

It was nearing winter break, and Ulla had come no closer to talking to her fairy-friend. Ulla once received an invitation to a birthday party, but she only wanted Linnea’s invitation of friendship.

“You should go,” her mother would say, “It’s good to have friends.”

“*You* don’t have any.”

“When you’re an adult, you don’t need friends as much.”

“Why?”

“You’re busy working and taking care of your children. And you’re my friend, *min lilla älskling*. My best friend. What more could I ask for?” She would kiss Ulla’s nose and tug her close. They slept in the same bed even though Ulla had her own room, where she kept pilfered camshafts, cylinders, valves, compressors, radiators, and batteries from Curlers’ junkyard to futz with. Besides, she loved the heat and scent of her mother’s presence, something she once feared was lost forever.

Chapter Eighteen

December 1977

Ulla

The lake froze early—before Christmas. An icehouse appeared a week before the last day of winter break. Her mother was now even more insistent on telling bedtime stories of *bäckahästen*. It was one thing to fall in the water on a summer day, quite another through the ice. The added danger meant the added chance of catching the mythological creature, even if Ulla was highly doubtful of its existence.

Blue light seeped through the curtains in her mother's bedroom, and Ulla reached over and picked up Beskyddaren from the nightstand. She twirled him in her hand while listening to her mother's tranquil slumber.

That was when she heard it. *Singing*. It sounded like a girl's voice. Heart pounding, Ulla checked her mother was sound asleep, then went to the window and peered between the curtains, straining her eyes at the fluorescent lake, lit by the moon. The singing grew louder, its melody like the Simon & Garfunkel song from the album her mother bought at Kmart.

She crammed Beskyddaren into his hiding spot and padded through the living room to the sliding glass door that led to the backyard. She inched the chain of the plastic slatted shades, anxious her mother would awaken. Once the door was clear, she smushed her face against the cool glass, waiting for the singing to reach her again. *There it is!*

She set about dressing in full winter garb and shoved her feet into the boots. She opened the sliding door with her mittened hands and paused. The singing stopped. Disappointment flooded Ulla. Was it her imagination? She held her breath, tuning her ears to its frequency.

Yes. Ulla scampered through the door, making sure to close it quietly, and ran. Her blood picked up steam from her racing heart and pumping limbs. Snow crunched and twigs snapped under her boots, and the singing grew clearer as she reached the edge of the lake. She squinted, looking for *bäckahästen*. She grabbed a stick. If it was *bäckahästen*, she'd have a weapon. Her limbs were stuffed now with terror instead of excitement, but she persisted. Ulla approached the embankment till she was standing on the lake. The snow was up to her knees. She followed the melody.

Finally, she locked eyes with the voice.

My fairy!

Ulla released the stick, kicking up clouds of snow as she sprinted. Even if this were *bäckahästen* in disguise, Ulla would gladly be taken away. "Linnea!" she gasped, hauling in elated breaths.

Linnea ran to her as well. "No!" she screamed. "Stop!"

Ulla plunged into the black water. It burned like a million needles. She grappled to the surface, the weight of her snow gear dragging her down, but she heard Linnea shout, "Grab this!"

Ulla saw a wooden rod poke at her, and with sopping mittens, snagged it.

"Got it?"

"I'm going to drown!" cried Ulla.

"No, you're not." Linnea shimmied backward on her belly, grunting, still holding firm to the rod, scaling Ulla from the hole with a strength Ulla thought impossible for Linnea's bird-like limbs. Sprawled on the ice, together they stumbled to their feet and hurried to the shoreline.

"You saved my life." The relief sent a surge of warmth through Ulla's blood, her breaths spewing in hot, white clouds. "I-I hurt everywhere." Tears poked her eyes.

"Come to my house," said Linnea, helping Ulla along. "You can borrow my clothes. Just don't let anyone see you."

The sopping winter gear weighed Ulla down as she trudged step-by-step. "Wait . . . you—you can talk?"

Linnea gave Ulla a sideways glance, her face partially concealed by the oversized gray hoodie, clearly meant for an adult. “Of course I can talk.”

Ulla tried to respond, but her teeth-chattering prevented her. Snow caked up to her knees, gluing onto her wet snow pants. Linnea’s house seemed so far away, even though they were nearly at the back door. She noticed lights and faint music. Linnea paused and chewed the sleeves of her hoodie. Her wide eyes grew fearful. “Let’s go through the garage.”

That felt like a mile to Ulla! But she obeyed. She wasn’t going to die from the cold but rather the *pain* of being so cold. The girls entered the side door on the driveway where a Grand Am and a Corolla sat next to a pop-up trailer rusting on the side of the lawn. Inside the garage, they passed haphazard piles of fishing gear and a dull green flat-tired Buick Skylark, where Linnea helped Ulla strip from pounds of soaked outerwear, out of her frosted boots. Ulla’s hair had frozen into crunchy strands. Linnea put a finger to her own lips, signaling silence. “They usually don’t notice me.”

“Your parents?” Ulla shivered in her pajamas and soggy socks, wishing she could take those off, too.

Linnea shook her head and motioned for Ulla to stay close. Once inside the house, they darted up a short flight of stairs, and Ulla caught a glimpse of a few adults occupied in a card game, others sprawled on the couch, and some hovered by a coffee table covered in liquor bottles and plastic cups.

Alone, finally, in Linnea’s bedroom, Ulla thought of her mother, praying she was still sleeping. Linnea switched on her ceramic lamp, casting the room in a glow. On a dark oak dresser, with loose brass handles, sat a neat stack of Boxcar Children paperbacks atop *Teen* fashion magazines, next to a neat line of sample perfume bottles, and a small pink purse. Linnea rummaged through her closet. Unintelligible voices emitted from downstairs. She offered Ulla two sweatshirts: a purple Vikings football and another with a cherry sundae that said Mora Café & Bakery. Ulla took the cherry sundae and stripped her clothes. She paused when hooking her thumbs in her underwear.

Linnea was naked and shrugging on the Viking’s sweatshirt. But Ulla saw it. Marks on Linnea’s back. A greenish-yellow blotch, a fresher blue one, and raised dots. Linnea turned. Ulla lowered her head and stared at a chip on the lamp. “I-it’s really cold if I keep my underwear on.”

She tossed Ulla a pair of white underwear with blue trim.

When dressed, with their damp clothes in a heap, Linnea went to her dresser and slid a drawer out completely. It was filled with a few t-shirts, creased into squares. She teetered with it, the pile of shirts sliding to one end, and then used her bony knee to foist it securely into her arms.

Confused, Ulla watched Linnea lower and scrape it across the carpet against the bedroom door. “I don’t have a lock.”

Still confused, Ulla nodded. “Oh.”

“The ones I hate the most take the longest to leave. Sometimes they spend the night.” Linnea talked as if chewing on spoiled food.

Ulla’s eyes went to the drawer blocking the bedroom. “Ohhh.” She hugged the sweatshirt around her chapped skin. “Is that why you were outside?”

Linnea hauled her Strawberry Shortcake spread off the bed and gave it to Ulla. “What were you doing out there?”

Ulla wrapped it around herself. “I heard you singing.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Ulla walked closer to Linnea. With the shock of falling through the ice wearing off, the shock of Linnea *talking* only grew. “How come you don’t talk in school?”

Linnea only teethed her thumb and straightened a pile of neon plastic bracelets on her nightstand. She swiped her bangs aside and Ulla stared at the long eyelashes, fearful she’d somehow switched Linnea’s mute button back on. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, sitting warily on the bed, as if asking permission.

Linnea glanced at her. “How many languages do you speak?”

“Just Swedish and English.”

“It’s pretty.”

You’re pretty, Ulla wanted to say. “Thanks.”

“Is that where you’re from?”

“No, my mother is.”

“Your dad, too?”

Ulla thought of Peter. She thought of her mother’s hateful words: “*I don’t want you to ever speak his name again, Ulla. Ever!”*

“I heard he died,” Linnea whispered.

Ulla hesitated, pulling the blanket up to her nose, smelling a mix of laundry detergent and smoke, and asked, “Can you keep a secret?”

Linnea's smile was deep, and a dimple appeared. "I'm good at keeping secrets."

Ulla said, "It's not true. My dad—he's alive. I've never met him." She frowned, recalling her mother's flimsy words that Ulla had initially accepted, but over time grew more suspicious of. "My mother says she was pregnant with me when she came to America. But she has no memory of who my father was."

"Really?"

Ulla shrugged. "She said she got into an accident, and it erased some of the past from her brain."

"Wow," Linnea said, "that—that is . . . I'm sorry."

Hearing and seeing Linnea's kind, but uncertain, response only made it worse. Of course it was a stupid story, invented by her mother. Peter had been her pappa, and so it was okay that she didn't know her father. But now Peter was gone, too.

From outside the window, loose laughter sounded along with a car door opening. Linnea zoomed to the curtain and peeked out. "They're leaving."

"Who?" Ulla asked.

Linnea went to the bedroom door and scooted the dresser back. She cracked the door and poked her head out as if listening. "I gotta go clean up. I hate doing it in the morning before school."

Ulla slid off the bed and dropped the spread, feeling warmer now. "Do you need help?"

Linnea shrugged and Ulla followed her out. They went past another bedroom awash in posters and clothes strewn on every inch of the carpet. "That's Abby's room, my older sister," she said. "She usually goes to a friend's house."

They treaded down the carpeted stairs the color of lakeweed, toward an eerie glow that Ulla realized was coming from a four-legged Zenith color TV. It was so late, there was no program on—just a blue screen. Ulla scrunched her nose at the strong smell of—*something*. Not cigar or cigarette smoke she recognized from the parties Peter had thrown. A pang of bitter nostalgia whacked Ulla. Of Peter with Ulla on his hip, a cigar between his teeth as he danced her around.

"Oh, hey Lin-Lin, you have a friend?" Ulla whirled at the sound of a woman's slurred, soft voice.

Linnea went to the woman slouched on the sofa wearing a boozy smile. “Where’s Daddy?” she asked. This was clearly her mother, but she was shockingly thin, a human skeleton. Linnea’s mother inclined her head upstairs and groaned, trying to sit up. Linnea said, “Stay there,” then turned to Ulla. “Can you watch her?”

Ulla pulled a worried face.

“I just don’t want her trying to walk. She hit her head once.”

Linnea’s mother sank deep into the folds of the worn couch. Linnea dashed to the kitchen, rummaging through the cupboards under a sink filled with rotting dishes. She emerged with a black garbage bag and started to work. From the kitchen table, she swept a pile of plastic cups, Heineken bottles, Coors, Michelobs, and Pepsi cans into the bag. She took a soiled napkin and used it to cautiously pick up three needles and thin, brown tubing, and plopped them into the bag as well. She crouched underneath the table, collecting cigarette butts. Linnea attacked the living room next, scraping debris off the coffee table and television.

An unearthly scream cut through the air outside. It sent zaps straight from Ulla’s heart to her head. Linnea froze, and her mother even struggled upright, as if sobered.

It grew louder: *Ulla!* Ulla clapped a hand over her mouth and then hissed, “Mamma!”

Linnea’s eyes bugged. Both girls went for the front door, and Ulla, having forgotten her ice dunk earlier, sprinted into the freezing dark. She didn’t make it far in socks once hitting the snow. “Mamma!” she shouted at the top of her lungs.

“Ulla!” Crunching, sprinting steps drew closer, and from around the home appeared her mother’s wild face. Her coat was open, and she was in a nightgown, bare legs stuck into her boots. She didn’t grab Ulla or cry in relief. She stopped and bent over as if wheezing, as if she couldn’t breathe, and grabbed her knees.

When it seemed Ronja could breathe, she lifted her face, and Ulla now saw it was stained with horrified tears. Her mother staggered to Ulla and clutched her shoulders, shaking her head. Her words came out as white, gasping plumes into the cold air. “I—where—how—?” Finally, Ronja’s pained face met Ulla’s as she gathered more air. “Where did you go! How could you—?” And then she crushed her daughter into her arms. Ronja’s

hands patted Ulla's wet hair. She pulled back, studying more of Ulla's appearance. Baffled. Her eyes darted to someone behind her.

Ulla followed Ronja's gaze to see Linnea's mother, holding onto the door jamb.

Ronja appeared to compose herself with such lightning speed it was as if an alien had taken over her body, except her eyes remained blotchy. In a steady voice, she spoke to Ulla in Swedish. "You will explain everything when you get home. *No lies*."

Ulla nodded, shivering.

"Your boots?" Ronja persisted in Swedish.

Ulla's eyes welled, and she shook her head.

Ronja smiled brightly at Linnea and her mother. "I am terribly sorry for the disruption. It seems there has been some," her eyes snapped to Ulla's, "miscommunication. I don't recall her being invited for a sleepover."

Ulla looked to Linnea, peering behind her mother.

Ronja extended her hand. "I'm Ulla's mother, Ronja. We live across the lake."

"Oh, sure," tittered Linnea's mother with a wobbly acceptance of the handshake, "I'm Margie." She'd drawn out the *oh* a little too long, enough for Ulla to register the alcohol fumes streaming from it. "Well, we woulda introduced ourselves, but you know how time gets away. Jesus, it's cold." She rubbed herself, and Ulla followed her mother's sharp eyes, landing on the bluish, red streaks of Margie's forearms.

"Yes. It is," said Ronja. "Ulla, I can carry you home."

Margie held up a finger. "Lemme get Dick, Lin's dad, he can give you a lift home."

"No, we'll survive." Ronja skimmed Ulla's meager clothing and took off her coat, draping it over her daughter. "Come," she demanded in Swedish. "On my back." Ronja turned and squatted.

Ulla normally would've been mortified to climb onto her mother's back, but the circumstances were already embarrassing enough. She swept her eyes to Linnea who lifted a hand in goodbye, but Ulla saw the plea: *Don't leave*.

Ulla begged in Swedish, "Can Linney come over, Mamma, please. Let her stay with us!"

Ronja turned around and sucked an aggravated breath, but then it seemed she, too, fully read Linnea's situation. She released a puff of

resignation. In what Ulla recognized as a false show of apology, she palmed her forehead. “I remember now, the girls had wanted a sleepover. I didn’t think much of it. I should’ve called you. Ulla was just telling me how they came over to grab some things and, gosh, I panicked when I woke up. They probably assumed I’d keep sleeping.”

Ulla chimed in, “We took the shortcut across the lake, but I fell in the fishing hole.”

Her mother’s eyes widened slightly. “Well,” she looked to the girls, “I will run back and get the car.” To Margie she said with serious eyes, almost threatening, “Linnea is welcome at our house. *Any* time.”

Margie snuffed and dropped her eyes to her daughter. “Go get your things.”

Linnea grabbed Ulla’s hand, beckoning her, but Ronja yanked Ulla back with a hiss in her ear, commanding in Swedish, “You are never *ever* to step foot in that house again.”

Once the girls were settled inside Ulla’s room, on a pile of blankets, it was nearly dawn. Ulla tried not to stare at Linnea in fascination, but the shimmer of the moon made her appear ghostlike, so beautiful.

Linnea spoke to the ceiling, “Your mom seems really nice. And pretty.”

Ulla felt bad she couldn’t say the same for Linnea’s mom, but maybe that was the point.

A silence drifted over them, not uncomfortable, but it made Ulla restless. On instinct, what she always did when she was restless, crawled on her hands and knees to her wonky dresser piled with scattered car parts. She yanked out the bottom drawer, reached into a deep corner, and emerged with Beskyddaren.

Ulla offered the Dalahäst to Linnea. Linnea accepted Beskyddaren, her eyes widening as she touched the jewels. “Are they real?”

Ulla nodded. “His name is *Beskyddaren.* It means protector in Swedish. He was my mother’s but belongs to me now. He’s special.”

“Besky-ddaren,” Linnea repeated clumsily. “This looks a little like our giant horse statue by the pool. Prettier though. What makes him special?”

“It’s stupid.”

Linnea frowned. “Stupid?”

“You promise you won’t laugh?”

She looked slightly hurt. “Why would I laugh?”

Ulla sighed. “When my mother came to America, this was all she had. She said it’s magical.”

Linnea’s face expanded. “What kind of magic?”

Ulla, nervous, said dismissively, “Never mind.”

Linnea dropped her gaze as if disappointed.

“She said the horse can give you what your heart wants.”

“Like a genie? Do you get to make a wish?”

Ulla nibbled on a lock of hair. “No, not like that. She said he knows who you love. And as long as you hold onto him, he’ll make it so that you’ll never be separated from that person.” She thought of her mother. “Or if you are—he always brings you back together.”

Linnea caressed the horse. “Who do you love?”

“My mother . . . ” Ulla thought of Melia and Shorty. And Peter. “My pappa.”

“I thought you never met him.”

Ulla felt the pull inside her chest. “Can you love someone you’ve never met?”

Linnea stared at Beskyddaren, spellbound, and nodded. “It’s because he’s your dad. Everyone loves their mom and dad.” Her expression fell. “Until there’s a reason not to.” She handed the horse to Ulla.

Ulla reached over and tucked aside Linnea’s soft, overgrown bangs, revealing a healing bruise, and, before she lost the nerve, she gently pressed her lips on it.

Ulla’s mother kept her promise. From that first night on, Linnea practically lived at the Bergstrom home. Ulla always kept the sliding door unlocked for her, in direct opposition to Ronja’s paranoid triple lock-checking and blind closures.

On school days, the other children, perhaps curious—perhaps jealous of the girls' new bond—took pleasure in squashing them. When Wiley Gardner shoved Linnea in the recess line, Ulla told him he smelled like dog breath. When Wiley went to shove Ulla, she sidestepped him and rammed

his face into the brick wall. Wiley's bloody nose sent Ulla to the principal's office. She was banned from recess until she wrote a proper apology letter:

> Dear Wiley,
> I'm sorry that your hair has bugs in it. Sorry for the bugs, that is. I'm sorry that I have to look at your crooked teeth. I'm sorry you smell like dirty underwear. I'm mostly sorry that no one saw you shove Linnea first and that the brick wall couldn't get out of the way fast enough from your giant nose.
>
> Sincerely,
> Ulla Bergstrom

When the principal read it, he said, "Write a *proper* apology letter." But Ulla outlasted him by fourteen days, staring at him dead-eyed, tapping her fingers on the chair to annoy him, until he gave up and said she could return.

Instead of returning to recess, the girls found hiding places in the janitor's closet and played clapping games: *Miss Mary Mack, The Spades, Miss Suzy,* and *Double Double*. They usually had to slap a hand over the other's mouth to muffle their explosive giggles amongst the noxious aroma of mold and bleach. Linnea's warm, moist breath on Ulla's palm sent shivers, right to the sensitive dip in her stomach.

Ulla also became Linnea's mouthpiece in class. When Mrs. America asked Linnea to name the state capital of South Dakota, it was Ulla who responded, "Linnea says, 'Pierre.'" Mrs. America, with her thin smile would say, "Thank you, Ulla, but Linnea needs to speak for herself."

"Fifty-six," Ulla replied when Linnea was asked eight times seven.

"Thank you, Ulla, but Linnea can speak for herself."

Ulla expelled a loud sigh one day and said, "*Of course* she can speak for herself. But she doesn't *want* to." It made no sense why Mrs. America, or any adult for that matter, thought it so important that Linnea *speak for herself*. Especially when Ulla could do it for her.

But when they were alone, when Linnea would tag along to Curlers' junkyard, she chattered as if she'd stored up words for seven hours. She and Ulla would climb into the steel and metal carcasses and invent stories about their previous owners. "This one died in a train accident speeding to the

airport to pick up his girlfriend. You can see the blood spatters on the seat." Or, "Some kids took their mom's car and crashed it; see the marker stains?"

Ulla would hand Linnea a pair of safety goggles to watch her with a cutting torch undo the bolts on engines and transmissions. If the engine was shot, Ulla dismantled it further into the carburetor and distributor. Sometimes she placed them into labeled bins for Curlers' customers that came and sifted through, looking for parts. Other times, she kept them for herself.

"Why do you like cars so much?" Linnea asked as they scraped snow off a totaled Chrysler De Soto.

"I like knowing how machines work. And my mom is good with them."

"Can you drive?" Linnea asked.

"Curlers lets me do it, and my mom sometimes when she's free. When I'm old enough, I'll drive the wrecker and sort the cars by make and model like my mom does. Curlers said she'll pay me then."

"Will you teach me to drive?"

Ulla nodded, smiling. "Curlers promised that whatever car I build, it's mine."

"I bet you'll do it. By the time we're sixteen. And then we'll be free." Linnea flung her arms and lifted her face to the winter sunshine.

Ulla's heart squeezed at the declaration. *We*.

Chapter Nineteen

October 1981
Four Years Later

Ulla

At lunchtime, in seventh grade, the day of Wiley Gardner's Halloween party, Everett Barnes announced he was moving to New York after Thanksgiving.

Ulla snapped her gaze sideways to Linnea who'd stalled the milk carton halfway to her mouth. She watched Linnea's fantasy swirl down the drain. The fantasy of "going steady" with Everett, her longtime crush. Ulla had no clue what Linnea saw in his over-styled hair and buck teeth, but there would be no holding hands in the hallways, no kisses in the alleyway behind the school property or under the bleachers, no shared love notes—

And no pushing your best friend to the wayside.

Ulla hid her smile and shoved down her glee.

"Dude, that sucks," said Wiley. "Can I come with you?" Wiley was Everett's best friend and counterpart when it came to tall and gangly, except Wiley's skin was so pale, it made his spiky hair look darker than it was, and his crudeness made Everett's manners look princely. Wiley would ask girls if they knew how to French kiss in elementary school, and if they slapped his arm, he said that was code for *wanting to hump*. Ulla was convinced Wiley had no idea what French kissing was back then, let alone *humping*.

Ulla and Linnea had somehow become tolerable this year to their classmates when transitioning to Mora's 7-12th secondary school. It was the boys who clamored for Ulla to sit with them at the *popular table*, and Ulla, not caring less if she sat with them, or anyone besides Linnea, knew how much it meant to Linnea to not be the butt of her peers' jokes anymore.

Ulla watched Linnea's eyes brim, and said, "Everett, maybe you could write to us. Although, Linney's better about writing back. So you might as well just write to her." Linnea reached under the table and squeezed Ulla's knee. It was a gesture of thank-you, but it made Ulla's stomach cartwheel.

Everett glanced at Linnea but bypassed her to look at Ulla. "Are you coming to the Halloween party?"

Wiley belched and said, "Hell *yes*, Oo-la-la. Me and you are gonna be Tarzan and Jane!" He pounded his chest and bellowed.

The boys at the table hooted. Ulla rolled her eyes. Nowadays, Wiley traded insults for sexual harassment. He would bat his eyebrows, tug her hair, and blow on her neck. She only tolerated it because he was Everett's best friend, and it seemed these days the only way to stick with Linnea was to stick with her love-of-all-things, Everett Barnes. So she didn't slap away Wiley's hand or kick him in the balls but certainly didn't encourage him with a flighty giggle or a high-pitched, "Wi-ley, sto-*op*," like the other girls did.

"Hey, Lin," said Wiley. "You should go as Princess Leia. Ev has a Han Solo costume."

Ulla felt Linnea's spirit re-inflate with that suggestion, and she swore Linnea's heart must've stopped when Everett said, "Yeah, let's do it."

She and Ulla had planned on being zombies, but now they'd spend the rest of the afternoon after school roaming Kmart to sift through leftover costumes.

Ulla began counting down the days to Thanksgiving, imagining the ways she'd console Linnea when Everett was gone.

Linnea whispered in Ulla's ear, "Are you still going as a zombie?"

Ulla shrugged. "I'll go as a car mechanic. Put on my coveralls with some black paint."

"So you're not dressing up at all then," Everett interjected.

Ulla shot him a disdainful look, annoyed at his eavesdropping. "At least I know how to change a tire."

“Ooh, wouldn’t it be nice if we all had *dyke*-moms to teach us that,” Everett fired back. The boys surrounding them roared and pounded the table.

Ulla’s chest tightened as if shriveling from flames. She slid a heat-filled look to Linnea who stared at her hands. *Just this once, Lin, please*.

Nothing.

Ulla stood from the table with her lunch tray. It shook in her hands. She hurried to the garbage and threw the entire tray into the trash instead of just the food.

“Oo-la-la, you forgot something!” Wiley heckled.

The derisive laughter scorched her further. She broke into a run out of the cafeteria and out of the school.

The crisp air cooled Ulla’s face and chilled her arms through her plaid flannel. She numbly walked, her feet doing the work when her mind couldn’t get unstuck. *Dyke-mom*. How much more normal would she feel if she *had* a father! How much less would she have to bear her spikes of armor in protection from her peers? Did she really believe her mother’s nonsense about losing her memory? Ulla’s hatred toward Everett shifted with each step home.

When she arrived at her house, the door was locked, but she found the hidden key in the crevice of the backyard oak tree. She slammed into the house, needing to do something with her anger.

With the house in disarray, boxes torn apart, Ulla tucked the evidence inside her sweatshirt and raced along Maple Street, past the library and the Nazarene church. She veered off the main road, out of sight of any cars and nosey townspeople. She crunched through the dead leaves and kicked away spindly sticks, then skipped across Snake River under the overpass bridge, leaping to and from rock piles where the water was shallow to avoid soaking her Keds. When the pavement on the main road hit gravel, she broke into a sprint. The loose earth billowed in a dust cloud behind. She ran past the chain-link gates that were open with the wooden sign tacked to it in painted-black lettering: Mora Wrecking Yard.

Sugar, the dog, came yapping to greet her, though slower in her aging years. But Ulla ignored Sugar and followed the trail of hollow radio music

bouncing off the concrete walls of the garage where she found her mother. The hood of a Chevy Apache truck had swallowed Ronja. It was fatally rusted and the tires were dead. Her mother had a foot planted on the rickety bumper and a knee balanced on the rim with a screwdriver in hand. She dug inside, cranking the fan with the tool.

Ulla marched up next to the hood. “What year is it?”

Her mother startled, then paused, gauging Ulla. “1950, pulled from the river,” she said with a huff from her exertion. “You’re not in school.” She blew a wisp of blonde hair from her eyes. It had escaped the bandana used to gather the hair from her neck.

Ulla whipped out the document she’d scavenged.

Her mother tilted her head, studying it, then her face dissolved as her eyes widened. “What are you doing with that?”

Ulla slammed her finger on it. “Right there. *Mother*. Right there. It says Peter Johansson is my father. I even had his last name before the police changed it. Why did you lie to me!”

Her mother drew herself into a rigid defense. “I never lied to you, Ulla.”

“*Peter* is my pappa! And you took him away from me!”

“No, he is *not*. I put his name on that birth certificate because I was alone and afraid, and he was . . . ” She pressed the back of her hand against her mouth and turned away.

“Why do you hate him so much!” she cried.

Her mother spun back around and snatched the birth certificate from Ulla. “Because Peter Johansson is a horrible, *horrible* man, and I never wanted—I wasn’t ready to explain any of this to you, not like this, not now.” She screwed her eyes shut.

“What did he do that made you run away with me in the middle of the night? That nearly got you killed!” Ulla’s tears came unwelcome. But as she unleashed them, she knew they’d been waiting, building, multiplying, and finally unable to remain silent any longer. “I almost lost *both* of you!”

Her mother’s expression mirrored her own. “I’m sorry, *älskling*, I never wanted it to end like that. Never. But I had to do the right thing. And Peter —” Her mother always seemed to lose all language when evoking Peter’s name.

She reached to embrace Ulla, but Ulla refused her mother’s consolation, deflecting her hands. “How can you not know who got you pregnant! That is such a lie—you’re such a liar!”

That silenced her mother.

“Mamma?” she whispered, resorting to pleading. “What happened?”

“You’re right, I did lie. I had an affair with someone I shouldn’t have. I had to get as far away from him as possible.”

“Why?”

“I just did.” Her mother’s vision appeared to glaze over at the concrete floor.

“Who was he?”

Her eyes appeared to retreat into the past. “A man I met once by accident. We weren’t meant to be together.”

“He doesn’t know about me?” Ulla said in a small voice, peering at her mother.

Ronja opened her mouth as if grasping for a response. Her face drew inward and she released a pained gasp. “He knows.”

Ulla’s anger simmered. She held the birth certificate in her hands. “You don’t have to lie about Peter being my father just because you hate him.”

“You have me,” her mother cried. “*Me*. You don’t need a father.”

Defeated and weary, Ulla dared to say, “I miss him.”

Her mother planted her hands on her hips as if composing herself, and nodded briskly, her voice now mechanical. “Peter was very charming. And he was good to you. At least that much I can say.” She locked Ulla’s gaze and pierced her with the next command, “Don’t you ever go looking for him, don’t you dare utter his name to *anyone*, you hear me? No one. If he came back into our lives, *terrible* things would happen.” She took the crinkled birth certificate, folded it, and handed it back to Ulla. “Go and put this where you found it.”

“Why not throw it away if it’s a lie?” Ulla poised to rip it.

“Stop!” Her mother cried and reached for the paper as if it were a treasure.

“What terrible things! I’m not some little girl who can’t handle the truth.”

“Fine,” Ronja surrendered.

Ulla spared the certificate.

“Do you know what the mafia is?”

“Like in the movies?”

“No, not like the movies, Ulla. Like real life.”

“Peter was involved with the *mafia*? That’s why you don’t want him to be my father?”

“He’s not your father!”

“Why do you wear his ring!” she demanded.

Ronja, as if confused for a split second, looked at her left hand, the gold band on her ring finger. “It’s not a wedding band. *Moderskap*. I wear it for you, *älskling*. Not Peter.”

Ulla discharged a growling, aggravated sigh. It was time for her trump card. She raised her chin. “I found something else with my birth certificate.”

Her mother crossed her arms.

“Why do you have an American passport with your picture in it, but the name Sarah Thomason? You don’t look like you’re fifty-three, like Mrs. Grost, our lunch lady.”

The blink and jerk of Ronja’s face was slight, but Ulla knew her mother. She *knew* that face. Even though it had been marred when she was beaten nearly five years ago, Ulla was convinced it’d be impossible to disfigure her mother’s beauty. It would always grow back, stubborn and strong.

Unless her mother was the horrible one. *Not Peter*.

“I—I applied for that passport after I got my citizenship. I’ve always preferred the name Ronja, and I look young for my age.”

Ulla nodded, backed away, and then slowly turned on her heel.

Her mother called after her, “I can come home early and help you and Linney with your face paint tonight. For Wiley’s party?”

She shook her head, calling over her shoulder, “No, that’s all right. We’re not going as zombies.”

Her mother quickened, fell in step next to her. “I can call the school and tell them you were sick.”

Ulla kept walking. Faster.

Her mother kept pace. “Did you run all the way here? Wait, let me drive you home.”

“No.” She sped up. “No, I can run.” She broke into a jog.

“Ulla!”

Then a sprint.

“*Ulla*!”

She ran from Ronja’s pleas, until they became distant, taken with the wind that scattered the leaves in the wake of Ulla’s flight.

She scrambled across the broken concrete and crunched through the lawn. She reached her backyard, breathless and forcing down her tears once more, furiously wiping her face of any evidence.

She glanced up and saw Linnea, at first wondering if her hazy tears had created a mirage. The property zone between her house and Linnea's was uninhabitable because sometimes the lake flooded, turning weeds and crabgrass into a marshland. The breeze nipped at Ulla's neck and tousled her hair as she sulked closer. School wasn't over yet, but her best friend grew distinct with her dark hair whipping. Linnea held a soccer ball in her hands, and when she saw Ulla, she ran and met her halfway. "Where did you go!" she cried, panting. "I looked everywhere!"

Ulla eyed the ball. It had a ring of lake muck around it. "Is that for Everett?"

Linnea rubbed its stains. "I found it when I was fishing and threw it in the backyard." She cast her eyes sheepishly. "I'm sorry about what Everett said. He probably didn't mean it."

Ulla hugged her arms and focused on the lake. The wind stirred up white ripples. "So is Everett the love of your life? You're gonna defend *him*?"

"No. He only said that because . . . "

Ulla swallowed the rising sense of abandonment. First, her mother. Now, Linnea? "Because *why*?"

Linnea scrubbed at the ball's mildew. "Because . . . sometimes you act like you're better than everyone else."

Ulla released a long scoff. Tears pushed behind her eyes again.

"I know that's not true. It's because you stand up for yourself. I don't know how to stand up for myself, let alone you. I wish I could be you."

At that confession, Ulla's fear transferred into disbelief. "Me? You just said everyone hates me!"

Linnea's gaze remained on the soccer ball. "No, they don't. They don't know you. They don't love you like I do."

Love. Linnea said that word all the time. Finished her notes with *Love*. Finished her phone calls with, "Okay, luv ya!" Ulla could never bring herself to use those words with Linnea. They'd come out all wrong.

Linnea turned the ball over in her hands. Her eyes went to Ulla's. "What are you holding?"

The tears finally spilled at the reminder. "It's my birth certificate."

Linnea dropped the ball and took it from Ulla. She read it, and Ulla watched the curiosity on Linnea's face turn into realization, then shock. Finally, acceptance. "Your mom's been lying to you?" She wrapped Ulla into her arms. "I'm so sorry. I know how much you want your dad." They broke apart, and Ulla sniffled. Linnea continued staring at the birth certificate as if memorizing it. "Peter Johansson. It has his birth date. Funny, it's the same as mine. And an address. Maybe we could find him?"

"I don't know," Ulla said, the confusion burning her chest again. "I hate my mom right now, but I'm pretty sure I'd die if I ever lost her again. And the way she talks about Peter, it's as if it would be the worst thing anyone could ever do to us."

"Do what?" Linnea asked, handing the birth certificate back.

"Find Peter. Like he'd completely ruin our lives."

"Really?" Her eyes were tender and it made Ulla choke up again. "How?"

Ulla shrugged and squinted at Linnea, her voice small when she asked, "Do you honestly love me?"

Linnea pulled her into a deep embrace. "More than anyone in this entire world."

Ulla buried her face in her neck, inhaling the familiar Kmart perfume samples. She exhaled those three words she'd been longing to say, "I love you, too." She knew Linnea might never feel the weight of them like she did. A weight in her heart big enough to overcome the trauma of watching her mother's attempted murder, of being ripped away from Peter, and from Melia and Shorty, adrift. Ulla sank into those words. Her anchor—I love you, too.

Chapter Twenty

Ulla

Ulla pinned Linnea's inky hair into matching side buns. The girls had found a silky white bathrobe at Kmart and wrapped it backward around Linnea to channel Princess Leia.

She didn't want to go to Wiley's party and watch Linnea pine over Everett, and she didn't care for her classmates' teasing. But any place was better than home with her *lying* mother, who was dangling the car keys to Tina. "I'm ready when you are! Can I get a picture of you two?" The forced brightness and the superficial niceties incensed Ulla. *Stop pretending*! she wanted to shriek at her but came to the conclusion that a vow of silence would be the cruelest punishment. Every word and acknowledgment Ulla withheld from her mother would be a stab. *How does it feel to hurt the way I do*?

On the short drive to Wiley's house, they passed homes with decorations on the lawns, fake tombstones, and cotton-strung cobwebs. Lynched ghosts hung from trees, and an angry wind blew them perpendicular. The wind bruised the T-bird as her mother drove, competing with REO Speedwagon playing over the radio: "I'm Gonna Keep on Lovin' You."

Her mother barely pulled into the driveway when Ulla popped the door open. "Ulla," her mother called as she stormed away, arms crossed. "What time—Linney—can you call me when you want to get picked up? Never mind, I'll come at ten unless you call earlier!"

Linnea hurried behind. Stray tendrils escaped her Leia buns. “How long are you going to ignore your mom?” she said when they huddled next to the jack-o’-lanterns on Wiley’s porch.

“For as long as she lied to me.” Ulla punched the doorbell.

Wiley opened the door, dressed as a skeleton. “Oo-la-la! And Li-Leia!” He cracked himself up and then tilted his head at Ulla. “What are you?”

“Thrilled to be here,” she said without a smile and brushed past him, following the trail of Queen’s “Another One Bites the Dust” blaring from the basement.

“Everett is already *her-ere*!” Wiley sang after the two girls.

The music from the record player competed with *The Incredible Hulk* on TV. But even louder were two boys engaged in lightsaber battles and another group of kids shouting over the electronic tones of a Simon game.

Ulla and Linnea immediately went for the coffee table with bowls of Doritos, Bugle snacks, and cans of Pepsi. Ulla snapped the top on one and gave it to Linnea. They wedged themselves onto the sofa next to Patsy and Sunny, two nicer girls in their class, who looked just as uncomfortable nursing their own pops. Patsy’s brown ringlets were mushed into a high ponytail, and her freckles were dusted with glitter. Sunny’s real name was Megan, but her yellow hair and perma-smile lent to her nickname. The girls wore matching fairy wings and pink cheeks. “Did you hear we’re going to play seven minutes in heaven?” Sunny said.

“I heard it was spin the bottle,” snorted Ulla.

Over half of Mora’s seventh graders were crammed into the basement living room. Ulla, still used to being ranked dead last amongst the popular girls, was surprised at making the cut tonight.

She followed Linnea’s gaze to Everett. He was dressed in a plastic and polyester replica of Han Solo and jostling with a group of boys who were smashing empty pop cans on their foreheads. Kevin Wallin, another boy from their clique, had a Dr. Zaius mask pulled on his head and nudged Everett to look at Linnea.

Everett waved and pointed at his costume.

Linnea melted into the couch.

Patsy leaned across Sunny and hissed into Ulla’s ear, “Did you hear that JJ and Tanya are together?”

Ulla raised her brow as if she cared. Of course Jake Jensen, future small-town football hero, and Tanya, future captain of the cheerleading

squad, were together. Sunny jumped in, “And did you hear Everett is moving!”

Linnea stiffened next to Ulla.

“I thought everyone knew,” said Ulla. “He announced it at lunch.”

“New York. Wow . . . ” Patsy fanned herself. “Do you think he’ll meet anyone famous there?”

“Why is he moving to New York?” Ulla asked Linnea’s dreaded question for her.

“Because he’s *rich*,” said Sunny.

The lights went out, and there was a collective, “Ooooohhh!” with screeching giggles.

Wiley shined a flashlight on his face and waggled his tongue. “Who wants to play?”

Someone shoved the coffee table over to block the stairs, and Ulla gripped Linnea’s sweaty hand. “We don’t have to,” she whispered, sensing Linnea’s sickening mix of panic and excitement at the prospect of kissing Everett.

The light beamed directly onto Ulla’s face. “Oo-la-la wants to play!”

Ulla exhaled her loathing. Determined to prove Linnea’s earlier sentiment wrong that her classmates found her stuck-up, she flipped her long ponytail over her shoulder and said, “Fine. Lin and I will play.”

A resounding, “*Me too*,” came from the boys, and Ulla gaped at the female cohort in a silent demand for them to join. Patsy and Sunny popped up, and soon more girls with snickers and squeals made a circle. The boys made up one arc while the girls formed the other.

“What if a boy lands on a boy?” Tanya shouted from the couch where she held hands with JJ.

Wiley placed the flashlight back on his horse teeth. “No fag or lezzy kissing.” He set the flashlight in the middle of the circle and turned it off.

Queen played on, but someone had turned the volume down. Linnea spoke into Ulla’s ear. “I can’t do this.”

“I’ll go first,” said Ulla loudly.

The boys clapped and wolf-whistled. Ulla shuffled on her knees over the shag carpet and spun the flashlight, but it didn’t really spin, so she flipped the switch on.

Three boys boxed one another out to aim themselves square on the spotlight. A boy named Justin hustled forward. He was the shortest boy in

their class, still had baby pudge on his face, and braces.

He shoved his tongue in Ulla's mouth amidst whoops and hollers, and after completing a few slimy thrusts, Ulla sat back next to Linnea, wanting to gag. She wiped off Justin's saliva. "All the boys want to kiss you," Linnea whispered in her ear.

Ulla whispered back, "That's because I'm easy."

"No," said Linnea, scooting a centimeter away—it may as well have been the length of an ocean. It was dark, so Ulla couldn't see Linnea's expression, when she finished off, "It's because you're so *pretty*."

Linnea had never told Ulla she was pretty. But Ulla spent many a night pondering the changeling nature of Linnea's eyes under that thick brim of lashes, how they could blend into a perfect shade of light green depending on the angle of the sun. Still, most days they traveled along the entire spectrum of blue. She'd memorized Linnea's face, what it took for the dimple in her left cheek to appear.

Of all the ways Ulla dreamed of telling Linnea just how pretty she was, it never would've sounded like that. Like spitting out a bad taste.

"Who's next!" shouted Wiley as Justin gave the boys a round of high fives and tens.

"I'll go again," said Ulla, with heat pulsating her eyes. "But I'm spinning for Linney." Ulla tapped the flashlight and made sure it landed on Everett Barnes. She sat next to Linnea and hissed in her ear, "There. Are you happy?"

But Linnea had gone completely stagnate. A statue.

Everett looked equally as shocked. It dawned on Ulla. Everett Barnes had never kissed a girl?

Everyone clapped and whistled. Kevin shoved Everett across the circle.

Shockingly, Han Solo took Princess Leia's cheeks into his hands and guided her mouth to his.

Ulla couldn't watch this. "I don't feel good," she said to no one and got to her feet. She tripped over someone's cape and stumbled to the stairs, stepping over the coffee table blocking them.

Once outside, the wind assaulted her.

She plopped onto the front stoop, next to the dark jack-o'-lanterns whose candles had been whooshed-out. If only the vow to punish Ronja was not stronger than the wish to be rescued from unrequited love. Her mother would hold her and kiss her on the forehead and tell her that

someday it wouldn’t hurt so much to love someone that would never love you back. Even more desperate was Ulla for her mother to say that of course nothing was wrong with her, nothing wrong at all with Ulla aching to pick Linney over any guy.

Chapter Twenty-One

Ulla

Linnea found Ulla chilled and shaking on the porch. “Why did you leave?”

“You had Everett,” said Ulla through chattering teeth. The wind had plummeted the temperature.

“Yeah, but-but . . . I never know what to say to him.” She plopped next to her.

“You don’t need to talk to *suck face*.”

In a dreamy voice, Linnea responded, “He told me I was a good kisser.”

Ulla wanted to vomit. One kiss from Everett Barnes erased Linnea’s resentment that Ulla was so *pretty*. Mission accomplished.

“Will you come back in?” Linnea asked. “I need your help.”

“You’re on your own with Everett,” she bit back.

“Why are you so mad? He’s moving, anyway.”

“Thank *God*.”

Linnea hugged her arms and sighed deeply. “I feel like we’re fighting.”

“We’re not fighting. I’m just upset at my stupid mom.”

Linnea was quiet. She fidgeted with the folds of her robe. “Let’s walk home.”

“Really?” Ulla’s chest inflated with renewed energy. “What about Everett?”

“Like I said, he’s moving.”

Ulla craned her head to study Linnea, not believing her explanation. Then she recognized Linnea's worried lips turn inward, her shoulders hunching upwards. "You're spending the night, aren't you?" Ulla asked her.

Linnea nodded hesitantly. "But my parents are . . . " She shrugged. Linnea often did that when talking about her parents, using gestures and incomplete sentences. Ulla understood and said, "Let's stop at your place first and grab your clothes," knowing very well that Linnea had enough of her belongings at Ulla's house. "Make sure your parents are okay?"

Linnea's grateful eyes pumped life back into Ulla.

They walked briskly to Linnea's house against the icy winds attacking their skin. Ulla wanted to ask Linnea why she cared so much about her addict-parents when they seemed to care so little about her. *They're not always like that*, Linnea would say.

They turned onto Linnea's street, and the only light from her quiet house was a blue halo from the television.

Ulla smelled the cigarettes and weed before they hit the crumbled concrete walkway to the front door, but they diverged from the path to the backyard. Linnea said she needed to check on a few things, which Ulla understood as confiscating as many Millers and Coors as she could, dumping half the contents of Schnapps, swiping marijuana and white powder, and scattering handfuls of it into the toilet.

Their footsteps crunched over the dead leaves piled against the side of the house. Linnea scanned the party through the window in the back door.

"Do you want my help?" Ulla asked.

"No," Linnea whispered, then squinted through the glass and said, "Maybe."

She whirled around and gave Ulla instructions, pointing at the door's window. "See the guy right there? The one with the really big nose? He's playing cards with the guy with glasses?"

Ulla nodded.

"Ask them if they want a refill. And if they say yes, put in Coke or Fanta first, okay?"

"Okay."

"And then this much," she narrowed her thumb and pointer finger to a sliver, "of vodka or rum. It's in the tall glass bottles."

"What are you going to do?"

"Take care of my parents."

“Is Abby home?”

“No, she’s at Jess Wilkson’s party. Ready?”

“Yes.”

They opened the door to muted sounds of *Love Boat* from the television and Blondie from an upstairs record player. “Pretend you’re getting something to eat,” Linnea said. She and Ulla walked into the haze of smoke.

“Hey! It’s Princess Leia,” Nose-man said and Glasses-man laughed.

“Just getting something to eat,” said Linnea. “She can fill your drinks.”

“Barmaids!” Glasses said, slapping down a card. “I love it!” He peered at Ulla. “What’s your name, gorgeous?”

Ulla lifted his glass, examining it. “Need a refill?”

“Rum and Coke, sweetheart,” he said.

Linnea grabbed the two-liter of pop and a tall amber glass. She handed Ulla the pop and whispered, “Shield me.”

Ulla slowly poured the cola while Linnea dumped half the rum down the sink and then whisked it back to Ulla’s hands to top it off.

They repeated this with Nose’s drink.

Ulla followed Linnea into the living room. They found more bottles to repeat their strategy. Ulla paused, recognizing someone on the couch. A skinny man who towed for Curlers’ wrecking yard. She never liked the way he handed over metal scraps and made comments like, *What’s a cute little girl doing playing with such big cars?*

“Meet me in my bedroom,” Linnea said.

Ulla gladly and swiftly did so. She closed the door behind her. She hadn’t been in Linnea’s room since third grade, always obeying Ronja’s demand not to step foot inside the Larsson house. But what did she care now about her *lying* mother’s rules?

She looked at herself in Linnea’s dresser mirror and wiped off the excess red lipstick smudged around her mouth. She handled a Rubik’s cube that Linnea had bought earlier at Kmart and solved in five minutes. Ulla twisted the colors up again. She arranged the Cover Girl eye shadows and hot pink tubes of lipstick. She picked up the small scissors Linnea used to trim her bangs.

The door opened. “That was fast,” Ulla said and turned to see Skinny-man close the door.

Ulla's throat soured, and her heart plunged into her gut. She slid her eyes to the scissors that rested in her palm. She tightened her hand around them.

An hour later, even though time felt suspended, Ulla and Linnea clutched one another, hidden under blankets on the floor of Ulla's bedroom. The door squeaked open, hesitant. Her mother's shadow cut across Ulla, and her hand gently stroked her daughter's damp hair. She sighed. "Get some rest." Her mother pressed her lips onto each of their heads and then left.

Ulla didn't rest. Neither did Linnea. They lay awake next to one another, their fingers entwined. Though Ulla's body had finally stopped shaking, her insides had coalesced into a heavy lump. Shared images from that night, though invisible, flashed above them on the white ceiling. Ulla closed her eyes to blot them out, but they were still there. Blood spurting. A violent scream. Running. Red drops on Linnea's white costume. Shoving their clothes into the garbage can underneath a greasy pizza box and other refuse. Scrubbing her skin in the scalding shower while her mother pounded on it, demanding to know where the girls had been when she went to pick them up at Wiley's.

Out for a walk, they'd lied.

They both startled at the sharp rapping on the front door. Ulla's heart exploded in her ears. She gripped Linnea's hand. The front door opened.

Hushed voices exchanged words.

The bedroom door creaked. "Linney," Ronja's voice splintered. "Linney, I'm so sorry, but someone is here—"

Ulla sat up. "Mamma, no."

"It's the police, Ulla. They—"

"No!"

"—have to take her."

"She didn't do it!"

Her mother flew to her, slapped a hand over her mouth, and spoke to her in Swedish. "Stop! Not another word!" With her hand still smothering Ulla's mouth, she said to Linnea in English, "Grab some clothes. You have to go. It'll be okay. You're not in trouble, sweetie."

Ulla dug her fingernails into her mother's hand. Ronja yelped in pain and retracted it. "Where!" Ulla cried. Flashbacks buried deep in Ulla's mind were unearthed: fists on her mother's face, blue and red lights. *I'm Kellee, I'm a social worker. I'm going to take care of you.*

"They're taking her from her parents, aren't they!" Ulla gasped.

Her mother's face crumbled. As did her apology, "*Ja, min lilla älskling*."

"But she can stay with us! Mamma, we can take—"

"That's not how it works. I'm so sorry," her mother cried.

Linnea curled into a ball, a tiny wail escaping her.

Ronja sighed to the heavens and rose to her feet. She left the room and Linnea's cries multiplied.

Ulla apologized to Linnea. Apologized for stabbing Skinny-man with the scissors, for not screaming for help first. Because her instinct was not to ask for help. But to fight.

A knock sounded again. This time it was a police officer. His dark eyes were kind. The corners drooped like teardrops. He reminded her of Shorty. And she wished that somehow Linnea could live with her godparents. The ones she hadn't seen nor heard from in years but whose phone number she repeated when she missed them terribly.

He took off his hat and knelt next to the girls. "Lin, I'm gonna take you someplace safe." Linnea's tears slowed once she looked at him with recognition.

"Hi, Oscar," she said. Ulla knew the Larssons were no strangers to the Mora Police Department, nor the Kanabec County Social Services Department.

Oscar gave her a sad smile. "I'll give you however much time you need to say goodbye to Ulla and get your things. Does that sound okay?"

She nodded. He stood and quickly left the room with Ulla's mother. Linnea smudged her cheeks with the heel of her hand and numbly moved about as if underwater, gathering clothes, a hairbrush, and shoes. She held them and stood in the middle of the room with her eyes cast unfocused on the floor speckled with moonlight. She took a step.

A hurricane rose in Ulla's chest. Losing faith in her mother was one thing, but losing Linnea, too? *All on the same day*! What would happen to her? Who would speak for her? Who would protect her?

Beskyddaren.

“Wait!” Ulla went to her bottom dresser drawer. The horse was probably nothing but a cheap trinket, maybe some flea market find. *Another lie*. Even so, Ulla still believed in his magic.

She placed the figurine into Linnea’s hand. “Take him, hide him.”

Linnea shook her head, dark strands of hair stuck to her wet cheeks. “No, he’s too special.”

“I know. That’s why I want you to have him. It’ll remind you of *us*. He’ll bring us back together.”

Linnea dropped her belongings and wrapped her arms around Ulla in a way she never had before, a desperate hug that unveiled all the things words couldn’t. “I love you, Ulla, I love you *so much*.”

Ulla shifted their embrace to kiss Linnea’s cheek, but her friend turned her face and met the kiss with her lips.

They kissed again. And again. The kiss went straight into Ulla’s blood, filled her with pumping energy, and sent her stomach and heart spinning. Their lips parted, but their eyes remained on one another. “We’ll go together?” Linnea said, gathering her things.

Side by side, they walked out.

Oscar gave Linnea a gentle shoulder squeeze and led her to the squad car.

Ulla watched Linnea climb into the back of it. Oscar closed the door. Linnea stretched a hand against the backseat window, concealing Beskyddaren over her heart with the other. The car disappeared down the street.

Ronja reached for Ulla, whose body was wracked with cries. “She’ll come back soon, *älskling*. Shhh.” Ulla turned into the comforting mold of her curves, breathing in her familiar scent, like being covered by a warm blanket, believing this to be just another one of her mother’s lies.

Part IV

A kiss has breathed new life into my soul,
And stilled the deepest yearning of my breast.
Come, Darkness! Fold me in your intimate embrace,
That my lips may drink in fresh delights.

Such life was steeped in dreams of old;
Thus I live on, forever gazing at those dreams,
Scorning the glitter of all other joys,
For only Night exhales such sweet balm.

The day is barren of love's sweet bliss;
Its light's vain splendor brings me pain,
And the sun's fierce heat consumes me.

Hide, then, O eye, from the glare of earthly suns!
Shroud yourself in Night; she stills your longing
And heals the pain, like Lethe's cooling waters.

— Karoline von Günderrode, "Der Kuss Im Traume"

Chapter Twenty-Two

Minneapolis, Minnesota
November 2017

Linnea

Beskyddaren rested in Linnea's hands. Knowing its true value made her afraid to touch him, but stronger was the desire to feel its love one last time.

Taylor would be arriving soon for their journey to Mora, to find Ulla. His residency had been kind in granting him a week off at such short notice. Probably because he never used his vacation days.

The horse's carrier sat next to her packed travel bag on the bed, and, on its other side, an Adidas soccer shoebox.

She'd found the shoebox crammed inside Taylor's old bedroom closet. The only reason she'd gone into her son's room at all was to catalog the items still there. Yearbooks, textbooks, soccer and academic awards. She'd be moving to a hospice facility next week with the help of her sister. Abby was a nurse in Milwaukee and applied for a leave of absence. A shame, she and her sister had only decided to bond now. Still, late would always be better than never. Her energy and faculties seemed to be dwindling by the minute.

She placed the Dala horse into its holder, took a deep breath, and lifted the shoebox lid. Though she had a hunch about its contents, Linnea hadn't

fully prepared herself. “Oh, Taylor,” she whispered. A whiff of perfume hit her, and she pressed her heart, recognizing the faint aroma from years back, as if it were only yesterday she discovered the scent while stripping Taylor’s bed sheets.

Linnea handled a stray napkin, bleeding with the blue ink of feminine cursive: *Analise Barnes, Isa Barnes, Mrs. Everett Taylor Barnes, Taylor & Isa Barnes.*

She sifted through a stack of photographs amongst a collection of receipts, tickets, letters, more scribble-filled napkins, a perfume bottle, and even a balled-up lace bra. A sad chuckle escaped her, and Linnea replaced the lid, feeling much too intrusive. How often did her son go through this box? Devoid of dust, it led her to believe it hadn’t gone untouched.

What would become of him? Overwhelmed with the finality, her permanent ending, she agonized. The words came, whether she was singing them or her brain was humming them to her. It was the song she used to sing as a girl, whispered to Taylor as a baby: “ . . . Like a bridge over troubled water . . . ”

Her hands shook. She smelled something burning, and her hearing grew muffled. The bed flew up and hit her in the face. Linnea slumped to the ground.

“Mom, *Mom*!”

Taylor’s terrified face came into focus briefly. She heard him cussing frantically. But he sounded far away. What was he doing? *Where am I*? Her tongue hurt, and she tasted blood and vomit. She coughed and felt her body being rolled to the side.

He was talking again, the words were disjointed, but she caught one: *seizure*. She felt so tired. Her eyes lifted to the contents on the bed. Her mind retreated, but her stare remained fixed on the shoe box.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Mora, Minnesota

Analise

A handsome and mysterious stranger entered Mora Café and Bakery. In rural central Minnesota, Mora hovered at a population of three thousand, making it easy to mark an outsider. Not just any outsider. He reeked of the Twin Cities: blue dress shirt with unbuttoned rolled cuffs, pressed gray chinos, and a sleek watch.

At first, Analise hadn't glanced to the door from her station behind the café's counter. Routine had trained her who to expect, when, and on what day. It was Monday. Oscar and Liam, retired policemen, had been seated at the counter for senior citizen specials since 7:30 a.m., arguing politics and crossword answers. The *Fabulous-Four* teenage girls from Mora's Secondary School, with their knock-off designer yoga pants, had arrived for machine-dispensed mochas before school at 7:45.

This was right before the members of the *Moms' Book Club* gathered around their usual table next to the glass display of baked goods. In five years, Analise had yet to see the moms pop out a book. She counted the women when they came in. One missing. Must be her now. But silence fell over the establishment, and so Analise averted her eyes from Oscar's coffee cup, where she mentally calculated the room he'd need for his cream.

The moment she saw the stranger though, she was thrown off, filling it to the brim.

It seemed everyone was sizing up the interloper. He was tall and blond like most Scandinavian folk of Mora, but, no, they didn't seem to know him. His gaze skirted about with uncertainty. For having such a polished appearance, he did not seem self-assured.

Thankful to have the coffee pot to steady her shaky grip, Analise treaded over in her generic, squelching sneakers.

The stranger was busying himself, scanning coloring pages still taped on the café's display wall from National Donut Day. Between the pages were Nordic memorabilia, framed photographs of the annual *Vasaloppet USA*, Minnesota's largest cross-country ski race, vintage photos of the town's Swedish relics: the giant Dala horse and Mora clock, the county courthouse, and an original 1943 photo of the husband-wife owners of Mora Café & Bakery.

When Analise and the stranger connected, his face blanched, eyes widened, and she noted the greenish hue and feminine-long eyelashes that framed them. His mouth unhinged as if she were either some sort of celebrity or a ghost left over from Halloween.

"Would you like to sit at the counter or—?" she started.

"Isa?" he gasped, though it seemed more like a choke. The name slid through her veins, solidifying her blood. Analise squinted her eyes. "Did . . . ? How would you . . . ?" She turned about as if someone could rescue her and explain how a complete stranger would know the nickname only her mother called her by. "Do I know you?"

The stranger's razor-sharp stare tickled the nerves along her spine. She focused on the buttons of his shirt rising up and down, the spiked rhythm of his breaths. "I—I'm sorry . . . I'm so sorry . . . " He ran a distressed hand across his shorn hair and cursed to himself, almost tearfully. He covered his mouth and then lowered his hand. "You—you don't know me?"

She started to form the word, *No*, but couldn't complete it. Because clearly, she ought to. "Should I?"

"Yes! You seriously don't —? It's *me*," he slammed a hand to his chest, "Taylor!" His eyes bore into hers as if testing her, asking, begging, *Are you lying*? But apparently seeing she was honest, because Analise was incapable of even a white lie, his countenance changed, as if he were going to

completely combust. He spun and fled out the door, taking her breath with him.

Analise spun too and clunked the coffee pot onto the counter, mumbling to no one, “Be right back.”

The man—Taylor—was halfway to a silver Audi parked on the street.

“Wait!” she called out, and he stopped, planting his hands on his hips as if to find balance. He shut his eyes and lowered his face, drawing her gaze to his footwear. He wore neither loafers nor dress shoes as expected, but black Adidas with white stripes. The kind soccer players wore. Something about them was so achingly familiar. When she arrived tentatively at his side, he opened his eyes but cast them onto his shoes, as if the answers to life’s most pressing questions were written on them.

“Are you okay?” she asked gently.

He exhaled forcefully. His face softened when he raised it to her. He swiped a hand down it to clear the perspiration. The tiny beads glistened in the cold sunshine. “I didn’t mean to freak you out.”

“Are you sure I’m the one who’s freaked out?” She immediately regretted her joking manner. But for some reason, the light exchange came effortlessly, and it set him at ease, relaxing his tense shoulders.

“I’m prone to panic attacks,” he said with a closed-mouth laugh.

Analise returned the smile, dying to ask him more questions, and so she coaxed him inside to stay. “Did you want some breakfast? We don’t have anything fancy.”

His look upon her was intense, saturated with what appeared to be a thousand questions as well, but he replied, “Sure,” and followed. Analise, feeling guilty at provoking in him such a dramatic reaction, said, “This isn’t something I share or talk about much, but I had a brain injury my senior year of high school. I’m fine now, but my memory took a little hit, so if I—if we—”

Taylor opened the door to the café, saying, “I was surprised, that’s all. I recognized you from Wayzata High. We were in the same class. It’s okay, you don’t have to explain anything.”

Analise paused and studied him, not quite buying it, but he avoided her gaze, and she thanked him for holding the door.

He settled between Oscar and Liam. Analise overturned a coffee cup and readied to pour, but he covered it. “I don’t drink coffee.”

“Are you human?” growled Oscar.

“Zombie,” Taylor deadpanned with such agility, both she and Oscar chuckled. The glimmer that flashed in his eyes struck Analise.

“How about orange juice?” she asked.

“What’s a zombie doing in Mora?” Oscar remarked in his gravelly voice.

“Just passing through,” he said, perusing the menu.

“Nobody *passes* through twenty miles off I-35,” said Liam. “Unless you’re a complete fool.”

Analise whacked the bill of Liam’s trucker hat.

Taylor released an uneasy laugh, but it died when his gaze landed on Analise’s hand curled around the orange juice she set before him, the one brandishing her engagement ring. Analise immediately released the OJ and busied her hands, covering the diamond.

With a restrained face, Taylor pored over the menu and all of its three breakfast choices: eggs of any configuration, pancakes, and doughnuts. Without looking at her, he said, “What do you recommend? No—just surprise me. I don’t care. I’ll eat anything.” He set the menu down gingerly and asked softly, “When’s the wedding?” His expression was masked, awaiting her response.

“Saturday,” she said, “nothing big. My fiancé has a huge family and I don’t.” *Why am I telling him all this? Why did he ask?*

“I got engaged once,” he said, “twice actually, but the last woman realized I was still in love with the first,” he said this directly at Analise, “so she dumped me.”

Oscar guffawed. “You sound like a real ass.”

Analise now whacked Oscar’s hat bill

Liam held up a crossword puzzle and said, “What’s a nine-letter word for medical history? Ends in S.”

“Anamnesis,” the stranger said without removing his eyes from Analise.

“Aha!” Oscar jostled him on the shoulder. “He’s a *smart* ass.”

Analise scrubbed the flush from her face and went to the kitchen. Willa, her co-waitress, was in there. She was old enough to be Analise’s grandmother and sometimes functioned as one because Analise had none. “Willa, can you take the new customer at the counter?”

Willa plumped her generous boobs with a smirk and grabbed her order for the *Sans-Book-Club* moms. “That hottie? Honey, Tom Selleck could sit

there, and it wouldn't be enough to make me deal with the Crusty Crabbies." She lowered her chin at Oscar and Liam and then lifted her brow at Taylor. "Get his story though. *Definitely* has one." With a wink and cluck of her tongue, Willa yanked her jeans up over her flat butt.

Analise scuttled to Hank, the lone cook. He played hockey with some sizzling eggs, back and forth on the flat steel grill, wagging his hips to Hall & Oates playing from the boom box. Analise snagged the cigarette butt from his mouth before more ashes dropped into the eggs. She reached into his apron pocket, grabbed a new cig and his lighter, jammed the cig into his mouth, and flicked the lighter in one practiced motion. "Waffles. Strawberries. Got it?"

Hank scrunched his pocked nose. "The hell am I supposed to make waffles?" he said out the side of his mouth.

Analise squatted to the stainless steel shelving at Hank's ankles. She pushed aside mixing bowls, a large grater, unidentifiable contraptions that resembled utensils, and baking pans, until she seized upon a waffle iron. "Ha! How long have you worked here?" She smacked it onto the counter.

"Since the beginning of time," he said, "but waffles aren't on the menu.*"* He scraped the scrambled eggs onto a plate.

Analise went to the industrial fridge and yanked it open. She moved aside half-priced Halloween cookies and clutched the container of strawberries resting next to a pan of banana cream bismarks. Their pastry chef—heaven forbid she be called a baker—probably needed the strawberries that afternoon to make strawberry creams, but she wouldn't miss a handful.

From inside the kitchen, Analise heard the café door open again. But instead of another stranger, she recognized the prattling and wailing and grabbed a pan of cookies. She set the strawberries next to Hank, snatched the plates of eggs, and floated out of the kitchen. She slid the eggs to the Crusty Crabbies, then announced operatically to her church-friend Wendy and her tow-headed children, ages four and eighteen months: "I haaaave Ghosts! I haaave Pumpkins! I haaave Monsters!" The children were dressed in the same garb they'd most likely been wearing the past week post-Halloween, Shaggy and Scooby-Doo. Analise held a Frankenstein cookie next to the toddler's cheek and made her best monster face. The toddler burst into effervescent giggles. Analise made another monster face, sending both children into spastic belly fits.

She caught Wendy's sideways glance at Taylor's stare while she continued with a game of *Scary Monster*, curling her fingers next to her bugging eyes, and then tickling the children. After a few minutes of gab with Wendy, Wendy corralled her frosting-coated tots, thanking Analise, and scooted them out the door, fanning one more gaze at Taylor.

Now came the late morning lull. *Bookless Club* moms settled into their post-coffee coma, furtively checking their phones, clearly desperate for time to stop altogether. Liam was in a slow-motion egg feed, and Oscar's were suffering from neglect. He was interrogating Taylor.

Analise snatched the coffee pot and dangled it over the counter in front of Taylor. "Never too late to start an addiction," she said, mustering a breezy, casual tone.

His polite grin communicated her joke wasn't amusing. She scrambled to recover. "Has Oscar discovered all your deep dark secrets yet?"

"Me!" Oscar jabbed a wrinkled finger into his chest. "He's the one doing the interrogating. Asking about the *Larssons*."

Taylor massaged his neck in a strained fashion and stared at the countertop. When he lifted his gaze, he bypassed Analise for Oscar. "Did you know the Larsson family?"

Oscar stabbed at his greasy eggs. "Everyone knew the Larsson family." He held up the skewered forkful. "I'm guessing so did you."

It was game-on to see who would crack first.

Taylor sighed and yielded quietly, "My mother."

Oscar's sagging earlobes twitched. His back straightened, and he set down the fork. His eyelids came together, slivers of examination, scanning Taylor's features. "Margie Larsson had two daughters. Abby and Linnea."

"Linnea," he replied.

"I'll be damned," breathed Oscar with a low whistle and took a sip of his coffee. He raised it to Analise. "You see? Never know what the day is going to bring you, Ana."

Utterly confused, she cocked her head, demanding Oscar continue.

Oscar nudged him. "If you're digging up dirt on your mother, look no further than the woman standing in front of you."

Analise was disturbed by the covert game. Disturbed by the way Taylor and Oscar were unpeeling her skin and exposing a rawness. "I know nothing about him," she thrust an arm in his direction and then sliced the

air, “or his mother. *Linnea*.” Analise made her way back into Hank’s 1970s time-machine lair.

“You Make My Dreams” was playing as he gallopped whipped cream atop the mountain of strawberries that were atop a mountain of waffles. “Ya?” He was humming along, “Whaddya think?” He presented her the creation. “Should we add this to the menu?”

“Sure,” she snapped, and without a smile added an equally pithy, “Thanks.” She latched onto a jug of maple syrup on her way out and thunked the waffles and syrup in front of Taylor. “What’s your last name?”

He drifted his eyes from the breakfast up to hers. “How did you know I love strawberry waffles?”

“Because *everybody* does,” she snarled and rubbed her face again. Sweat moistened her armpits, heartbeat lurching into her neck. “I’ll refill your orange juice,” she replied in a softer tone, taken aback by her own insolence.

Oscar snorted. “Ana might not know anything about your mother. But *her* mother, Ulla, definitely knows about *your* mother.” Oscar dragged in a deep breath that pulled along with it several memories it seemed. His eyes took on a sad, faraway trance before returning to his coffee, signaling another refill.

Analise aimed her gawking, silent mouth at Taylor.

With a penitent expression, Taylor said, “I need your help.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Analise

Taylor's only explanation for Analise was that his mother, Linnea, had once been best friends with Ulla, and he urgently needed to speak with her. He declined to elaborate, much to her irritation, and wolfed down his waffles while she finished hurrying the *Not-So-Bookish-Moms* along in hopes of catching him. But he placed a twenty by his plate, next to a napkin inked with his information, and escaped.

Analise snatched the napkin and scanned it: *612-555-1208. I'm at the AmericInn Hotel. Can we talk*? *Taylor.* Still no last name. He wrote in small, precise, capital letters. So he *was* from the Twin Cities.

Analise hustled after him, the door dinging loudly. His scent left a path in the breeze. It didn't trigger any deleted memories from her brain injury, as scents sometimes did, but it elicited a recurring, amorous dream of hers, setting her on edge. She didn't want to feel tempted by the sudden and intense attraction of another man when she had a loyal fiancé eager to marry her in a few days. She stopped short, hesitating, watching him signal the lock of his slick car. "Taylor!" she called out.

He froze.

So did Analise. Their eyes connected, and she waved the napkin, unsure what to say when her gaze flicked to his shoes. "You play soccer," she said, moving toward him, meaning for it to be a question, but it felt obvious.

Taylor snapped his head up and went to her. "You remember?"

Taken aback by his intensity, Analise shook her head, her pulse cranking as he neared. “No, no, I mean, your shoes, but how well did we know each other?”

A spark in his eyes died. He looked away. She stared at his profile, his eyelashes, and the cleft in his chin.

He finally answered, “We were in the same class.”

“Last name?”

“Barnes.”

Analise rifled through her catalog of scant high school memories. “Taylor Barnes . . . I think I might remember you out of five thousand people, but I kind of kept to myself.”

He looked at her pointedly, his gaze wistful. “I remember you, everyone liked you, but you disappeared halfway through senior year. You didn’t show up after winter break.”

Everyone liked me? She wanted to laugh at that. “Um . . . after my brain injury, my mom pulled me from school. She—”

“She what?” He took a step closer.

“She didn’t allow me to return.”

“Why? Where did you go?”

“Here.”

“Here?” Taylor seemed astonished. “All this time,” he whispered.

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing. Everyone thought you left the country and went back to Sweden. You know how high school kids talk.”

She twisted her lips and clamped her impulse to ask. “Sure, I suppose.”

“Did you graduate?”

“I got my GED.”

“How—how bad was your accident?” He clenched his forehead as if scrubbing away a stain.

“I don’t remember it, or really any of my senior year. I had to do a lot of rehab. I had seizures.”

“Jesus,” he whispered and stared out into the street. A car went by. Then two. A pall of uncomfortable silence fell over them. Taylor’s breathing increased. “But you’re okay now?” He cleared his throat as if preparing to say something else, but he didn’t.

Intrigued by his deep concern, she nodded, feeling an urge to touch him, but hugged her arms instead. “Yes, I don’t even need medication,” she

replied, recalling the dread of side effects, the constant fear of missing a dose, the brain fog, the insistence she go on birth control while on these drugs, but birth control wreaked havoc with her already-fragile moods, increased her crying jags, and made her fat.

Taylor exhaled as if it were his great relief, not only hers. She circled to his original request. “You need to find my mom?”

He tongued his cheek. “Do you have her address? Would she talk to me?”

“Is there a reason she wouldn’t?”

He rubbed his lips as if contemplating.

“There’s something you’re not telling me,” she said and then softly entreated, “please.”

Still, he didn’t answer.

“I’ll call her—”

“No, that’s not a good idea.”

Annoyed with the obscure behavior, she sighed.

“I’m sorry for being so cryptic. Truly, I am. But our moms apparently have some unsettled history that I’m not sure is our business.”

“Why doesn’t your mom come herself?”

He tightened his mouth and aimed his unfocused, squinting eyes behind her as if he didn’t know how to answer.

“She . . . can’t?” Analise encouraged.

“No. She has cancer,” he replied to the sidewalk.

“Oh, God, I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“I have something I need to give to your mom personally—”

“Is she dying?” Analise interrupted him.

“Yeah,” he said quickly, “How can I find her?”

Yeah? Was it strange she wanted to hug him? Fold him into her and say, *It’s okay if you want to cry.* She traced his words on the napkin*: Can we talk? Taylor. “*I don’t remember being in the same classes together,” she said, evading his question, wanting to pump him with her own, “which meant you were in all the classes for the smart kids, like advanced placement or post-secondary.”

He didn’t answer.

“Were you?”

“What?”

“In those classes?”

He nodded absently.

She looked over his fancy clothes and car. “What do you do now?”

Taylor placed a heavy gaze on her. “I’m in my last year of residency.”

“A doctor?”

“Neurologist.”

With a mirthless laugh, she said, “I could be one of your patients with all my brain injuries. One ironically was from a soccer ball.”

He appeared to mirror her laugh, but it wasn’t quite genuine. “How’d that happen?”

“Cross country practice. We were doing laps around the boys’ soccer team. Could’ve been you that hit me.”

“Could’ve been,” he said, resuming his stare past her shoulder. He fidgeted with his watch. “And you don’t remember the other one?”

“My mom said I was found unconscious in our neighborhood in Minneapolis.”

He tilted his face to the sky and wiped a palm on it.

“Why neurology?” she asked, satisfying her urge to keep him talking. It seemed he was chained to an unbearable weight, condemned to a bottomless sadness.

Taylor stuck his hands in his pockets and shrugged. “I wish now I would’ve chosen physical or occupational therapy. All I do is look at brain scans, tweak seizure drugs, and watch people slowly die from dementia.”

“At least you’ll make more money than a therapist.” She tried a lighthearted approach and then kicked herself.

“Too late for that. But I’m not gonna bitch about it.”

“You could if you wanted. I wouldn’t judge you.”

“I know you wouldn’t,” he said warmly, and that strange familiarity with him returned. His smile was authentic, but still, it couldn’t erase the melancholy in his eyes.

Analise finally caved. “My mom works over on Fifth at Jorgen’s. Just go see her.”

“Do you have her home address instead?” He pulled out his phone.

Analise nodded and gave it to him, watching his thumbs tap the information.

“How long are you staying here?” she asked, staring once again at his penmanship: *I’m at the AmericInn Hotel*.

“After I see your mom, I’ll head back to the Cities.” He locked his phone and slid it into his pocket. “How late does she work?”

“Six. Usually.”

“Can you do me a favor?”

“What is it?”

“Don’t tell her about me.”

“Why?”

“It’s just better this way. I’m sorry.” Taylor swallowed and creased his forehead. “It, ah . . . it was nice to run into you.”

She opened her mouth to speak, to loose all the remaining questions fighting, rushing to the surface.

“Even if you don’t remember me,” he said almost inaudibly—*painfully*. He went toward his car and then stopped, turned, and reached his hand out, as if offering to shake hers.

Analise grabbed it. His touch released a thrill from her nerves, bursting her wide open. Taylor shifted his fingers, tracking them up her palm, and sealed them together. He didn’t look directly at her, only at their hands delicately lacing.

The door to the café clattered open with loud, high-pitched chatter. “Ana,” one of the *Book-Hating* moms laughed. “There you are. Willa thinks you ran off with this guy!”

Analise abruptly let go of Taylor, afraid of what was happening. Her phone rang. She wrangled it from her jeans pocket and saw the number. “Oh, no,” she said, flustered. It was the number from Mora Elementary. “It’s my daughter’s school.”

“You have a daughter,” he said, clearly stunned.

Analise swiped the icon to answer. “Hello,” she said out of breath, unable to fully register the voice on the other end.

Taylor mumbled a swift farewell, went for his car like a man on a mission, lowering himself into it, and starting it up. The school secretary told Analise something about her daughter’s missing lunch? She started after him, holding a stop sign hand like a fool, as if she could possibly thwart his now single-minded getaway.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Analise

Analise finished her shift at the café in a state of troubled nerves. She drove three blocks to Jorgen's Autobody Shop to interrogate her tight-lipped mother. But Ulla Berglund was tougher to crack than a lug nut.

Maybe Ulla's aversion to intimacy sprouted from the death of Ronja, her mother, and then later the estrangement from Analise's father. Ronja died shortly after Analise was born, but from what—Ulla refused to expound, except for*: It was a freak road accident, and I hate talking about it.*

Analise bugged her great-godparents, Melia and Shorty, for answers, but they, too, were mum about Ronja's death: *Too painful to talk about. Ulla will tell you when she's ready.*

The townsfolk were useless, and when Analise snagged Oscar, the retired know-it-all police officer, who'd just interrogated Taylor, he'd only squint his eyes and say, *What did Ulla tell you?* When she repeated that it was a road accident, that the wrecker hit an icy patch, Oscar had replied, "Ah, well, that's it. Was over twenty years, Ana, my memory's fuzzy." Fuzzy memory? Analise now wondered, especially after Oscar's exchange with Taylor in the café this morning.

If answers regarding Ronja were difficult to come by, they were even more so regarding Analise's paternity. Her demands of Ulla for details of her father, at least a *name*, came to no avail. As a seventh-grader, she once ransacked the house for her birth certificate and found:

Date of Birth: *December 24th, 1987*
Place of Birth: *Cambridge, Minnesota*
Biological Mother: *Ulla Berglund*.
Biological Father: (Empty)

But then, at Shorty's funeral, Ulla and Melia were arguing heatedly in the anteroom before the service. Analise, still in her anti-seizure med-fog haze, was ready to abandon her raging, eighteen-month-old daughter and just walk out the doors and keep walking—maybe forever—until Melia shouted at Ulla, "Shorty never wanted this! She deserves the truth!" Analise collapsed at the doorway and had a seizure from the exhaustion and cloud of noxious, unbearable grief. Her great-godfather's death made talk of anything emotional even more verboten.

The silent, weighted curiosity and wild speculation about her father grew into the invisible baggage she carried, never imagining the unbelievable would be added to that weight.

Not until she awoke in the hospital on her eighteenth birthday, with a diagnosis of retro-anterograde amnesia, Ulla's adamant story of being beaten by an abusive boyfriend, and—

A positive pregnancy test.

Here she was, caught in that same dreaded and tenuous dance of avoiding the answer to that delicate question for her eleven-year-old daughter, Penelope. *Wait—you don't know who my pappa is?* Penelope, much more zealous than Analise had been and armed with the Internet, beseeched Analise to start a Facebook page so he could find them. Analise avoided social media—too many weirdos—although she didn't put it past Penelope to secretly make an account at the school library.

Maybe, if patient enough, she wouldn't need to channel her daughter's hardcore quest for truth. The answers to her past would come in their own time.

Maybe that time was now. With Taylor Barnes searing her mind, Analise went around the back of the stucco-spackled garage, past a line of cars, and opened the glass door. She fluttered a wave to Jorgen, who always reminded her of some ancient Norse god that would probably live for 150 years. He'd been married three times and sent Ulla roses on her birthday and every holiday. Analise once asked Ulla why Jorgen didn't know she

preferred women, to which Ulla had shrugged and said, “Who says he doesn’t?”

Analise found Ulla, an ageless Norse goddess herself, wiping a wrench with a grease rag. An Alanis Morrisette song played on the radio. “What are you doing here? Where’s Pen?” she asked Analise.

“I have about fifteen minutes before school’s out.”

“Do you need something?”

“No . . . ” She stuck a hand in her pocket, surprised to find a LipSmackers chapstick. When did Penelope borrow her jean jacket? Analise took the cap off the *Strawberry Swirl* and sniffed. “I was talking with Oscar today.”

“Oscar doesn’t talk with anyone but himself.”

Analise squeezed out a laugh, but Ulla eyed her. “What did he say?”

“He mentioned the Larsson family.” She studied Ulla’s movements. “He said you were best friends with Linnea Larsson.” Ulla stiffened so fleetingly, had Analise not been ready, she would’ve missed it.

Ulla continued cleaning her tools at a slightly more aggressive pace. “Yeah, they had a daughter about my age. The girl never talked. Probably because her parents were stoned twenty-four-seven and never taught her how.”

“So you did know her.”

Ulla sighed, clearly annoyed. “That’s why you came here? To ask me about a girl I vaguely remember from over thirty years ago?”

“What was she like?”

“I don’t remember, Isa.”

Liar. “You seem upset.”

“I don’t like pointless conversations.”

Analise applied the LipSmackers to suppress her jittery hand and then capped it, switching tactics. “The nurse called me from school and said Pen forgot her lunch, which I had to drop off, but she was crying about something or other. Was I emotional when I was her age? I don’t know what to do with her.”

Ulla’s posture relaxed as if relieved by the change in topic. “You were shy. When you got older, you were more emotional, but you also had two back-to-back concussions, so your moods were all over the place. You’d cry at the drop of a hat. You still do.”

This was true, and Penelope loathed it. “Do you think she takes after her father? She definitely didn’t get her smarts from me. I can’t relate to her at all.”

Ulla wiped her hands on her coveralls and walked to a Honda Civic with its hood open. She released the catch and caught the hood, closing it securely.

“Is that possible?” Analise probed.

“Is what possible?”

“That maybe she takes after her father?”

“I hope not.”

Analise tightened her jaw. “She discovered these websites, where you can send in your DNA and somehow find your long-lost ancestors.”

Ulla opened the driver’s door of the Civic. “Sounds like a scam to me.”

“But what if? What if she finds him someday? What if he finds *us*?”

Ulla paused before turning the ignition. “Penelope never needs to know her father. You never knew *yours*. I didn’t know *mine*, and I think we’re living proof that women turn out just fine without men. In fact, I’m convinced no father is better than a shitty one.” She started the car. The engine purred.

Ulla revved the gas pedal, silencing Analise’s aggravated sigh, and then turned the car off. She got out. “Why the sudden curiosity?”

“Just tell me his *name*.”

“No,” Ulla said emphatically. “We’ve gone through this. I got you away so you’d never be duped into going back to that piece of shit, wouldn’t end up a statistic. You’re damn lucky you don’t remember anything.”

“Shouldn’t Pen and I know his name if he ever does come around?”

“If some random stranger shows up saying he was once your high school boyfriend, then *run*.”

She thought immediately of Taylor. She had his number. *He might know.* “We could’ve only been together for a few months, not even that long. I still remember everything up until the beginning of senior year.”

Ulla swiped the hair from her face and avoided eye contact. “Enough. My answer won’t change.”

“So we’re done then?”

“From dragging up the past?” Ulla palmed her chest and nailed the coffin in Swedish, “*Ja. Du och jag är klara.*” We’re done.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Analise

Analise idled her Pontiac outside Mora Elementary, waiting for Penelope to flop herself into the backseat with entitlement and complaints, as she did every day while expecting a different answer—*Really, Mamma, why can't I sit in the front seat yet*?

Analise had stormed from Ulla at the autobody shop, dissatisfied and wondering why she bothered.

With Ed Sheeran serenading her over the radio, Analise waited and stared at Taylor's napkin: *Can we talk?* It seemed though, from his elusive demeanor, his abrupt getaway, talking was the last thing he wanted.

The school bell rang. She folded the napkin back into a miniature square and placed it in the zippered pouch of her purse where she kept extra Tylenol and tampons.

Penelope cracked open the back door and sank into the seat with her two-ton backpack containing probably at least eight hardcover adult novels from the library, none of which she was allowed to read at home, let alone at school.

Analise greeted her as she always did. "Hi, Pen! I missed you!"

Her daughter curled her lips into something resembling a sneer or a smile—a *snile*?—before saying, "Ugh. It's so hot in here! I can't believe I forgot my lunch. Do you want to know what Mac did?"

Analise put the car in gear and drove, inserting appropriate head nods and empathetic lip pouts, when all she could think about was Taylor's

message burning a hole through her purse.

"You're not listening," Penelope accused.

"I am. Really."

"Then what was I *saying*?"

"You were comforting MaKenna—Mac—from the horrors of her terrible mother who can't make a decent lunch, but then your own terrible mother forgot yours, which meant you nearly starved—"

"You *so* don't care. You're doing that *thing* with your face. With that fake smile."

Should I tell Dany about Taylor? Analise thought of her fiancé.

"See? You don't even say anything to me!"

Analise stopped at a red light by the DQ and flopped her head on the steering wheel. "I care, *min lilla älskling*, really I do," she repeated with the type of lax effort that Penelope immediately called her out on.

When Penelope was a baby, only punctuated moments of bliss provided enough fuel for Analise to carry on through diaper explosions, chronic insomnia, puke stains, food in the hair, and a constant fear that at any moment Penelope might accidentally kill herself. The physical exhaustion eventually morphed into emotional exhaustion, along with an occasional gutting of the soul.

They drove the rest of the short way home. "Are you picking up Jules?" Penelope asked, yanking her backpack out from the floor of the car.

No, Dany was picking up his daughter, Julia, from her piano lesson at the school. Penelope stomped into the house, Analise slowly following, stepping over piles of shoes accumulated from years of visits by Dany's extended family: Vans, Sketchers, sequined flip-flops, size thirteen Rockports, a pair of wooden clogs, and muddy work boots. Analise held onto the faint hope that maybe Penelope had moved on, skipped off to read a forbidden book, but no, she stood unmoving in the foyer.

She loved that her daughter could never let something go until it was repaired. And she hated that her daughter could never just *let something go*.

Analise extended her arms and went in for a hug. Penelope dodged it.

"I don't even know what I did wrong!" Analise said.

"You don't listen!"

"I'm sorry, I thought I *was*."

Penelope frowned. Her daughter's bullshit detector was top of the line.

“Okay,” Analise continued, “I was distracted. I . . . I had a weird day and that’s what I was thinking about when you were talking to me.”

The front door of the house breezed open. It was Julia, beaming as she dumped her backpack and piano books on the tile. “Ms. Roach got sick, thank God!” She sized up the situation and mouthed to Penelope, *I’ll be upstairs*.

Penelope blew Julia a kiss. She turned to Analise and walked into her chest, pressing her face against her mother’s heart. The conflict was over. Analise wrapped herself around Penelope.

“What happened that was weird?” her daughter asked.

Analise combed her fingers through Penelope’s locks. “A random person came into the café this morning looking for Ulla. He said she was friends with his mother.”

“That *is* weird. Ulla doesn’t have any friends.”

They shared a laugh, and as Penelope disappeared upstairs, Analise went to find Dany.

She’d first met Dany at kindergarten orientation—technically his late wife, Sofia, first. Sofia and Dany co-owned a remodeling company. She’d traded hard hats for spiked heels when not on the job and was quick-witted with her shiny black ponytail and bright makeup. Their only daughter, with her pierced ears, curled pigtails, and patent dress shoes was Penelope’s opposite. They hit it off immediately. By the end of second grade, the school administration conspired to keep the girls in separate classrooms to avoid any more talk of becoming president and vice president and demanding pure allegiance to their every whim. The girls at first had decided on being co-queens. But this was America.

Julia was frills on the outside and unflappable on the inside. Penelope was skinned knees and soccer cleats on the outside, but on the inside, a volcano of fiery emotions that could erupt unprovoked.

When Sofia was diagnosed with an aggressive brain tumor during the girls’ third-grade year, Sofia took Analise aside and said she knew Penelope would take care of Julia—and that Analise would take care of Dany. Analise, flummoxed, mutely nodded. She’d found Dany attractive, but admiringly so, sort of how a woman could look at her friend’s husband and understand the appeal.

After Sofia died, Analise did care for Dany the way all good Midwesterners do. She made food. The problem was, every time she

brought over a new hotdish, she was roped into staying by the myriad of family that floated in and out. Over the years, Analise wondered about Sofia's dying request. Was it really Dany, who had family members and affection in spades, needing to be taken care of?

The relationship with Dany was a foregone conclusion a year later when Julia and Penelope realized their path to true sisterhood was via *Parent Trap*. They arranged their school projects together, and *accidentally* intermixed belongings to provide excuses for drop-offs, eventually necessitating such text messages as: Less than 4 hrs since the girls have seen each other—J is going thru withdrawals.

When Analise caught Dany and Penelope playing a game of pickup basketball like any father and daughter would do, she'd decided that this was what love felt like.

He finally asked her on a date.

They'd talked about making love long before they actually did. It required logistical planning. Dany arranged for the girls to have a sleepover at his mother's in St. Paul on a Saturday night. When Analise and Dany retrieved the girls the next morning, in time to attend Mass with his family, far too many of them asked how *things went.*

Dany proposed to Analise one quiet morning when they were alone but the next day made a show of asking her hand in marriage at the Sunday family brunch. He'd cajoled Analise the night before, teasing that she needed to practice astonishment. "No, Ana, I need more chin trembling! Can't you manufacture some tears for crying out loud?" And she did cry, but from laughter. He was good at that. Making her laugh. Humor was his defense, a guard he seldom released. Except when he asked about Penelope's father.

She told him the truth one hot August evening, underneath the stars, in the back of his pickup. "Apparently my abusive ex-boyfriend nearly killed me."

Ulla had pushed for an abortion, but when Analise asked Ulla if she wished she'd had one, it was the only time Analise had seen Ulla cry. *God, no, Isa, you're my life. I love you more than anything*!

"Aren't you afraid for you and Penelope?" Dany had asked. "What if he ever finds you?"

Fear was the logical outcome of a horrific story. But Analise, surprisingly, felt none. "I don't think he will. And no, I'm not scared."

“What’s that like? Not remembering.”

Analise replied with a question, “What do you remember about your senior year?”

“That was over fifteen years ago. Not a whole damn lot.”

“Exactly. No one has a memory that replays like a recorder. There are gaps everywhere. And memories change over time. People fill them in with things that aren’t always true. It’s been so long now for me.”

“What have you told Penelope?”

“About her dad? That he was a bad guy, and it’s best that he never knew I was pregnant.”

“And she’s okay with that?”

“Of course not. It’s Penelope. She and Julia will Nancy Drew the hell out of the missing-father-mystery until she gets an answer.” Analise had tucked her head inside his armpit, listening to his steady, reliable heartbeat.

He’d kissed her hair. “Don’t worry, you’ve got me, but I do wish your mom would let me know who he is.”

That conversation with Dany now traveled on a loop in Analise’s brain as she walked outside to the driveway.

Her fiancé was hauling plywood from his hefty 4x4 Chevy truck emblazoned with Ramirez Homes & Remodeling. She rarely saw him during summertime, not until the sun went down, and, even then, he still worked until midnight overseeing projects that reached into the Twin Cities. The extra work had extended deep into this year because he wanted to get ahead of foreseeable problems and avoid a disgruntled client’s call while on their honeymoon in Cabo.

Analise pecked him on his lips and tasted salty sweat.

“How’s my favorite *güerita*?” he said, grunting while heaving the last load into his arms.

She waited too long with the standard, *Good*. Or *Fine!* Even if nothing was really *good* or *fine*. And since Analise’s days were as predictable as a hellacious Minnesota winter, Dany tilted his head, inviting an explanation.

“Oh, good. I mean—as good as the worst mother on the planet can be,” she said, kicking the entire *Taylor* situation under the rug.

And because nothing out of the ordinary, such as a beautiful stranger grabbing hold of her insides would ever happen, Dany accepted that her misery involved their shared plight of raising eleven-year-old girls.

He laughed. The deep parentheses around his smile always made her heart expand. “I’m officially the worst dad on the planet for making her continue with piano lessons and refusing to get a *latte* on the way home. Hey, maybe we should get married.” He extended his gloved hand.

Analise accepted it, and he twirled her around and into his thick chest. She smelled his cologne underneath the dirt and pine. A comfort that made her heart widen even more than his smile did.

She would throw away the napkin with Taylor’s number the first chance she got.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Ulla

Ulla worried her way home on the drive from Jorgen's. Ever since Analise marched in today, opening not only the wounded *father* question—but *Linnea*? She jumped every time someone walked through Jorgen's doors, and now kept an eye in the rearview mirror, to see how close the specter of the past was encroaching on their lives.

When she saw the Audi A5 Coupe parked along the curb, she knew it was Taylor Barnes, not at all surprised at his choice of car make and model. It matched him: impressive, a notch down from obnoxious, but still spoiled. Her legs pooled with cement. She parked the T-bird in the driveway and exited her car at the same time Taylor emerged from his.

He approached, older-looking, of course. His hair was shorter than she remembered, emphasizing his large eyes that had not aged, still those of a tortured seventeen-year-old boy fighting not to let go of Analise.

Ulla closed the door but clenched the handle. She refused to be the one to speak first.

He stopped several feet in front of her, as if waiting for her to strike the first verbal blow, but then, with a tight voice, he said, "I'm here for my mom. Not me. Not Isa."

"What?" This was not what she expected.

"My mom. She needs to talk to you."

"Why?"

He appeared to grapple for words. “Apparently I’m supposed to convince you with this.” He withdrew from his pocket a folded paper. “She wants you to have it back.”

Reluctantly, Ulla accepted the paper, unfolding it. She gasped with all the rage and fear that came with it. She sucked in her composure and shoved it back into his hands. “She can go to hell. You both can. The fact that she didn’t come herself still shows me what a coward she is.”

“She’s not a coward, she’s dying.”

Ulla turned away, thrown by the force those words delivered to her stomach. *Linney is dying*? She massaged her throat and faced Taylor. “From what?” she whispered.

“Ovarian cancer.”

Ulla took in his sorrow. She glanced at his hands gripping the picture of Beskyddaren. He wore no wedding band. *Why isn’t he asking about Isa*? “I’ll think about it.”

He said nothing, but he didn’t move to go.

There was a crack in the steely hatred she felt for Linnea, but she wasn’t about to let Taylor intrude upon Analise’s happiness. “If you’re wondering about Isa—don’t. She’s fine. She decided to move on after what you did to her.”

He drilled a hard, unforgiving stare into her, and slowly folded the Dala horse, methodically creasing each edge. He lowered his eyes and said quietly, “Please, don’t wait long. Isa has my number when you’re ready.” He turned and left.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Analise

Analise lay in bed that evening, her eyes refusing to close, listening to Dany brush his teeth in the bathroom. She stared at the dresser opposite the bed, knowing inside the top drawer a tiny perfume sample that still belonged to Dany's late wife remained tucked inside. Since moving in here three months ago, she'd done nothing to redecorate their bedroom, to remove traces of Sofia.

Dany climbed onto the bed, folding his length along her body. He pressed a minty kiss in her hair, and Analise wondered if he compared her to his first love. Did he remember holding Sofia the same way when she was dying?

Taylor's mom is dying.

Dany slipped his hand under her shirt and she didn't respond.

He removed it. "What's bothering you?" he nudged. "Wedding stuff—?"

"No," she interrupted. "No, it's not that," she said, perhaps too quickly to convince herself.

"Is Pen stressing you out?"

"Pen is always stressing me out," she grumbled.

Dany propped his elbow and cradled his head to look down at her. "I was thinking . . . I wanted to bring this up after we were married, but I don't see why I can't mention it now."

She traced the dark crinkles around his eyes, lines caused by hours of squinting in the sun thanks to his constant misplacement of sunglasses.

"What if I adopted Penelope?"

Analise turned her head away and dug her cheek onto the pillow. There was a time she would've said yes without pause, at the promise of a lifted burden from being a single mother. She had Ulla, but it didn't feel the same, and Dany understood that sinking feeling of doing it all wrong. He was offering her a gift. She linked her hand through his calloused one and kissed it, yet found herself saying, "Let's ask Penelope."

"Sure," he responded, "of course."

Her thoughts returned over and again to Taylor. She looked at Dany's hand inside hers. It felt nothing like Taylor's from earlier that morning. Not like reconnected wires. She closed her eyes and tried to banish him.

After hours of tossing, Analise flung aside the bedcovers and went to her daughter's bedroom. She glanced around it in the dark. The girls wanted to share a room, but Analise had no clue how that would work, given Julia's taste for anything the color of Pepto-Bismol and Penelope's mix of gothic and sporty. They compromised by redecorating the entire room in Harry Potter, except Julia was *Gryffindor* and Penelope was *Ravenclaw*.

Even in sleep, neither girl let go of their personality. Julia was in a serene ball next to Penelope's wild disarray of hair and limbs.

She marveled at her daughter's beauty, even more so when she slept because she was at peace, retreating back to innocence, her face not twisted up with hormonal passions. Analise admired the thick blonde strands, the wisps of baby hairs that still grew and curled around her heart-shaped face, her impossibly long eyelashes, an endless subject of awe from Dany's older sisters. She traced her daughter's bone structure with a finger, finding the groove of her "butt" chin, as Penelope so often complained, and leaned over to kiss her cheek. Such beauty couldn't have come from ugliness and pain. Or maybe Penelope was a testament that beauty could still be born from it.

Analise clicked the door shut and padded back to the bedroom where Dany breathed heavily through his mouth, deep in slumber. Analise quietly opened the closet and stared at her wedding gown. With a quick backward

glance at Dany, she took it out, trailed it to the bathroom, and closed the door.

The slide of the zipper down the garment bag seemed abnormally loud in the still night. It was a used gown, found at a tiny vintage boutique in Minneapolis amongst 1980s prom dresses and tacky formal garb. Not wanting to spend a lot of money, it felt serendipitous—because this dress was the *one*. The one she wore in her recurring dream. The dream that came to her so often, the dream she'd linger inside while awake. When she felt all out of sorts, it would comfort her.

As she held the gown up to her body and looked in the mirror, the dream became reality. A vision. *A memory*? The woman staring back aged in reverse. Her eyes grew lush with mascara, her lips filled with gloss, and her hair formed into styled curls with a crown pinned atop. She smoothed her hands over the V-neck bodice. Someone else appeared in the mirror. A king? He, too, wore a crown. And he kissed her. The kind of kiss felt beyond her lips, tapping into a deep well of desire.

The world within the mirror shifted. Analise's stomach lurched, and her reflection hurtled upon her. She sunk to the ground, stifling a cry.

Disoriented, but working quickly to get off the bathroom floor, Analise stuffed the gown in its garment bag and returned it to the closet. Her breaths came in muffled chokes as she took flight down the stairs and found her purse. And Taylor's number. Her mind dizzied with the possibilities, the potential consequences of her next decision.

With her phone and purse in hand, she retrieved her coat, shoes, and car keys. When she stepped outside, the wind pushed through the leaves, sending them skittering across the sidewalk and street. Once inside the Pontiac, she dialed his number.

Taylor answered on the first ring.

It was drizzling when she drove into the hotel lot at 4:15 a.m. The windshield wipers slapped every few seconds. Analise parked next to his silver Audi. Her pulse hammered into her throat.

Taylor got out of his car and dashed into the passenger side of the Pontiac. Analise couldn't look at him, at his expectant eyes. Her first thought was to apologize, but she'd already done that, profusely, over the

phone when she called, waiting for some confirmation that she was irrational, and that he was irritated at being woken up at such a bizarre hour.

But that maybe if they could meet—?

"I'll come right now. Give me forty-five minutes," he'd said so intently she was afraid to negotiate. But her mind protested. He was going to drive over one hundred miles an hour in the middle of the night?

The fractured orange light from the parking lot was the only illumination, but more than enough for her to fully see him. The streaming water on the windshield reflected onto his features, moistened from the rain. She compared him to the king in her vision. His jaw was unshaven and it would feel rough against her lips. No overgrown hair curling around his ears that she could thread her fingers through. The sinews of his neck that she imagined burying her face in were covered by his jacket, zipped to his chin.

"I have this dream," she started and paused to keep her emotions from seizing her voice. "It happens over and over, more times than I could ever count. It's always the same. In it, I'm a queen. I wear a white dress with a crown on my head, and I dance with a king, but I never recognize his face. I don't know where we are, I don't know why it feels so *real*. I don't know why I called you in the middle of the night, and I don't know why I'm telling you all this." She lowered her hands and stared at her engagement ring.

Taylor's breathing matched the pace of hers. The rain continued quietly.

"Yes, you do," he finally said.

She looked at him.

His mouth parted, speechless, but he said it all with his eyes.

"We were more than friends, weren't we?" she said.

"Yes," he cried. "*Yes*." He held her face and pressed their foreheads together. "Yes," he repeated against her mouth, the word falling into their kiss.

Analise kissed him back, shockingly with no resistance, the impulse driven by the strength of countless kisses that must have come before this one. Countless kisses that surely led to so much more—

Penelope.

Analise broke free and cupped her mouth.

"I'm sorry." He turned his face away, putting a hand to his lips.

“Don’t be,” she said, becoming emotional. Of all the possibilities, of Penelope’s father someday revealing himself, it was never this. “What happened to us?”

Taylor turned to her again, and their embrace this time was one of shared grief, and yet an immense release. He rested his face in her hair, and she felt him walk his fingers delicately to where her scar was, as if he knew exactly what had happened. “It was my fault.” His voice broke, shuddering against her. “It was my fault. I lost my mind when they took you from me.”

Analise pulled away, so confused, as he groped to relay the story of what was clearly and horribly traumatic for him to revisit. Taylor paused, met her perplexed eyes, and catching his breath, he said, “Give me your phone.”

“What?”

“Log into your phone and give it to me.” He didn’t sound demanding as much as desperate.

Analise fumbled for her phone, found it on the dashboard, and unlocked it. She handed it over.

Taylor’s thumbs tapped furiously on the screen that lit up the fragile hope in his eyes. He returned it. “The username is *kingandqueen*, all one word, and the password is lowercase, initials of my name followed by yours, and the years we were born, t-b-i-b-8-8-8-7. It’s all there. Everything. *Us*.”

With her mouth ajar, Analise looked at the phone. He’d opened a Gmail account. There were hundreds of messages, many unread. She scrolled through to see who the sender was.

They all displayed: ME

“We had an email account together,” he explained. “It was just for fun, I guess, I don’t know. And then I kept writing in it after you were gone. You never wrote back. I don’t know why I kept—promise me you’ll start at the beginning. It won’t make sense otherwise.” He acknowledged it would take her awhile, and she didn’t need to do it now.

“Taylor.” Analise gathered the right words. “I have to tell you something.” She worked to regulate her tears and went into her photo album on the phone. She found a few silly selfies that Penelope had taken, many were of her playing soccer. Analise chose the one on her eleventh birthday in August, and she handed him the phone. “She’s beautiful, isn’t she? Her name is Penelope.” Analise didn’t even wait for his reaction, hers was so

messy and apologetic, and she only cried harder at the way his expression caved, as if he wanted so badly to reach into that photograph, to hug his daughter.

Several moments passed. Analise watched him absorb this life-altering revelation, how he pinched his eyes, the way his shoulders shook, restraining his cries. She begged him to believe that she never would've kept Penelope away from him.

"I know," he gasped. He hugged her tight and reassured her. "I know. Our mothers have a lot of explaining to do. But all I want right now is to meet her. Can I meet her?" he asked. "Would you let me be—?" He stopped short of what she knew he was truly asking.

"Yes." Of course she would let him into their lives. Emptied of doubt, stripped of the fear Ulla had sown, she was filled instead with disbelief and outrage that her mother had made a lie of her past

Part V

The memories live they cannot be buried
They cannot be hidden among dust and gravel
No, they shall live in the birdsong
In the scent of flowers and in the wind's whispers.

— Anonymous Swedish eulogy

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Minneapolis, Minnesota
September 2005

Analise

As she did 800-meter repeats, Analise lagged behind the cross-country team around the soccer field during practice. She decided to end her senior season the same way her high school career had started. Average, likable, slightly invisible. When she got pegged in the head with a soccer ball, she awoke to the beginning of a different reality.

The first face to emerge from the darkness was Taylor Barnes.

His expression wore horrified guilt. A horror matched only by Analise's humiliation. *Did a soccer ball knock me out?*

Her friend, Missy Halverson, appeared in her line of vision. She whacked Taylor, "Oh my God, Barnes, you practically took her head off! Ana, don't move!"

Shadows gathered above, and people chattered. She tried to sit up.

"No!" came a resounding chorus. The cross-country coach said, "The ambulance is coming." She lay back down and closed her eyes.

This is so embarrassing.

"I'll call your mom," Missy said. Missy was part-Marching Band, part-Cheerleader, a rare breed of popularity at their school. She sometimes drove Analise home if marching band practice ended early.

When the EMT arrived and walked Analise into the back of the ambulance, she heard him say over his shoulder, “You don’t need to come.”

Taylor answered, “I’m . . . um . . . I’m her boyfriend. Please?”

Boyfriend?

As if things weren’t mortifying enough. Analise turned sharply to look at him, and the world tilted violently.

“Fine,” the EMT agreed, helping Analise into the ambulance.

They placed an ice pack on her head and asked her questions about time and place, ordered her to count backward and say the alphabet backward, which Analise was sure she’d find surprisingly difficult even without a head injury.

She squinted at Taylor, drawn by his fake-appearing eyelashes. Like the ones Missy glued on once, before dragging Analise’s uncoordinated hips to a downtown club’s sixteen-plus night.

She worked to recall exactly when she officially met Taylor Barnes.

Maybe it was at new student orientation. She’d transferred as a sophomore. When collecting her thick orientation packet, he was there in the office and made an awkward joke about killing trees. Perhaps the first day in homeroom when the teacher arranged their seats by alphabetical order, and he said she had a pretty name. Maybe lunch, junior year, when she dropped her milk carton, and he swooped in to rescue it.

Taylor must have caught her scrutiny because he waved a hand in front of her face. The EMT also cocked his head in concern.

“Did you ask me another question?” she said.

“No,” Taylor said quietly, “you looked confused, like you didn’t know who I was for a second.”

Analise arrived at the emergency room. The light was blinding, splitting her head apart. She groaned and turned her face into the starchy white sheets. Someone mercifully turned the light off, only to beam one directly into her eyes. “Look straight ahead,” said a voice, “checking your pupils. Can you lie still for a CT scan? To make sure you’re not bleeding.”

Analise whined, “It was just a soccer ball, not a brick. Does my mom know I’m here?”

“I’m sure she’ll be here soon,” said the voice before footsteps retreated and the door slid closed.

Analise shifted to find a better position. One where her brain wouldn’t seep out of her ears. She assumed she was alone, but her eyes met his. “You’re still here?” she whispered to Taylor.

He gauged her, and, though it was dark, she didn’t miss his deep worry. “You should go,” she said. “I’m not mad at you. It was my fault. I should’ve paid more attention.”

“What if you end up a vegetable?”

“I’m sure my mother will come after you.” She managed a tiny smirk.

The door opened, and a woman spitting Swedish curse words hustled through.

Ulla was a tall waif of wiry muscle underneath her coveralls. Her light blonde hair was knotted in a bun. She touched Analise’s forehead as if testing a fever. “You got kicked in the head by a soccer player?”

“No, a soccer *ball*.”

“Who’s the idiot with no aim?”

“Me,” croaked Taylor.

Ulla startled. She sized up Taylor. First with narrowed eyes, then with a spark of something Analise couldn’t decipher.

“What’s your name?” she demanded of Taylor.

Taylor swallowed, held out a hand, and then dropped it. “Taylor.”

“Taylor—what.”

He shot a pleading look to Analise. “It was an accident, really, I had too much spin on the ball—”

“Last name?” Ulla flapped her hand, annoyed. “Where are your parents?”

“It’s Barnes, I don’t know, I don’t have my phone with—”

“Barnes. You said, Barnes.”

Even in the dark, Analise caught Ulla’s eyes draining, the pause of her breath.

The door opened and the lights flipped on. She was lost in her pain again. Someone clicked the brake release on the hospital bed, ready to wheel her. Analise bypassed the look of Taylor’s unease for that of Ulla’s preoccupation with Taylor. Hostility might be a stretch, yet nothing else came to mind when describing what Ulla was aiming at him.

Chapter Thirty

Analise

When Analise returned from imaging, Taylor was gone, and she was surprised at her disappointment. She listened to the nurse give instructions to Ulla. "She might have headaches, light sensitivity, trouble concentrating, and no physical activity until she can tolerate school. She might get nauseated, or this could all go away, but no one knows when. Alternate between Tylenol and Ibuprofen for pain . . . "

On the way home, Ulla asked how Analise knew Taylor Barnes.

"We had homeroom together once, I think."

Ulla opened her mouth and clamped it. "You go to the same school?"

"Duh," Analise replied.

"Are you friends with him?"

"No. Seriously, do not sue the school. Or his rich parents."

Ulla tightened her mouth and said, "Believe me, I won't."

Analise stayed home the next day, alone in their duplex. Guilt over missing school replaced her dull headache. Algebra II was not going to forgive her absence.

Still in her fleece pajamas and armed with a box of Lucky Charms, Analise was flipping between *The Young and the Restless* and *Family Feud*

when the doorbell rang.

Assuming it was a package delivery, she let it go, hoping they'd leave it between the screen. But the bell rang again.

Analise scuffled over and peered outside. When she saw Taylor, she hesitated, rubbed her pale cheeks, and fixed her ponytail. She opened the door a crack. "What are you doing here?"

He wore a warm-up jacket with the collar flipped up, hands snug inside his pockets. The breezy weather swiped at his sandy locks.

"I wanted to make sure you were okay," said Taylor. "I'm sorry I didn't stick around at the emergency room. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I should probably be in school."

"You don't have a phone," he said.

"I have a house phone. I don't have a cell."

"Yeah." He glanced away.

"Wait. How do you know where I live?"

"Missy."

Analise groaned inwardly. What other embarrassing information did he get out of Missy?

Taylor scratched his face and shifted his feet. "Could I have it?"

"Have what?"

"Your number, just so . . . I don't know." He readied his phone.

"Oh. I guess," Analise replied, feeling chilled as the wind took flight. She rattled off her number and then said, "Do you want to come in?" He'd already seen the worst of her living situation.

"Sure. Okay."

Analise widened the door. He tentatively stepped inside onto the scuffed oak. She smelled his cologne. Or deodorant. Whatever it was—she liked it. *Would Ulla find out he was here*? She glanced over Taylor's shoulder at her bedroom. *Is that my bra on the floor?* Analise whipped past him and slammed her door. "My room is messy."

He cracked a half-smile. "I'm a neat freak," and they shared a soft laugh as she leaned against her bedroom door.

Taylor rocked on his heels. "Is there anything I can do to apologize? I swear I'll do anything to make it up to you."

Anything? She compared him to Dave Laviolet, her long-time crush, another senior on the soccer team. And supposedly Taylor's best friend.

Heat filled her cheeks, and she started to shake her head, but Taylor must have caught it. “Come on, tell me. What is it?”

Embarrassed, Analise laughed.

Taylor persisted.

She rolled her self-conscious eyes and said, “No, it’s stupid.”

“I’m not leaving until you cough it up.” His grin widened, and she noticed the cleft in his chin.

“Okay, fine. A date.”

Taylor’s face expanded even further, but his response shrunk to a whisper, “Really?”

“With Dave. Dave Laviolet.”

His expression plummeted, and he looked down, pushing out a shaky laugh. His brow creased, and he rubbed the back of his neck. “Dave? Do you know him at all?”

“I was joking!” she backtracked. “Of course, I don’t know him. Or me him. Him know me?” *Oh my God*. No one said the head trauma would make her lose her filter or forget proper grammar.

“If that’s what you want—”

“Isn’t he dating Shaina?”

“No, they broke up. Again.”

“I was kidding. He has no clue who I am.”

“Yes, he does. He’d definitely go out with you.”

Analise should’ve been elated, but Taylor had delivered the declaration with such a flat tone it made her all the more determined to back out. “Don’t say anything to him, *please*?”

“Sure.” Taylor moved toward the door but paused. He pulled a greeting card from his pocket. “You can open it later. It’s nothing. I wasn’t sure what to get you.”

Before Analise could say thanks or ask why he ditched school, and why he seemed so weird about a date with Dave, he left. She watched him plod down the shoddy porch steps, over the broken concrete, past the rusted chain-link fence and gutter full of trash. In his clean Adidas soccer shoes, name-brand jeans, and with a cell phone in hand, he climbed into his Jeep Wrangler and left with a limp wave.

Analise opened the envelope. Inside was a Get Well card with Charlie Brown and Snoopy on the front saying:

Wouldn’t life be nice if it were a DVD player?

The inside read:

You could skip through all the yucky parts.
Hope You Feel Better Soon.

He’d scrawled his phone number and signed it. In neat, measured, capital letters.

Chapter Thirty-One

Analise

The day after she returned to school, there was a note on her locker. Analise unfolded it and read the message:

Ana,
Roses are red violets are blue.
Turn around and you might find another clue.

Analise started to whirl around, but then caught herself. What if this were some kind of a prank?

Missy rammed her voluptuous hips into the locker next to Analise's and grabbed her shoulders. "Would you just look behind yourself? You're being asked to Homecoming for God's sake."

Homecoming? Analise's Homecoming experiences were fraught with a consistent low-grade misery. She'd been asked by *okay* guys, but it often felt like she were leftovers. Usually being asked with only a week's notice. There'd been Ross from Bandland sophomore year. Swim-team Alex was last year, who also took her to prom, and, even in flats, she was still taller than him. This year she'd planned to go stag with the entire cross-country team.

Homecoming was still weeks away.

Analise turned and faced a dozen red roses. Behind them was Dave Laviolet. “I promise to keep stray balls from your head if you say yes,” he said with a wicked grin.

Rocketing laughter came from the crowd of students that had gathered to witness. She covered her red-faced grin, accepted the roses to collective applause, and wondered if this would go down as the best day of her senior year. Of her *entire* life.

The students dispersed to class. Analise spotted Taylor among them, hands stuffed in his pockets, shoulders slumped, his back facing her as he slowly retreated.

The red roses invited stares and comments from passengers on her city bus ride home. *Who’s the lucky guy—or girl!* She usually took a later route after cross-country practice but was still banned from physical activity to heal her concussion.

Analise watched the scenery pass out the window. It melded from suburban, cultivated landscaping into uneven lanes, people panhandling at stoplights, shops selling fantasy lingerie, money transfers, tarot card readings, and gyros. Attending the fancy Wayzata High School instead of her local neighborhood’s school had been a manipulation of Melia, her great-godmother, who worked there as a substitute secretary. The application for open-enrollment was swift, and by winter, Analise had been accepted.

She tugged on the line to signal a stop. The bus chugged forward when the light turned green, and at the next block pulled over. She followed a small woman wearing white nursing shoes. Analise stepped onto the pavement, and she walked two blocks until reaching GoodYear Tires.

She pushed through the door, engulfed by the smell of car grease, and bypassed the reception area where Brenda was usually seated, and Analise herself worked ten hours a week. She went through another glass door into the garages. The echo of cranking drills and faint radio music muted her footsteps as she gravitated to a familiar and comforting picture—Ulla swallowed by a car. This time it was a black Toyota Forerunner. Analise was certain it was motor oil, not blood, that pumped through Ulla’s veins.

She set her backpack on the ground and displayed the roses.

Ulla escaped from the car's hood and swiped a wrist across her misbehaving hairs. Her mouth quirked. "Are you in trouble?"

Analise couldn't rein her grin. "I got asked to Homecoming today!"

"And now you can die happy."

She rolled her eyes, though her smile remained. "I know you don't care."

"Who is he?" Wariness shadowed her gaze.

"Dave Laviolet."

Ulla's bright blue eyes lifted. She grabbed a rag and wiped her fingers. "Who's Dave?"

"A soccer player."

"Stay away from his balls."

"Geez, can't you hug me and say congratulations, or 'I'm so happy for you,' like a normal mother?"

"Congratulations for what? It's not like you actually accomplished anything."

Analise sighed audibly. "I'm going to need a new dress."

"You already have three dresses." Ulla held up the corresponding number of fingers and ticked them off. "The last two homecomings, which I don't recall you being all that excited about anyway. And prom. Please help me understand why you need a new dress when you haven't gotten fatter or taller."

Analise regretted her eagerness. "Can I earn the money? I'll ask Brenda for more hours."

"You don't need a new dress, Isa."

"I doubt you even went to your Homecoming. You don't get it," Analise bemoaned.

Hurt passed over Ulla's face.

"I'm sorry," Analise said.

Ulla turned her attention to the car.

"Do you want me to start dinner?"

"No." Her voice was distant. "You're supposed to be resting away that concussion. I'll bring something home."

With the flowers limp in her hand, Analise took her backpack and began to walk away.

"And it's not true," Ulla said. "I did go to Homecoming. Once. My senior year."

Analise turned and looked at her, but Ulla was back in the car's jaws, a cue that the conversation was over. She retreated, confused, as if the confession were not an attempt to relate to Analise, but to warn her.

Dave Laviolet called Analise that night and asked her to come to watch the first home soccer game. She said, yes. He asked if she wanted to go to Conner Patterson's party afterward. But Analise was expected to be home by midnight on weekends. One minute late was an entire day's grounding. Did this mean if she went with Dave to the party, he'd drive her home? Analise's stomach clenched. For all her inward pining to be popular, her cloak of invisibility had been safe, something she quietly and subconsciously wanted to maintain. Otherwise, they'd all see her for who she was: poor white trash who'd won the open-enrollment lottery, or worse, that her great-godmother had pulled strings to get her in. Maybe just this once, she'd ask Ulla if she could borrow the car, an ancient T-bird that Ulla doted on. It had a name, too: Tina.

No city bus dared to venture to Conner Patterson's glass neighborhood with houses that would consume Analise's entire block. Could she ask Missy for a ride?

Dave awaited her answer on the phone. "Are you still there?"

"I have a curfew," Analise flubbed out.

"I can take you home—"

"No, I'll find a ride."

He paused. "Okay. Meet you outside the gym entrance after the game? We can at least go to the party together."

"Yeah. Great. Okay."

That evening, Analise made sure the house was dusted, vacuumed, and she even scrubbed the plastic kitchen linoleum that curled away from its crusted glue in the corners, hoping to bank penance if she broke curfew.

Ulla came home when Analise was touching up her mascara and lip gloss in her room. She listened to Ulla's predictable routine. The one where her keys clanked into the ceramic bowl on the consul table, bedroom drawers opened/closed, the toilet flushed, faucet ran, leftovers microwaved and carried into the living room for her nightly date with the television. It was then Analise would go to her, and Ulla would ask to see her purse,

check for mace, condoms, and an extra bus token before saying goodnight. Analise would always be the first one to kiss her on the forehead, inhale the comforting mix of Herbal Essence shampoo and motor oil, and say, "*Jag älskar dig, Mamma*." I love you.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Analise

Taylor scored the only two goals in the soccer match. Analise knew as much about soccer as she did about cars, enough to appreciate quality. She turned to Missy and said, “Is Taylor Barnes the best player on the team?”

Missy gave her a capital-L *look* and gnawed on a chunk of her rope licorice. With her mouth full, she said, “Taylor Barnes is the best soccer player in the entire state of Minnesota. What rock have you been living under? I heard he got an offer to play at Stanford.”

That pricked Analise. “Stanford?” she said, “Like California—Stanford?”

Missy rolled her eyes hard. “God, Ana, how bad did he hit you with the soccer ball? I don’t know of any other Stanford.”

“Is Dave any good?”

She hummed coyly. “Let’s just say Dave’s good looks more than make up for anything lacking on the field.” She dropped her voice to a whisper. “Speaking of which, don’t look now, but you are getting stabbed *to death* with Shaina’s eyes.”

Analise darted her gaze two bleachers down to Dave’s on-again/off-again girlfriend.

“Noted,” Analise whispered back and swallowed a shard of anxiety.

The referee whistled the game’s completion. Analise stood, clapping with the rest of the spectators, nervous about Dave. Classmates clung to

Missy, and, oh, how Analise wished Missy's charisma would rub off. She never knew how to banter or crack jokes. She'd been shy in her other schools and had friends who promised to stay in touch when she switched districts, but over the past two years, the phone calls stopped. Analise learned to memorize everyone's names and stories and, when running into them in the hallway or at lunch, was always ready: *How did your mom's knee surgery go? Did your dog have her puppies yet?*

Analise dismounted the bleachers, surprised at how many people knew her name and asked if she was going to Conner's party with Dave. She waited for Dave on the bench outside the school's locker rooms. The night breeze guided clouds across the stars. Analise's nerves multiplied when she studied other girls loitering. Their spotless Vans shoes, the manicured nails typing away on Blackberries, swiping professionally-dyed locks of hair from their freshly glossed lips.

She stood from her seat on the bench and walked away before any of them noticed she was alone, hands stuffed into her dorky cross-country jacket, head bowed. But then she stopped and contemplated where to wait for Dave. She turned abruptly, focused on her brisk steps, and collided with Taylor.

He caught her with a chuckle, gently extending her from him. "I don't want to knock you out a second time."

She held her breath, certain her exhale would shudder. Because Taylor was showered, his hair in damp waves, and he smelled amazing. His smile was big, but his eyes should've held more, should've held pride and exhausted relief over winning. But they didn't. He dropped his hands from her shoulders and stepped away, adjusting his Adidas bag.

Of all the questions her brain manufactured at that moment, she blurted, "Are you going to Stanford next year?"

Taylor blinked in obvious surprise. "Who told you that?"

"Missy."

He twisted his mouth and shook his head at the ground. "I don't know."

You don't know? Her chest constricted.

Dave called out her name.

Taylor mumbled goodbye and moved to the parking lot. She watched him, wondering if she was mistaking his gruff stride. Dave took her hand and shouted to Taylor, "Where's the love, Barnes?" But Taylor ignored him.

At the party, Fall Out Boy played loud on the stereo but not loud enough to summon cops to break up the underage drinking. On the drive, in Dave's Nissan Pathfinder, their conversation consisted of, for her part, air-headed giggles, sighs, and "uh-huh." She'd tried cataloging what he was saying, but her mind kept drifting. *Did I say something dumb to Taylor*?

Inside, she accepted a red Solo cup with vodka and Coke, and though she wasn't going to drink it, she wasn't going to turn it down. No one was drunk enough yet to start grinding to the music, and the house was only half full. Analise wondered where Conner's parents were. She wondered if Taylor was going to come. She wondered why she cared.

Dave spoke in her ear and sent a spark down her neck. "Let's hang out." He led her up the marbled stairs, and her socked feet sunk into the white cushy carpet on the landing. She took a nauseating sip of her drink as he led her into a bedroom. It looked like a magazine spread she'd seen in a copy of *Good Housekeeping* at Missy's house. Analise thought of her home, where every room had a function, along with every object, none of which were meant solely for eye appeal.

Dave set his drink down and turned on a lamp. It cast the room in a shadowy glow. He flopped onto the bed. It felt like they were in a furniture store. The cream-stitched duvet looked more expensive than an entire year's worth of rent.

"Analise Berglund," Dave said. His large white smile brushed thrills down her skin. "Where have you been all my life?"

Analise sat on the edge of the bed and told herself if Dave kissed her, he'd know instantly how bad she was at it. Her Homecoming date from Bandland, Ross, had kissed her. He scraped his teeth around her lips, dispelling all romantic notions that kissing was pleasurable. But Missy told her that there were good kissers and bad kissers.

Analise touched the vodka-Coke to her lips, licking the pungent drops. *Where's my purse?*

Dave set her drink on the nightstand. She slid a *Homes & Garden* magazine under the cup and scooted next to him, hoping he'd remembered the condom. He turned her cheek and kissed her on the mouth.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Analise

Dave linked their fingers when they left the bedroom.

By that time, the house was brimming and pulsating with teenagers liquored up on alcohol, hormones, and weekend relief.

No one said anything to Dave and Analise, but she interpreted every glance in their direction. An *easy lay* is what they were thinking. But if anyone asked what she and Dave had been doing, she would've been honest. *Just kissing*. Sort of. With the one person she'd crushed on so hard. *For so long*. But she'd felt nothing. Worse than nothing—she had winced in pain, and he pulled his fingers from her underwear. "We can go slower next time," he said with a smooch. Maybe she'd built an unrealistic fantasy? She'd have to give it time. That's all.

Dave downed his drink, dropped himself into a couch corner next to Conner Patterson, and pulled Analise onto his lap. To Conner he said, "You know Ana, right?"

Conner rolled his eyes at Dave as if to say, *of course I know Ana*, and acknowledged Analise with a jut of his chin. She smiled, never recalling exchanging even a single word with Conner. He didn't play any sports, but his dad owned a GT-3000, Lamborghini, and a Hummer and let Conner's friends drive them.

Analise fiddled with the strings on her cross-country jacket, working to find a comfortable dip in Dave's lap. It felt unnatural and forced, and she scanned the partygoers. Missy was surrounded, and most others were

dancing, something Analise considered to be a cruel and unusual social norm for rhythmically challenged teenagers such as herself.

It was almost eleven o'clock, and Dave was buzzing. His words grew louder, stretched out, and everything was hilarious. It would be hours before his blood alcohol level was within driving range.

She cupped his ear and said, "Can I get your keys? My purse is in your car. I gotta leave."

Dave fished them out of his jeans but held them back. "Stay. I'll take you home later." He kissed her lips and then her ear, saying, "C'mon, stay. Please?"

She forced a sad smile. "My mom is really strict."

"How are you getting home?"

"I'll call her."

An affable, but frustrated groan emerged from him. "Fine." He handed over the keys. She shimmied through sweaty, gyrating bodies, sloshing drinks, and was back within minutes to return Dave's keys. He snagged her waist, stealing another slurpy, rum-flavored kiss. "Call me?" he said with droopy eyes.

She nodded, eagerly escaping, and the farther she got from the epicenter of the party, the more relief she felt. Once outside, where the noise was only a hum, she drank in the chilly air and started down the winding private driveway toward the residential street.

About a half-mile down the road, a car drew near and its headlights cast her shadow onto the pavement. It moved slowly but she still jumped onto the curb and sunk into soggy leaves. If she dodged into the trees, it'd be obvious she was hiding. She prayed the driver would pass her by.

But no. The car shifted to a crawl, and someone rolled down the window. "Where are you going?"

Analise turned to Taylor in his Jeep Wrangler. "Home," she said, thankful the dark shielded her anxious, dripping armpits.

"Home?" He shifted gears, yanked the brake, and jumped out.

Analise took several steps back as he leveled his face so close to hers it warmed her lips. His voice dropped to a hushed panic. "Are you okay?"

The fright in his eyes struck her mute. She formed her lips into a, *Yes*, but he continued, in a soft cry, "He didn't like—do anything to you, did he?"

“Who? *Dave*? No!” She emphasized again, “*No*. No. He, we, just kissed. I swear, no, I—” Would forming coherent sentences around Taylor Barnes ever be possible? She flapped her lips, embarrassed. Taylor retreated, and she felt his relieved sigh.

She questioned him, “What are you doing? I didn’t even know you were at the party.”

Taylor stuffed his hands into his jacket and shrugged. When he turned his face away, her gaze fell onto his profile, his square jaw, and those impossibly long eyelashes against his masculine features.

He faced her, and she dropped her ogling gaze, listening to his words. “Everyone was coming, so I figured why not? But then I saw you leave.”

“Oh,” she whispered. “You followed me?”

He shrugged again. “Were you seriously going to walk home, or is someone picking you up?”

Analise hugged herself and stared at her muddy second-hand sneakers she’d found at Goodwill. “I was going to walk to the gas station and call my mom.”

“Why not borrow a phone?”

Because she was hoping to find the nearest bus route and avoid calling Ulla altogether.

But she didn’t need to explain because he said, “Can I take you home?”

She nodded, and he opened the passenger door for her.

When settled inside, Taylor handed her his iPod. “Pick something.”

Analise fumbled through it, hoping to hide her lack of tech-savviness. His music tastes were vast, many artists she didn’t recognize, but finally chose Evanescence.

“How are you doing, you know, with the concussion?”

“Okay, I think. Bright lights hurt a little, like the awful ones Ms. Camach keeps on in Civics, but otherwise . . . ” *I feel like crying all the time. Like now.* She blamed the morose lyrics of “My Immortal” and lowered the volume on the iPod.

He cleared his throat. “I hope Dave treats you well. That you have a good time with him. He’s . . . I don’t know.”

Analise watched his solid, sinewy hand shift the gear stick. “You convinced him to ask me out, didn’t you?”

His laugh was sharp and disbelieving.

“What?” she asked in defense.

“You really have no idea.” He shifted into fifth gear and accelerated the Jeep onto the freeway.

“Guess not.”

“Fine. Dave was giving me a hard time about knocking you out. All the guys were. I said he should ask you himself how you were doing, and then he reminded me, and everyone, how untouchable you are. So I bet him if he asked you to Homecoming, and you said yes, then he’d owe me a hundred dollars.”

Heat and pressure threatened to spill tears. “Did you get your *money*?”

“What? No!” said Taylor. “You both got what you wanted. I told him to keep it.”

Analise focused out the window on billboards and green exit signs affixed to overhead street bridges.

Taylor downshifted on a cloverleaf exit to change freeways. “He’s got a reputation for being a dick.”

“I thought you two were best friends.”

“We are. That’s how I can verify the reputation.”

Analise chewed her lip, the discomfort increasing, tightening her throat. “*Untouchable*? What does that even mean?”

Taylor accelerated into the merging lane. The freeway lights bobbed and weaved, passing over his face. “Who are your friends? I see you hang out with Missy, but that’s Missy, and maybe the cross-country team, but do you *actually* have any friends?”

“Why?” she said, hugging herself tightly, pinching her ribs to distract from what felt like a total insult. But Taylor’s tone conveyed the opposite. “I know that you must have open-enrolled to get into our school, so maybe it’s hard to hang out with people from Wayzata, but no one really knows you. You hang onto people like Missy Halverson, who’s nice enough, but let’s face it, her only aspiration in life is to be Homecoming queen. She’s more like a politician than a real friend.”

Analise didn’t know what hurt more. The truth of his words, or the fact he’d said them. Her release was loud and messy. She smothered her face and hiccupped, “Let me out at the . . . next . . . exit.”

Taylor cussed at himself in contrition. He pulled off the freeway and whipped into a gas station. Analise opened the door. He grabbed her arm. “Don’t. *Please*. I’m so sorry. I was trying to say you don’t have to avoid being friends with people because you’re ashamed that you don’t have any

money—or that you don't live on a fucking lake, or have rich asshole parents who buy their kids off and don't give a single shit about them!" He let her go and slammed a palm against the steering wheel.

"You don't know anything about me," she said, pausing.

"I know some things," he said to his hands. "I'd be your friend. If you let me. I know where you live. I know your mom works at GoodYear, and you don't have a dad who's around, and none of that matters to me. You don't gossip, you're unbelievably kind to everyone—I mean *everyone*—and every single guy at school thinks you must have some mysterious older boyfriend, or that you're a lesbian. Dave hasn't asked you out before now because he was too arrogant to risk getting rejected."

Analise's tears stopped. She wiped her cheeks and sifted through her purse for a Kleenex.

Taylor leaned his head back against the seat. "I'm so sorry," he repeated.

"I'm just sensitive. The doctor said it might be from the concussion."

"Great. It's even *more* my fault."

She gave him a wan laugh. "It's okay. I like that you're honest." She thought of Ulla. *Unlike some people in my life*.

He faced her fully. "Can I still take you home? Please forgive me."

"It's okay." She closed the door and fastened her seat belt.

Taylor drove, appearing to contain endless questions behind his tight, closed mouth. Analise glanced at the dashboard clock. She would probably beat curfew by a full thirty minutes. "What did you mean by, 'rich asshole parents who don't give a shit about their kids?'"

He exited the freeway near her neighborhood. "*My* parents. My mom, she's okay. But I don't know why she stays with my dad. He doesn't care about me, never has. I used to think it was normal for dads to never hug or say, 'I love you,' all that sentimental bull. He's always traveling. I think he's cheating on my mom, but I don't think she cares. So I'm not even sure who I should be more pissed at." Taylor finally arrived at her house and cut the ignition.

"You're an only child?"

He frowned, nodding. "Alone." The word fell straight from his heavy eyes and into her, opening guarded places. When she nodded back, his face relaxed, the silent understanding passing between them.

"Where's your dad?" he asked.

Analise stared at her hands.

Taylor kept his eyes on her. “Sorry, you don’t have to tell me.”

“I don’t even know his name, or what happened. My mom, she—I think it hurts her too much to think about him, let alone talk about him. At least that’s what my great-godmother says.”

“Don’t you think she owes you the truth?”

She shrugged, looked out the window, and saw a pair of loud men on the sidewalk, shuffling across the street in front of the Jeep. Their conversation dimmed out of earshot as a car passed by.

Taylor’s tone was gentle when saying, “Have you ever had a stepdad or anything?”

“No.” She hesitated and then said, “My mom’s the lesbian. Not me.”

Analise expected shock, but Taylor only leaned forward. “Oh. Really?”

“Don’t say anything to anyone. I mean, it doesn’t bother me—”

“It doesn’t bother me either.”

“I think it must have bothered some people,” she spoke to the window. “She’s had a couple of girlfriends, nothing serious. Makes me even more confused about what happened with my dad.”

“Yeah.” A silence fell over them, but one that brought comfort. As if sensing she needed a change in topic, he asked, “Do you like being called Isa?”

She laughed in surprise. “How do you know my nickname?”

“I heard your mom cheer at a cross-country meet. Is she from Sweden?”

She blushed in humiliation, and flattery, at the thought of him watching her race. “No, but my grandmother was. Since when do you go to cross-country meets?”

He chewed his thumb as if to temper his bashful smile.

“I love the name Isa,” she confessed. “People automatically call me Ana, but Ana feels so common. I guess it fits me better that way.”

“You’re anything but common,” he said with such conviction that it skipped her breath. She quickly covered it with, “Taylor is your middle name, isn’t it?”

“How’d you know?”

She rolled her eyes. “Missy.”

Instead of returning her smile, his face fell. “I hate my first name,” he said, looking away. “I’m named after my dad.”

She searched for an appropriate response. All she had was, “Sorry.” Their connection, or what felt like the beginning of one, started coming apart. “I should go. Thanks for the ride.”

“Wait—you have my number?”

Analise thought of his card tucked in a box underneath her bed. Safe. She nodded, hopeful. “Yes?”

“Good.”

Analise waited for him to elaborate. Instead, he held up his phone. “I won’t go to bed for a while.”

She grinned and stepped out of the car onto what felt like clouds. She thanked him for the ride again and said goodnight.

When she floated inside, a full eighteen minutes before curfew, Analise pulled the patchwork afghan over a sleeping Ulla on the couch and turned off Jay Leno on the *Tonight Show*. She kissed her forehead and got ready for bed.

Analise lay atop her covers, hands pressed onto her jittery stomach. Waiting.

She waited for Ulla to get up and pad to her own bedroom. Waited for the cadence of heavy breathing. Waited until she could no longer wait and slipped quietly to get the portable phone.

She grabbed her bedspread, dragged it into her closet, wrapped it around her body, and encased herself inside the darkness and privacy.

Analise dialed Taylor’s number.

He answered on the first ring.

They said, “Hi,” shyly at first, followed by, “What are you doing?” and then this eased into school gossip, their life stories, a recounting of childhood with parents that both seemed to enjoy their secrets, including her great-godparents, whom she adored and laughed at when they argued with one another in German. Taylor practiced some of his fourth-year German with her. “I’d love to go there someday,” he said, “find a college where I can study abroad.” But then this veered into silly things like, “How bad was the *Lost* finale? Did that make any sense to you? Did they all *die*?” It was just before dawn when the battery on the phone finally gave up, exhausted, and forced them to say goodbye to one another.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Analise

Homecoming at Wayzata High School was a royal affair, complete with all the pomp of expensive coattails and white-ruffled gowns to put a million-dollar wedding to shame.

Though Analise secretly died to be a royal court nominee, especially as a senior, her anxiety would protect her from that ever happening.

With two weeks left before the event, the student body gathered at a pep rally to announce nominees. Analise had apparently gone from *untouchable* to Dave Laviolet's *girlfriend*, thanks to his public stamps of ownership that included waist grabbing and the most abhorred—from-the-behind neck kissing. She tolerated these displays of affection but avoided any more parties with him, and she warded off his attempts to come over. They'd had three official dates: a forgettable action-thriller at the movie theater starring half-naked actors, then bowling, and, finally, Camp Snoopy at the Mall of America. She went to his house once, met his parents, both doctors, and saw pictures of his two brothers, with Dave being the middle child. He took her to his bedroom, undressed her while she traveled her attention along the walls with ticket stubs and photographs from concerts and vacations. He was in a mid-tear of the condom wrapper with his teeth when his parents bellowed his name from downstairs, demanding to know who'd put a dent in their Range Rover.

The school's fight song finished with a blast from the trumpets in the pep band, and she sat next to Dave on the gym bleachers. He slid his arm

around her waist, and she rested her head against the smell of Old Spice laced into his sweatshirt.

She saw Taylor three bleachers down next to Fiona Hayes, the class president. He must've made a joke because she laughed and nudged his shoulder. Analise couldn't take her eyes off him.

They announced the names of the nominees. Missy was a no-brainer. And there were the usual suspects, those with the most visibility, which meant if you weren't in sports, you'd better be on every club or student council board imaginable.

"Taylor Barnes!"

No surprise there. The boys' soccer team was undefeated, thanks to Taylor.

Fiona Hayes hugged him far too long.

Analise tracked Taylor's legs as he dismounted the bleachers, the way his jeans tightened against his thighs, walking out to the center of the gym amongst cat calls and whistles, how he combed a humbled hand through his thick waves that any mother would argue needed a trim but curled at all the right places. He wore a buttoned plaid shirt, probably from Abercrombie, fashionably un-tucked and rolled to his elbows, revealing the flex of his muscles when he stuffed his hands in his pockets.

They called out the final name for the girls.

Taylor's eyes landed on hers. His face broke into a wide grin.

Dave kissed her cheek. "You have to go down there!"

"What?" she asked.

"Are you deaf?"

Other students surrounded her with congratulations and claps. Analise stood. Her legs were like vibrating strings. How would she make it down the bleachers without another concussion?

Missy hugged her first when she arrived on level ground in one piece, followed by the other four senior queen nominees and junior court attendants. Analise folded her arms across her body, sunk her nails into her skin, and counted the rungs on the railings, every last one, fifty times over, waiting to be dismissed to go and cry in the privacy of a bathroom stall.

The neurologist said Analise could run again, but there were only two cross-country meets left before section championships, for varsity only. She was dispensable when it came to winning, but otherwise indispensable because she had her teammates' birthdays memorized, even their personal race records, made *Good Luck* cards, and cheered the loudest.

She never ran to race. Running to Analise was cars to Ulla. *Freedom*. Freedom from the persistent yet unanswered questions about the past. Freedom from insecurity about the future.

The dark September morning was perfect running weather: thirty-five degrees. Analise brushed her hair into a ponytail, grabbed a granola bar, water bottle, and a change of clothes. She shimmied into her running tights, long sleeve racer, and laced her shoes.

Ulla was reading the paper and drinking her black coffee at the sink while finishing a burnt piece of toast. "Don't you think you should take it easy?" she asked, appraising Analise.

Analise shook her head. "I'm gonna run to school."

"That's a ninety-minute run. *One way*." Ulla dusted breadcrumbs from her uniform. "And with your backpack?"

"I don't need my books." Analise hesitated, and then said, "Yesterday they announced who'd be on Homecoming court. By some freak accident, or a cruel joke, I'm on it, so I really do need a dress. Everyone on the court rents white gowns, like wedding dresses, and I don't want to be left out. I know the whole thing is bogus, but I can use my savings, I guess, and maybe if I run to school, I can save a little extra on bus fares." She rushed over, kissed Ulla on the cheek, and ran out the door.

When Analise returned home from school that day, having completed a total of nineteen miles round trip, and was an injury waiting to happen, she collapsed onto her bed next to a bulging white envelope. Curious, she sat up and undid the flap.

Inside were twenty-dollar bills. Fifteen total.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Analise

The Pageant Shop was located in an upscale suburb, and it was part of the queen nominees' shopping plans that Saturday before convalescing at the soccer match. Analise waded through dresses with price tags that could pay six months of rent.

"Oh, Ana, try this one!" Missy said.

Analise went straightaway for the price tag, but Missy slapped her hand. "Don't. Try it on."

She rolled her eyes and snatched the dress, gathering it along with the growing weight of cheaper ones in the crook of her arm. She tried on the others, leaving the untouchable one for last. Was it worth falling in love with something she could never have? Instead, she photographed it in her mind, memorized it with her touch, stroking the endless layers of clouds for a skirt, the V-neck bodice stitched with thousands of tiny, glittering pearls and sequins.

It wasn't Dave Analise thought of just then, nor his eyes that she imagined absorbing her, should she wear something this beautiful for Homecoming.

Taylor scored a hattrick during the game to wild fanfare. But he looked miserable doing so.

At the end of the game, Dave badgered her to a pizza parlor with other players and their parents. But Analise wanted to go home and call Taylor. Ask him about his grumpy face. Pester him again for an answer about Stanford, as if that would loosen the knot inside her stomach. The one that tightened at the thought of him thousands of miles away. He said he'd been courted by several colleges and hadn't made a decision. "Why don't you play professionally?" she'd asked, and he laughed kindly, answering, "I'm good, Isa, but I'm not *that* good."

At the restaurant, Dave's parents joined them, and the hostess asked for a head count. Analise turned at the creak of the main doors opening with a gusty chill, and her cheeks warmed at the sight of Taylor walking through with his parents.

Taylor's mom paused at the sight of Analise. She removed a hand from her designer puffer coat, brushing aside her stylish bangs as if to get a better look. Her scrutinizing eyes—*Taylor's eyes*—were striking, and the giant diamond on her ring finger briefly distracted Analise. Taylor's dad towered over his mom, and he shared his son's nose and jawline.

Analise offered Taylor a closed-lipped smile. Taylor's returning smile was stiff, not surprising, his usual range of facial expressions went from mildly intense to severely intense. The *severe* intensity he saved for soccer matches, but it also materialized at any mention of his father. The invisible barrier between father and son was palpable, easy to light on fire.

Taylor and Dave exchanged nods. Their parents greeted one another with hugs and high-pitched chatter. Dave's mom gestured to Analise, "This is Dave's new girlfriend, Ana."

"Isa," Taylor said.

Dave cocked an eye at him. "Ana."

"Analise," she mollified.

"Analise," repeated Taylor's mother slowly, her large eyes pooling with fascination. "What's your last name?" she asked as if inspecting Analise.

"Berglund."

"Berglund? Not Bergstrom?"

Why the preoccupation with her name? "No." *And why the weird stare*? Analise bounced her eyes to Taylor's dad. He, too, had laid a perplexed gaze on her.

The waitress broke the awkwardness, and Analise meekly followed the two families, praying more would join. Her nerves would not survive this gathering with Taylor's odd parents.

She sat next to Dave. Taylor and his parents sat across. Taylor's mother quietly chatted with Dave's mom, her mouth pinched with short answers, as she repeatedly stole glimpses Analise's way. Taylor's dad seemed to have dropped his interest in Analise, busily messaging on his phone. He pushed his chair back and said he had to take a business call. Taylor's eyes followed him with enough poison to annihilate a citywide block.

Analise felt ill. Her head was fuzzy. She asked Dave to order her a Coke and left the table. When she reached the bathroom, she splashed cold water on her face and remembered she hadn't eaten anything today except a piece of toast before running five miles that morning. There'd been the Frappuccino from Starbucks when she was shopping for dresses. Maybe the caffeine-sugar infusion was making her sick.

She peed, exited the stall, and, while washing her hands, sipped water from the tap. In the mirror's reflection, she pinched her cheeks until the color rebounded and did several slow breathing exercises that she'd employed on occasion to keep from fainting after a race.

Analise exited the bathroom, past Taylor's dad in a quiet corner, giggling on the phone with a finger in his ear to block a Justin Timberlake song overhead. She would've kept walking, but heard him say, "What are you wearing? I'm serious. At least let a guy fantasize . . . I don't want to be here either, but going to his game apparently wasn't enough . . . he has nothing to bitch about." He chuckled in a smarmy way. It curdled Analise's gut. "I will," he turned around, "I love you, too," and locked eyes with Analise.

Analise feigned innocence, as if she were only passing and ducked away. When she joined the table, she couldn't bear to look at Taylor. And when his dad returned a moment later, she sucked her Coke with her eyes down, every sip like gagging on cough syrup.

Another soccer player and his family settled, jolting the conversation up a notch. Dave rubbed her thigh and whispered in her ear, but all she heard was Taylor's dad saying, *What are you wearing . . . at least let a guy fantasize . . .*

Taylor stood from the table. He spoke inaudibly to his mom. She looked up in concern and said, "Are you sure?"

He nodded and kissed her cheek, deliberately ignoring his dad who was attempting a goodbye. His teammates protested when he said he had to go study, with one calling out, “Hey, Barnes, Stanford only cares about your body, not your brains!”

Analise watched him retreat. Something mobilized her. She told Dave she’d drunk too much Coke and had to pee again but hurried after Taylor. He was halfway across the parking lot, having clipped at a good pace. She called his name, her breath vaporizing into a desperate fog. He either didn’t hear or pretended not to. She tried again, this time running.

He turned around finally, his face stony and wordless.

“Do you want to talk—I mean later. You can call me?”

His mouth quirked, but his eyes were sad, staring past her shoulder. “Don’t bother waiting up.”

“But I will,” she promised. “As long as the battery on the phone doesn’t die.”

Her reply sparked a genuine smile in him but it quickly died. He opened his mouth as if to respond and then seemed to change his mind. He inclined his head to the restaurant, as if shooing her away, cutting off her impulse to beg he take her with him.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Analise

In Analise's dream that night she stood on a glass-bottom boat, looking down. Her reflection pounded back at her.

She was startled awake, the phone still clutched in her hand. Taylor never called?

She heard a sharp rapping.

Her heart lunged into her throat, stifling her scream. What she had thought was pounding from her dream came from her window. She froze. Analise started dialing 9-1-1, but the phone was dead!

Isa. Her name, muffled, traveled through the glass, spurring her to action. She yanked the curtain aside, revealing Taylor's expansive smile.

She jammed her hand against the rusty lock and cracked it open forcefully. Analise immediately covered Taylor's mouth and put a finger to her lips, bracing for Ulla's footsteps.

Taylor stayed put, but his eyes dropped to the hand over his mouth, and his hot, moist breath tingled her palm.

When no sound came from Ulla, Analise hissed to him, "What are you doing!"

He gently removed her hand. She noticed his half-lidded eyes and smelled him.

"You din' answer . . . " he slurred. His face crumbled for a moment.

She presented the dead phone to prove her innocence. "I'm so sorry—wait—you drove here!"

His grin was crooked, and she spun her mind over what to do next. “Stay there,” she whispered and stumbled in the dark, looking for her sneakers and sweatshirt. Once she had them on, she lobbed one leg over the windowsill, then the other, ducking through the opening and into Taylor’s arms. “Where are your keys?” she stage-whispered again.

He frowned and fumbled with his jacket and jeans pockets. She took his hand and led him from the house. Their footsteps crunched over leaves and dead grass. His Jeep was hiked halfway onto the curb.

She opened the unlocked passenger door, pushed him in, then rounded to the other side and found the keys still in the ignition.

Taylor slumped into his seat. “Do you know how to drive a stick?” He giggled and then palmed his face. Analise would have loved to hear him laugh, but not under intoxicated circumstances.

She put her seat belt on. When Taylor made no move with his, she exhaled in annoyance and reached across to do it for him.

She adjusted her seat, pushed the clutch, and revved the engine. “Why were you drinking?” she asked, easing the clutch and shifting into first gear.

“Couldn’t sleep.”

Analise released a condescending snort. “That’s a great reason.”

“It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know why I’m drinking.”

“Your dad?”

“Among other things,” he muttered.

“I can’t believe you drove over here drunk.”

“I wasn’t drunk when I left.”

She stopped at a light and looked over at his face, the red glow illuminating his dull, vacant expression. “He didn’t even want to be at my game,” he said, “but I’m sure my mom pressured him, and you know when he left to take a phone call?”

Her gut tightened. The light turned green. She shifted gears.

“*Business* call?” he spat. “Fucking cheater.”

“It wasn’t,” she confessed, her own anger percolating.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Analise pressed the clutch, shifted to fourth, fifth, and gunned the Jeep onto the freeway.

“Tell me,” he demanded.

“What’s your address?”

“Four seven double oh merry-fucking-lane. Cough it up, Berglund.”

She examined his boyish eyes. They seemed to be the only permanent remnants of childhood left in his adult body. If she told him and confirmed his worst fear, would she risk losing that sight? Would the truth be cruel?

Taylor faced the window. “It won’t surprise me. In fact, I’ll feel better. I won’t feel crazy. I won’t have to listen to my mom’s bullshit excuses for him.”

“How much did you drink?”

“Are you going to tell me what you heard my dad saying on the phone?”

“You’re justified in hating him,” she replied.

He made a grunt of acknowledgment.

“Do I need to take you to the hospital?”

Taylor laughed loudly and slouched further. He rolled his head to look at her, more than look, a long stare that crept underneath her skin, and not in an unpleasant way. “What are you thinking?” she asked.

Taylor sucked in a long breath. “That he loves you.”

“What? *Who*?”

“You know who.” He turned his gaze away.

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Dave doesn’t love me, and we barely even talk.”

“Why is that?” He then answered his own question, “Never mind, I already know. I have to listen to him. Every fucking day.”

“What!” She nearly floored the pedal and bit her cheek. “We are—*not*. He’s lying!”

He shoved the heels of his hands into his eyes, and his voice was small. “I really think he loves you.”

“Knock it off! He doesn’t love me. He doesn’t even know me.”

“Do you love him?” He sounded like he was going to cry.

“Taylor.” She glanced out the driver’s window to hide her wet eyes.

“Do you?” he repeated dropping his hands.

“No. I don’t know.”

“So you might.”

“Please,” she whispered.

“I’d know right away if I loved someone.”

She sighed, exasperated, and swiped her eyes. “That’s not love, that’s infatuation.”

“What’s the difference?”

Analise didn’t answer, wanting him to drop the whole thing. She glanced at the speedometer to make sure she was staying under the limit, then registered the clock. It was one in the morning.

“I’m taking Fiona to Homecoming,” he said.

“I know. Missy told me.”

“You and I will be in the same group. All the seniors on the soccer team wanted to go together.”

Analise chewed on this piece of information that Dave had yet to share. In Dave’s defense, it’s possible he did tell her. Her mind wandered elsewhere in his presence.

“Renting a limo,” Taylor continued, circling a hand, “dinner at Kincaids, fucking Kincaids. And then someone’s cabin for the weekend. I can’t remember whose. Like it matters. Probably Conner’s.” He sniffed. “For the record, you deserve better than some guy who’s slept with half the school.”

“Why did you get him to ask me out?”

“Because that’s what you wanted.” The sincerity broke through his inebriated gaze. She wished she hadn’t seen it. Analise rolled her lips inward to suppress another lump of emotion.

Taylor cradled his head between his legs. He held it as if keeping it glued together, and she thought maybe he fell asleep. But he finally lifted it, and their exchange turned distant and robotic as he directed her to his house.

“Where should I park?” she asked once they arrived at a massive colonial home.

“Behind the single garage,” he said with a long inhale. “Will you come inside with me?”

Analise nodded on impulse before she could search for and find all the reasons it was a terrible idea.

He stumbled out of his side. She got out, jogged over, and steadied his back.

Taylor laughed drunkenly and straightened. “I’m fine.”

“What if your parents wake up?”

“Good for them.”

Analise moved him along, not knowing which door, of the three, to choose from. He took the keys and fiddled them into the side garage door.

“Wait. I hafta remember if I turned the alarm off.” He scratched his face. “Eh.” He unlocked it, and she held her breath.

It swung open to silence. Taylor pumped his fist in victory. “Told you I wasn’t drunk when I left.”

The garage held a Lexus, a Mercedes, and the third stall was empty. So distracted by the enormity of the garage, she forgot the risk of getting caught. He wobbled and bumped into the Mercedes. Analise grabbed his hand to steady him, and he led her inside the house, stepping into a mudroom. They plodded over rain boots, coats, and a mass of soccer gear in the dark.

Their grip tightened as they tiptoed through the kitchen toward a basement door. He opened it with a creak that felt as loud as a gunshot. She was going to have to leave this way? Each step downstairs, with his hand swallowing hers, felt somehow to be a step closer to a point of no return.

The basement looked like an apartment made of teenage boy dreams: flat screen television, refrigerator, gaming systems, foosball and pool tables, knee hockey nets and sticks piled in a corner, a sectional couch with soccer balls aplenty lounging on the cushions like pillows.

Taylor took her to his room and left her there, saying he had to pee. His desk light was on, casting a reflection across a large bay window. Outside was a sloping hill that tumbled into a swampy pond surrounded by naked trees. Beyond that stretched Lake Minnetonka. His room was a tug-of-war between childhood and adulthood. Autographed posters of soccer teams and players with names like Chelsea, Liverpool, Brazil, and AC Milan wallpapered one side. The other had a whiteboard with calculus equations and passages of diagrammed poetry. Above the desk, one shelf held the *Harry Potter* collection, *Lord of the Rings*, while the other was crammed with textbooks and novels from all his Advanced Placement courses. On his desk was a Manchester United beer mug filled with junk toys from fast food kids’ meals, unredeemed Chuckee Cheese tickets, and next to the mug was a divider with large, heavily stuffed envelopes that had return addresses: *Augsburg, University of Wisconsin, University of Indiana, University of Virginia, University of Chicago, Luther College, Stanford.* On and on.

She was still counting the envelopes when he came into the room. Analise didn’t look his way. She kept staring at the envelopes, at the endless possibilities he had awaiting his future.

She'd taken the ACT once and never bothered to open her score. What was the point? She wasn't in AP classes, not even Honors, and the best she could do in her average classes was get average grades.

Taylor came close and followed her gaze.

"Where do you think you'll go?" she whispered, crossing her arms, digging her nails into them—hard—through her sweatshirt to feel the pain. To redirect her nerves away from her budding tears.

Taylor didn't answer. He unclenched her knuckles, lifting her fingers up one by one and sliding them through his. She focused on the carpet, looking for something to distract herself. Because the beating of her heart was much too fast, pumping a growing, intractable current. *Does he feel this, too?*

He stared at their enmeshed fingers and finally whispered, "I think I'm really wasted."

Analise nodded and broke her hand free.

Taylor walked to his bed, and then, as if it were the most natural thing, and he'd done this countless times in front of her, bunched his sweatshirt and t-shirt up behind his neck and swept them onto the floor, unzipped his jeans, stepped out of them, and peeled his socks off. Analise held her breath, dizzy, her head floating upwards. Her traitorous eyes diverted briefly to see him crawl underneath his comforter, enough to see that he at least kept on boxer briefs. She dug her nails into her arms once more.

Taylor buried himself inside the covers, only his thick tufts of hair poked through. He shot his arm out, beckoning, and Analise went to him, kneeling at the bedside. He turned his face to her. "You can stay here," he whispered, his eyes begging.

She shook her head. "Is it okay if I take your car back to my place, and I'll pick you up in the morning?"

"Keep it, and take it to school. I'm not going."

"Why?"

"'Cause I'm going to feel like shit all day," he said with his lips mushed against the pillow. "I'm sorry I dragged you into this. I'm bad at drinking."

Analise ached to smooth the hair from his forehead, tuck it behind his ear, and trail her palm over his clean-shaven skin. "It's okay, you needed a friend. Just *please* promise me you'll never drink and drive again."

He sighed and nodded, closing his eyes. It seemed he fell asleep when his breathing relaxed. She began to rise, but he said, "Thanks for being my friend. I know I don't always say the right things—I actually say a lot of

fucked up things. Maybe ‘cause you make it so easy for me to say anything.”

“Same here,” she said and waited a long while, content to take in the woodsy scent of his linens, trace the lines of his neck, the slope of his nose, and his slightly parted mouth. She did this, committing his face and smell to her memory until the red digits on his alarm clock ticked by, until she was certain he was asleep. Certain he would never know she’d satiated the desire to finally feel his eyelashes on her lips.

Analise thought of nothing but Taylor the entire drive home in his car. *His car*. As if taking him with her. How often had they occupied the same space in school, how many of his shy smiles and friendly waves could she count? How, in mere weeks, was she consumed by him? The empty passenger seat, devoid of his heat, taunted her.

There was no room left in her mind to consider the consequences of what she’d just done. What waited for her when she returned home at 2:30 in the morning.

Flashing emergency lights were not something that gave her much pause in her neighborhood. But as she slowed the Jeep, Taylor didn’t disappear from her consciousness. He only shouted louder.

Analise parked and got out of the car. Everything wavered as she entered into a nightmare.

When the police officer stepped aside on her porch, revealing Ulla—a sculpture of solid fear—her mother didn’t sob in relief or fall to her knees in thankful prayer, she rocketed to Analise, hair rippling like a frenzied flag. Ulla shook her as if breaking both of them free from the horror that had been Ulla’s for the past hour. The one where Analise had been kidnapped, raped, and left for dead, taken from the window that had been left wide open in her haste to get Taylor home.

Everything in her room was gone, stolen. Her closet was ripped clean of her clothes and shoes. Her desk had been ransacked.

She could accept her coronation dress and shoes being taken. It hurt, but she’d go to the administration and withdraw her nomination for Homecoming queen. Earn the money back.

What she could never accept, what made her curl up in bed, claw at her knees in wracking sobs was the promise Ulla yanked out of her to never talk to Taylor Barnes again.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Analise

Ulla dropped her off at school that morning in the T-bird instead of making her take the bus but seemed otherwise unsympathetic to her haggard, emotional state.

Analise now trudged inside their home after school with gritty eyes. It felt like they would swell shut and force her to sleep standing if she didn't lie down.

Ulla was home, waiting. Taylor's Jeep was gone.

"What did you do with his car?" Analise muttered.

"Dealt with it," Ulla replied in an even tone, but she appeared anxious.

Analise grunted and moved past her to the kitchen.

"Melia called me," Ulla said.

"Yeah, so?" Analise got a glass of water. She usually went for the Lucky Charms, but her appetite had tanked, and she'd spent lunch hour sobbing to Melia, who was working today. Well beyond retirement years, Melia's sapphire eyes were as ageless as any godmother's in a fairy tale, and everything Analise needed to allay her despair. As a girl, Analise had begged Ulla not to move out of Melia and Shorty's when she started first grade, still recalling Ulla's cryptic explanation. *We can't always depend on Melia and Shorty to rescue us*. Rescue? Melia, over the years, reminded Analise to be gentle with Ulla. *Liebchen, she has been through an awful lot.*

So, Analise focused on Ulla's good. A mother that taught her daughter to be self-sufficient: work, pay bills, fix your own cars, and memorize city

maps so you're never lost. They didn't shop or get mani-pedis, but they watched endless reruns of *Friends* and could speak to each other using solely quotes from the television series, but translated into Swedish. Their talks about periods and sex were refreshingly blunt. And Ulla always tried, and failed, to bake Analise a cake on her birthday every Christmas Eve. A flattened, burnt mess that they'd feed to the squirrels.

Analise had nothing to complain or fight about with Ulla.

Until now.

Ulla blocked Analise's exit from the kitchen. "I got you some new things," she said with a demeanor that felt more sympathetic, giving Analise a shred of hope. "Mamma—"

"I'm not changing my mind about Taylor Barnes."

Analise burst into a fresh batch of tears. *Seriously*. How much could one person cry? "You don't *know* him!"

"I know his kind," she said. "You'll thank me someday."

Analise shook her head angrily, wiped her face, and huffed past Ulla, just wanting to sleep this all away. Except her bed was occupied. There, splayed on the bare mattress, was the dress from the Pageant Shop. *The dress*. The one with the princess skirt, miles of gossamer tulle, and beaded V-neck bodice. Its price much too high and not for rent, and oh, how she loved it. Analise turned to question Ulla, but her stunned mouth locked up.

Ulla lightly touched the dress as if afraid to tarnish it. "Melia said you tried withdrawing your nomination from Homecoming court."

Analise found her voice. "Because Taylor's on the court!"

Ulla skirted her gaze, and with a sigh, she said, "I know. I don't want him in your life. But I didn't say you couldn't *have* a life."

Analise sat next to the dress, stroking it. *Was this a bribe*?

"You'll survive without him, Isa. Trust me."

On coronation day, the court members were excused an hour early to dress. Analise assumed she would need only five minutes of the allotted time and then watch the other girls preen with their personal entourages. Melia found her, though, armed with a Caboodle of makeup, hot rollers, and hair spray. "Did my mother put you up to this?" Analise's waterworks restarted.

Melia thumbed her tears. "Of course she did, *liebchen*. She loves you."

“Doesn’t feel like that,” Analise moaned, the weight of her gloom increasing. She’d erased Taylor’s voicemails from the past two days, but the confused rejection continued chiseling her mind. They had no classes together but had shifted their orbits during passing time over the previous weeks toward one another, and now she hid in the nearest bathroom, waiting for eternity to end. Even worse, they’d rehearsed coronation yesterday, and the couples were paired by alphabetical order. Analise faked a stomachache and cramped over in the bleachers as another girl took her place to practice with him.

Melia dabbed Analise’s eyes dry and set about transforming her. With a few minutes remaining, she helped Analise into her dress, cinching the zipper.

Missy, all gussied up, swished over, and appraised Analise. Her unhinged mouth slowly came together in a silent but emphatic, *Wow*!

“Is my bra showing?” Analise teethed her shimmery lip.

Missy frowned. “No one is going to care if your bra is showing. You look incredible! Have you *seen* yourself?”

Analise wanted a picture with Melia, but time ran out, and she was left hobbling into her heels as the court took their places in the bleacher wings. The junior classmen were announced first, followed by the candidates for king and queen. They were to walk in from opposite sides of the gym and greet one another in the center.

The band started. “Go, Ana!” someone hissed from behind.

The student body cheered, pounded the bleachers, and rose to their feet. In her four-inch heels, death by tripping was a possibility. Analise stepped carefully and focused on the floor. She saw Taylor’s shoes, his trademark soccer shoes instead of the shiny ones that came with the tux rental.

She curtsied and waited for Taylor to proffer his arm. But he didn’t. She reluctantly lifted her face to meet his. And there it was. He wanted her to see it. Analise squeezed her eyes, unable to keep from absorbing his hurt. Taylor took her hand. They walked. His familiar scent left her awash in this forbidden craving for him, and she felt herself unraveling.

They reached the dais. She slipped her hand from his arm and pressed it to her stomach to quell its tumbling. The remaining nominees arrived, and Analise exchanged tepid hugs and pasted smiles with each girl. The marching band played their final note. Analise resisted the urge to pinch her arm. She counted the band members opposite the bleachers where the

Homecoming court resided, starting with the percussion. The reigning king and queen from last year took the microphone.

Analise moved onto the brass section.

“Your 2005 chosen King is . . . Taylor—”

Cheers and stomping feet drowned his last name. Soccer balls materialized and flew onto the gym floor, bouncing with echoing thuds amongst the uproar of jubilant pandemonium. Her heart swelled with happiness at the deep smile that broke his intensity. It fell when he caught her eye, but she lost sight of him when the soccer team rushed to the floor and ambushed Taylor in congratulations.

The teachers and staff worked crowd control, righting the ship onto the regularly scheduled program, and when the moment came to crown Homecoming queen, Analise dutifully gripped hands with the girl next to her.

“And your 2005 Homecoming queen is . . . ”

Students threw out names, stalling the proclamation.

Analise floated her gaze to Taylor. He mouthed her name right before it boomed over the loudspeakers.

The congratulatory hugs smothered her dazed response. She remained rooted as if her high heels were screwed in place. A heavy crown was thrust upon her head, a robe draped over her shoulders, and a scepter laid into her palms. She’d have to suffer his morose eyes the rest of the day and into the evening, where he’d wave limply from their perch on the convertible at the parade, and she’d wilt upon having to hold his stiff arm during the Homecoming procession at the football game.

They prodded Analise to the podium next to Taylor. Her eyes zeroed to the walkway above the bleachers where she saw Ulla. She waved to her, big, airplane-taxiing arms that Ulla ignored because she didn’t seem to care about Analise, too fixated on someone else. She followed Ulla’s line of vision, landing on Taylor’s mom snapping pictures with a zoom-lens Nikon. When Analise looked back to Ulla, she was gone.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Analise

If Friday's festivities weren't bad enough, if Analise's cyclical tears throughout the night weren't bad enough, Saturday afternoon certainly was, marking the kick-start of the next twenty-four-hour installment of the Homecoming debacle. First, primping at Missy's house amongst the other senior girls in their group. Next, pictures at the lakeshore. Then dinner, and finally the dance, followed by Conner's cabin. Ulla insisted she go. "*But Taylor will be there!*"Analise had wailed. "And you'll be with Dave, won't you?" was Ulla's quip, the subtext not escaping Analise. As if sleeping with Dave was the cure-all.

At Missy's now, the girls gossiped as they curled and pinned one another's hair and applied makeup. Several half-drunk cans of Coke, Diet Coke, Mountain Dew, and Starbucks coffee cups dotted the room. Beyonce's "Crazy in Love" played from Missy's iPod speaker. Analise sat on the bed applying eye shadow, wondering how on earth she was going to replicate Melia's artistry. Especially with dark circles under her eyes.

Taylor's date, Fiona, had done little to mask her pouting that week about not being on the court. But Taylor was now King. Fiona gleefully shoved a bobby pin into Missy's hair in front of the vanity mirror. "How many rooms does Conner's cabin have again?" she asked with a coquettish giggle.

Someone answered, "I'm pretty sure Barnes is still a virgin."

"Not for lo-ong," Fiona sang. "Hey, Ana, you mind if I deflower your king?"

Analise dropped the eyeshadow brush on Missy's pink quilt. She scrubbed the brown powder from it.

"Ana, what's Dave like?" another girl said.

"Oh, please," came another, "ask half the female population—no offense, Ana. There's a reason they call him 'fuck and duck.'"

How many questions did Analise just get asked*? What is Dave like in bed*? She cringed.

"There's no way Taylor Barnes is still a virgin," Missy said. "Didn't he and Deanna hook up sophomore year?"

"Do you honestly believe anything Deanna says?" Fiona snarked.

Analise went back to applying eye shadow but couldn't steady her hand. The words *Taylor* and *Virgin* and *Fuck* and *Duck* kept ping-ponging in her ears. "Can—could anyone do my eye makeup?"

Missy grinned. "I got ya covered when Fi is done."

Analise reached for an unopened can of Sprite and fumbled her nails underneath the tab. She looked at Missy's pink and white clock on the wall.

Thirty minutes had passed since Ulla dropped Analise off. Thirty minutes since Analise asked, "Aren't you coming to pictures?"

"I told you," Ulla spoke to the steering wheel, "I have to cover for Brenda at the shop. We're redoing the filing."

Bullshit.

"Have Dave's mom send me copies. My camera sucks anyway."

Analise cried, "This is so *embarrassing*! First, you ditch me at coronation, then the parade. Now, all the other parents will ask, 'Where's your mom, Ana?' It's bad enough I have to tell them I have no *dad*!"

Ulla drummed her greased-caked fingers, and a faraway, pained veil drew over her eyes and words. "I'm so sorry, Isa. Really, I am."

Analise had flung open the car door, gathered her dress, overnight bag and shoes, and slammed it shut. She was angry with Ulla, yes. But mostly she was already weary from the energy she'd have to muster tonight, all the false gaiety she'd need to exude under the heaviness of Taylor's presence. Her mind fast-forwarded to the pictures Taylor's mom would take of the two of them together at the lakeshore, his cool arm around her waist. Dave would land a jocular slug on Taylor's shoulder and say, *Gimme your crown so I can take a pic with my girlfriend, too.*

Girlfriend. The word would come from Dave's lips for the first time and taste sour against hers.

Analise closed her eyes and imagined going back to the day Taylor Barnes knocked her on the head with his soccer ball. When he told the EMT he was her boyfriend.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Analise

Half the student population clustered by the DJ in the balloon-laced gymnasium. The other half trickled in, already sloshed, and Taylor was, too. She'd watched him in the limousine take shot after shot while Dave kissed her neck, while she grew more sickened. He'd gotten out of the limo, loose and flirtatious with Fiona, who'd drunk as much as him.

Dave guided her to dance, keeping their bodies wedged together, his rhythm more than concealing her lack thereof. More students glommed to the center and no one, thankfully, could see how really terrible she was.

One pop song blended into the next. She swiped away strands of sweaty hair plastering her neck. The pins fastening the crown to her head began to sting.

An hour ticked by before the first slow jam crooned through the speakers. It cleared two-thirds of the bodies. Dave crossed her arms around his neck, and she rested her cheek on his shoulder. A passive, defeated comfort settled over her. She would accept her fate as Dave's girlfriend, lose her virginity, and in the future, remember it wasn't cliché to be careful for what you wished for. Analise's eyes wandered to Taylor and Fiona.

They were kissing.

She buried her face in Dave's chest. Mariah Carey punished her with the lyrics, "We Belong Together." Her breath sprinted away, tearing apart her chest.

She was a complete fool.

How had she fallen in love with Taylor Barnes and not even known it?

She slipped herself from Dave's arms and cupped her mouth. Analise hopped and tripped her way out of her stupid high heels. With them clutched in one hand, she gathered the skirt's layers in the other and ran.

She ran in search of the deepest corner of the school. One where she could discard her heart. But every hallway was cordoned off with metal caging. The bathroom wasn't an option because other girls would hear her ugly cries. *Outside*. Yet every single door was locked. She slammed the bar over and over.

"Isa!"

The sobs wrenched themselves free. She backed into a corner and sank, the tulle of her gown floated up like a cloud with a tiny *whoosh*.

Taylor fell to his knees at her, repeating her name like a balm.

"Talk to me, please."

He pulled her gloved hands away to reveal smeared makeup on the palms. He framed her face and smudged off the rest of the stains. His hands were so tender.

"Leave me alone!" she cried.

Taylor sat back on his heels. He stared out the glass doors into the night. She followed his gaze, and her hiccuping filled the silence, along with the muffled, up-tempo music echoing from the gym.

He finally asked, "Are you pissed at me for coming to your house drunk?"

"Like you are now?" she said, sullen. "Go back to *Fiona*." Analise unpeeled her gloves. She squeezed her nails into the fleshy underside of her pinky.

His tone matched hers. "Go back to *Dave*."

She said nothing and watched the wind tug on helpless leaves.

"Why are you ignoring me?" he urged. "I thought . . . " He shook his head.

"My mother found out about you drinking, and me sneaking out." Fresh tears burned her eyes. "I'm not allowed to speak to you."

Taylor took her in his arms. "Why didn't you tell me?" he said against her cheek.

Analise pushed him away. "Don't—don't. I can't—"

"She'll get over it. She *has* to."

"She won't."

“You’re practically eighteen, are you going to let her tell you what to do?”

“She’s all I have!”

Taylor gripped her wrists, and she smelled the alcohol on his breath. “No, she’s not. Listen to me. I didn’t kiss Fiona. She kissed *me*—I can’t kiss one girl when I’m in love with another.” Taylor let go. He yanked the crown off his head and ran a hand through his hair. He pressed a fist to his forehead. “I’m such a fucking mess over you. I have been ever since I saw you in the office that first day, when you were picking up something. I can’t explain it, Isa, what I felt, you have to believe me. I just never thought you’d . . . ”

“Never thought I’d what?” She looked up and cried harder but for very different reasons now.

Clicking footsteps rounded the corner. It was Missy. She planted her hands on her hips. “Taylor? Ana? Everyone and their *mom* is looking for you! It’s time for the court to dance, and we can’t exactly do it without you two.” She paused and regarded them. “Ana, are you okay?”

“We’ll be there in a sec,” said Taylor, steadying his words.

Missy threw up her hands and left, her long skirt swish-swashing.

Taylor handled Analise’s shoes and placed them on her feet while she furiously swiped at her face.

“Everyone will know I’ve been crying,” she said.

Taylor took her face into his hands and studied it. He thumbed the skin under her eyes as if wiping away mascara streaks and blew softly on her cheeks. “Let’s get this over with.” He took his crown, put her gloves inside his tux pocket, and threaded his hands into hers. The gesture, slow and deliberate, felt as if the nerve endings on their skin were wiring themselves into the other’s. He raised her to her feet, and they walked back to the gym.

Once they hit the doorway, they broke contact. A fanfare of impatient students eyed them, clapping. Grateful for the near darkness, save for the colorful strobes of the DJ, no one would know she’d been crying.

The Verve’s “Bitter Sweet Symphony” began to play. The DJ announced the court members one by one, the song’s wailing violin chords leading each couple out to the floor.

They awaited their moment, fingers brushing. The pulse in her ears drowned the proclamation for King and Queen.

She forced a smile and waved to their fellow students. He curled her hand between their bodies, anchoring his other into the dip of her back. She fondled the hair at the base of his neck. Their feet moved imperceptibly, and with his breath on her cheek and her palm over his heart, Analise fretted over the impossibilities. Of choosing between Taylor and Ulla. Between remaining the newly popular queen at school and risking the scorn of breaking up with one boy because she'd been in love with his best friend all along. *No*. What truly plagued her were not her present choices. It was the reason she'd never given Taylor Barnes a second glance all these years. Never mind his wealth. Or popularity. He was named two-time Mr. Soccer for Minnesota and the projected Salutatorian of their senior class out of nearly a thousand. The only reason he wasn't in the running for Valedictorian was because he'd had a bout of mono freshman year and had to downgrade an AP class to Honors.

"Isa?" he said in her ear.

If she'd known this before he held her hand during the ambulance ride over a month ago, or when they'd talked for hours in the middle of the night, arguing about whether a soccer match was more grueling than a cross country race, maybe it would've been enough to stop her from falling for him. Because this time next year, he would be at one of the most prestigious universities, a rising collegiate soccer star, studying for an O-chem final and dating a girl whose parents were like Dave Laviolet's, probably pre-med herself, or pre-law—

"Isa."

Analise looked into those imploring eyes, dragging her under.

The song reached its climax. She shook her head and stepped away.

When he kissed her, she wanted to be angry with him.

But she kissed him right back.

They cast off their crowns and ran outside into a night of possibilities.

The fallout from their very public act of betrayal was swift and immediate. Half the student body turned their noses up at the scandalous king and queen. The other half covered their slack jaws, closing in, eager for a fight between Dave and Taylor. It was Analise who stepped between

the two boys and said, “I kissed him.” She used Dave’s mouth-drop to grab Taylor’s hand, fist her skirts, and together they fled.

Except they were stranded outside the main doors and Taylor lived five miles away. It was cold. He guided her arms through his tuxedo jacket, and with a heady amount of euphoria to keep each other warm and fuel their legs, they dashed to the city bus. They stumbled aboard, giggling and staggering through the aisle, arms and legs tangled. They stole more kisses and collapsed into an empty seat far from other passengers. “I should hate myself for what I did to Dave. I’m cruel,” she moaned into his mouth.

Between their shared breaths he replied, “No, you’re not. Trust me.”

“Didn’t you think he loved me?”

“I only said that to find out if you loved him.” He spread her lips with his, and their tongues dipped in and out, slowly, opening places in her that she needed him to touch and fill. *Everywhere*.

When they arrived at their stop, Taylor piggybacked Analise off the bus, her dress trailing down the dirty steps and onto the sidewalk.

They reached his house and sneaked downstairs to his bedroom. Taylor left her alone for the few minutes it took to go upstairs, tell his mom he decided to ditch the cabin, and to leave him alone the rest of tomorrow.

Analise lay prone on his bed, feet swinging in the air, searching through his iPod that was connected to a speaker. She hit play on an Oasis album. When he entered the room, she sat up and hugged his tuxedo jacket around her arms. Her gown’s skirts filled almost the entire bed.

Taylor locked the door behind him, and they looked at one another. He went to her and slid his jacket off her shoulders.

Chapter Forty

October – November 2005
Two Weeks Later

Analise

Dirt and grass sprayed from underneath Taylor's soccer cleats. He kicked a pass too far, sending it out of bounds, allowing the opposing team a throw-in. When he stopped and hiked his jersey to mop the sweat from his stern forehead, Analise's eyes dove straight to a peek of his taut, bare stomach.

She trailed her fingers across the ridges of the empty bleacher seat next to her, far from the reproachful cloud of her classmates, from the blame over the soccer team's last two losses. She closed her eyes, wishing for that insular moment from Homecoming night to return. "How do you say 'I love you,' in Swedish?" he had asked while making the bed sheets a tent over them, his smile obliterating every one of her senses, except for the feel of his skin, firm and naked, causing hers to rise.

The steam from her Styrofoam cup of hot chocolate dwindled, and she nursed it as the only distraction from her peers' derision, from the furtive glances of Taylor's mother a few seats down, huddled with the other soccer moms. Surprisingly pitiful glances. Not contemptuous like Dave's mom. Though Analise wanted neither. Surely, Taylor's mother must have known that they'd had ditched the dance, and the entire weekend, together.

The referee's whistle sounded, and this signaled the end of the first half but the start of a verbal spar between Taylor and Dave. The coach told them to cool off, and Taylor snagged a ball with the top of his foot, launching it deftly into his hands. He trudged to the far end of the field. A fellow student threw an axe her way: "Hey, Ana, might as well go fuck the rest of the team while you're at it!" She got up amongst the laughter and stomped down the fiberglass benches.

She tossed the lukewarm chocolate into the trash bin and went to the field's perimeter, behind the chain-link fence, the darkness cloaking her fury.

He juggled the ball with hypnotic dexterity. She counted each tap on his cleats: one, two, three, four—onto his right knee—five—left knee, six, seven—right knee—eight—

Analise had reassured him that night when he'd asked, "Am I hurting you?" No, God no, this is what she'd dreamed it would feel like. As they fit their bodies together, she touched his mouth and said, "*Kyss mig*." He asked what that meant and she showed him, sliding her tongue over his, weaving her legs through his. Tight, tighter—

She clenched the fence's icy metal.

Nine, ten, eleven, twelve—Taylor trapped the ball and looked right at her, and then at the scoreboard ticking off the seconds. He sprinted over and reached her, working to loosen her rigid knuckles. She burst out, "Will you please just *win* so those assholes will leave me alone?"

The apology seemed to form on his lips, but he clamped it shut. His eyes matched her wounded, indignant ones, and he let go.

They won not only that game but ascended to the State Championship two weeks later.

The soccer team was crowned victors inside the Metrodome in downtown Minneapolis, and the very peers faulting her for Taylor's mistakes now hugged and congratulated her as if she had scored his winning goal.

Students and parents climbed over the bars, hopped down onto the synthetic turf, and joined the magic. Analise remained where she was, drained from the tension of it all. She watched his mother cry and smoosh

Taylor's cheeks. When his dad gave him an awkward side hug, Taylor's smile faltered, and his eyes searched elsewhere.

When he found her, he dodged and brushed aside bodies, grabbed the metal railing, and hoisted himself up and over. They embraced. His sweat dripped and mingled with the smell of cleats and deodorant. She emptied her tearful relief into him.

Taylor held her and swayed their bodies as if hushing her. "This is the second-best moment of my life." The warmth of his words moved from her ear to her mouth. His kiss was long and hard, but like that first morning after giving their virginity to one another, they were forced to part. He told her he loved her and jumped back into the fray.

Analise watched Taylor pose for a picture with his mother.

The week before Thanksgiving, Taylor was scheduled for a ten-day trip to visit colleges with his parents. "Ten days of *hell*," he told her. They shopped for phones at the mall, and Analise bought a cheap Nokia that came with prepaid cards and no features except phone and texting.

When Ulla left for work on Saturday, the day before his flight, Taylor came over. His legs were like solid and secure beams that she wrapped herself around. No longer were they in her bedroom, forbidden to see one another, but in his dorm room, lingering in bed after making love. She'd curl her fingers through his hair and tell him it's not the end of the world to get a B in Advanced Calculus.

"Let's go," he said, getting dressed. She pulled on her jeans and sweatshirt, too, and they embarked into November's sunshine.

They bought deli sandwiches, picnicked at Nicollet Island, and walked across the abandoned Boom Island Bridge. She tried to steal the soccer ball from him, and he took pictures of her with his digital camera. They went to the public library off Washington Avenue and uploaded the photographs onto his laptop. She clicked through the ones he'd saved from Homecoming. Her favorite: on his bed, the skirts of her dress a blanket for them to lie upon. He'd positioned the camera above and captured them in a kiss.

Taylor sat at a library computer and logged onto the Internet. He clicked on Google email and "Create an Account."

“What should we name it?” He tugged her onto his lap.

“We?” she asked. “I only use email for school.” And she forgot her password half the time.

“This one’s for us.”

“Our own diary?”

“Something like that.” He laughed self-deprecatingly. “I’ll be the one pouring out my heart half the time.”

She traced a tender finger along his nose. “How about our names?”

“Too obvious.”

She lightly slugged his arm. “You already have something picked out, don’t you?”

He unleashed a guilty smile and then typed it in: *kingandqueen*

It was available.

“I got the password.” Analise typed in their initials followed by their birth years. She clicked a few more buttons, and their new inbox appeared. Taylor reached past, his fingers rapid on the keys:

Subject: FIRST EMAIL: IMPORTANT QUESTION

How am I going to survive being away from you for so long?

Love,

T

Chapter Forty-One

Analise

Analise sat at the Thanksgiving table with Shorty, Melia, and Ulla, around a spread of traditional American turkey, mashed potatoes, stuffing, and German standards like bratwurst, *plachinda,* and *kuchen* for dessert.

The night before, she and Ulla helped prepare. Although, there was less prepping and more harping from Ulla for Melia to, “Take a break, look at all that fluid in your ankles,” and “Shorty, are you taking your heart pills?” And finally, “Isa, stop looking at that stupid phone!”

Taylor had returned from his college tours at two in the morning. The flight was delayed three hours from San Francisco, and neither could escape their family dinners today. But he hadn’t called her yet. *Not even a text*. Even when they had the chance to talk while he was away, his voice was terse. He barely sent any messages. His “I love you’s” felt distant.

She scrubbed a cranberry sauce stain on Melia’s white doily tablecloth and said, “I broke up with Dave.”

Melia took a minute bite of her mashed potatoes. “Dave?”

Ulla bit a chunk of her bratwurst and planted an unsympathetic stare on her, as if working to see through Analise’s brimming eyes and straight to the truth. “Shame.”

“It was never serious.” Her phone buzzed in her pocket. She reached inside and silenced it. “Can I take the Porsche for a drive, to get some ice cream?”

Ulla said with a mouthful of food, “There’s nothing *open* on Thanksgiving.”

Melia replied, “She’ll have to drive to the gas station, probably the one on Portland and 60th.”

Shorty pointed his fork behind him. “Key’s in the hutch. Take your time.”

“*Danke*!” Analise professed gratefully in German, avoiding Ulla’s scrutiny, and methodically slowed her excitement. She tossed on her coat, grabbed her purse and the key, and left out the back door to the garage in the alleyway. It was a balmy fifty degrees, and the light snow from that week had melted. The roads would be wide open.

Her pulse thrummed along with the 6-cylinder engine of the 1964 *Neunelfer* Porsche. She’d driven it many times with Shorty. At first, she’d been terribly anxious. *What if I crash it*? “Impossible,” he’d said.

Once out of the neighborhood, she pulled over and checked her message from Taylor: *I need to see you.*

Analise: *B ready n 10.*

Taylor: *Ur serious.*

Analise: *Yes Surprise xoxo*

Taylor: *OK*

When she arrived at his house, he was waiting on the steps with his soccer zip-up hoodie. His dress shirt peeked out from the collar and sleeve cuffs. He jogged to the passenger door and climbed in. “My dad would kill for this car,” he said and rested, weary-faced, into the seat. She was expecting a kiss, a hug—something.

“More reason to hurry up.” She drove away, barely trusting her voice. “How did you escape?”

He closed his eyes. “Told my parents I was leaving.”

“They didn’t argue?”

Taylor snorted a one-beat laugh, fluttering open his bloodshot eyes. “They were shocked I even agreed to sit around the table with them. They don’t care what I do the rest of the day.”

“You look exhausted,” she whispered.

He said nothing, just sighed.

Analise shut off the car behind a copse of trees in a nearby park. She looked at him; his eyes were fully open, but staring ahead, as if lost in thought.

She couldn't help it. The sob finally broke. "I stopped lying to my mom about Dave."

Taylor jerked his head to her. "Did you tell her about me?"

"No," she cried, sniffling, "but it's not like your parents know."

"It's not like my parents care!" It seemed he was about to cry, too.

"Fine, get it over with already. Break it off. You're going to Stanford—"

Taylor held her face. "I'm not going to Stanford, I'm not going anywhere without you. I'm signing a letter of intent to the University of Chicago. They'll give me the most money between athletic and academic scholarships. And it's the closest place to Minneapolis."

She pushed his hands away. "That was so stupid, you're so *stupid*. You have the best chance of getting into med school if you go to Stanford!"

"I'd be the biggest wreck if I had to live two-thousand miles away from you." He pinched his mouth, looking out the window.

She inhaled slowly, absorbing this declaration of his.

Taylor reached into his pocket and pulled out a velvet ring box. They both stared at it. He seemed to grope for his next words. "It's not . . . like this isn't an official proposal or anything, or maybe it is, I don't know. But if we got married we could be on our own, free from my dad reminding me of the silver spoon up my ass every time I call him out on being a lying, cheating dick."

"Taylor, wait—"

"I could apply for whatever loans are left over after my scholarships, we both could. I've been thinking about this, researching the whole time I was away . . . " he trailed off.

"I thought you were going to break up with me," she confessed quietly.

"Why?"

"But we should."

"*Isa*."

"I don't know what I'm doing next week," her tears loosed again, "let alone the rest of my life." She dug her nails into her thumb. "How can you be so sure of us? Of me? You'll get so bored." Letting go, she watched the indentations on her skin rebound. "I'm not good enough."

Taylor scraped his hair up. A crack formed in his expression, rupturing his mask of self-assuredness. "Do you not *read* my emails? I haven't scared you off with how messed up I am? How I worry every single minute of the day that I'm going to fuck something up? Like *us*? If you don't wanna be

with me, I get it, you don't have to make up shit to spare my feelings like saying you're not good enough."

"You'll get over me."

Taylor's single laugh was hollow and frail. "Because you'll get over me?"

Her answer, a whisper, came automatic. As if she could ever unstitch her heart from his. "Never."

His kiss caught her by surprise. The intensity of it drove their bodies together with the same urgency, hands fumbling, unable to keep up.

"Reach into my pocket," he said, kissing her neck.

Analise quit fighting with her jeans zipper and plunged into the soft folds of his black hoodie, coming up empty. "Which one?" She kissed him again, going for the other pocket.

Taylor checked himself. He cussed. "I think my parents have a pretty good idea of what I'm up to."

"It fell out?"

"Do you have one?"

Analise rummaged through her purse. "I think I'm due for my period anyway." Both their phones started going off, one after the next. Their mothers no doubt, like some kind of warning that only intensified the need she felt to lock him inside her. He told her he couldn't live without her, and Analise told him the same. She feared it wasn't because he truly loved her but because she was a means to an end, to untether himself from the weight of his world.

Chapter Forty-Two

December 2005

Analise

Analise kept the engagement ring hidden in her closet. It was a simple gold band with a modest diamond, something Taylor said his mother gave to him, with a promise that it could be an engagement ring for whomever he chose to love. But it seemed to take on a haunting presence, a ticking countdown. He didn't give her any ultimatum about the marriage proposal, and he didn't pressure her. But the longer she lied to Ulla, the more she feared losing a little of Taylor each day, of losing him altogether. She could maybe get Ulla to come around to boyfriend/girlfriend. Not *husband/wife*. She could see the disappointment now. The disgusted scoff. *A wife, Isa? At eighteen?* she would say. *That's what I raised you to aspire to?*

She wore the ring once, as if test-driving, when she and Taylor played hooky from school, while his parents were out of town. Separately. His dad on business. His mother at a spa. Analise made him his favorite strawberry waffles for breakfast. They snacked on Lucky Charms, laughing hysterically while watching *Napoleon Dynamite*. She quizzed him on his AP Euro History final while he bounced a soccer ball off the basement walls. They erased answering machine messages from the school about

their absence, took sultry pictures, ran along the lake, and afterward showered together until the water ran cold.

He'd asked her to be his date to his cousin's wedding on the 23rd, the day before Christmas Eve, her eighteenth birthday. "Lie to your mom, but don't worry about my parents seeing us together. My mom knows something is up."

Analise couldn't accept his invitation. Not yet. She could still hear those two words bouncing off the walls from his soccer ball: *not yet—not yet—not yet*. On the wedding day, she stewed in her bedroom, spinning the ring on her finger.

She heard Ulla come home and smelled the thick aroma of Domino's pizza. Analise tugged her ring off and placed it in its hiding spot, inside the toe of her high heels from Homecoming. Her phone rang. She scrambled to answer it. It was only ten minutes past seven. "Hey," she spoke softly when answering.

His intoxicated voice sent her stomach reeling. "She's *here*. I know who my dad is cheating on my mom with."

"What are you talking about?"

"This chick he brought over to the house once and said they were *friends."*

"Tay—"

"Fucking arrogant asshole, shoving it in our faces."

"Don't do anything stupid."

"That's why I'm *calling* you. Come take me home before I kick the shit out of him."

In her head, Analise mapped the bus route to the Walker Art Museum where the reception was being held.

He spoke her name again.

She cussed to herself in Swedish, and somewhat to him. "Please don't drink anymore?"

"There's like a thousand glasses of leftover champagne that I'm not about to let go to waste."

"Stop joking!"

"Isa. Relax. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, okay? I'll wait for you on the steps by the sculpture garden."

"It's freezing, don't do that. It's gonna take me an hour. Is your Jeep there?"

"Yeah."

"I'm leaving." She hung up and went for the bedroom door.

Except Ulla was there. Analise leaped from her skin. "You scared me!"

"Who was that?" Ulla asked. Her face was a thin layer of ice.

"It—it was someone from cross country. She's at a party drunk and was hoping I could come and drive her home."

"Take Tina."

"My—my friend—has her own car. If I take the bus, I can drive it."

"How will you get home?"

"What's with all the questions?"

Ulla remained.

I love him, Mamma. Analise felt the words gathering at the base of her throat. *I have to go to him*, but before she could, Ulla moved, walking away with a dismissive, "Fine. Go."

Analise hurriedly got into her coat and boots, and, once outside, realized she forgot her hat but couldn't risk the potential of Ulla changing her mind. Risk an argument that would end God-knows-when or how.

There was only one transfer on the way to the art museum. She texted him multiple times on the ride, but there was no response. Not even when she called. *C'mon Taylor, answer.*

Upon dashing off the bus and into the freeze, she ran past the outdoor garden sculptures, the iconic Cherry in the Spoon, remembering her childhood marveling of it on a school field trip. At this time of night, there might be security guarding the wedding reception. Or she'd have to turn in circles, up and down flights of stairs, hunting for Taylor *who still wasn't answering*.

Her footsteps echoed off the dim corridors where exhibits were closed and found a sign for the wedding party: 2nd Floor CITYVIEW ROOM.

Each unanswered ring carved her gut. She rushed up the sharp, marble staircase, and stumbled. The phone slipped from her hand, bounced, and shattered down the steps. "No!" Analise cussed, rushing to find the pieces. Her hands shook, jamming the cracked battery cover on. Reaching Taylor was impossible now with a broken phone, and she sprinted back up and around a corner, following the din of ambient music, clinking flatware, and jovial laughter. Embarrassed and insecure over her casual appearance, she cowered at the threshold of the party, pocketing her mittens, momentarily

struck by the beauty of the glittering skyline outside the floor-to-ceiling windows.

"Isa."

Analise decompressed at the sound of Taylor's voice. She turned and found his arms. His familiar smell was tainted with booze and hair gel, and his kiss was sloppy. "Why didn't you answer your phone?" she cried.

He patted his blazer and cursed. "I think I left it on the table." Taylor bumped and sidled through the guests, disappearing. She slunk against a wall and dug her nails into the top of her hand, counting the seconds before he returned.

He emerged, with his mother trailing, quietly berating him, her brow and cranberry lips wound tight. Analise braced herself. But when they approached, their eyes grew, gluing onto someone behind her.

Taylor's mother appeared to slam into an invisible wall when she cried, "Ulla!"

Analise whipped around, unsure of what shocked her more. That Taylor's mom knew Ulla? Or that she'd followed her! Ulla's perpetual calm exterior and her narrow range of expression was something Analise chose to interpret as protection from past hurt. The armor was gone now. "It's not enough you destroyed my life once, you have to *keep doing it*!" She motioned at Taylor.

His mom blanched and bobbed her head at the nearby guests as if to assess how much they'd heard. She gripped Ulla's arm, dragging her out of the room. "I had nothing to do with this."

Analise pleaded with Ulla, "What is going on? If you didn't want me to see Taylor because of his mom, why didn't you just—!"

"I asked you to trust me!" shrieked Ulla. She stabbed a finger at Taylor. "He was raised by two *murdering* narcissists!"

Taylor cursed softly.

"Stop it," Linnea countered, shaking.

Taylor's dad appeared, and his face mottled upon seeing Ulla, but he recovered, and said with a measured disdain, "Do I need to call the police? You weren't invited here." He shifted his eyes to Analise, studying her, his ire giving way to an odd realization.

Taylor tugged on Analise and palmed his head. "Can we let the grown-ups figure out their own shit? C'mon."

Analise resisted and gaped at the three of them. "Mamma?"

Ulla stared hard at Analise before demanding in Swedish, “End it. *Now*.”

She cried back in Swedish, “You’re being *so* unreasonable!”

“When in your entire life have I *ever* been unreasonable!”

“You can’t ask me to do this! I love him!”

“More than me?” It wasn’t betrayal that set Ulla’s mouth trembling, nor anger. *Grief*? She turned and left.

Ulla would only need time, that’s all, right? They’d talk over these sordid accusations about Taylor’s parents. Ulla would understand Taylor was nothing like them. But something told Analise if she didn’t go after her, do something, she would irreparably lose Ulla. Analise cried an apology to Taylor and ran from him.

But he caught up at the top of the stairs.

His hand was too clumsy from the alcohol when he reached for her.

Chapter Forty-Three

Linnea

Linnea paced outside the small interview room at the third precinct of the Minneapolis Police Department. Surely she looked the part of a gothic model with her dripping mascara, faux fur coat, black heels, ripped pantyhose, and bedraggled strands escaping her stylish chignon.

Everett was still on the phone at the end of the hallway, head lowered, hand on his hip. She looked at the wad of shredded tissue in her grip bearing wet makeup stains and snot. Where did she get a Kleenex? Was it in her purse? Had someone from the police station given it to her?

Taylor's heartbroken cries had abated for now, but it wasn't the end of them. Linnea knew she'd still hear those cries in her sleep.

Everett finally ended the call and walked to her. Linnea choked down the bile lumped in her throat. "What did Francis say?" she asked, referring to their lawyer.

He sighed. "To make sure Taylor shuts up. They can't hold him here. Ulla might still be able to press charges, but probably not if her daughter corroborates Taylor's story."

"So we can take him home?"

"I think so. I don't know what the hold-up is," he muttered with a curse. He glared at Linnea. "I also don't know what blows my mind more—that Ulla has a daughter—or that Taylor ended up dating her! Did you know about this?"

Linnea chewed the pad of her thumb.

“Well!” he spat.

“Well, *what*! What difference does it make if I knew they were together. You honestly think we could’ve kept them apart?”

“Yes. I do. I would’ve threatened to cut him off or kicked him out.” He cussed again.

She hated Everett. She’d always hated so much about him, but this—*this*—is what she hated the most. His complete and utter lack of compassion for their son. “Fuck you,” Linnea whispered.

“What did you say?” He barked a dry laugh.

An officer came toward them with a stack of papers. “Take your son home, but don’t let him near the girl. We put a restraining order against him until they decide on charges. He’s getting ticketed for underage drinking and assaulting a police officer.”

“*What*!” demanded Linnea, trying to recall the blur of events. Of a police officer ripping Taylor from Analise as they put her in the ambulance. *Had Taylor kicked him*? She covered her face now, remembering the handcuffs after Ulla’s hysterical insistence that Taylor had intentionally pushed Analise. The only reason the cops hadn’t shoved her son into a squad car was because Everett promised he would get him to the station for questioning.

Everett snatched the paperwork. “This is bullshit.”

“He can stay in jail overnight if that’s your preference,” said the officer.

Linnea thanked the man with a tight smile. She entered the room where Taylor sat on the floor in the corner, his long legs outstretched in dust-caked, navy dress pants; his white oxford shirt was un-tucked and stained in blood. He rested his head against the wall with a dead stare.

She hesitated her way over and knelt. She touched his face. He didn’t flinch or acknowledge her. “Tay, honey, let’s go home.”

He shook his head, his voice eerily quiet. “I’m not going home. Take me to the hospital. You promised.”

“Sweetie, I’m sure Isa is okay. You saw it yourself—she was fine when they took her away.”

“No, she wasn’t.”

Linnea looked to Everett for help.

Taylor’s dad cleared his throat. “Get up. We gotta go home. You’re not seeing Isa. Ever. There’s a restraining order against you.”

“Like I fucking care!” Taylor yelled at his dad.

Linnea cupped her forehead. “Taylor, please.”

Everett jabbed a finger at him. “You’d better fucking care after ruining your cousin’s wedding. After what it might cost me to bail you out of any legal shit.”

Linnea whirled in gaping incredulity at Everett. She then turned back to Taylor, urging him to his feet. “Let’s go, we’ll get a cab. You don’t need this.”

Her son stayed rooted. He aimed his vitriol at her. “Is what her mom said true?”

Linnea linked her arm through his. “No, just come home, and I’ll explain everything.”

Taylor pushed her arm away and shifted his narrowed gaze between his parents before his eyes changed. His breathing took off. He fisted his hair and pulled his knees up. Another round of sobs wracked his body.

Everett swore and rolled his eyes. Linnea snarled at him, *“Just leave!”*

She reached for Taylor again, and this time, he did not push away her arms. They didn’t fit around his lanky adult body but were big enough to hold the small boy who clung to her, his cries echoing far beyond these four stark walls.

Part VI

From: Isa and Taylor <kingandqueen@gmail.com>

To: Me

December 23rd, 2005 9:01 am

Subject: (no subject)

I'm so scared, but if I wait until my birthday to tell her, at least I'll be an adult. If she kicks me out maybe Melia and Shorty will let me live with them. Let's use winter break to figure out getting married? Call me after the wedding.

From: Isa and Taylor <kingandqueen@gmail.com>

To: Me

December 23rd, 2005 9:30 am

Subject: Did you accept my marriage proposal over EMAIL?!

Please change your mind about tonight? If you crash the reception, I promise we'll only dance to the slow songs. Can't wait to give you your bday present tomorrow.

From: Isa and Taylor <kingandqueen@gmail.com>

To: Me

December 23rd, 2005 5:30 pm

Subject: The only birthday present I want is you

Better not be anything else, Barnes. ;-P

Chapter Forty-Four

Mora, Minnesota
November 2017

Analise

At 6:30 a.m. Analise sat at the kitchen table, having pored through her and Taylor's secret email account for the past two hours, after calling in sick to work. She hadn't known she was capable of such passion. But weren't all teenagers heedless and emotional when it came to first-love intoxication?

The only problem was, the emails didn't stop after her accident. Taylor kept writing. *And writing*. It would take her days to get through his messages. Not because of the sheer amount, though that alone would explain it, but because she could hardly bear his torment. The most recent was sent at 3:00 a.m., twelve minutes before she called him. The subject line: *Last Email.* It was tempting to read that one first, but she'd promised to start at the beginning. And she understood why. With each one, her wrath toward Ulla rose another degree. How could Ulla justify that kind of deception not only to her—but Penelope? The shock that drained Taylor's face when Analise told him he had a daughter would be forever branded in her mind. She tried salving his pain, teeming with apologies, for she'd gotten a blank slate and Penelope. He'd gotten a memory bank crammed with debilitating nightmares and childlessness.

“Ana? What are you doing home?” Dany’s voice was full of trepidation. He’d entered the kitchen dressed in cargo pants, a sweatshirt, and jacket, ready for early work. He’d promised to return before dark and take the girls shopping in the city. She looked at him and burst into a fresh batch of tears. He knelt at the chair and gathered her into his arms, compounding the impossible emotions. Dany wiped her face, kissed her, and alternated between soft-spoken Spanish and English, as if testing which language would give her the most calm.

When she felt able to form a sentence not chopped with hiccups, she told Dany everything, filling in the details Taylor had shared about the accident and their forced separation, and how she told Taylor that he had a daughter.

Was any of this making sense to Dany? Analise watched his face morph from sensitivity to confusion, to hurt, and now suspicion. He stood, ran a hand through his hair, wiped his lips, and made a tent with his hands over his face. His brown eyes, always jovial, were now possessive. And angry.

He dropped his hands to his hips. “You’re telling me some guy shows up out of the blue with this story and says he’s Penelope’s father—and you *believe* him?”

Analise searched for a more rational defense, but all she could say was, “Yes.”

“It doesn’t mean he’s safe! Your mom wanted you two apart because clearly he was—a jerk at best, *abusive* at worst.”

“He-he’s not! It wasn’t like that,” she said, flustered.

“I thought you didn’t have any memories of him, of getting pregnant.”

Our first kiss. “I have one memory. I know that now. But even if I had none, he has all the evidence. We were engaged.”

“At *seventeen*? That’s ridiculous! What are you trying to say, you’re gonna run off and marry this guy instead of me?”

“What—*no*!”

He clearly saw the pained conflict before she could hide it. “I can’t handle losing someone again. I won’t lose you.”

His aching plea sliced her open.

“Do you have feelings for him or not?”

She started to shake her head but touched her mouth, where she still felt Taylor’s kiss. “What if Sofia came back into your life?”

“That’s different.”

“Is it?”

“I don’t understand your point,” he argued.

“I can’t control my feelings, and I honestly don’t know what I feel other than confusion—or maybe happiness that Penelope might have what I never did. A relationship with her dad.”

“So I wasn’t good enough?”

“This isn’t about you! You wouldn’t ask Julia to start thinking of me as her mom, would you? He missed out, too. He *wants* to be a dad.”

Dany tensed, every muscle in his face stretched thin.

“We’re seeing him tomorrow,” Analise continued. “He wants to spend the day with her—with us. Obviously, I’ll be with her. I’m going to take her out of school—”

“You arranged all this before talking with me?”

“I have to get your permission?”

“You know nothing about him!” he hollered and slammed the side of his fist on the cupboard so hard it splintered.

She flinched and then froze at his outburst. They’d never fought about anything. He’d made being in a relationship easy. Or perhaps she’d been the one who made it so.

He was quieter, but his words were no less emotional. “This couldn’t have waited till after the wedding?”

She didn’t back down. “If you just found out you had a daughter you never knew existed, could you wait even one *second* before meeting her?”

Dany stared at the floor.

Penelope’s voice cut through the silence. “Mamma? Dany?” She was in her pajamas, hair frizzled. The sight of her broke Analise all over again. How could she have missed Penelope in Taylor’s face the moment he walked into the café? She was there in his expansive intense eyes, those endless lashes, the quirk of his lips, and the cleft in his chin. All those ardent emails revealing his inner life, she could easily imagine their daughter writing such lengthy devotions.

Alarmed at her mother’s sobs, she rushed over, and in Swedish said, “What’s wrong?” They held each other. “Are you two breaking up?” Penelope, nearly crying, too, turned to Dany and said in English, “Please don’t tell me you’re breaking up.”

Analise pulled away, forcing a reassuring smile as she touched her daughter’s face, and tucked a blonde lock tenderly behind her ear. “*Nej, min*

lilla älskling." In English, she asked Penelope, "Would you like to meet your pappa?"

Penelope, attached to Julia at the hip, walked down the stairs to meet Taylor in the foyer. Her daughter's questions from the day before were like a dripping, unrepairable faucet, demanding how her mysterious father could turn up out of the blue. "Am I going to get a DNA test?"

"*No*," said Analise, the annoyance fueled by her sleep deprivation and crying-induced headache. She finally had to shout at Penelope, "Let me take a nap!"

Analise now focused on Taylor's reaction, desiring to experience through his eyes what it might be like to rewind time, have someone present her with a beautiful human, and say, "This is going to be your daughter in eleven years."

Taylor blinked and fingered one of his eyelashes as if he had something stuck in them. Analise cried for him but then saw Penelope's embarrassed face. She pulled herself together.

When the girls reached the bottom of the stairs, Taylor appeared to grapple with his mouth, finally saying, "Hi, Penelope."

"Hi." Penelope pressed her cheek against Julia's. "This is my sister."

"The resemblance is unmistakable," Taylor said with a smile, but Analise caught the flash in his eyes.

"What should I call you?" Penelope asked.

Taylor seemed slightly taken aback as if he hadn't thought this far. "Taylor's fine. It would be weird to call a complete stranger Dad.'"

"Maybe," said Penelope and regarded him. "Except I wouldn't ever call you Dad."

"Oh."

"Because in Swedish, we say Pappa."

Taylor's grin uncovered his deep laugh lines, which disappeared when Dany entered, dressed for the office in dark, worn jeans and a plaid, untucked flannel that he'd probably gotten from Sofia fifteen Christmases ago. The two men were similar in height, but her fiancé was inflating his chest as if trying to appear taller and more intimidating. Their handshake was brief but no less terse.

Yesterday, after they'd fought, Dany had left fuming, ignoring Analise's calls and text messages. Yet when he arrived home, he was apologetic, groveling even, and transparent about his fears. How he'd always been prepared to protect Penelope from her father, not to have to fight the insecurity of competition. He was desperate to communicate that with his lovemaking, something her conscience felt obligated to do, but her body did not. Afterward, wracked with guilt, Analise swiped through pictures on her phone of Dany—the four of them—their *Scanda-Tino* family as Julia and Penelope self-described them. The girls even crafted future baby names by combining Swedish and Latino from Google searches—Elsa and Maria—*Elaria*! Dany would join in the clowning, "What about boy names? Carlos and Hans—*Cans*!" She loved him for that. That laughter only he could pull from her daughter.

Analise looked to Taylor now, reminding herself that *this* was her life. No longer was she a reckless, lovesick seventeen-year-old. Her kiss with Taylor the other night was nothing but a reflex leftover from the past. And yet she'd read through Taylor's emails and wondered—*wished*—it were possible to split herself, to exist in two lives at once.

"*A que hora me volverás, amor*?" Dany asked in quiet Spanish and placed a lingering kiss on her mouth.

Analise asked Taylor, "Do you know when we'll get home?"

Taylor glanced at Penelope. "I thought Penelope could decide, but I have one request if that's okay?"

Analise caught Penelope's questioning eyes, and said, "Of course, what is it?"

His brow pinched and he cleared his throat, but his voice still came out small. "Could we see my mom first?"

Analise crossed to him at once and touched his shoulder, a gesture meant to absorb the sadness, and the woeful recognition that someone was about to meet her granddaughter for the first time. And possibly the last.

Chapter Forty-Five

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Linnea

With every pang that paused her steps, every bite of food that became intolerable, Linnea wondered how close she was to death. When Taylor had found her on the bedroom floor in vomit and urine, he whisked her to the hospital, but she'd insisted he still go to Mora. He only left because Everett agreed to care for her.

Her ex-husband tucked her back home yesterday, and she slept fitfully, groggy from the anti-seizure medication. Taking morphine for the pain would make her comatose. Besides, she wanted to wait the pain out, see how much she could bear. Today, though, she took a fraction of it in anticipation of meeting her granddaughter. Hopefully, the opioid would quiet the physical pain and allow room for the bittersweet joy to saturate her instead.

She couldn't stop the blitz of emotion once again as she replayed her son's face, his tearful breaths as he'd exploded into the house yesterday morning. "Mom—*Mom* . . . I'm a *dad*!" Her granddaughter, Penelope, what a perfect name, a *promise,* would not want to see a stranger making a blubbering mess of herself.

Her home was spotless. Devoid of all the wilting sympathy flowers and gift baskets that had piled up. A diffuser misted lavender and frankincense.

Taylor had commanded she rest, not get up when they arrived, knowing she wouldn't have slept, that she'd be counting down the hours, minutes, until she could see her granddaughter's lovely face. Could he even fault her sleeplessness, the unending marvel of the pictures he'd sent that Analise shared of Penelope? Especially when they included Ulla. That certainly piled her emotions into a lump. The anger that Ulla would dare keep her grandchild a secret, the longing for her touch still, and the shame at what Linnea had done to destroy it all.

She reclined in the leather chair, curled her legs inward, and wrapped the cream fleece blanket around herself, concentrating on the lake outside the window. Her hand went to the scarf concealing her patchy hair. Would Penelope even be happy to meet her? She remembered Taylor as a pre-teen. He never cared much for Everett's mother. Neither had Linnea. His mother had gone from a tolerable alcoholic to a mean drunk, never accepting of Everett and his older sister's interventions. Her death several years ago was one they all felt with a complicated relief.

She heard the slam of a car door, footsteps, low voices, and the opening of the front door. Her heart catapulted.

"Mom?" her son's voice echoed.

"In—" Linnea's voice snagged on budding tears. "In the family room."

Taylor came in first, and she trained her attention on the two people who stepped hesitantly from behind him. Seeing Analise again, in the flesh, reminded her of how strongly she still felt about Ulla. It was Penelope, though, that fully captured Linnea, how her son's features were perfectly woven into her granddaughter, especially those eyelashes. Taylor hated his eyelashes as a boy. The children in grade school called him, "Minnie Mouse."

No one would dare tease Penelope. Linnea worried the opposite. Girls at this age were likely to be jealous. *Like I'd been of Ulla*.

Analise murmured something to Penelope, resembling Swedish. Visions engulfed Linnea, of Ulla and her mother, Ronja, carrying on in Swedish.

Ronja.

"Hello, Ms. Barnes," Analise spoke first and closed the distance, bringing her daughter with her. She embraced Linnea in a long, warm hug, reminding Linnea of why her son had fallen in love with Analise, and how this girl's aura managed to contain Taylor's intensity and hold it. Like she'd

been his sigh of relief. Clearly, the head injury had not erased her personality.

It had only erased Taylor.

"Please, call me Linnea." She wrestled a calm smile toward Penelope and said, "You don't have to hug me. I'm a complete stranger."

Penelope passed an anxious glance to her mom, then to Taylor. She stiffly hugged Linnea. It took all the self-restraint of her cancer-eaten muscles, invigorated by the smell and touch of her grandchild, not to squeeze Penelope and never let go. She gently patted Penelope's hair and said in a crumpled voice, "Would you like to see pictures of your mom and dad? They were Homecoming king and queen."

Penelope's eyes widened. "Really?"

Linnea nodded to the stack of photos on the coffee table next to a book on 1960s art from MoMA and a set of never-used candles. With eager eyes, Penelope snatched the pictures. Analise appeared apprehensive, hovering back, not looking at them, and Taylor wandered to the large bay windows overlooking the lake. He put his hands into his pockets and masked his conflicted eyes.

Penelope gaped at the first photograph, constricting her gaze, and shuffled through the rest in amazement. She shoved a picture in Analise's face. "Mamma. That looks *just* like your wedding dress!"

Taylor turned around.

Analise's face contorted when she took the picture and studied it. She touched her lips, handed the picture back, and excused herself to the bathroom.

He watched her go.

Penelope gawked her way through the stack again. "I don't understand," she whispered to each one. "How could my mom not *remember* any of this?" She directed her next question to Taylor. "You said you'd be able to explain it?"

Taylor nodded with a sad smile. "Give me a sec," he said and went to the drawer in the kitchen where Linnea kept loose scrap paper and pens.

He returned and sat on the sofa next to his daughter. "Ready?"

Penelope's eyes alighted onto his.

Taylor drew a rudimentary brain and neatly labeled the sections. "Memory isn't confined to one part of the brain," he said, "but your *short*-term memory is. Right here in the hippocampus." He raised his

head to Penelope. “If I give you five objects to remember, chances are you won’t recall—unless there’s a way you incorporate them every day into your life.” Taylor paused. “What happened to your mom . . . when she fell . . . ” His voice failed. He stopped. Linnea recognized the small shake of his head, the controlled breaths. She glanced at Analise padding silently into the room, and her son looked at her and said weakly, “The location and force of the fall probably sheared some of the fibers connecting your short-term memory. You had something called anterograde amnesia.”

Analise stepped closer to him as his voice recovered. “You would meet doctors and therapists repeatedly and not remember their names. It’s why you couldn’t finish school, why you probably couldn’t remember your way around Mora for the first year, even though there’s only one main road.”

Analise nodded, transfixed with watery eyes. “That’s exactly what happened,” she whispered. “But it got better.”

“You started healing,” he said.

Penelope spoke to Taylor, “That doesn’t explain how she lost all the other memories.”

Taylor bent close to the diagram, drawing more arrows as he answered, “It wasn’t only anterograde amnesia, but retrograde—retro meaning back in time. For some reason the memories made most recently in the span of a few months didn’t get encoded into the longer-term memory storage. Like not backing up photographs on your phone. Everything—was lost.”

Linnea watched Analise, whose eyes swept back and forth between Penelope and Taylor. “Not everything.”

Analise stayed behind with Linnea when Taylor and Penelope went into the backyard to kick the soccer ball. Next to one another, the two women watched from the window. Linnea drank in the sight and listened to their muted laughter. It rejuvenated her frail body. Shaking her head in disbelief, she begged God, the universe, *someone,* to allow her just one memory—this one—to keep inside her grave.

“I always wondered where she got her coordination.” Analise paused for a long moment. “He never played in college, not like he’d dreamed of.”

“He tried, but—” Linnea forced away her cry and then looked at Analise. “Wait, he told you?”

Analise's face took on a conflicted, faraway look, as if she didn't know how to answer.

"Then he must have told you what happened to him—" Linnea couldn't. It wasn't her place to divulge the extent of Taylor's undoing. The alcohol poisoning on his eighteenth birthday. With that crisis, Linnea's voice had finally solidified into that mythical, tigerish one supposedly instinctive to mothers, demanding the physician order a psychiatric hold once her son was detoxed. Taylor denied it was a suicide attempt, but she knew better. Now, instead of drinking to death, he was working to death.

When Analise touched her shoulder, Linnea saw it in her eyes. Somehow, she knew everything. "Why don't you rest?"

There was a knock on the front door, and then it opened. "Hello? Linney?"

Everett? She and Analise exchanged curious glances, and Linnea walked to the door, hiding her wincing steps. He stood in the foyer in his buttoned dress coat. The breeze had tousled his silver-flecked, blonde hair. His astonished eyes held hope.

"What are you doing here?" Linnea asked.

"Lin?" he breathed, "we have a granddaughter?"

"Taylor called you?" Linnea, eager to call Everett herself, had known this was not her news to share. "What did he say?"

"That if I wanted to meet my granddaughter, to come over right away." His gaze went past Linnea's shoulder. She turned and saw Analise lift a shy hand in greeting.

"Hi, Mr. Barnes."

"Everett," he corrected. "Hello, Analise."

Linnea shoveled Everett outside. "Go, they're in the backyard. If Taylor doesn't feel like explaining, I will later." She held in an ugly cry and said, "She's so beautiful."

He took a few hesitant steps backward, turned, and quickened his pace.

Linnea shut the door and turned to Analise. "Did you convince Taylor to call him?"

She shook her head. "No, I think it was Pen. On the drive over, she asked what her grandfather was like, and Taylor said she could see for herself."

Linnea returned to the window overlooking the backyard. She watched Everett shake Penelope's hand. He looked to Taylor. A few words appeared

to be spoken, but nothing more. Taylor went back to passing the ball to his daughter, and Everett stood still, his expression pensive, hands in his coat pockets.

Analise said quietly, “I know how much pain his dad caused him.”

“Did Taylor say something?”

“Not exactly.” She looked down, squinting her eyes as if to funnel back emotions. “Taylor showed me an email account we’d created, like a secret, personal diary. He wrote about his dad a lot. And to me. After we were cut off from each other, he just kept writing.”

“There’s more, you know,” Linnea said, “a memory box.” She followed quickly with a stammering lie, “I didn’t look at it, I just know about it.”

Several moments of silence passed as they stared out the window, at Penelope trying to steal the ball from Taylor’s quick moves, screeching in delighted frustration when he’d trick her with a quick snap back.

Linnea finally looked to Analise and said, “I want you to know, it wasn’t entirely Ulla’s fault you were kept apart. She filed an order of protection against him, and he had a future, a really bright future. He would’ve been arrested if he went near you, though I can’t know exactly if that stopped him, to be honest. If I had known you were pregnant . . . ” She paused, staring at Penelope and Taylor. “I hoped maybe you would’ve tried to find him. He thought for a while you were dead, but as awful as this sounds, I knew that couldn’t be true because he would’ve been charged.”

“Did you see me fall?” Analise asked.

Linnea shook her head. “Not the fall, no. But I was there for everything else.”

“Can I ask you a difficult question?”

“You can ask me anything.”

“What did you do to my mother? That she could justify that level of deceit to me and Penelope?” Her eyes flooded and her voice withered. “His *emails* . . . he was so . . . devastated isn’t even the right word to describe it. He would’ve *loved* Penelope. He would’ve been there for all of it. I know it.”

“Ulla never told you about me?”

Analise blinked her tears away and replied steadily, “No, why would she? You were erased from my memory, along with Taylor.” Her expression collapsed again at saying his name.

Linnea carefully searched for the words, slowly piecing this fact together. *Ulla never told her how Ronja died?* It made perfect sense why she wouldn't tell Analise, though, at least not when she was a child. But why withhold the truth now?

"You're not going to tell me," Analise said.

Linnea sat gingerly, "No, it's not that. I did something—something unforgivable. All I can say is that I caused Ronja's death. You're going to have to ask Ulla for the rest. Believe me, I'm so sorry. It's just not my place."

"You knew my grandmother?"

Linnea nodded, her face screwing with pain. "I loved Ronja."

Chapter Forty-Six

Mora, Minnesota

Ulla

Ulla had known the reckoning with Analise was going to happen the second Taylor Barnes reappeared. Although, she was surprised it was about to happen at two in the morning.

She clicked on a lamp and opened the pummeled door. Analise's pretty, pale face was stained with blotches, and her eyes held contempt. "Where's my ring!"

She barged past Ulla with a black Adidas shoebox in her hands and dumped the contents on the floor. Analise dropped to her knees and scrambled through photographs scattered on the carpet.

"Isa? What are you talking about! What is all this?"

Analise clutched a photograph and held it, jabbing her finger on a captured moment: seventeen-year-old Isa kissing Taylor, her left hand palming his cheek, and on it, an engagement ring.

Ulla whispered, "Did he give all this to you?"

"*That's* how much he loved me."

Ulla hardened her jaw. "You're pining over your teenage infatuation two days before your wedding?"

Analise slammed a palm on her chest. "That teenage infatuation is the father of my child!"

"So?"

Analise threw up her arms. "So? *So*? That's all you have to say for lying to me for twelve years? For ripping me and Penelope away from him all because what—you had some fucking grudge against his parents?"

"It was more than that."

"More than what? You just wanted to punish Linnea, but all you did was ruin my life. You nearly destroyed Taylor, and you kept your own granddaughter from her father. I don't even know you!" She pushed the hair from her forehead, taking in ragged breaths.

"Ruined your *life*?" Ulla repeated. "You really have it so bad now? You're going to throw away a perfectly good future with a perfectly good man?"

"That is *no*t what I said."

"I saved your life. I saved you and Penelope from a bunch of selfish, entitled people that would've taken advantage of you."

"I don't care about his parents. What did Taylor do to me? Tell me how horrible he was."

"He was a rich, spoiled brat. And a drunk. Because of him, we got robbed —"

"*What*?"

"And even if that wasn't the case, he was so possessive of you, forcing you to lie and sneak around, and got you pregnant."

"No. *I* made us sneak around, and I'm pretty sure I was an active and willing participant in getting pregnant."

"How would you even know?"

Analise dropped to her knees and started grabbing scraps of mementos. "Letters, emails," she gathered a stack of photographs and thrust them at Ulla, "and *everything* I needed to know from spending the past twenty-four hours with him."

"Does Penelope know?"

"Penelope knows." She began replacing the box as they argued. "Unlike you, I don't believe in lying to my child."

"He almost killed you."

"It was an accident."

"I was there," Ulla countered.

"He thought I was breaking up with him. He was trying to stop me."

"He pushed you!"

“You saw what you wanted to see!” She scooped the remaining items, slammed the lid on, and stood, hugging the box to her chest.

The two women stared at one another across a crevasse, widening with each rapid breath.

“You believe him over me?” Ulla’s voice shook.

“Yes.” Analise’s reply had no hesitation. *None*. Leaving Ulla mired in the same grief that overtook her that night twelve years ago when she watched Analise fall. When she thought, *No, no, God, please not again*. “You don’t understand. It’s complicated.”

Analise brushed past her. “No, it’s not. Taylor’s mother owned up to everything.”

“Wait, what? You-you saw her?”

“She wanted to meet her granddaughter.”

“You had no right! That woman does not deserve . . . ” Ulla bit her upper lip. “What did she say?”

Analise rubbed her eyes. “That it was her fault your mother died.”

“And that isn’t enough to choose *me*?”

“What did she do?”

Ulla felt the horror strain against her will to keep it buried. The horror she thought certain if she’d kept alive, it would kill her. And she needed to live for Analise. For Penelope.

“Just *tell* me,” Analise pushed, “it’s not that hard.”

“You wouldn’t fucking know about hard!” Ulla yelled, immediately regretting her abrasiveness, but it was too late.

Analise fixed her bewildered eyes on Ulla. “You’d rather lose me and Penelope than tell the truth?”

Analise had no idea what she was asking. That demanding Ulla resurrect the most traumatic moment of her life was like holding a gun to her head.

“Fine,” Analise cried, “I don’t want you near me or Pen, and I definitely don’t want you at my wedding. I can’t *stand* liars.” She left, sentencing Ulla to solitary confinement, save for a photograph on the floor, one that Analise had overlooked: two seventeen-year-olds enraptured with one another. She recognized that look.

She’d felt it once.

Part VII

Angels come and
make me pure
so that I may come
to them in heaven.

— Traditional German prayer

Chapter Forty-Seven

Mora, Minnesota
August 1983

Linnea

The summer before ninth grade, it was inside a piecemeal 1969 Ford Galaxie that Linnea and Ulla first made love. Linnea shared an exhilarating giggle with Ulla, and they swiped their clothes back on while Sugar, the dog, snuffled tiredly around the junkyard.

Ulla clasped her bra and scraped her sweaty, long strands of hair into a ponytail. The two had been inching toward this moment over the past eighteen months. Hands held underwater in the lake, eventually roaming over breasts and underneath waistbands, long make-out sessions. But they'd never been fully naked with tongues and fingers over and inside places that shocked Linnea. She had no idea her body could experience that kind of pulsating pleasure. It was all the more exhilarating because it felt daring, like a delicious secret. In middle school, their peers relentlessly teased them for always holding hands like a couple of "lezzies." But *fags* and *lezzies* existing in Mora were as mythical as apocalyptic zombies, and Ulla and Linnea could hide their affection in broad daylight because girls could hold hands and play with each other's hair. *Lezzie* didn't hurt nearly as much as *retard*—because Linnea never talked. *Dopehead*—because her parents were

addicts. Sometimes, for an added measure of cruelty, they combined the two—*Dope-tard*.

Ulla danced her fingertips over to Linnea's. "What should we name her?" she asked, looking around the interior of the Galaxie.

"The car?" Linnea smiled. "How do you know it's a girl?"

Ulla laughed. "They always have girl names."

"Probably because of men." Linnea snorted and tucked a piece of Ulla's hair that escaped her ponytail into the elastic band. "You're sure this car is the one? The one you've been searching for your whole life?"

Ulla rested against the cracked, two-toned blue seats with spilled stuffing. She rolled her head to Linnea with a deep grin. "I'm in love."

Linnea kissed her. "Me too."

Ulla closed her eyes, the sun filtered through the dirt-caked windows and cast her face in a glow.

How is it that the most beautiful girl in the world loves me? Linnea thought back to those one hundred and twelve days in 1981, ripped from one another and placed under the temporary guardianship of Kanabec County, where two questions consumed her every day: Would she ever see her parents again? Would she ever kiss her best friend again?

Everett Barnes had kissed her first on that awful Halloween night, but kissing him during spin-the-bottle was like holding onto a car door handle around a fast turn. He lodged his tongue against hers, leaving indents from his braces on her lips and saliva in the corners of her mouth. She dismissed Ulla's soft and slow kiss as something born from desperation. So why did it leave her insides in a flurry? The memory had soothed her to sleep in the children's shelter, and she held Beskyddaren, the horse figurine, against her heart. She lay in the squeaky bunk bed and listened to her sister, Abby, snore above her. It was Abby who scolded the adults for continuously attempting to interrogate Linnea. "Don't waste your time. Linney won't talk to *anyone*."

Linnea remained mute in her foster home in Ogilvie, fifteen minutes from Mora, but feeling like a whole country away. Stuck in a new school, they tried to get her to talk. At the doctor's, she only cried. They prescribed her an antidepressant. Linnea spat the pill into the toilet every night.

After her parents passed supervised visits, cleared drug screens, and her mother obtained a job cleaning office buildings at night, Linnea was sent home. But upon pulling into the driveway, she sprang from the car and ran

for Ulla's. The Bergstrom women engulfed her, and oh, how she wished Ulla's mother could be hers, too. Despite Ulla's hatred of Ronja's lies about her father, the only truth that mattered to Linnea was Ronja's singular devotion.

Linnea wondered how her own mother could crave something more than her children's happiness and safety, and she promised herself never to touch a drop of anything that would split her into two different people. While her parents were sober from drugs and alcohol, the demons that lurked inside them were angry at being starved.

In better moments, after the demons that possessed her mother and shoved Linnea into a corner, backhanded her, or were dried out on the floor pleading about how *fucking hard* detox was, there were quiet and genuine apologies for the forgotten birthdays, the insults during highs, the missed parent-teacher conferences, the neglected school choir concerts, and plays. During visitations in foster care, Linnea had taken these apologies as performances, but there were times her mother would come into her room, kiss her hair, and stroke it as if worshipping. Linnea would pretend to sleep, squeeze her eyes, wrapping herself in the only fond memories she had of her parents. Of fishing on Lake Mora. Of her mother snapping a picture of the pike she and her father caught together: *Look at that, baby! Big smile!* Where was that picture now?

Abby was by far the more hardened one, determined to finish high school and *get as far away from Mora as possible*. Linnea, though, was content in Mora. Mora had Ulla and Ronja. Where they went, she would go. At night, she would continue to hold Beskyddaren and kiss the jewels. Ulla never asked her to return him, so, wanting to keep its magic and protection, Linnea kept him.

Now, in the back seat of the Ford, two years later, Linnea still believed in Beskyddaren's power, as sunbeams filtered through the dust and radiated onto Ulla. "What kind of car is this again?"

Ulla opened her eyes. "Ford Galaxie."

"How about Lexie?"

"It's perfect."

Just like you.

Chapter Forty-Eight

August 1986
Three Years Later

Linnea

The summer before their senior year in high school, Everett Barnes waltzed back into Mora. Right into Dairy Queen.

Linnea had worked there since she was fourteen. It was a good job. She didn't have to talk to anyone. Not really. Just take orders. Ask scripted questions, which mostly were, *What size*? She subjected her anxiety to the job because it was her ticket to freedom.

She'd saved every penny in her own bank account. The teller at First Nation knew enough about Linnea's parents to make sure it was kept secret and out of their clutches.

By now, she'd saved enough to fantasize about the cool breeze and warm sands of the Pacific Ocean, where she and Ulla would be tanning on a California beach, hands laced together, marveling at their love and life's possibilities. A telephone operator would track them down in their remote bungalow asking if Linnea knew of anyone named Margie and Dick Larsson of Mora, Minnesota, and Linnea would tell the operator she had the wrong number. Her parents had died a long time ago.

Yes, with the passing of each day toward their senior year, the more of a reality this dream became, and the lighter she felt. The flutter inside her

ribs, like a gentle ripple of the wind, would lift her off the ground and away to a land where girls kissed freely and deeply under the sunshine.

But that all changed with Everett Barnes on a humid August day. Exactly eight days before school started.

Linnea peered through her bangs at him.

Oh, how she needed Ulla right now. Her mouthpiece. The one to cull the words Linnea needed to say and arrange them into the perfect order.

He stood, towered, over her from the other side of the counter. He was still gangly, but his pointy elbows and shoulders had thickened. He seemed to grow into his prominent Grecian nose and had ditched the glasses for contact lenses, making his light brown eyes seemingly glitter from his olive skin. “I was told I’d find you here.” He touched the paper hat pinned over her matted ponytail. “Good look on you.”

Her hand flew to the hat, wanting to rip it off, and find some way to feather her flat, greasy bangs. Since every teenager in Mora had already seen her working in her cringe-worthy uniform, she didn’t care. *But Everett*?

He smudged a finger over his cheek, encouraging her to mirror his action. Linnea wiped a palm over her entire face, checking for dots of ice cream that always spackled her skin and hair by the time her shift was over. Everett rested his lanky forearms on the counter, a more intimate posture, and said in a low, quiet voice, “I’ll take a Dilly bar, and the first hour you get off work.”

Linnea rubbed her hot neck, relieved at the distraction of a family that came bouncing through the door, the bell above it signaling their arrival.

Her hand shook trying to punch the correct numbers, to *ding* open the cash register. She went to the refrigerator to get the Dilly bar. He asked what time she’d be ready. Her pulse banged from her chest. “Eight?” she whispered.

She turned her attention to the family waiting but caught Everett backing out the door, biting a chunk off the Dilly bar with his perfectly aligned smile. Those braces sure had worked wonders.

Her last hours were spent mentally chastising her body’s quivers of delight, the way he could still do that to her after five years. She had to ask every customer to repeat their order.

She’d heard from Wiley Gardner that Everett’s dad had died, and his mother wanted to move back to Mora to be near her sister. Or maybe it was

her sister who demanded Mrs. Barnes move back. It was no secret Everett's mother had a drinking problem. At least not to Linnea. As children, at the lunch table, she recognized his lowered eyes, the subtle attempts to keep classmates from coming to his house. This was probably why she dismissed him being a jerk, especially to Ulla. He practically lived at Wiley Gardner's, and once at a school carnival, Linnea overheard Wiley's mother lamenting over the Barnes family. About Everett and his older sister, who was in the military, and the brother between them who had died from a "lung problem" when Everett was three. Wiley's mother sympathized that Everett spent so much time with them because Mrs. Barnes was an *eccentric* and *grieving* mother. Linnea resented that. Her own mother was simply called a *drunk*.

But still, Linnea felt terrible for Everett. She had imagined he would come to school on the first day of senior year, his face somber, and she'd hug him and offer condolences for losing his dad, ask how his mom was—really was. But Everett did not appear to be a grieving, fatherless child.

The first person she wanted to tell about Everett was Ulla. And the last person she wanted to tell about Everett was Ulla.

Linnea scrubbed the ice cream splotches from her hair and face, as well as the sheen of grease from the fryers. God, she smelled awful. What to do with her hair? Linnea rolled her eyes in defeat. Fuck it. He probably wasn't even waiting for her.

But he was.

The sun had started its descent, a reminder the days were getting shorter and school was to begin. It cast Everett in a backdrop, obscuring his features as he rested against a new, two-toned Chevy Blazer, hands stuffed in his jeans, and sunglasses perched sexily.

She walked to him, grateful she hadn't tripped and sprawled on the asphalt. Even without Ulla here physically, she was always channeling Ulla mentally. Linnea had memorized Ulla's signature expressions. The way she'd subtly lower her chin and lift her eyes when she disagreed. The various types of laughter she could summon at just the right moment: a one-syllabic laugh if she were sarcastic; an under-the-breath snort if she were condescending; a high-pitched titter if she felt it necessary to fit in. Ulla saved her genuine laughs for Linnea. The guttural, eye-crinkling ones.

With Everett, Linnea chuckled like an insecure airhead, as if everything he said was funny. Did he think she'd gotten uglier? Did he notice the snugness of her jeans around her hips, how their roundness made the

waistband pucker because she could never find a pair that fit her proportions? Did he notice the line of pimples that had bloomed across her jawline, and how she had not one clue how to effectively flirt? Had their brief junior high kiss been a figment of her imagination? Was she reading too much into his smile, the glint in his eyes, the way he kept trying to touch her arm?

"You still hang out with Ulla?" he asked.

A face slap would've been kinder. Linnea's smile deflated, and she looked away with a dull, "Yes, we're still best friends," and swatted away the reminder that her beauty paled in comparison to Ulla's. The winter of their freshman year, a junior football player, Robbie Monroe, visited Linnea's locker between periods and invited her to his party after the hockey game, and she'd soared, buoyed miles high by a fantasy come true. *Boys do think I'm beautiful*! Then Robbie smiled—and asked if she'd bring Ulla with her.

That wasn't the only instance:

Lin, do you think Ulla would go out with me?

Lin, can you give Ulla this for me?

Lin, you've got *to know who Ulla likes. You're best friends!*

Linnea was mousy next to Ulla, with those lithe legs and cornsilk ponytail that swished back and forth.

Ulla, with a pencil *tap-tapping* on her lush, pouty lips before jotting an answer on a test.

Ulla, with her enormous blue eyes framed to the brim with naturally curled lashes.

Everett touched Linnea's arm, drawing her back, but it didn't send a zing of electricity the way it had moments ago. "She never liked me much," he said, "I was wondering if she was going to be competition."

At this, Linnea bristled. *Competition*? Their peers had long ago stopped teasing her and Ulla for being *lesbos*. She and Ulla made enough public appearances with double dates at school dances to keep the rumors to a low frequency.

Linnea channeled Ulla's falsetto laugh in response to Everett's question. He smirked and handed her a Dairy Queen napkin with his phone number written in blue ink. "Do I get yours?"

There was one move of Ulla's that Linnea had mastered in copying: the cool shrug.

Linnea arrived late to Ulla's house and sank into the tweed couch. She'd already missed half of a rerun of *Scarecrow and Mrs. King*. She wondered if this is what being buzzed felt like. Slightly off-kilter, electrified limbs, short attention span.

"Lin!"

"What?"

"You're acting like a total space cadet."

"Everett Barnes showed up today."

"So I heard."

"Wait. You did?" she said, slightly too shrill.

Ulla looked at her cynically. "Did Casanova try to sweep you off your feet?"

Linnea picked at the fabric of the couch. "He asked for my number."

Ulla didn't say anything. But the silence, the lack of Ulla's steady respirations, was enough. "You didn't give it to him, did you?"

"It's not like he's interested in me."

"Are you?" Ulla stared at Scarecrow and Mrs. King conspiring at a cocktail party on the television screen.

"No," Linnea lied. "Would you mind if I went out with him, though? Just once. I heard his dad died."

"No." But the cool shrug said otherwise.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Linnea

"Everett *Barnes*?" Linnea's mother said as Linnea primped in the bathroom. Her dad passed through the hall, and her parents locked eyes, both laughing.

Annoyed, Linnea carped, "What?" as her dad continued into the kitchen. She heard the fridge open, the clink of amber glass. Next came the *pop* and hiss of the bottle cap being opened. She painted her lips red and smacked them.

Her mother fondled a strand of Linnea's dark brunette hair and said to her reflection, "You're such a pretty girl, Lin-Lin. People always comment on those beautiful eyes you know."

"Whatever," Linnea reacted under her breath. Margie Larsson never said such things.

"So much prettier than Abby." Their eyes met in the mirror, and in her mother's vacant stare, Linnea knew that was her last reach. Barely forty years old, she was all but gone.

"That's enough, Mom." She brushed past, out the front door, to wait for Everett on the steps. Her parents didn't enforce a curfew, and never had. Probably assumed she'd go to Ulla's.

Linnea hugged her jean jacket around her arms and fingered a pin button with a Dr. Pepper logo. One that Ulla had given her. She had a few others: Rainbow Brite was a secret fetish; Michael Jackson from his *Thriller* cover; a Mora Mustang, their school mascot; and one with a

Minnesota North Stars hockey logo. She'd feathered her sufficiently hair-sprayed bangs and adjusted the elastic of her stirrup pants. She licked her finger and rubbed a speck of dirt from her white flats.

Everett arrived in the light gray and blue Chevy and got out. Anxiety jammed her throat. He looked very Andrew McCarthy in his shaggy hair and baggy blazer.

She stood and met him halfway, pocketing her shaky hands.

If Linnea's speechlessness bothered Everett, it didn't show. He said he was taking her to Minneapolis, a surprise. "I went to these types of places all the time in New York."

He spent the next hour of the drive detailing his escapades, how New York was nothing like Minnesota. Judging by Everett's new truck, his pleated khakis, and penny loafers, Linnea wondered how much more Everett's father was worth dead than alive.

He gunned the Blazer and crossed the double-yellow line to pass a hazard-flashing sedan with a mattress tied to the roof. He cruised easily onto the interstate as "Don't You (Forget About Me)" played on the radio. She marveled at the Metrodome where Minnesota's pro football and baseball teams played. It was a monstrosity that sat in the middle of downtown like a squashed marshmallow. He appeared struck by it, too. "They opened it the year after we moved. We should go. I'll take you to a game."

"*Really*?" The squeal burst from her. She blushed, knowing it had to be all talk. Something casual he threw out, not a promise.

That spurred Everett's chatter about sports, how he'd gone to see the North Stars play the Islanders at the Coliseum. He said his friend's dad took them. The word *Dad* reminded Linnea she hadn't properly offered condolences yet. "I'm sorry," she whispered, "about your dad."

Everett shrugged as if she'd apologized for picking the wrong radio station. "Do you like hoagies?"

She hated the greasy, messy excuse for a sandwich. "I love them!"

They parked on a university campus street outside a tiny pizza joint shoved in the basement of an apartment complex. "I'll get the door for you." He loped around, opened it, and took her hand. She stepped onto the sidewalk. The air had a pleasant, summer coolness.

Inside was dank and smelled of Italian spices. Everett ordered a hot hoagie minus the banana peppers, and Doritos. Even after all these years,

she associated the smell of Doritos with Everett's tongue lapping against hers. She conjured Ulla's kisses, how they always sent shivers between her legs. *What is Ulla doing now*?

"Lin? What's your order?"

She massaged the cringe in her stomach. "I'll take what you're having."

Once they were seated with the hoagies, Linnea chewed around the more disgusting ingredients, removing the ham, the tomato, and the salami, too. She nibbled the non-soggy parts of the bread. Everett didn't seem to notice her picking at it. Maybe he'd chalk it up to nervousness. Which wouldn't be untrue.

He described his high school life in New York. Student council, junior Homecoming court, playing hockey until he hurt his knee. He said he was going to apply to the University of Minnesota and major in business and economics. That he could easily get an internship at Cargill where his dad had worked. "That's why he traveled so much, you know. He even lived in London for three years."

"Without you?"

"Well, yeah."

Everett still didn't appear to be a grieving young man. He appeared to be—completely unaffected. She dismissed it as a defense. She fantasized of a private, vulnerable moment between the two of them, of him breaking down in tears, clinging to her. Underneath his confident bravado and endless chatter was the sad boy who needed her comfort.

He wiped his lips. Linnea reached across the booth and fingered away a dot of mayo that he'd missed.

Their next stop was a nightclub, brand new, in the warehouse district. It was one thing to dance in her bra and underwear to Culture Club and Madonna with Ulla in the confines of her bedroom. Quite another in a room full of strangers with her seventh-grade crush. "Did you bring your driver's license?" he asked.

She nodded.

"It's age sixteen-plus until midnight in this section," he said as they waited in line, at what appeared to be the back door. At least that meant no alcohol. Dozens of teens stood huddled, jabbering, and many were

smoking. The bouncer checked their IDs, Everett paid their entrance fee, and they were engulfed by dim lights and flashing neon strobes. Oddly, instead of claustrophobic, Linnea felt cocooned. And there was no need to hold a conversation. Everett took her into the thick of it, wrapped her arms around him, and guided her hips to Rick James' "17." The music was so loud. It penetrated her skin and overtook her pulse.

It wasn't exactly like being Cinderella at the ball, but when Everett's lips skimmed her thrown-back neck, Linnea couldn't think of anything better.

They kissed. And kissed until the harsh lights kicked them out and the music stopped. They kissed in his truck in the parking lot across the street until the cops rapped the window, telling them to leave or they'd call their parents. Linnea wanted to say *go right ahead.*

During the hour-long drive to Mora, she leaned her head back and drank in Everett's features: the cleft in his chin and deep-set eyes. She would live in this moment. Not tomorrow. Not where she'd have to see Ulla's stony face and feel the rock of guilt in her stomach when she asked what they did. Linnea wouldn't ask if there would be more Thursday dance club nights. She'd make this one last forever.

Everett took her to his house. They crept past unopened moving boxes. She hit her knee on the railing and rammed her hand into her mouth to stifle the painful gasp of laughter.

His room was in the basement. They were both peeling away their outerwear before he even closed the bedroom door. He straddled her on the bed and took off his shirt. He was skinny, but his muscles were sharp and distinct. When he kissed her ear and told her he'd always thought she was the prettiest girl he'd ever seen, she didn't believe him, but the rest of her body did, opening itself up to his.

When they lay naked next to each other, he asked if that had been her first time.

"Could you tell?" she replied, feeling the sore throb between her legs. Her mind went to Ulla.

Everett took her home when dawn was breaking. She awoke hours later in her bedroom to the punitive sunlight and the small hand of her alarm clock on eleven. Linnea's first thought was Ulla. *Where is she*? Had there been a day in recent years where she didn't see Ulla before eight in the

morning? Her own bed felt foreign, and for a brief second, she was confused upon waking, not rolling into the luxury of Ulla's hair.

The house was quiet. Most likely her father had left hours ago, leaving her mother to sleep off withdrawals. Linnea showered, dressed, and cleaned her parents' mess from the night before. Based upon the rim of lipstick on beer cans and full ashtrays, they'd had friends over.

She looked inside the fridge but only found a near-empty jug of pulpy orange juice, some leftover pizza slices, and a package of bologna.

Hungry and bleary-eyed, the memory of her date with Everett—*We had sex?*—seemed unreal. They'd had little to say to one another after it was over. Everett assured her that he'd pulled out in time. She hadn't dared to ask if he was a virgin. Doubtful, but still, there was an irritation in her gut that he didn't use a condom. These were things you talked about with friends, *your best friend*. It was Abby who had sat her down when she was twelve and asked if she knew what a period was, and how girls got pregnant.

Yes, she did, actually. Ulla's mother was not a neglectful, abashed parent when it came to explaining these things.

She had no appetite anyway and slammed the fridge. She walked to Ulla's house across the unkempt yard and weeds, mostly covered in crabgrass. The sun was blazing and felt unnatural.

Linnea needed to talk to Ulla. Needed her to hold her and kiss her and help her figure this all out. Help her not feel as if the world had run off course and was chugging along a different track now, to a place unknown. But the car was gone. It was a good two miles out to Curlers' wrecking yard.

Bereft and unmoored, Linnea sank onto the front steps. She was scheduled to work at Dairy Queen in a couple of hours. Her stomach and heart wrestled against one another. Linnea wanted to cry, as if that would rid what was consuming her.

He called me beautiful.

It wasn't Ulla who visited Linnea at Dairy Queen that evening. Had they ever gone this long without talking? Her time spent in foster care didn't count.

Everett leaned his elbows on the counter. He appeared almost coy. His eyes were doe-like and begging. As if he were looking for a fix. “Can you come over tonight?” he whispered. “I miss you already.”

Those words pressed the gas pedal of her senses: the ache to be wanted. By a boy, by *Everett.* It raced through every vein. She nodded.

When he picked her up from work, after they downed a Dairy Queen hot dog and fries, she was underneath him again. Less than twenty-four hours later. It only took Everett a few moaning thrusts. He gripped her head to brace himself, and his face twisted in ecstasy. An ecstasy Linnea found herself to be no part of. Instead, she was drifting further off track, away from the reach of the one person who actually knew her. Who helped her find herself.

Chapter Fifty

Linnea

Linnea caught Ulla at her house early that next morning. Ronja was scrambling eggs. She looked over at Linnea with a brief flicker of surprise and said, “Hi Lin, Ulla’s still sleeping,” instead of what Linnea sensed Ronja had wanted to say. *Did something happen between you two?*

Linnea went to Ulla’s bedroom. It felt more like *their* bedroom. Ulla was not, in fact, sleeping, but pretending to. If Ulla were sleeping, her limbs and wild hair would be splayed over the mattress. But she was hugging her knees. Linnea climbed next to her and lay on her back, linked her fingers over her stomach, and waited.

Finally, Ulla said, “So what was it like?”

Did Linnea smell like sex? When a guy entered inside, did it release some sort of imperceptible aroma that only those who knew you most intimately could detect?

“It—” her voice cracked.

Ulla rolled toward her and propped on an elbow to cradle her head. Her eyes looked beaten as if she hadn’t slept at all. Ulla always awoke in the mornings with hooded, soft eyes.

Linnea spoke to the ceiling. “It’s nothing.”

“Do you want it to be something?”

Linnea shook her head.

“You’ve been with him every night.”

“It didn’t mean anything to me.”

"Do you want it to?"

"No," she insisted.

Ulla rolled onto her back, reflecting Linnea's posture, but her eyes were a dark, wet, storm. Neither spoke. Linnea couldn't understand how two people of the opposite sex could cause her stomach to tumble like this. She didn't want to choose between either, and anyway—did she have to? Was she cheating on Ulla? *Tell me to end it*, she pleaded silently. Everett was a riptide, and Linnea felt only Ulla could rescue her. "I don't want anything to change between us."

Ulla sighed as if she didn't believe her, but that didn't prevent them from reaching for one another.

Everett showed up at Linnea's house on the first day of school. But Linnea wasn't going to further fray the precarious rope that knotted her to Ulla. "No thanks," she'd said. "Ulla and I always go together."

Everett gave her a slow once-over. It had never occurred to her that he'd take that as a challenge.

The minute she stepped through the doors of the school, she noticed the change in the air. Eyes trained on her. Seeing her. As if for the first time. No longer *dopetard* Linnea.

Student after student asked Linnea if she and Everett were going steady. "*No*," she said emphatically, each time suppressing a grin. As the morning wore on, the attention grew into a potent, novel addiction. She'd do anything to keep this drug pumping.

At lunch, Everett tugged Linnea to sit with him amongst the growing horde of lemmings. And just like that, overnight, she'd rocketed into the popularity stratosphere. Everett had been mildly popular in junior high. But he was even more so now. God-like. He graced Mora with his New York sophistication and acid-washed jeans. As if his coolness were transmissible by association, if he acknowledged your name. He was enticing, flirtatious, charismatic, mysterious. He could tell anyone anything. Really. How could they disprove him? *Is it true you got mugged? How big is Central Park? Did you really get to see a taping of Letterman?* One would've thought Rob Lowe had joined their class.

Everett called out to Ulla as she walked from the lunch line in search of Linnea. “Hey, *Oo*-La! You can sit here, too.” He said this as if granting her charity. Those who didn’t know Ulla the way Linnea did would’ve missed her moment of frozen uncertainty, the tight knuckles on her lunch tray, the flash in her eyes. But it passed quickly when she shrugged in that bored way of hers. As if it didn’t matter where she sat. She squeezed next to Wiley, shoving him playfully.

Linnea caught Ulla’s eyes. A glint of something sharp and unmistakable: *Is this really what you want?*

Chapter Fifty-One

September 1986

Linnea

It started at the first home football game of the year.

Mora Mustangs against Braham Bombers. Linnea felt lightheaded at school. Her stomach had been protesting against food the past twenty-four hours, everything she'd eaten went straight to the toilet minutes later. The sickness had her fretting she'd caught some flu bug from a kid at Dairy Queen that probably didn't wipe his butt before slapping change on the counter.

But Linnea couldn't miss out on her newly crowned status as Everett Barnes' girlfriend at the game. Technically, he'd yet to utter *girlfriend*, but he didn't correct anyone who did. And she wasn't about to dispel the magic by asking him, *Am I? Are we . . . ?*

The pep band played their screeching brass tones, and the setting sun ushered in autumn's evening breeze.

Ulla said she wasn't going to the game; since when did either of them care to watch doofus boys ram one another and smack their spandexed butts for the town to cheer in cloying adoration? The only reason the two ever made an appearance was to snicker at the cheerleaders shivering in their knee highs, performing canned chants like, "We are number one *yeah*, we are number one, *woo*!" followed by rocket jumps and side leaps and pom-

pom shuffling. Mora High's one true cheerleader was Aaron Lutz, a skinny, acne-faced junior who left everyone in the dust as a distance runner for the track team. Out of his gaunt body, came a barreling drill sergeant's voice: "LET'S GO MUSTANGS!" *CLAP-CLAP-CLAP*.

Linnea joined Aaron's lead, surrounded by a chorus of classmates that had once upon a time placed her on the fringe. Stacey Schwartz, a volleyball girl with short, permed black hair, tapped her on the shoulder. "Are you and Everett going to the drag?"

Linnea turned to Everett who was giggling in response to some joke of Wiley's. "Ev?" But Stacey interrupted her, "Ulla's probably looking for you." Linnea followed Stacey's bug-eyed gaze. She imagined *everyone*'s eyes bugging at the vision of Ulla walking, as if in slow motion.

It wasn't Ulla though. Ulla's hair wouldn't be curled and bouncing in perfect Christy Brinkley waves nor wear makeup that sparked her eyes to twice their magnitude. She'd be wearing baggy Kmart jeans and an oversized, unbuttoned flannel with a Rolling Stones t-shirt underneath. Not tight Jordache denim and a matching jean jacket over a turquoise sweater.

Linnea stifled the mass of jealousy and awe forming in her gut and waved.

Ulla grinned. It appeared genuine, but Linnea saw the façade in her eyes. The sea of classmates parted when Ulla climbed the bleachers. Stacey repelled from Linnea as if she'd only been warming the seat for Ulla, expecting her all along.

It was Everett's reaction that Linnea most closely gauged. He shifted his eyes briefly to Ulla and said as if bored, "Lin said you weren't coming."

Ulla flopped a coiffed wave over her shoulder. "Senior year," she replied to him, and then to Linnea, "never too late to catch up on all the things I might have missed."

Linnea chewed her cheek. Her nausea doubled.

She and Ulla didn't speak during the entire game. Mostly because Ulla was too busy attending to the flock that had gathered around her and her insipid comments:

I'm always too lazy to fix my hair. This took me two hours!

Who's number twelve for Braham! Should we get him to come to the drag with us?

Everyone was falling for Ulla's shtick. Linnea leaned in, smelling the drug store perfume, and mock-hissed into Ulla's ear, "Who's number

twelve? What is *going on* with you?"

Ulla narrowed her eyes. "If you don't want me around anymore, just say so."

The Mustangs scored. The crowd jumped to their feet, and the pep band screeched the brassy fight song. Ulla trailed her eyes over Linnea as the two remained seated in their insulated bubble. "You look kind of pale."

Linnea hugged her stomach. It wasn't a burgeoning flu making her ill. It was envy seeping from her pores, turning her love for Ulla into poison.

The "drag" was a stretch of graveled roads by the cornfields. Notorious for drag racing and drunken shenanigans, the class of 1987 considered themselves impervious to police and consequences. JJ, the star football player, was caught drunk last year, and instead of suspending him, the school corralled the entire class for a meaningless lecture. Not even the death of a fellow student in a car accident two years ago gave them a moment's pause on mortality. They christened themselves "The Baddies," topping it off with their motto: *Life is short and life goes on*.

Linnea was stuffed into the back seat of Everett's Chevy with two other football players, one of whom was Kevin Wallin, with his girlfriend, Debbie Lockman on his lap. Debbie refused to smoke with the window rolled up. The wind whipped Linnea's hair into her own mouth. Wiley, next to Everett, battled over the radio stations, eventually settling on "Smokin' in the Boys Room" and led everyone in a carousing sing-along. Everett turned the Blazer onto the crunching road, where the cornstalks were well past six feet, and parked behind a row of cars.

Linnea burst from the haze that Debbie had created with her Virginia Slims, out into the brisk air, just in time to gulp down the rising vomit. She jostled her head.

Everett lifted the hatch of the Chevy. Classmates mobbed him to snatch their drink of choice from the makeshift bar: Captain Morgan, Smirnoff, Michelobs, Millers, Pabsts, and the accompanying liters of Coke and plastic Solo cups.

Linnea and Ulla had never before been invited to these parties. Selected sophomores were accepted, usually girls. Limited exceptions were made for freshmen girls, but they had to be dating an upperclassman.

It was Ulla who found Linnea grimacing in the ditch. She held a cup, taking pursed, timid sips of her drink. She glanced at Linnea's empty hands. "Your boyfriend supplies the booze, and you get last dibs?" She took a heftier swig of the alcohol and coughed.

Linnea flashed her a heated, disgusted look. Before she could retort, Patsy and Sunny appeared with Tanya, captain of the Mora Mustang cheer squad. Each girl held a Miller Lite. They tapped drinks with Ulla. Tanya fingered Linnea's Rainbow Brite button on her jean jacket. "So cute. Everyone's got their vote in already for you and Ev to be Homecoming king and queen."

Linnea contained her inward squeal with a bored shrug.

"Or you!" Sunny pointed at Ulla. "I'd *totally* vote for you!"

Linnea seethed.

Tanya's laugh was disbelieving. "Sunny, who's going to vote for you, then?"

Sunny's breezy giggle spilled into her words. "Duh. Like I don't care!"

A voice broke through their chatter. "Ulla!" It was Wiley. He pointed an empty bottle at her, dropped to his knees in the dirt, and dramatically spun it, the bottle kicking up dust. He stopped it to aim directly at Ulla. All the girls cackled and egged her on.

Linnea expected one of Ulla's snarky replies, an exaggerated eye roll, the cool shrug. But instead, she moistened her lips and said, "Sure, why not?"

Wiley hooted amongst the crowing of their peers, and in false seriousness said, "Change in rules." He pulled Ulla toward the cornfields. "Kissing is in private."

Ulla followed him, leaving the trail of ruckus and catcalls behind.

Sickness crawled through Linnea's belly. More classmates joined the circle of girls that Ulla had vacated. JJ sucked on Tanya's neck while she continued talking.

Everett was with Cal LaFore, another star football player second to JJ, and a consortium of other athletes. He looked like he was conducting a meeting, animatedly waving his bottle of Michelob. Everett could've easily been cast as the sidekick to the football players' brawn and popularity, and to Wiley's wiles. But he was the puppet master. In the yearbook, opposite to JJ's five-sport resume and Ironman club membership, Everett would be voted as the "Most Likely to Succeed" and the "Next President of the

United States.” But under “Extracurricular Activities,” they couldn’t list the amount of time he spent crafting his outer *Miami Vice* image, schmoozing the teachers with his flashy grin and less than subtle use of flattery to achieve straight As. He made it a point to always ask Mr. Culvers, the American History teacher, about his elderly mother’s health. And if hopelessly frumpy Ms. Porter knew that people thought she looked like Linda Evans. Rumors of Everett being the main source of booze, acquired with his fake New York ID, would be dismissed by school faculty. *He’s such a nice boy*.

“Should we spy on Wiley and Ulla?” Patsy hissed to the group.

“Gross. No.” Sunny giggled, taking a sip of her beer.

Linnea started plotting her getaway. Who could take her home? Should she ask Everett?

Ulla and Wiley emerged. Ulla was thumbing her lips and taking sips from her cup. Wiley, with a loopy satisfied grin, shadowed her.

Linnea tugged Ulla aside and admonished in her ear, “What did you do?”

She glanced at Linnea’s lips before addressing her in the eye. “I had to see for myself what I was apparently missing out on.”

“Hey, Ulla.” Tanya batted her eyes theatrically at Ulla and sucked her thumb before popping it out of her mouth.

The girls shrieked.

Ulla shrugged at Tanya. “Maybe.”

The laughter doubled.

“Swallow or spit?” Debbie asked, taking her last cigarette pull before tossing it into the dirt.

Ulla smirked.

Linnea fumed. Everett joined and lobbed an arm around Linnea. She gagged and covered her mouth. The earlier heat from the claustrophobic, cigarette-clouded car grew to hell-like proportions. “Everett,” she whispered. “I kinda . . . I don’t think . . . ”

“Are you sick?” He placed the back of his hand on her forehead.

She nodded, dopey-eyed.

He fished his keys out. “C’mon. I’ll take you home.”

“Really?”

“Of course.” He kissed her cheek. “I hope you didn’t get me sick.” But he winked when he said it.

Everett addressed the group. “Be right back.”
Ulla and Linnea caught one another’s eyes.
Be right back?

Chapter Fifty-Two

Linnea

Everett delivered Linnea to her bedroom. “Get better, gorgeous.”

Weak and dehydrated, yet levitating from his flattery, Linnea lay in bed. She listened to her parents carry on downstairs with a card game. They glanced at her when she and Everett walked through the door hunched over, but otherwise said nothing. Her hands worked the Rubik’s cube, a mindless fidget instead of a challenge. Her brain seemed to work that way. Could make things click with numbers and puzzles. *Just not words. Or people.* Her Algebra II book sat open on the floor. She was already ahead by a chapter, so no matter if she missed a day or two. The senior advisor had asked Linnea what colleges she was applying to, and she’d shrugged noncommittally. Because she and Ulla were planning on driving to California in Ulla’s still-incomplete Ford Galaxie.

That dream was fading to black and white.

How could she salvage it? *Break it off with Everett*. But she couldn’t. *I can’t* . . . Linnea’s mind wrestled and grew hot. So, so hot. The black and white picture of her and Ulla, the one fading, burst back into color. They were already there. In California. The sun toasting them. Linnea had never seen the ocean but imagined it was breezy. The way she’d seen in the movies, women basking, tendrils of hair floating lazily up, how they craned their necks toward the rays. Ulla was next to her. Perhaps she felt the heat, too? She was saying her name now, “Linney . . . Linney, wake up!” *Is Ulla crying*? “Linney, are you okay? Linney?”

Linnea opened her eyes to see Ulla. A cold hand was on her cheek. It was dark. Why did she feel so warm? The beach, with its blazing sun and briny ocean, was gone. “Lin, you’re burning up. Do you have any Tylenol?”

Linnea was so tired. She said, *Yes, in the medicine cabinet,* but never heard her voice. Soon, Ulla was there, lifting Linnea’s head, placing two pills into her mouth along with a glass of water. Ugh. She didn’t want anything going down that would come back up. Even water. But she did as Ulla insisted and curled back into herself, retreated into her dream where Ulla was next to her on the beach, stroking her hair, kissing her forehead. “Lin,” she was saying again, telling Linnea a story about the time Ulla was at “the drag” and had too much to drink. Everett Barnes took her into the cornfields and kissed her. “But I wasn’t that drunk, Lin!” Ulla had shoved his face away, leaving fingernail marks on his cheek.

Linnea thought this was a horrible story to tell her on the beach.

Ulla begged, “I can’t do this anymore. I’m going crazy. I want it to be *us*. Please. I hate him. I *really* hate him.”

Linnea just wanted this dream, now resembling a nightmare, to end. She groaned and hugged her cramping stomach. “Okay,” she promised to make it all stop. “Okay.”

Over the weekend, Ulla checked on Linnea repeatedly, brought over chicken broth and ginger ale for her to sip on, lay in bed with her, brushed her hair, and soothed her with talk about how she’d found a bucket seat for Lexie along with spark plugs from a brand new GM towed from Moose Lake. They could map their route to California. Linnea wondered why Everett hadn’t called or checked on her.

She returned to school on Tuesday with Ulla, the real Ulla, in her casual jeans and natural face and hair.

Everett was absent. Linnea thought of calling him but never had before. He’d always been the one to arrange their dates. The sex. She’d find out from someone, probably Wiley, where he was.

“Sick,” Wiley said with a shrug, slurping Ulla’s neck. “Barfing.”

Ulla wiped her skin and told Wiley to cut it out.

Linnea felt guilty.

Ulla looked satisfied.

Without Everett, Wiley resorted to fart jokes at lunch. Patsy and Sunny talked in hushed tones and ear whispers, and it seemed to Linnea they kept stealing furtive glances at Ulla.

On their Wednesday night *Dynasty* ritual, in between commercial breaks of waiting to see if Alexis, Dex, and King Galen would make it out of Moldavia, Ronja fettered in with air-popped popcorn drenched in melted butter. She paused as if to linger on the sight of Linnea combing fingers through Ulla's obstinate hair, something they genially argued over—Ulla's lack of proper hair maintenance.

Ulla rested her chin on Linnea's breasts. "I missed us."

"Me too," said Linnea, feeling as if the past weeks had been only a blip. She stayed over that night, entangled and happy, with only the faint memory of a lucid dream where Ulla had asked her to dump Everett. He'd made it clear with his absence that he was doing it for her.

It was Friday when he returned. There he was, leaning against Linnea's locker, ankles crossed, dressed in a white blazer, polo, and Levi's. He clocked a smug look at Ulla and pulled out a rose, handed it to Linnea, and said he missed her. Pressed his lips on hers for all to see. That he was an idiot for never making their relationship official. "Which would make you my date for Homecoming. Please?"

Linnea stammered," Ye-*yes*."

When she turned to the spectators, she met Ulla's eyes. They were the same eyes that had begged in fear—*save me*—when falling through the ice all those years ago, believing she was going to drown.

But this time, Linnea held Ulla's head underwater.

Chapter Fifty-Three

Linnea

When the Homecoming court was announced, it was a foregone conclusion that Ulla would be nominated. Linnea had been nominated for queen, too, along with Everett for king. In these past weeks, Ulla solidified her rising status as the most popular girl. Everything she once eschewed with an eye roll was now front and center on her priority list: Sake bombs at every party, drunken powder puff games, hocking spit wads on the chalkboard in English when the teacher had her back turned. It was Wiley who happily took the fall for those because, rumor had it, Ulla would repay him with a hand-job in the bathroom.

Ronja, who rarely went to football games, had tracked Linnea to the concession stand and dragged her aside, eyes fraught as she begged Linnea in pressured words, "I'm losing her. She comes home drunk. She's spending ridiculous amounts of her savings on clothes and makeup, stopped working on the cars, and asked to be put on birth control." Linnea frowned, summing Ronja's litany of worries into one: *Is it really over between you two?*

Forever stymied with never the right words to say, never the right timing, Linnea shook her head and said, "Sorry," right before Ronja's final words slapped her: "I thought we meant something to you."

Linnea would wonder the same when the following week Ulla and Everett were crowned Homecoming queen and king. When Ulla, in her strapless white gown, with yards of tulle skimming the floor, danced with

Everett as the royal couple to Motley Crüe's "Home Sweet Home," whispering in his ear as his hands slid past her waist.

The Homecoming festivities continued at Fish Lake Resort after the dance ended. The resort's stretch of rentable cabins just outside of Mora was a popular destination when nights were too cold for the drag. Whoever turned eighteen first in their senior class rented cabins on behalf of their peers. Billy Hayes, a Boy Scout and golfer, took this oath seriously, and the avoidance of hazing threats by the jocks *more seriously*. He shadowed the partiers, caught bottles before they shattered to the floor, and armed himself with a bucket of soapsuds and a rag to wipe spills, a readied bandana to cover his face when mopping vomit that missed the toilets.

Linnea, the only other one who remained sober besides Billy, provided a hand. She taught Billy her trick for clearing a party sooner by making the alcohol disappear faster.

Someone hit play on a boom box. "We Built this City (On Rock & Roll)" blared, and Billy ran to crank the volume down. Everett jostled through the partygoers with bottles of vodka. "Lin, help me out." She followed him into the kitchenette, grabbed a Smirnoff from his arms, and let it slip. It shattered. Everett whipped around. "Jesus Christ, Lin, are you a fucking moron?"

Stacey Schwartz, glitter in her short perm, rebuked Everett. "Relax, your royal asshole, *geez*."

He set the remaining bottles on the counter with loud clinks and left to get more. Billy swooped in with a dustpan and broom as if they were additional limbs, and hollered, "Here! I can get the glass!"

Linnea plugged her nose from the sting of alcohol fumes as she picked up shards.

Ulla popped her head into the kitchen and snickered. "Ooh, break something?" Linnea soured at the sight of Ulla's crown atop her thick, bouncing curls, her lips coated in a pastel-pink.

"I think I got all the big pieces," Stacey said, mopping the liquor, and Billy swept the rest. Everett returned with what was hopefully the last of the alcohol and soda. People crowded the kitchen, grabbing plastic cups.

Linnea straightened and swiped her hands free of dirt. She smoothed her long white skirts. She had an off-the-shoulder version of the same dress Ulla wore as a member of the Homecoming court, but she didn't have Ulla's perky breasts to fill it. Breasts she knew intimately, a lifetime ago, it seemed. Linnea followed Stacey into the living room where classmates released their dirty dancing, having left it tame for chaperones in the gymnasium.

For someone who'd spent her entire existence in Mora rebuffing the attention of her classmates, Ulla sure knew how to command it. She'd started a game of *Drink or Strip*. Ulla and Debbie were the only girls, surrounded by six or seven boys.

Everett needled Linnea, pinching her waist. "Gonna join*?"*

I'd be the first one naked, she wanted to say but shook her head. She set her sights on the array of shot glasses lining the coffee table and the open bottles on the counters. With everyone distracted, she could pillage some of the alcohol, dumping an ounce here and there, offer to make classmates drinks and add the vodka last. But Everett steered her into the bathroom. He closed the door, burying them in darkness, and twirled Linnea up against it. "Missed you," he said, tasting like Michelob. She kissed him back. His hands raced over her body. Were they really going to do it in the bathroom? Without a lock on the door?

"Ev," she mumbled between kisses, "wait."

"Can you go down on me?" he breathed, "I swear I'll come quick."

She sighed, annoyed.

He moaned into her neck and chuckled. "It's your fault I can't control myself. Stop looking so gorgeous."

Linnea rolled her eyes and worked the buttons and zipper of his tux pants.

The door opened, knocking Linnea into Everett. He slammed a palm on it. "Get your own fucking bathroom!"

"Ooh, sorry!" It was Ulla, clearly inebriated. "Is that my king in there?" she added further, "Hey, Ev, I thought you promised me a royal fuck."

A laughing uproar exploded.

The memory of Ulla and Everett dancing as king and queen hours earlier flashed in Linnea's mind. Everett's hands sliding down Ulla's butt, Ulla's lips in his ear. Linnea pushed Everett away and opened the door. He tugged on her hips. "Where are you going?" He closed the door.

She yanked it open, hot tears burning her eyes. The envious fire made her indifferent to what her peers were about to witness. She clawed Ulla's arm and cried, "What is wrong with you!"

"Excuse me?" Ulla demanded. "Get your hands off me."

Someone shouted, "Fight, fight!"

"I don't even know you!" Linnea yelled.

"Know *me*?" Ulla laughed angrily and then matched Linnea's pain, yelling, "You're the cheater!"

"Stop," Linnea said through her teeth and scattered her gaze over the hush that settled.

Unaware of the silence—or not caring—Ulla hissed, "How does it *feel*?"

Linnea half formed the word, "Wha—?"

"It's true!" someone hooted.

"Hey Ev, you were in on this?" another howled.

"Threesome!"

Linnea wheeled back to Everett. His face was stone as if calculating his next move, and then her vision moved over the wall of giddy faces, having just witnessed Mora's biggest fodder for gossip. *Lesbians!* "She's—she's drunk," Linnea whispered to herself, stuttering. A rush of blood ballooned her head.

Ulla sneered at Linnea. "Tell Everett we were doing it long before you two were," then to Everett, she said, "actually, Lin and I kept doing it the whole time you were fucking her."

Linnea swung back to Everett, silently pleading. Everett threw back, "You're wasted, Ulla. You think I'd sleep with a dyke?"

At that, Ulla's impassioned face chilled. "Don't give me that. Especially after what you did to me."

"I did nothing."

"Your face healed up pretty nice," she said in a low accusing tone. "You piece of shit."

Linnea's memory of that night came unbidden. Of Ulla crying through her lucid dream. *He tried to kiss me, Lin. I hate him*. She contrasted that with Ulla now: *You promised me a royal fuck*. Linnea spewed at her, "You're the liar."

Ulla fired, "Go to hell."

Chapter Fifty-Four

Linnea

Linnea watched Ulla stumble out of the party that night to who-knows-where, leaving Linnea alone with classmates' stares, cold and jeering as they shrunk away from her. Linnea, too, stumbled into the frosty air. Her coat was locked in Everett's car, and there was no way she was going inside to ask for the keys. It was six miles from Fish Lake to her house.

Once she made it onto the highway, she stuck dangerously close to the shoulder. It was too much work in heels to hug the muddy perimeter of the lake. She rubbed her bare arms. She'd not been on the highway long, just crossing over the bridge that jetted across the lake's narrowing, when two glaring beams fixed on her and slowed, coming to a stop just ahead of her.

It was Mora Police. An officer silently stepped out of the vehicle.

"Hi, Oscar," Linnea cried. Oscar had a blanket ready. He wrapped it around her, guided her into the backseat, and drove her home.

She wondered if he'd completed the same route moments before.

Her house was dark except for the glare of the television that had been left on to a local program highlighting ice fishing. She didn't bother to see if anyone was still awake. At least no one was partying.

The sobs she'd been caging now escaped with ferocity, and she buried them in her pillow. Sobs that broke her body, until finally, she labored to a sitting position. She examined the makeup stains on her pillowcase and her wrinkled dress.

Go to hell.

Linnea went to her closet and found their memory box, mementos she'd kept to make a scrapbook for Ulla when they graduated and kissed Mora good riddance. *Now what*? She sifted through the movie stubs and tore *Back to the Future* into tiny shreds. The Polaroids were harder to rip. She saw the one from Halloween 1981, the night they first kissed. The night they thought they would never see each other again.

And there, nestled at the bottom, as if feeling as abandoned as she did, was Beskyddaren, with those shiny jewels that now looked fake. As stupid and tacky as the giant Dala horse in the middle of their town, nothing but a tourist trap. She clutched the horse, her lips curling in scorn, and hurled it at the wall. It bounded off and landed on the carpet by her dresser with a chip in its hoof.

She wanted—*needed*—Ulla to suffer. And Linnea, the keeper of Ulla's secrets, her deepest wounds, knew exactly what to do.

In the middle of the night, she grabbed a thick, heavy Twin Cities white pages from a stack her parents collected for bonfires, and swished through the house in her filthy Homecoming dress. One by one, she dialed every Peter Johansson that was listed.

Chapter Fifty-Five

September 1986 – July 1987

Linnea

Linnea stayed home the entire week after the Homecoming fallout, too mortified to show her face at school, but then Everett appeared on her doorstep and asked her to the dance club in Minneapolis. She accepted, but only to return his silence. To test him. Except it seemed he was prepared for this. Armed with compliments of her beauty, how much he'd missed her, flowers pulled from his back seat, tickets to see Motley Crüe this summer. *This summer*? That had to mean something.

She deflected his kiss in the passenger seat of his Chevy. "Am I your girlfriend again? Was I ever?"

Everett, whom Linnea thought was immune to insecurity, tapped his fingers on the steering wheel and chewed his thumbnail. The only time she'd seen this mannerism was early in their relationship when they'd gone upstairs from his bedroom in hushed giggles and found his mother passed out on the living room floor, a thin trail of drool trickling from her open mouth. He'd walked over and pulled her skirt down to cover her underwear.

"Yeah, you're my girlfriend," he said, shifting the car into gear.

And so followed the subsequent restoration of her popularity over the next weeks and months. It was such a satisfying relief, Linnea knew she'd do *anything* to never lose it again. She made sure to degrade Ulla's

reputation, to bury her so deep she'd suffocate. She'd nod emphatically when Everett would explain to everyone that Ulla got creepy and possessive of Linnea once they started dating. That she was drunk and made up the nonsense about them being lesbians. *She's the lesbo, not Linnea.*

And then it happened.

Soon after Ulla's eighteenth birthday, the first week in February, Linnea passed Ulla in the hallway toward the front entrance. The two girls, now used to avoiding one another, both paused, fleetingly, and Ulla carried on, but Linnea caught her eyes. For once Ulla's blue eyes were not cold, nor despondent. They were almost happy again. Linnea followed her at a distance, peeked outside the double glass doors and watched as Ulla climbed into the T-bird, not with Ronja but with a strange man, one that could easily pass as her father with his handsome, light-colored features.

Linnea wondered, is this Peter? *The* Peter Johansson that was supposed to ruin the lives of Ronja and Ulla? Was supposed to deliver certain horrible revenge that Linnea had so desperately and impulsively wanted that night she called him, needing something *to do* in her state of drunken humiliation. She'd called so many numbers, asking through her angered tears, "Are you Ulla Bergstrom's father?"

He'd been the only one not to hang up. Simply drew a quiet breath and didn't even ask for Linnea's name, or why she was calling. "Where is she?"

She watched Ulla hug Peter warmly before lowering herself into the car, assuaging Linnea's sliver of guilt she could not tweeze out. Orchestrating Ulla's social pariahdom turned out to be enough revenge.

They were even now.

Yet somehow the sliver didn't go away. It was replaced by something else. Something she didn't want to acknowledge. She missed Ulla. She missed Ronja, and everything about the Bergstroms. The way they bantered in Swedish, the way Ronja would braid Linnea's hair at night, or how every midsummer Ronja would insist they stay up all night, and they'd pork out on Ronja's smorgasbord of candy, chocolates, and popcorn, and play *Skitgubbe.*

The news of Ulla's father spread like wildfire. Ulla had a *dad*? Wasn't he dead?

Still, a deep, insidious pit opened in Linnea's stomach, yawning.

Linnea replaced the Bergstroms' home with the Barneses' home. She felt special that she was the only one Everett allowed over, fully. She even began to stay overnight most of the time, and in the bathroom her Suaves and Baby Softs sat next to his Dep gel and Calvin Klein. She took care of his mother, deployed her tried and true tactics to minimize the alcohol available, cooked for her, cleaned their house.

But one night, Linnea's efforts backfired when Mrs. Barnes raged through the house screaming that *Goddammit there'd been at least half a bottle of Smirnoff in the cupboard!* and accused Everett of stealing it. He eventually went out and bought her a new bottle to shut her up, slammed it on the counter, grabbed Linnea's hand, and they stayed over at her house. They snuck into her bedroom, quietly got naked, and she lodged a hand between his teeth to mute his animal groans, hoping not to wake her parents. Afterwards, he got up and wandered around her room, explored her closet as if on some archaeological excavation, fascinated that perhaps Linnea was a rare specimen, especially when he found Ulla's Dala horse.

"What's this?" he'd asked, holding it up and squinting.

Linnea had held that horse over the trash so many times, yet in the end, buried it in a Coors box with books she'd collected. She turned her back to him and shrugged, hoping to sound cool and not tearful. "A stupid toy. You can have it."

"These jewels look real."

"Doubt it," she said and heard him put it back before he joined her. She felt his stickiness against her skin and he chattered on in her ear, like he often did after they had sex, as if the act unlocked all his secret plans for *world domination*, as Linnea liked to tease, pressure-testing them on her. They both enjoyed playing with numbers, too, figuring out how to manipulate them. *You're pretty smart, Lin*, he'd say, which she didn't know whether to take as an insult or a compliment, as if he expected her to be dumb. Smarts without confidence, though. Not sure where that would get her in life.

The sex increased exponentially. Sometimes twice in one day. In the car, bathroom stalls, and once in the alleyway of the ice arena. Everett complained endlessly about having to use rubbers.

She counted the days to her eighteenth birthday when she could go to Dr. Olsen's office, the female family doctor, and ask for birth control. She

couldn't ask her parents. Her mother might say yes. But she also might call her a slut.

When her birthday finally arrived, the day of her appointment, it snowed. One of those spring blizzards that spoiled everyone's mood. She stomped the snow off on the welcome mat, filled out the requisite paperwork, and was weighed and measured. *5'6, 127 lbs*. Down ten pounds from what she would've guessed. She'd been skipping dinner and refusing to eat at Dairy Queen ever since dating Everett, afraid of losing his *gorgeous* endearments.

Dr. Olsen, with her youthful, permed bob, had recently moved here out of training, and Linnea found it to be serendipitous. She couldn't ask Dr. Mendelssohn, the regular family practice doctor. He sponsored all the booster clubs for the boys' sports and had six kids.

Dr. Olsen finished her interview, and Linnea grew restless. The doctor had already asked, "Do you have a boyfriend?" followed quickly by questions about graduation, summer plans, and college. Was Linnea going to have to bring it up herself?

The doctor left upon finishing her physical exam. Linnea balled the sanitary paper on the examination bed into her fist, listening to it crackle.

When Dr. Olsen returned, Linnea was in the middle of a slow-motion buttoning of her jeans.

The doctor pressed her hands together with a amiable laugh. "I'm sorry, Linnea, I forgot to ask about you and your boyfriend. Are you sexually active?"

Instead of nodding, Linnea shook her head.

"If you ever need birth control let me know."

Linnea had one foot out of the exam room when she turned and said, "Actually . . . "

Dr. Olsen smiled, as if she already knew, and said, "I'll need to get a pregnancy test first."

The doctor slid a sheet across the desk tucked in a pamphlet. The pamphlet had an artist's sketch of curved lines in blue, the outline of a pregnant woman. Inside were lists of clinics. Linnea accepted them into her numb hands.

She put her coat on and stepped outside into the sunlight. The snowstorm clouds were gone, revealing a completely different world now, one that was not the same as the one she'd belonged to an hour ago.

Her shift at Dairy Queen was soon. She thought about calling in sick. But that seemed like a very non-adult thing to do. What now? Burrow under her Strawberry Shortcake bedspread?

Linnea folded the paper and pamphlet into her purse. And walked. Slowly. It wasn't an hour's walk to Dairy Queen, so she made a loop of all the churches. First, the three Lutherans, then a few yards to St. Mary's Catholic. She and her parents hadn't been regulars at any church. Sometimes, in junior high, Sunny invited her and Ulla to youth group events that consisted of "ice breaker games," making Linnea nearly erupt into nervous hives. Yet Ulla's hand was always inside hers, her solid ground, her calm breath, the one who'd whisper in her ear what to say and what to do. It wasn't Everett she thought of when Dr. Olsen told her she was pregnant.

She stopped outside St. Mary's, begging that God would somehow be kind enough to exit through the doors and give her advice. But then again, he might also hate her as much as she hated herself right now.

Linnea was tired, and sometimes a surge of emotion would overtake her. Otherwise, time passed, and she felt no different, which meant she didn't have to make a choice. Not yet. Safe in her comfort zone of indecision and inaction, Everett made up her mind. What he said, she agreed with, where he went, she gladly followed, what he liked, she liked. When he wanted sex —of any kind—she gave it to him. Linnea wondered if she'd ever be able to exist on her own, with her own beliefs, choices, and opinions. Isn't that how she'd learned to survive? Yet here she was, supposedly the voice on behalf of a future human, when she'd never once been able to speak on behalf of herself. Was it horrible to wish for a miscarriage, allowing her to continue her life of indecisiveness?

It was a week before graduation, during a party at Fish Lake Resort, when Everett gave her an orgasm for the first time, something she thought could only be achieved with Ulla. She basked in the pleasant distraction as her climax wore off, so much so that when Everett pinched her waist and

said, “Working on the fries again?” she walked past the insult and straight to, “I’m pregnant.”

He laughed and flopped back onto the pillow. She didn’t move, listening for his stillness to break. He sat up, not touching her. She knew he was waiting for the *just kidding*. Linnea hugged herself and whispered, “So . . . ”

Everett stood from the bed and faced her. She circled her eyes briefly to his narrowed ones and focused instead on his stiff jaw. “What the fuck, Lin.” The calm way he delivered those four words made Linnea wish he’d at least yelled. Yelling, insults, she could handle those. But not this. She slid off the bed to look for her clothes, but such a simple task seemed impossible.

“Are you going to get an abortion?”

Linnea found her shirt and held it over her breasts. It was a *yes* or a *no*. One easy syllable. In her immobilized state, she could utter neither, and remained mute.

Everett pulled on his boxers. While her mind remained frozen, it seemed his was a machine, making calculations. That much she could surmise from his tensed muscles and darting eyes. “Christ,” he finally muttered and yanked on his jeans. “Then we’ll have to get married.”

Her stupefied laugh escaped, and she looked at the alarm clock. The red digits said 12:24 a.m.

Like a hungry dog grateful for the scraps thrown under the table, Linnea accepted the proposal.

In three months’ time, the fall of Everett’s freshman year at the University of Minnesota, when the two of them would stand in front of a court commissioner with a tipsy Mrs. Barnes as the only witness, Linnea’s parents having disowned her, when the gossip about Everett and Linnea’s shotgun wedding lost its steam, the vows would emerge from her lips.

Linnea recited them not to Everett but to the living being inside her: *From this day forward, for better or worse, to have and to hold, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part, according to God's holy ordinance; and therefore I pledge myself to you.*

Chapter Fifty-Six

January 1987

Ronja

Ten years wasn't enough. She'd been so foolish to allow her fear of him to settle into dormancy, to ignore that whisper when she spotted a Mercury Lynx lingering outside Curlers' junkyard a handful of times the past months.

It was January twenty-seventh, Ulla's birthday, eleven years to the day she'd last seen Peter, after a Dairy Queen cake and eighteen lonely candles, that Ulla answered the door.

They stared at Peter Johansson. He wore his yellow hair shorter than Ronja remembered. The laugh lines around the corners of his mouth were deeper, hardened. His eyes, with their icy blue color that stole her breath, softened at Ulla in awe. He had a birthday present for her, placing it gently into her hands.

"How did you find us?" Ronja hissed, prodding an immobile Ulla aside.

Peter shifted his gaze between the two women, mouth parted, as if he, too, were dumbfounded at arriving on their doorstep. Ronja didn't wait for an answer, told Ulla not to say anything, not to talk to him, and went to the phone. She'd been told to call the federal marshals if Peter, or any of the men in Gabby's regime located her. Peter followed her, taking off his gloves. She latched onto the receiver, and his hand enveloped hers, his skin

cold, but his breath warm. He wasn't gruff, threatening, or violent, because he didn't need to be. They both knew she wasn't going to call. The dial tone filled the silence. "I will always find you, *min lilla fågel*."

The tinny operator's recording cut through: "If you'd like to make a call, please hang up and try again . . . " Peter guided Ronja's hand to click the receiver into place. Her thoughts traveled backward in time, and it was Peter who spoke them aloud. "That was quite the long con you pulled off. I would've been so proud if I hadn't been the target."

"Are you alone?" Ronja asked, working to control the pace of her breathing. "No one else knows where we are?"

"Of course, I'm alone. After what those bastards did to you?"

"I was told they're on parole now."

"What did they tell you about me?" he asked.

"That you were released five years ago."

"Mamma, Peter?" Ulla said behind them. For a moment, Ronja was transported to 1975 when a six-year-old Ulla caught them arguing in the kitchen. Ronja had been careless and misplaced a receipt for the pictures she'd developed and bought. The photographs had been the most damning evidence of Peter and Gabby's gambling ring and escort service that doubled as an operation to smuggle immigrants.

Ronja stepped from Peter's sphere and went to Ulla. "It's okay. Turn on the T.V. and let me have a talk with Peter. Do not open that present," she said, eyeing the huge box wrapped in confetti paper and silver ribbon.

Ulla obeyed with the present, setting it on the kitchen table, but she insisted on knowing how Peter found them, too.

Peter answered the question, "I didn't find you. You found me."

Ronja whirled to face him as he spoke, "Your new last name, Bergstrom, that suits you. And they stashed you only an hour from the Cities?" His laugh held genuine mystification. "Imagine my surprise when the universe rang my phone and said, 'Are you Ulla Bergstrom's father?'"

Ronja watched the chill run through Ulla before igniting into rage. "What is she trying to do to me!"

She wrapped her arms around her daughter. "We don't know it was Linnea."

Ulla fought against Ronja's embrace. "She saw my birth certificate. She's the only one on this earth who knows. She and I used to talk about

trying to find him—you!" Her eyes raced to Peter. She bolted from the kitchen.

Ronja snatched her. "*Älskling*, no, no, stop. She's not worth your time. Maybe this is what she wants, to see you upset." Ronja felt Peter's eyes appraising their exchange. Ulla went limp. Ronja smoothed her daughter's red face and wiped the corners of her heartbroken eyes, wishing she could resuscitate Ulla's lynched heart. She whispered in her ear, "I will take care of this. Trust me."

Ulla pulled away. "Last time you promised me that, you almost died."

"Not this time."

Ulla shifted a wary, skeptical glance at Peter, as if she wanted to run into his arms—and as far away from them as possible.

Ronja knew that feeling all too well.

Ronja watched him sleep on the couch. Unable to close her eyes, she'd first checked on Ulla and found her daughter had mercifully gone to sleep. But late.

She quietly slipped outside into the arctic twilight clad in heavy boots and a parka with a thick comforter around her head, protecting her hands. She needed the cold to shock her thoughts back into order.

The lake was solid. She stood on the wooden dock, ready to collapse from years of freezing and thawing and that she and Ulla had rescued and repeatedly salvaged over the years with fresh planks. Ronja had hoped to save up and buy one that was removable. She braved walking out farther, not wanting anyone to hear her sadness. They would have to leave Mora, where she'd planted her heart. Rip it out from the earth. Peter was wrong. The federal marshals had not chosen to relocate them to Mora. That was Ronja's bargain.

Before she could shed a tear, Ronja knew he was behind her, and she fought the emotion away. Without turning around, she said, "Are you here to kill me?"

He chuckled sadly. "Five years in prison, and every day I thought of how desperately I missed you."

"Why can't you leave us alone?"

"I would if you meant it."

Ronja faced him. He had thrown on his coat and boots. His hair was disheveled, and she saw the longing for her, the possessiveness that he always seemed to think he had earned. “If they find you here, they’ll kill all of us. What is *wrong* with you? You think they don’t track you? It’s the fucking mob,” she cursed. “It’s one thing to put my life in danger, but Ulla’s?”

“She’s mine, too,” he yelled, clearly not caring if all of Mora heard his indignation. His eyes flooded. “What is wrong with *me*?” He was in her face, his gaze straining with anger. “*You* did all this, Ronja. *You* set this in motion thinking you were so goddamn righteous. They were never—*ever*—going to touch you and Ulla. We finally had everything we ever wanted, more money than we ever imagined, steady money. We were a family, and you threw it away.”

“Don’t you dare blame me.”

He locked his jaw, sniffed, and looked away. “So what now?”

“What *now*?” she mocked.

“I work a menial job, live in a shithole apartment,” he pointed to the lake, “while you get all this.”

“So you *are* here for revenge.”

He gripped the blanket and pulled her into him, drawing his mouth close to hers. “I’d be fine with nothing as long as I have you and Ulla.”

“I hate you,” she whispered.

He stared into her, their breaths ghosting against one another’s. “You hate that you and I are the same. You hate that you’re as much of a criminal as I am.”

Ronja wrenched out from the blanket. “I’m nothing like you.”

He dropped his voice to match hers. “Listen to me.”

She continued backing up, her heel dipped on the edge of the dock. Panic flashed in Peter’s eyes. Did he think she was going to fall? Crash through the ice or hit her head? He snapped his hand around her back and, with the other, cupped her neck, yanking her tight into his body.

His chest heaved, and his breath coated her cheek. “I swear to God,” he choked out, “I swear to God, I’ll kill myself if you ever leave me again.”

Chapter Fifty-Seven

February – April 1987

Ronja

Peter had taught Ronja the patience of a long con, that people believe what they want to, and there's very little you have to convince them of. So Ronja did nothing. Peter stayed. He said he'd look for work closer to Mora, maybe Cambridge or St. Cloud. She carried on with her life, indifferent. Ulla could not carry on indifferently. Ulla, sweet Ulla, had her pappa again, and so Peter did not have to convince Ulla that he wasn't a trickster, a horrible man, or hiding anything. Ulla was happy to believe this because she wanted to.

"Look Mamma!" she'd said, astounded, when finally opening her birthday present from him. It was a new Snap-on-Tool set, much nicer than the one she'd had to leave behind at age seven when they fled.

Day in and day out, Ronja had to watch this. Watch as Peter happily slept on the couch, because, in exchange, he would get up and drive Ulla to school, sometimes surprise her, and they'd stop at DQ or McDonalds, and Ronja had to summon all the strength of her acting, to not be horrified when Ulla told of Peter taking her to Minneapolis, to go shopping for car accessories for Lexie. When he wasn't working, he lightened the load, a regular house-husband when Ronja was called away at any hour to tow a wrecked car.

She would lay awake at night, unable to sleep knowing he was steps outside their door. Hating that her body craved him. The problem with Peter was that he wasn't always lying. She believed him when he said he didn't want any harm to come to either her or Ulla. *But people want impossible things all the time, don't they?* she wanted to say to him.

A month went by of this, then two, and Ronja, one night, finally got up and went to him. She wrestled with how to crack into his mind. His back was faced away, the couch had molded into the shape of his body and smelled like him. She wasn't startled, nor surprised, when she heard his voice. "Are you going to do it?" He turned over, with that devilish look, the one that she hated adoring. His eyes were sleepy, but piercing nonetheless, and they grazed over her body in a nightgown and housecoat, hair loose.

"Do what?" she said.

"Bludgeon me to death."

She couldn't help herself, snorting a laugh, and rolled her eyes. Peter sat up and wiped a palm down his face. He was bare-chested, and Ronja rolled her lips inward. The one thing she could never hide was her attraction to him. "If you knew I was going to leave you in Stockholm all those years ago, why didn't you stop me?"

"I wanted you to be happy."

Such a Peter answer, so smooth, almost sincere.

"You don't believe me?"

Ronja hugged herself, unable to look at him as Peter continued talking, "I pivoted, made a backup plan just in case."

His words from that first night on Ulla's eighteenth birthday, and every night since, still clanged inside her skull, probably the true reason she could not sleep since his return: *You hate that you're as much of a criminal as I am*. Ronja now looked him in the eye. "I did what you are incapable of. I created an honest life."

Peter's soft laugh would've been condescending had he not looked saddened for her. "Ronja." His voice was quiet but no less resolute. "You lie to your daughter every day."

The tears were bitter and swift. "Fuck you," she whispered and gasped, shoving a hand over her mouth and nose. This did nothing to deter him from rising to his feet and slowly coming toward her. She backed into the wall, smothering her face, fearful her restrained sobs would awaken Ulla. But more so to shield herself from his expression that was neither gloating

nor prideful. It was a mirror of her own self-loathing and sadness. Peter took her into his arms. How was it that she could hate someone so much and yet want their affection and their comfort so badly? Maybe because he was right. She didn't truly hate him. He was the only one who ever knew her, knew every last one of her secrets. And Ronja felt a bizarre release from all of it when he held her hands, uncovered her face, and softly kissed her.

Dawn's blue light spilled into Ronja's bedroom. She sat on the edge of the bed, naked, her mind replaying their fervent lovemaking. Had Ulla heard them? In about an hour, she'd be listening to her daughter's rituals outside the door: teeth brushing, face washing, slamming drawers, the pop of the toaster, and scraping sounds of the butter knife.

Peter shifted, moved her hair aside, and trailed kisses up her spine. Ronja shivered. He caressed the ring still on her hand after seventeen years, the one he'd gifted her on Ulla's first birthday. "You still wear it."

"Keeps away strange men," she said dismissively, knowing he'd spotted it on her that very first day of his return but said nothing, and it seemed too obvious then to remove it. The truth was, after all this time she still loved the ring, still loved the fantasy he'd spun that night.

Peter continued touching it. "You've not been with anyone?"

"What does it matter to you?" She looked over her shoulder at him.

He lifted his eyes to hers, impishly, contagiously, and she weakly pushed his shoulder. Peter drew her face to his and kissed her mouth. Ronja succumbed but then pulled away, left the bed, and went to her closet. Peter rested on an elbow. "We can make this work."

"Where have I heard that before?" She opened a dresser drawer and snatched a t-shirt. "Just leave, already, please." She slammed the drawer shut. "Don't you dare tell anyone about us."

He looked genuinely hurt. "I would never do that."

"We're happy. The two of us, all right? We're happy."

"You said that twice."

She yanked the t-shirt over her head, then, realizing she forgot her bra, swiped it off.

"Ulla doesn't look happy," he said.

“Ulla’s had her heart broken.”

Peter sighed heavily and placed his legs over the edge of the bed. He reached for his trousers.

There was a knock on the door. “Mamma, is Peter in there?”

“No,” said Ronja when Peter said, “Yes.”

“I'm ready for school,” said Ulla from the other side.

Ronja avoided his eyes and blinked away the emotion in hers. Peter buttoned his pants and quickly tossed his flannel on. He opened the door. “Let's go,” he said to Ulla and turned to Ronja, hand on the door jamb, eyes pinched, as if he wanted to say something, but Ronja had her eyes fixed on Ulla. She’d not seen her daughter look this happy, not in a long while.

It was mid-April when Ronja sped home for Ulla, annoyed that she’d stopped at school and was informed that, “Ulla was feeling ill. Her dad picked her up.” Ronja had wanted to surprise Ulla with good news, and here Peter was stealing her thunder. She found the two of them plopped on the couch watching *Days of Our Lives*. A bowl of popcorn kernels sat on the coffee table.

“Why aren’t you in school?” Ronja asked Ulla.

The guilt that passed between Ulla and Peter was fleeting.

“I had a stomachache,” Ulla said and fetal-positioned herself into the couch, muffling her giggle into the throw pillow.

Ronja picked up the empty bowl of popcorn and Hershey wrappers. “Yes, I can see that.”

“Peter ate all of it.” The two of them cracked up.

Ronja surveyed the clutter. They’d binged on more than popcorn and chocolate. They’d made cookies and brownies from a box. As if sensing her rising temper, Peter said, “Relax, I thought I had the rest of the afternoon to clean before you came home.”

Ronja massaged her head. “I don’t care about the mess. Ulla, do you want to go on a pickup with me? It’s just outside Pine City. I stopped at the school to surprise you. It’s a Dodge Charger. The sheriff thinks it’s in good shape.” Ronja hoped her daughter could have first dibs on the salvageable parts. Lexie still needed bodywork.

Ulla sat up. “You’re not mad?”

“Are you still going to graduate?” Ronja stared at the unopened box of announcements that they’d gotten for free and would send to no one.

Ulla shrugged. Ronja had wondered if one day Ulla would plain refuse to go to school. She had felt the extra long stares at Bachman’s SuperValu the past year, the whispers when no one realized she was standing in the opposite aisle: *Think about it, her mother never dates, even turned down Vic Lidstrom. What if. . .* ? Ronja heard at Town & Country Oil from one of the more sympathetic teachers that Ulla’s locker had been plastered with Kotex on her birthday, and Ulla had said nothing about it.

“So can I go with you?” Ulla asked Ronja, reaching through her jumbled thoughts. She nodded, and Ulla dashed for her coat.

Ronja looked into Peter’s compassionate eyes. He rose slowly and went to her. They exchanged a long look, and she masked the worry and unease chipping away at her. He slid his hands across her cheeks and up into her hair, kissing her. “You look tired,” he whispered in Swedish. “Hurry back?”

Ulla returned with her jean jacket and flipped her ponytail out from the collar. She glanced at Peter with a tiny but conflicted smile when she said to him, “Bye.” The sentiment hung incomplete, as if she’d wanted to close it with, *Pappa*.

They walked outside. Sprouts of green were poking through branches, and a pair of squirrels chased each other up the maple.

Ronja touched the handle of the T-bird and halted, rolling her eyes. “I forgot the keys.” She went into the house and heard Peter’s voice. “I have to go,” he said, followed by the click of the phone on the receiver. She froze.

Peter walked out of the kitchen and chuckled at her. “You took my wish seriously.”

“I need . . . ” Ronja began to say, stopping herself, and searched about the spinning room. She touched her forehead in false admonishment. “I forgot the dispatch address.”

Peter’s eyes clouded. “Oh,” he said, and they moved past one another. She went into the kitchen and picked up the phone.

Ronja spun Curlers’ number on the rotary and skirted a glance to see he was watching her. She covertly pressed the receiver button to cancel her dialing and completed a quick zero for the operator.

Through the receiver, a voice said, “Operator, how may I help you?”

Ronja exuded a fake cheerfulness. “It’s me. I lost the location, what was it again?”

“I’m sorry,” said the woman on the other line, “what is your need?”

“Give me the phone number. Let me call them?”

“Ma’am, I’m not quite clear—”

“I’m sure it was the last number dialed. Go on, I’ll wait.” Ronja kept her cool, feeling Peter hover.

The operator said, “The number you just called?”

“*Yes*, yes hurry please.”

“Would you like me to connect you?”

“Oh, you found it! Yes!” Ronja stretched the cord to the kitchen junk drawer, opened it, and retrieved a scrap of paper and pen. Her heart thundered as she listened to the operator connect her.

One ring.

“Mmm hmm,” Ronja wrote down random digits, shooting a quick grin to Peter.

Two rings.

“Wh-what was that last number?” she continued the charade.

*“*Hello?” answered a man.

Ronja dropped the pen. The kitchen grew dim, shadowy. She dug her nails into the countertops.

“Hello?” the man’s voice said again.

She hung up.

Ronja gunned the engine of the wrecker. The radio was tuned to a scratchy pop station out of the Twin Cities. “Money for Nothing” played its crass electric guitar tones. The road in front of her wavered, and her gut began tossing itself. She let up on the gas. On the steering wheel, she drummed her nails.

“Mamma?” Ulla’s worry from the passenger seat sounded far away to Ronja. “Are you okay?”

Are you okay? Peter had asked, eyes on the clenched receiver in Ronja’s hand. *Did you get what you needed?*

Ronja nodded to Ulla. “Yes, yes, *älskling*.” She zeroed her vision on the road, spotting the state patrol ahead. Her nails continued their rhythm, counting out the beats of her next steps.

First, tow the car. Then, plot her and Ulla’s disappearance.

She pumped the brakes and maneuvered the wrecker behind the Dodge that was belly up in the ditch.

Ulla craned her head to assess the damaged car. She pushed open the door, sending in strong winds that were left wild and unchecked on the highway. She stuck her head back in, her ponytail flapping across her cheek. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

Ronja opened her door, inhaled, and jumped down. Her boots sounded on the asphalt as she went to join Ulla, her mind a rapid machine. How much time did she have? How much time before the man on the other end of that phone line, the one Peter had been speaking to—*Gabby*—the one responsible for plotting Ronja’s murder twelve years ago, would snatch her and finish the job?

The asphalt tilted and smashed her.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Ulla

Ulla kicked the vending machine inside the Emergency Department of Cambridge Medical Center until the hot black liquid squirted sludge. She didn't drink coffee but had acquired the habit this year, needing a jolt to get her through the hell that was twelfth grade. Most of her classmates were not cruel in what they did to her—that came from a select few—mostly seventh and eighth graders. Her classmates were cruel in what they did not do. They did not stop the gossip, nor the insults hurled down the hallways, and the girls did not change in front of her in the locker room after gym class, somehow convinced that because Ulla was gay, she wanted to have sex with *every* female.

Therefore, she didn't stray from home unless it was to Curlers'. Until now. Now she had Peter. Peter, *my pappa*, she wanted to introduce him to the prying townsfolk. He would accompany her to the junkyard after school, make her laugh with stories of when she was a girl. Of how she'd once locked a woman in the bathroom at one of his many parties. Of her first birthday: *You're the one who named that porcelain doll, Baby*. *Do you still have it*? She studied the looks Peter gave her mother and her mother's furtive glances at Peter. She'd listen to the hushed erotic moans in the middle of the night and question once again her mother's sordid accusations. The childhood memories and all their comforts were drifting over Ulla like a pleasant fog, shielding her from the ugliness that she'd

endured the past eight months. She had to laugh, thinking of how Linnea had been the one to call Peter. *Maybe I should thank her*.

But while Ulla felt happiness brewing, it appeared opposite for Ronja. Her mother grew fidgety, her teeth always set on edge. And inside Ulla, her mother's old vehement words would knock repeatedly like an unwelcome visitor: *Peter Johansson is a horrible, horrible man.*

Maybe he was. Or had been. Her mother was no saint either, continuing to lie about Peter being her father, and about her past in Sweden. Especially with that suspicious passport. Ulla never bought the story that her existence was the result of some illicit affair her mother had run away from. But people could change. *Couldn't they?*

She grabbed the coffee from the dispenser and met Peter rushing into the emergency room waiting area, his face aghast. Ulla glanced at his unzipped coat and unlaced boots. "Is she okay?" he asked in Swedish.

They walked together and found Ronja resting in a hospital bed. She turned her face toward the two of them. Her hand rested on her stomach.

Ulla watched Peter and her mother exchange a wordless glance that was complicated with a history she'd never understand. Peter hesitantly kissed her mother's forehead and spoke inaudible Swedish to her.

The doctor walked in with a clipboard and said, "Go home and get some rest, Ronja. You're not sick. Just pregnant."

Her mother turned away from Peter and locked her gaze onto Ulla. Ulla couldn't hide her own delight. She was going to be a sister! Her mother, though, didn't smile back. She squeezed her eyes, releasing a tear.

It was well past midnight when Ronja crawled into bed with Ulla and stroked her hair. Ulla had not been sleeping, as if knowing she needed to wait up for her mother.

"*Min lilla älskling*, what are we going to do when you graduate?" Ronja whispered. "You're eighteen. You can go to school and think about more than just working in a junkyard, more than wasting your life in a small town. Go to California like you always wanted. You never needed Linnea. You can do so much."

Hurt, Ulla sat up. "You don't want me around? Not even for my sister or brother?"

Her mother wept silent tears and lodged a hand against her mouth to quiet them.

Contrite, Ulla rested back down and swiped her mother's eyes. "What is happening between you and Peter? Can you *never* be honest with me?"

Ronja worked a muscle in her jaw and steeled her wet eyes. "Peter is a criminal, and I don't want a criminal around my children."

"What if he's here to prove he's changed? Don't you love him?"

The questions froze her mother's face.

Ulla fingered the threads of her blue comforter; the smell of Linnea still lingered after all this time. She wondered aloud, "You can't stop loving someone, can you?"

The pain in her mother's eyes matched Ulla's. "No, all you can do is escape from them."

"So you're leaving him. Again. But what did he do this time?"

"It's not what he's done. I told you, it's who he is."

"Are you asking me to go with you?"

She touched Ulla's cheek. "Are you willing to give up everything? We'll have to start over."

"He's my pappa, though," Ulla protested. "And what about Melia and Shorty?"

Her mother shook her head. "I can't drag them into this mess."

"They were involved before."

"And I promised they wouldn't ever be again. Ulla." She held her face. "I'm leaving. And to protect you, I will *never* tell you where to find me and the baby."

Ulla thought of Peter once more. "I don't understand why you can't make things work with him."

"Someday you will."

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know yet."

She covered her mother's hands and replied, "I lost you once. I wouldn't survive if I lost you again."

Ronja pecked Ulla's nose. "*Okej*," she said lovingly, and then, "I have one more thing to ask of you."

"What is it?"

"Do you remember the Dalahäst I gave you all those years ago, and I told you to keep it hidden for yourself only?"

Ulla flinched, but in the darkness, it didn't seem Ronja noticed. "Make sure Peter never finds it."

She nodded, confused at first, but the ache of Linnea tightened her chest, making it hard to breathe. What did Ulla care about that stupid horse anyway?

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Christmas Eve 1987

Ulla

For the next eight months, life returned to the one Ulla knew as a girl. Her parents, together. Laughing and flirtatious at times, but, what she could not see as a girl, she saw fully as a woman. Her mother was deceptive. She appeared to enjoy and even reciprocate Peter's affections. But alone, Ulla saw her true face, the one steeped in resolve and single-mindedness.

After Ulla had graduated in May, they worked additional hours at Curlers' to save money, and it afforded them plenty of alibis, telling Peter they had to go into the Cities to obtain car parts. When instead, they were filing the paperwork for new passports. When instead, they were walking into a travel agency to buy one-way plane tickets to Stockholm. The departure was the day after Ulla's nineteenth birthday. Her new baby sister or brother would be a few weeks old. "Perfect for traveling," Ronja had said. "All I have to do is nurse them the entire way."

Her mother planned all this with such ease and agility. As if she'd done this before.

Their house currently smelled of spiced cider and evergreens. Last weekend Peter and Ulla had gone to a tree farm and chopped one down. She remembered his ruddy cheeks and laughing smile. He'd been so excited. And with each day that had passed since agreeing to this operation to leave

Peter, she felt as if she were an accomplice to an act of cruelty. It left a steady, crushing grip on her heart.

Who do I believe? She hadn't had the guts to ask Peter about his past crimes. And there seemed to be an unspoken rule that no one was allowed to talk about the past in general. Not unless it pertained to those memories that were innocent, like the soft coat of fresh snowflakes covering the dirty, days-old snow piled on the curbs.

Peter was gone now, working, but said he'd be home to celebrate Christmas Eve. He'd found a job six months ago, a position as a freight and stock laborer in a St. Cloud warehouse. It was still an hour from Mora, but second shift, and he could be home at night to help with the baby. When he'd said this, Ulla flung a look to her mother who stretched her mouth into a warm smile and kissed Peter.

It made Ulla ill. Her mother was growing a human inside of her, while Ulla was growing a lie, each day causing her more discomfort, a shift under her skin, with its own beating heart.

Ulla sat at the kitchen table finishing a letter to Curlers. They were going to deliver a box of homemade German teacakes to her before Peter was due home, and Ulla would sneak the letter inside. She and her mother had sat down with Curlers and explained they were leaving in six weeks. Ulla watched Ronja manufacture tears and describe Peter as a dangerous and abusive man, one they had to escape.

Curlers had tapped her cigarette in the ashtray and covered her mother's hand in solidarity.

Ulla wrote:

December 24th, 1987

Dear Curlers,

Lexie is finished. She's yours if you want. I can't take her where I'm going, and it breaks my heart. It breaks my heart even more to leave you. You've been so good to us. I'll never forget you.

Love,
Ulla

Ulla began to fold the note, but her fingers went numb. All she had to do was cross out the name *Curlers* and replace it with *Peter*. And then she thought of Linnea. This was not how it was supposed to end. It was supposed to end with packed bags in the trunk of Lexie the day they graduated, with their matching John Lennon sunglasses, fighting over the music as they drove off. Madonna for Linnea, John Cougar Mellencamp for Ulla. Linnea, with her dark glossy hair blowing out the window and her fingers woven into Ulla's, would lower the sunglasses and laugh, sail her hand outside the passenger window as they drove west.

Her mother, as if sensing Ulla's grief, stroked her ponytail. She glanced at the note, skimming it, and then said quietly, "*Min lilla älskling*."

"Why do you love cars so much?" Ulla asked. Though she'd asked her mother this countless times, she never tired of the answer.

Ronja rubbed her back and pressed her face into Ulla's neck. "*Oberoende*," she whispered in Swedish. "Freedom," she repeated, but the word sounded as if it were cracked in two. She tapped the note and said, "Be sure to hide that well," and retreated quickly.

Ulla watched her go, watched her walk past the Christmas tree decorated in cheap tinsel. The colored lights often went out, and Peter would spend up to an hour patiently sifting through each light, determined to find the culprit that was ruining it for the entire string.

She felt the heavy pressure build inside her chest, and it finally burst. She scraped the chair back and went after her mother. Ulla found her in the bedroom. Ronja was robotically touching Peter's shirts, lifting the sleeve of one and running it across her face, inhaling. Ulla watched her do this, and she finally cried out, "I don't want to leave him. Neither do you."

Her mother turned her back, shielding her reaction.

"You took me away from him once. When I didn't have a choice, and I'm tired of your stupid, cryptic answers. I want to know everything! Why do you think leaving my father again—"

"He's not your father."

"He is!" Ulla slammed the bedroom door shut. "I refuse to go with you unless you tell me the truth. And don't think I don't know when you're lying to me!"

"What does Peter tell you?" her mother snipped back, facing her. "Ask him! Ask him why he's still in contact with the man who tried to have me killed."

“How—why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to scare you.”

“Peter wouldn’t . . . are you sure?”

There was a sudden pause in her mother’s demeanor, as if she’d contemplated this, too, but then quickly shook her head. She opened her mouth to respond but cocked her head, listening. “What was that?” She rushed to the door, past Ulla, mumbling, “He wasn’t supposed to be home for hours.”

Ulla followed her down the short flight of stairs, crossing the living room to the kitchen.

There he was. His back faced them, still wearing his heavy coat, shoulders slumped, head bent. In one hand was a bottle of Jameson whiskey. His favorite. In the other, Ulla’s letter to Curlers. Peter didn’t acknowledge either of them, just slowly set the whiskey on the table.

Ulla glanced remorsefully at her mother, but her mother kept her eyes away. Her face was masked, serene, and not at all the face of someone about to be caught in nearly a year’s worth of lies.

Ronja went to Peter and wrapped her arms around him, placing a docile kiss on his stubble. “You’re home early,” she cooed, along with Swedish endearments. “Such a wonderful surprise.”

Peter didn’t respond to the touch or the kiss. He set the letter down and ran a palm over his face, wiping his lips.

He stared at Ulla, and she averted her gaze, unable to hide the swell of tears. Her mother picked up the letter, reading it as if for the first time. “You were going to give this to Curlers tonight? Peter, Ulla was going to tell you, she’s moving—”

Peter cut her off. “Ulla, where are you going?”

Her mother continued, “The Cities.”

“I asked Ulla,” Peter said, steadfast.

“Mamma, please,” Ulla pleaded with her. “I can’t.”

Peter shifted to Ronja and placed a tender hand on her round stomach. It was such a fearsome contrast to the growing fire in his eyes. He shook his head, and her mother stepped back, but he gripped her wrist. “Tell me why.”

“Ulla doesn’t want to live in Mora anymore, there are better jobs—”

Peter swiped the whiskey from the table and smashed it against the wall above Ronja’s head.

Ulla stifled a scream. The alcohol stung her nostrils. She focused on the liquid smearing down the wall, joining the littered shards of glass at the baseboard.

The only perturbation in her mother was a subtle widening of her eyes. Peter looked just as collected, as if smashing a full bottle of expensive whiskey was a common occurrence. But then Peter flashed his eyes to Ulla, and she cried harder seeing the hurt in them along with all the memories they'd shared this past year, the first seven years of her life, as if asking whether she found him as disposable as the alcohol soaking the wall and carpet.

He placed that hurt onto her mother. "If this is what I mean to you, Ronja, after all this time, go. But I want that fucking horse. Don't you think we'll be even?"

Her mother remained stoic. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't lie."

"I'm not lying. It's at the bottom of Lake Mälaren."

He slammed a fist into the wall.

She flinched. "I don't have it."

He clawed his fingers up in her hair and brought her forehead to his. "That is *my* child you're carrying."

"You care more about the money," Ronja snarled, yanking herself from him. "You always have. That's what this charade is all about, isn't it? You want the horse because you have some debt you owe the mob?"

Ulla crumpled to the floor. The horse. *Beskyddaren*. "Peter, I know where it is."

Her mother shot warning eyes at her and jerked a headshake.

Ulla watched the tears drip onto her lap. "Will you promise to leave us alone if I give it to you?" she said to Peter.

"Ulla," Ronja spoke quietly, "Ulla, don't—" but she stopped herself when their eyes met, and through a blurry haze she saw her mother capitulate. Ulla cried harder, licked her lips, and mouthed, *Linnea.*

Chapter Sixty

Ulla

Once the shock had left Ronja's eyes at the truth of Beskyddaren, she raised her chin, resuming her icy posture, and instructed Ulla with a determined edge, "All right then, take Peter to Curlers. I'll meet you there with the Dalahäst." To Peter, she said, "We'd planned to visit Curlers this evening before you came home, but it's getting late, and she'll wonder where we are." And then to Ulla, "Curlers will want to see Lexie all finished. All the work you did—*inside*—of it, too." She patted Peter's shoulder but still aimed her words at Ulla, as if she were passing a code, "Hopefully she'll recognize Peter's car because she likes Mercurys. She knows them inside out."

Ulla scoured through the possibilities of what her mother was scheming.

"Go," said Ronja, smiling unscrupulously at Peter. "I'll get you the horse. And if you try to follow us, you know what I'll do."

She'd never seen this look on her mother. Or Peter. Like two people sizing each other up in a battle of wits.

Ronja went for her coat and keys and grabbed the tin of German teacakes as if nothing earth-shattering had just taken place.

Ulla followed Peter with shaky legs and shallow breaths to his car as her mother peeled away in the T-bird. Tina's tires spun on the salt and gravel, and the red taillights turned the street corner. Ulla puzzled over her mother's words: *All the work you did inside of it, too*.

She climbed into Peter's Mercury. And she knew. The passports and airline tickets were hidden inside the Galaxie. Ronja had never wanted Peter to find them in the house. Ulla gripped her knees, struck by the realization of what her mother was trying to pull off. *She wants to escape tonight.*

Peter's face remained impassive, and, even now in the car, he was silent. Ulla stole furtive glances at his square jawline, the thick, blonde tufts that squirted out the sides of his stocking hat. "Peter, why is the horse so important? How do you know about it?"

Peter looked at her with a guarded expression as if thinking through his answer. He finally said, "She stole it from *Livrustkammaren* and ran away to America. She's a hypocrite and a thief. That Dalahäst is worth millions. Probably more than that now. She owes me."

"*Livrustkammaren*?" Ulla repeated.

"The Swedish Royal Armory."

Ulla shook her head and tried to slow the onset of questions pummeling through her, but the shock was rapidly closing her throat, preventing her from asking.

They arrived at the junkyard. The headlights beamed through the chain-link fence onto a young German Shepherd charging toward them, baring her teeth—the replacement for Sugar, who had died the year before. Ulla exited the car and crouched down, hushing the dog. She glanced up when the door to Curlers' mobile home cracked open. She called out in her throaty rasp, "Who's there!"

"It's me, Ulla!"

"Ulla?"

"Sorry we're late!" she hollered back, "I have Peter with me!"

Curlers disappeared inside for a moment and re-emerged with her bare legs stuck into snow boots and a heavy men's coat slung around her thin, nightgown-clad body. Her hair was set in pink sponge rollers. She shuffled through the dirt and snow, cursing. When she arrived at the gate, she peered suspiciously at the Lynx. "Where's your Momma?" She clicked the key in the padlock, her words dissipating into white puffs.

Ulla took a hand out of her mitten and stilled Curlers' fingers, making sure their eyes connected. "She had to run a quick errand but will be here soon. Peter came home early from work."

Curlers squinted her eyes.

Peter exited the car and walked to the fence. “Merry Christmas! Sorry to barge in on you, but I guess the girls were planning on stopping by? Ronja’s meeting us here.”

Curlers passed her gaze between Ulla and Peter. She cranked the lock open and grabbed the dog’s collar who was gnashing furiously. “Lady’ll snap your leg right off if you don’t hurry back into that car.” Peter did as he was told.

Ulla rolled the gate, eyeing Curler struggling with the rowdy German Shepherd, and suddenly she solved her mother’s riddle. *She likes Mercurys. She knows them inside out*. Ulla quickly spoke to Curlers, “Remove his spark plugs the first chance you get while we’re inside. Can we leave the gate open?”

Curlers gave her a succinct nod. “You got it.” With her back hunched over, she latched firmly onto Lady’s collar and hustled herself and the dog into the mobile home.

Ulla got back in. Peter drove the car into the lot and parked it next to a station wagon. He turned off the ignition and reached across the consul to the glove compartment inches from Ulla’s knees. “Excuse me,” he said, opening it.

Ulla leaned back.

Peter reached inside and pulled out a pistol.

Her breath stabbed her. “Wh—what are you doing!”

“Don’t worry, it’s just insurance.” He left the car, stuffed the gun into the waistband of his jeans, and let his coat fall back over to conceal it. He ducked into the open driver’s side and said to Ulla, “Are you coming?”

Chapter Sixty-One

Linnea

Linnea had reached the part in *It's a Wonderful Life* when Clarence the angel appeared. They watched it on the brand new Magnavox with digital buttons that Everett had bought for his mother. A collection of porcelain Santa dolls sat atop, surrounding the VCR, and stared glassy-eyed at Linnea from her seat on the couch next to Everett.

His mother was curled in the Laz-E-boy recliner and on her fifth or sixth glass of sherry.

Linnea hadn't wanted to return to Mora for Christmas Eve. "Can't your mother come to our new house?" she'd asked Everett but knew his answer before he said, "Maybe if you moved a little faster than a snail at unpacking we could." Linnea forgave the insult. His mother was an alcoholic, after all, better for her to be in her own home. It's not as if Everett wanted to come back either, but he was a good son, Linnea told herself, and his sister was overseas. If she and Everett had anything in common, it was the relief that neither would have to explain to the other that alcohol and drugs cloaked their real mothers.

Linnea rested her head on Everett's shoulder and felt their baby shift, as if intent on kicking its way out of the womb. "Feel this." She placed Everett's hand on her belly. He shrugged and stared at the flickering black-and-white movie. "Feel what?"

"He'll start up again. Just wait."

"What makes you think it's a boy?"

“Just do. We could name him after you and then call him by his middle name.”

“And what’s that going to be?” He reached for a handful of peanuts in a ceramic dish on the glass coffee table.

“Taylor.”

He munched a mouthful. “Taylor?”

“Yes, like James Taylor.”

Everett’s mother interjected, “I love James Taylor.”

Everett rolled his eyes at his mom. He kissed Linnea’s head. “If it’s a girl you can still call her Taylor, too. Whatever you want.”

Linnea thought he’d be happy. Or at least make a show of being flattered. But that had been his answer to everything regarding their baby. *Whatever you want*. How could she tell Everett what she really wanted? A college degree, a man remotely excited about having a child. She thought of Ulla. They’d once talked about children. *Do you want them*?

Ulla had adamantly shaken her head, yet replied, “But you’d make a good mom, Lin.”

You’d make a good mom, Lin.

She dragged up the two-week-old memory of Everett coming home at dawn after studying at a classmate’s dorm. An all-nighter for his finals, he’d said. Except he’d left his books on the table.

It had been their first, and last, fight. He denied cheating, but Linnea wasn’t going to bother confronting him about *anything* ever again, and she made sure at her next prenatal appointment to ask the doctor about tying her tubes.

You’d make a good mom, Lin. She wondered if being a *good mom* meant sparing any more children from having an egotistical father.

There was a frantic knocking on the door. Linnea startled. Everett cussed, and his mother nearly tipped over the sherry.

He grumbled to his feet.

The knocking continued, relentless. Linnea followed Everett, both fascinated and frightened at what awaited on the other side. It had to be some awful emergency on a holiday evening.

He opened the door, ushering in the frosted wind. Linnea hugged her arms, her thick sweater still failing to keep it from stinging.

Ronja stood with her coat hung open, clearly distraught. And *clearly* pregnant. Linnea’s eyes drew toward their matching bellies. Ulla’s mother

had always been a paragon of cool, but her face was twisted in panic, and her untamed eyes attacked Linnea with her tears. “Linney, thank God! Oh, thank God you’re here!”

Everett stepped aside but remained at the doorway with a guarded look. His mother’s voice sounded behind them. “Ronja Bergstrom is that you? Goodness, you’re pregnant!”

Ronja ignored them and focused on Linnea. “The horse. I need the horse. The one Ulla gave you. I’m so sorry, but I need it. *Please*.”

Beskyddaren. The memory came to her vivid and real: Ulla’s simple and pure act of love. *He’ll bring us back together.*

Everett’s mother brushed past Linnea, who felt the weight of the earth sucking her under. “Ronja, honey,” his mother said, “why don’t you come in and have a glass with me? A little bit won’t hurt the baby.”

Linnea stuttered, “I—It’s—”

“The Dala horse? It’s gone,” Everett interjected. “Linnea gave it to me.”

“What?” Ronja said weakly.

Linnea cried to Everett, “What did you do?”

“Paid for our *house*?”

“*You sold it*?”

Ronja’s breath came in rampant streams, her eyes flooding with horror. “*How could you?*” She turned and fled, her last words infusing Linnea with the guilt she was certain one day would turn her body against her. Into a cancer.

Linnea railed into Everett as he closed the door. “Get it back! Do something!”

He rolled his eyes as if this were all melodrama, moving his mother along. Linnea searched for the Chevy’s keys. He protested feebly, telling her to stay as she crammed all but her belly into her winter gear. She rubbed her abdomen, not feeling so alone in this endeavor to beg forgiveness.

She waddled into the driver’s seat. The Chevy Blazer was an ice block. The rear window always made a high-pitched rattling whenever the temperature dipped below zero. She revved it, knowing Everett would yell at her for not allowing the engine to warm. Linnea sped to the outskirts of Mora and past the street where her estranged parents still lived. She turned up the road toward Ulla’s unlit house.

Linnea roared into the driveway, slammed the brakes, and shifted into park. With the car still running, she got out and ran to the door, banging on

it. “Ulla! Ronja! Open up, please!”

The longer she knocked, the more the regret intensified. “Please!” she wept to no one. “I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry for everything,” she whispered against the silent, cold glass.

If anyone were to ask Linnea what happened Christmas Eve in 1987, what she’d witnessed when she pulled up to Curlers’ junkyard looking for Ulla and Ronja, it would be told in frames, as clear as photographs placed in an album. One that she would bury in the deepest corner of her mind, that would manifest in her dreams, or appear suddenly whenever she’d see a German Shepherd, a wrecked car, or a mobile home. Even the sight of a chain-link fence could elicit a restrained scream, leaving her body coiled in anguish.

Every year thereafter on this holiest of nights, Linnea would beg God for the forgiveness she did not deserve. She would devote her life to her son. She would teach him to be good to people no matter what. To be everything she was not. She would cling to the worthless hope that someday she would unsee what Peter Johansson did. The man she called upon to end her embittered humiliation.

He stepped out behind Ulla and Ronja as they exited Curlers’ home, and he followed them, shouting, pleading.

He pulled out a gun.

A flash of dark fur streaked toward him and clamped onto his leg. He crashed to the ground.

The single gunshot drowned Linnea’s scream.

It tore through Ronja.

And it ripped apart Ulla’s soul.

Part VIII

From: Isa and Taylor <kingandqueen@gmail.com>

To: Me

November 7th, 2017 3:00 am

Subject: Last email.

The first thing I noticed was your shoes. She's a runner, I remember thinking. And then it was your nose. It's weird, I know. Who looks at their dream-girl, and thinks, Wow she's got a really great nose. Maybe because my schnoz is so big. Hang ups never die! The third thing was my chest and how bad my heart raced. Fuck, she's gonna hear it. I didn't know what to say to you then and I sure as hell didn't yesterday. Both times, whatever it was, truly forgettable.

I'll see you someday with your daughter, maybe she'll be playing soccer, ha. And you'll be cheering in Swedish, and when she scores the winning goal you'll cry, and she'll be embarrassed that you're crying. She'll roll her eyes but secretly love that you love her so much. I love that you cry, Isa. I hope you're not still pinching your skin or digging your nails into your hand to make it stop. I want you to cry all the way home in the car from the game while you sing at the top of your lungs, "Wonderwall." And when you get home, binge on Lucky Charms to celebrate. Just the marshmallows though, right? And when you finally tuck her in at night, you'll say your prayers and make wishes, and they all come true. Because no one deserves it more. Not one fucking person.

Especially not me. I wish our love had been stronger than our mothers' hatred. I wish twelve years was enough time to stop the ache of wanting to kiss someone the way I still want to kiss you.

But, by some miracle, my biggest wish did come true. I didn't ruin your life. You're as perfect as you were that day I first saw you.

Who am I kidding? I'm a selfish asshole. That's not my biggest wish.

Farväl, min kärlek,

T

Chapter Sixty-Two

Mora, Minnesota
November 2017

Analise

It was snowing on Analise's wedding day.

Flurries, the weatherman said on the television that morning, but nothing that would accumulate from the somber sky. The church had a quaint sitting room containing a scarred oak vanity with an attached mirror. Analise sat on a stool fitted with crushed blue velvet. How many brides had been here before, looked in this mirror, and saw an elated face beaming in the reflection? Smiles as bright and hopeful as a perfect spring day in Minnesota. She turned away, unable to admit that her wide eyes, shaded and outlined to magnify their color and shape, could not mask the sadness and hesitation.

There was a knock on the door. It was the fourth knock in the past ten minutes. She kept stalling. Every time she rose to her feet, she couldn't take a single step and would sink back onto the stool, immovable. She imagined the guests murmuring, checking their phones, and craning their necks every minute or so. The pianist was on the same song for the third time.

The door quickly opened, and Dany entered. He'd brought reinforcements: Penelope and Melia. Dany's hair was styled back from his

face. He strode over in his shiny rented shoes, and his eyes glinted with concern as he knelt in front of her.

She smoothed the black lapels of his tux. “You’re not supposed to see me in my dress,” she whispered, not trusting her full voice.

“Truth be told, Ana,” he whispered back, his mouth twitching, “I’d much rather see you without your dress on.”

She chuckled, a bit of tension easing from her, but then Dany turned serious. “My timing is terrible, I know, but sometimes I can’t get my thoughts together when it’s convenient.”

She touched his shaved skin.

He continued, “You asked me what I would do if Sofia suddenly came back into my life.”

“Yes.”

“It would tear me apart. I’m telling you this so you know I understand.” His brown eyes held hers tightly. Eyes full of what Analise loved: his steadfastness, loyalty, and devotion. “But,” he pressed on, “I need you to believe me when I say this—I would still choose you. I would get up every day, and, even though it might kill me to have to see her, I would choose *you*.”

Analise nodded, swallowing her emotions. She looked past him to Melia holding Penelope’s hand. Her daughter’s eyes reflected Analise’s uncertainty.

Dany brushed his knuckles on her cheek. “Sofia was meant for me in a certain time and place. She gave me Julia. How could I not love her the rest of my life?”

His words brought the clarity Analise needed, but she dropped her face, shaking it. “No,” she gasped, shocked at what she was about to do, about to say. “*No*. If Sofia came back, I’d want you to be with her.” She stole a glance at Penelope. “I’d want you to have back what was cruelly taken from you, to have what you desperately prayed for when she was dying.”

“Ana, no—”

“Yes. *Yes*.” She smudged her eyes. “I can’t—I can’t be with you when I can’t stop *thinking* about him. What he lost. What Penny and I lost. I love you too much to lie to you.”

“Mamma?” Penelope spoke up, and Analise saw the conflict etched into her features.

“I’m sorry, Pen,” said Analise. “I know how much you love Julia and Dany.” To Dany she said, “And maybe I’m making the biggest mistake of my life, but I can’t marry you hoping that someday I’ll wake up and stop wondering what it would be like to give my daughter a mom and a dad—together.”

“And we didn’t have that?” he protested, standing. Dany thrust a hand at Penelope. “Have you asked Penny what she wants?”

“She’s *my* daughter, I’ll decide—”

“Plenty of separated families make it work! She’s happy with *us*. You can work out a visitation schedule.”

“Taylor deserves more than that.”

His voice grew agitated. “You couldn’t decide this until just now?”

Melia sternly interrupted, “Dany.”

“What am I supposed to tell everyone,” Dany yelled, “that the bride jilted me at the altar for another man?”

Melia pulled Penelope out of the room and closed the door.

Analise cried, “No! I’m not running into his arms. I just need the time and space to figure this out!” She closed her eyes to shield his pain from her. “I’m sorry. I can tell everyone.” She opened them in time to see Dany yank open the door and walk out of her life. In the hallway stood Penelope wrapped inside Melia. Analise connected eyes with her mercurial daughter, not knowing what to expect. But Penelope rushed over and hugged her neck, saying repeatedly, “*Ingen fara*.” It’s okay. She clung to Penelope, thinking of Ulla. How this day was not meant to happen, not without the one person who still meant the world to her.

Melia entered and crossed to them, slow but agile in her ninth decade of life. She hunched over, placing a firm and loving palm on Analise’s face, thumbing away an errant tear. “Look at me.”

Analise obeyed, captured by Melia’s gaze. Its intensity shined like a clear summer sky, timeless, contrasting with the deep grooves of her porcelain skin and her silver hair. “Am I a horrible person?” Analise asked.

“*Nein*,” Melia negated in harsh German, and her eyes sharpened. “You are brave. Just like your mother. I’ve told you about the day I first met you in the hospital after you were born. You remember?”

Analise grinned faintly. “Yes, of course, you said she wouldn’t let go of me.”

“Not for a single moment.” And yet Melia shook her head, her expression transformed into one of fierce resolution. “It was not your mother that couldn’t let you go.” She touched Analise’s heart. “*Liebchen*, she is your sister.”

Chapter Sixty-Three

Ulla

Ulla cussed loudly in Swedish. She prided herself on solving cars, could assemble one from scraps, and had done so many times. If it didn't start, there was always a solution. The spark wasn't igniting, the pistons weren't oiled, the carburetor didn't have the correct ratio.

Now had to be the time Tina was stumping her? When Ulla, finally, at the eleventh hour was going to crash Analise's wedding, beg forgiveness, and somehow find a way to vomit the horror she carried the past thirty years.

Damn car. Like an enigmatic human that hadn't come with a manual. Ulla emerged from the hood coated in snowflakes and kicked the tire with a closed-mouth scream.

She looked up, and her heart caught in her throat. "How did I not hear you?" she said to Analise. "What are you doing?" The vision of Analise in her gown plucked Ulla's chest, sent pangs reverberating, and loosed her emotions. Penelope was with her, too, dressed in her bridesmaid gown, hair and makeup done. A contrast to the dingy coveralls she'd tossed over her dress to keep it from getting mucked.

Analise's expression was unreadable, and she tightened the faux fur capelet around her shoulders. "I'll never forgive you for keeping Penelope from her father."

Ulla steeled herself.

"But I forgive you for keeping me from mine."

Ulla pressed her fingers to her mouth. Then planted her hands on her hips and nearly doubled over.

"Peter Johansson," Analise said, her face now revealing a deep sympathy, and she sent a backward glance to the Pontiac, where Melia sat in the passenger seat, watching. "She told me everything. He's the one you were really afraid of all this time. The reason you were able to pass off as my mother in the hospital, and change the birth certificate, was because the U.S. Marshal Service helped you do it, and they covered up the murder to keep people from asking questions. No one wanted him to know I survived. They were going to put him away for life."

Peter. His name sent Ulla reeling. "Isa, he *never* would've found us if not for Linnea. I hated her. I needed to get as far away from her as I could, and I didn't care if it meant taking you away from Taylor, but there was Melia and Shorty—" Ulla straightened and turned to the house. Somehow, she saw Ronja step out. "I felt her here the most. Like she could protect us." Ulla faced Analise. "And besides, I was always notified when he was due for parole." She shuddered with grief, trying to contain the sobs, but Analise freed them when she embraced Ulla with a tender force. Ulla caught her breath, walling back the images of Ronja's murder. "When he was released a few years ago, I didn't have the heart to uproot you and Penelope from Dany. But he never came looking for me."

"You didn't have to hold onto this, Mamma, not after all this time," Analise implored. Snowflakes dotted her thick, wet eyelashes.

Ulla remembered calling herself "Mamma." Something she'd seen mothers do with their babies. It was foreign and uncomfortable, but calling Analise, "Isa," was organic. She'd rock her as a baby and imagine Ronja singing along the name of her own baby sister she once spoke of: *Analise, lise, lise, analisa, isa* . . . Ulla felt Penelope touch her back. She unhooked an arm from Analise, bringing her into their embrace and exhaled long and deep.

Two cars slowed on their street and stopped in front of the house. A silver Lexus RX and a black Lincoln Continental. The three of them exchanged befuddled glances.

Taylor exited the Lexus and walked toward them. He was dressed sharp, wearing a fitted wool coat, but for the soccer shoes poking out from the hem of his dress pants.

Ulla's first instinct was anger.

Then Penelope broke free. She ran to him. He stretched his arms wide, but his grin was wider, and his limbs collapsed tight around his daughter.

"What are you doing here?" Penelope questioned him when he let go, and her eyes bounced in fascination between her parents.

Taylor began to explain, "Trying to find Ulla . . . " But when he raised his eyes from Penelope, and they fell onto Analise, any remaining words appeared to fail him.

Penelope frowned. "Ulla?"

"Me?" said Ulla.

Taylor didn't answer. He took Penelope's hand and approached Analise.

Analise clutched the neck of her capelet and met them halfway, her gaze drawing up and down Taylor and their daughter. Their grasped hands. Ulla remembered Penelope's fingers as a baby, imagined how they would have clamped around Taylor's, and he would've smiled just as he was now. She wondered if Analise saw this, too.

Yes. Of course she did.

Taylor seemed to regain composure. "We went to the church first, thinking the wedding was over, but they said it was canceled?"

Analise gently brushed the snowflakes from his shoulders, down his coat lapels. She breathed, "Yes."

With his free hand, the other still holding Penelope's, he laced his fingers through Analise's.

Ulla broke their enchantment. "You were *looking* for me?"

The passenger door of the Lexus opened, and Taylor's gaze leaped from Ulla to Penelope. "Help me with your grandma?" They hastened to the car with him, Analise and Penelope's skirts rustling across the snow-dusted lawn.

Ulla stopped short when she saw the woman inside. Not a day had gone by that there wasn't some whisper of Linnea Larsson that pierced Ulla. Of all the images, Ulla had never pictured this one. A frail woman with a scarf concealing her shaved head. Hairless, penciled brows, and sunken cheeks. But still, those elvish, fairy eyes. Taylor reached for Linnea and gently helped her into his arms.

"Hello, Ulla," Linnea said. "I'm sorry for the intrusion—truly I am, but he couldn't wait one more second to meet you."

“Linney.” Saying her name released a weight she’d thought certain was too heavy to lift. She searched for the hatred in her heart . . . but somehow found none. “What are you doing here? Who wants to meet me?”

Linnea stared at her as if expecting Ulla to answer. As she’d done for so many years. *Give me the words, Ulla*, she seemed to be saying with a sad smile. “Your pappa.” She turned and waved to the Lincoln.

A man stepped out of the driver’s side, appearing to be a chauffeur, or a bodyguard. He opened the back passenger door.

Another man emerged. Much older. His brown loafers were genuine, polished leather, and his tailored, navy suit was in crisp pleats. The rest of his lanky frame appeared. His skin sagged in wrinkles but tightened at the corners of his mouth and spritely blue eyes. He crossed over the grass to Ulla as if he’d done so countless times.

Or perhaps because he’d been waiting to do so nearly his entire life.

Ulla looked down at her greased coveralls and swiped a stray hair from her forehead, self-conscious in the atmosphere of this man’s obvious wealth and power. His eyes took in the sight of Analise and Penelope, but it was clear he was taken with Ulla. In flawless Swedish, he said, “You look as how I always imagined. Right down to the coveralls.” He jammed a hand to his mouth, swallowed, and slowly composed himself. He opened the flap of his suit coat.

From the inner pocket, he removed a small wooden horse.

The man took Ulla’s hand and placed Beskyddaren in her palm. “I’ve been looking for you and your mother in every face for nearly half a century.”

Ulla wiped her tear-stained mouth. “She’s gone.”

“Never,” he said, and curled his hand around Ulla’s, gripping Beskyddaren. He repeated the words her mother had spoken to her from forty years ago: “He did his job well, did he not?”

Part IX

There shall that strife in me disappear:
to be wise and not satisfied,
when I can make it with a calm mind
to smile at the world's joy,
despise the false ornaments of fortune
and flee the blind men.

—Charlotta Nordenflycht, "*Lugnet*," lines 5–10

Chapter Sixty-Four

Mora, Sweden
May 1968

Ronja

Ronja hooked the clasp of her bra and slipped on her panties. She tiptoed across the rough wooden floorboards of the cabin. There was a slight gap in the pale, yellow curtain of the window overlooking Lake Silja. She brushed it aside and peered out. The lake matched the sky, and a hazy light appeared where the sun would eventually peek over the treetops. Across the glassy water, she spotted the white tower of Rattvik Church.

Warm fingertips grazed her bare shoulder. Sparks coursed through her skin and lurched her heart. She cursed and broke into a laugh. "How did you sneak up on me?"

Fredrik kissed her shoulder. "I learned a thing or two in the Navy."

Her body reacted at the sight of him naked, the tanned skin along his generous forearms. He walked backward, taking her with him, and sat on the mussed bed sheets, the springs creaking under his weight. She stood between his legs. "We have to leave." She combed her fingers through his blond hair.

"No, we don't." He grinned, slipping her underwear down her hips. "We can stay at least another day." His blue eyes were impish. He pressed a kiss onto her stomach and whispered, "Ulla."

“What?” she said with a uneasy chuckle. “Ulla? How many mistresses is a duke allowed?”

The playfulness faded from his eyes. “If we have a girl, I want to name her Ulla.”

Ronja’s pulse sprinted. She bit her lip and looked away. Her cycle had skipped a month and was late again. How did he know?

“We’ll get married first?” His marriage proposals while they made love were nothing new, but lately, they’d been delivered in earnest.

Ronja forced a queasy laugh, gently removed his hands from her hips, and slid her underwear up. A mournful shiver ran through her, and she turned away.

Fredrik rose and went to his clothes strewn across the bed and on the floor. They both silently dressed. She pulled on her trousers and boots along with a wool sweater and cargo jacket. Fredrik wore leisure clothes, designed and tailored to his sculpted frame. He’d turned twenty-six this past month, having completed his training in the Swedish Army and the Royal Swedish Navy, commissioned as an officer in both.

Her mind drifted to when they had first met on *Dagen H*, September of 1967. The day Sweden switched to driving on the right side of the road. She was scoping the accidents, rescuing motorists—then pilfering their pockets. People in distress were the easiest to steal from.

Fredrik was not in distress, however, when he’d caught her slipping a wad of kronor from the glove box of his chauffeur's black Saab. “You stole something priceless that day,” he told her when they made love for the first time, when he placed her hand on his heart, and said, “I never want it back.”

The crown prince of Sweden. Of all the people she tried to rob.

He wasn’t even angry; he was amused. It shocked Ronja he hadn’t thrown her in jail, and even more shocked when he let her go, but only after demanding her name first. She couldn’t fathom why she had given him her name—her real name—not one of her aliases.

“Ronja. Ronja Buchholz.”

“Buchholz? Is that German?” His roguish grin widened with intrigue.

“I answered your question. Am I free now?”

He tilted his head and his eyes softened, along with his reply, “One of us is.” He turned to go.

“My father was German,” she blurted. “I was sent to live with my aunt and uncle when I was eight, just outside Stuttgart. My uncle built the first Porsches in Zuffenhausen.” Why divulge such intimate details? Maybe she felt she owed him more truth than simply her birth name. It felt wonderful though. She’d long forgotten how fluid and light the truth could be.

Fredrik said nothing, only tipped his head in a small bow. A farewell.

Or so she thought.

He discovered her address and left cryptic letters inviting her to meet him, which she tossed. At a café two months later in November, the waiter handed her a rose and said it was from the gentleman waiting in the black Saab across the street. She launched the flower in the gutter and marched in the opposite direction. Fredrik finally dropped the keys to a 911L Porsche onto the steps outside her apartment building one frigid morning in January at the turn of the New Year, 1968.

Ronja scrunched her brow and parted her mouth in disbelief. “Where did you get this?”

With his arms crossed in his leather bomber jacket, Fredrik lounged against it with a confident smirk. “I thought I’d take the old-fashioned route. Impress you with a cool, fast car.”

“You want me to steal this so you can officially arrest me?” she asked, and then added, “I’m with someone, you know.”

“Is he better than a prince?”

Instead of being offended by his arrogance, she found it charming. “You know nothing about me,” she argued, though her smile betrayed her.

“Are you sure about that?” He cocked his brow. “You’re resourceful, clever—”

“I’m a thief,” she said.

“No one’s perfect.”

“One drive.” She snatched the key off the ground. “And this better not be a setup.”

She drove him all the way to Mora.

“You’re kidnapping me,” he said.

“You look terrified.” She pushed the car to its limits, rapidly shifting gears, crossing lines, jetting past cars. Memories flashed of her Uncle Shorty dissecting this beauty of a machine when he allowed her to drive an early model. She’d been twelve.

“Kidnapping royalty is much more serious than pick-pocketing and auto theft,” he said. “You’re going to have to serve at least ten years. Maybe even a life sentence.”

He rented a cabin under one of his own aliases. They made love, and she never expected to see him again, convincing her saturated heart it was simply a one-time affair, that he’d gotten what he wanted. Fredrik had other plans, it seemed.

“Ronja,” he said to her now with dawn pouring inside the room.

She tied her thick, blonde curls into a topknot and faced his adoring eyes. What was he even thinking, offering her a future together?

The fantasy stung.

Fredrik went to his satchel by the door and reached inside. He pulled out a figurine of a wooden horse, painted in brilliant vermillion, varnished to a glowing shine, and studded with diamonds. She gasped. “It’s the most beautiful Dalahäst I’ve ever seen.”

“My father says it’s a relic from *Fälttåget mot Norge*. It’s been in the royal family for over a hundred years. Apparently, it was part of the peace treaty between Sweden and Norway. Christian Frederik had to abdicate his throne—*and*—return this horse that had been held captive after the collapse of the Swedish Empire.”

She covered her emotion with a tease. “All those years of history in boarding school—you’re quite the expert.” She frowned. “Shouldn’t this be locked up somewhere?”

“I was granted special permission.” He came close to her.

“I don’t want it,” she said, flattening her expression and stepping back.

“Do you want to know why it’s worth so much?”

She shook her head, continuing to retreat as he narrowed their distance. His mouth was upon hers when he said, “Because of its magic. It will always give you what your heart wants.”

Ronja concealed her longing with doubt. “Who wouldn’t know what their heart wants?”

Fredrik caught her eyes. “You.”

She laughed to further stall the tears, turning away. “What a lovely fairy tale.”

He caught her hand, unfurled it, and rested the horse into her palm. “Keep it,” he whispered and placed a lingering kiss on her cheek.

Ronja kissed him on the mouth, exiling the reality of what awaited her in Stockholm. She held the Dalahäst fiercely, tightened her grip on Fredrik, and drank him in. “Let’s never leave this place,” she begged. “We can stay here the rest of our lives.”

Fredrik’s embrace was solid and strong. “I’ll plant a garden.”

“I can add a bedroom to this cabin,” she said.

“For Ulla.”

She chuckled into his skin. He knew. Somehow, he knew. “Yes. For Ulla.”

They drove back to Stockholm, the sun chasing them. With the windows of the 1964 green-gold Porsche rolled down, swaths of Ronja’s tresses escaped and whipped across her face. Fredrik dozed in the passenger seat with a lazy smile.

She focused on the road, having taken the longer route, the one that hugged the lakes and forests, allowing her the thrill of speeding around the turns while thwarting time. Ronja slid a hand across her stomach that held an uncertain future. She thought of her long-lost parents and siblings. Her father, a German who’d been wounded in the Second World War, met her mother during his *permittent-tåg*, when Sweden allowed passage of wounded German soldiers, and he had stayed. But his wounds extended to his head. Charming and handsome, he had a nasty temper and debilitating headaches, preventing him from working and leaving her mother with long factory hours that never brought enough money.

Ronja stole food in the market, and when her father discovered this, he beat her. But unable to care for the children, he sent them to live with relatives. Her brothers were shipped west to the North Sea with maternal relatives, and Ronja went to Germany with her father’s youngest sister, Amelia. Ronja’s baby sister, Analise, was the only one who stayed, and years later when Ronja returned at eighteen, she searched for them only to find her former home a pile of ashes.

“Tell me about your godparents,” Fredrik had once asked Ronja, as they lay spent and naked inside the Porsche on a March evening.

Ronja rested her cheek on his bare chest, his heartbeat pulsed into her when she said, “I called her Melia, and my uncle Arthur went by the name

Shorty."

"Why is that?"

"He had an accident in the factory. His pointer finger was smashed when the lift for the chassis malfunctioned. They had to amputate it."

"Why not return to Germany?" he'd asked her when she told him of her missing family.

Because of Peter. But Ronja had only shrugged, not willing to confess the details to Fredrik then. The truth about Peter would come later.

Chapter Sixty-Five

STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN

Ronja

It was drizzling when Ronja and Fredrik arrived in Stockholm from Mora. The wipers on the Porsche squelched lazily. The weather matched Ronja's insides, as if the rain was disintegrating her heart.

She left the car running on the busy, narrow street. Saabs, Beetles, and VW buses splashed by. Fredrik took her knapsack and slung it on his shoulder. They hurried to the awning under her apartment of the Södermalm borough. He tugged her into him and kissed her. She tasted the rainwater on his mouth, savoring it, but time was running out. Ronja jerked free and cried, "I can't." She took the knapsack, rooted inside for the Dalahäst, and clutched his wrist. "Take it."

Fredrik refused, keeping his hand clenched, and with the other, he cupped her chin calmly, as if he'd been prepared for this moment. "Look at me—"

"I've been conning you this entire time. I *wanted* you to give this to me so that I could turn around and sell it for a fortune. Because that's what I do, that is who I am!"

"No." His face, normally serene and youthful, looked hurt, but not by her words. She knew he didn't believe her any more than she did. He

framed her cheeks with his hands as she pleaded, “You think catching me trying to steal from you was a coincidence? That I wasn’t baiting you?”

“Does it *matter*? Even if that were true, you think I wasn’t a willing victim?”

She shook her head. “I’d ruin the reputation of an entire country. And Peter—”

“I can protect you from Peter.”

“No, you can’t.”

He buried her face into his body. She memorized the scent of his cologne, the way he held her. “I’m not taking the horse,” he said, his voice shaking.

She smudged her face into his sweater and mumbled, “Because then you can finally arrest me for stealing when the authorities come looking for it?” Ronja felt the vibrations of his sad chuckle against her cheek. “That’s one way to hold onto you,” he said. Fredrik released her and captured her eyes, causing fresh tears to sprout, releasing all the images she couldn’t bear to see eventually come to pass: his picture in the periodicals, the television, watching his royal wedding someday, a perfect bride at his side with her untainted soul. Fredrik stroked her hair. “Meet me at the steps on the eastern façade of *det Kungliga slottet* at midnight. Leave it all behind. We’ll start new. The *three* of us.”

She wiped her face.

“I’ll wait till dawn,” he promised.

When she arrived inside their apartment, Peter was waiting. He sat on the corner of the couch, one knee crossed casually over the other. His suit pants were taut against his leg muscles. His black tie was loosened. In his hand, he dangled a glass of single malt whiskey.

“Get dressed,” he said as if his throat was constricted, without glancing in her direction. “The reservation was at eight forty-five.”

Ronja stared at the horse resting in her palm. “I did it. It’s over.”

The small figurine commanded their attention. “Is that from him?” Peter rose to his feet and went to her. He touched the jewels on the horse. “It’s magnificent,” he breathed. She closed her fingers around it, opened her

knapsack, and placed it inside. “It belongs in *Livrustkammaren*,” she whispered. “We’ll never have to con another day in our lives.”

Peter tipped her chin up to meet his eyes. Could he see she’d been crying? Ronja mentally tightened her costume, the one she’d put on the day she’d returned from her first rendezvous with Fredrik five months ago. When Ronja had told Peter everything, he’d chuckled in admiration. “Conning the royal family? You dream big, Ronja.” His face had split into a wide smile, one that faltered when Ronja said she was done sleeping with him, but he agreed. They’d done it before, abstained from one another during a long heist, fusing into their characters. That didn’t stop him from threading his fingers through her hair and kissing her languorously. “What’s the end game?” he’d asked.

“When he gives me his heart. Or something more valuable.”

“You’re cruel.” Peter had searched her eyes back then, just as he was now.

And Ronja held her ground back then, just as she was now.

Because if she looked away, he’d know that she’d broken the first rule of con artistry.

She’d fallen in love.

Peter was tense, fidgeting, and his eyes were a tempest as they hurried to the dinner party. His touch chilled her more than the post-rain air as they walked on the cobblestone street, past blocks of stuccoed homes toward the restaurant in Gamla Stan. The waters surrounding the city crested from winds that thrashed through the narrow streets. Ronja hugged the fur stole around her shoulders and gripped her clutch. It was an act of balance and skill in her black stilettos, relieved once entering Den Gyldene Freden.

Tonight would be the last night she’d ever see Peter again. She thought back to all those years ago, when he’d whisked her from her perch aboard the *Finnlines* vessel on her way from Germany, in her quest to find her family. “I mistook you for an angel,” he said. She rolled her eyes, but it was impossible not to be smitten with his golden skin and hair, his square jaw, and blue-green eyes. She would have easily lost interest in his outer appearance, but there was more to him—intelligent conversations, dreams

to travel the world, and riches to make. This dinner party was no doubt a seed of his latest inception.

Inside the restaurant, she was enveloped by warmth. Golden tones rippled across the ceiling, and well-loved oak flooring was underfoot. The ambiance was accompanied by the muted gaiety of conversations and clinking dinnerware, white tablecloths and flickering candles. They were led into one of the intimate rooms, a gathering of men and women in dressy attire. From the corner, a string quartet serenaded them.

"You haven't told me what this evening is for," she said, surprised. Typically, he gave her at least an hour, if not a day, to memorize her new persona.

He glanced at her with sincere eyes. "Because it's not for fun this time."

For fun. Peter's code for finding their next target. The last time she'd attended an event *for fun* had been a Christmas gala at Moderna Museet, the night she began plotting how to leave Peter, right before she surrendered to Fredrik's pursuit of her. Peter always found his way into these high-society soirées. A forged invitation here. A smooth lie there. But that morning before the gala, Ronja had read in the newspaper about a business tycoon found dead in his home. The article didn't say it, but she suspected he'd killed himself.

Because he'd lost his trust fund to a couple of scam artists.

She imagined the man's family spending Christmas without him. Peter had dragged her heavy limbs to and from each guest at the art museum, his irritation increasing with her lack of enthusiasm. Afterward, at home, she could barely undress, the guilt was an albatross. He removed his suit coat, took off his cufflinks, and unbuttoned his shirt.

"I can't do this anymore," she'd said, unmoving. "Don't we have enough money now—to lead honest lives?"

Peter frowned. "Not one person we took money from lives an honest life." He stuck his hands in his pockets and regarded her pensively. His jaw ticked. "What are you going to do? Leave?"

"You don't need me," she whispered.

He crossed to her at once, took her face into his hands, and drilled his eyes into hers before claiming her mouth. Peter always found a way to dissolve her doubts and hesitation. Either with his touch, his words, or his restraint. She feared he knew her better than she did herself.

After they made love, Ronja had watched him fall asleep, and she touched his face, kissed his closed eyes that quivered from a dream. And she knew. The only way she could ever leave Peter was to escape from him.

Now inside the restaurant, Peter pressed a hand on Ronja's back and prodded her toward two couples at one of the tables. He said in her ear, "I want you to enjoy yourself. No games tonight. We're Peter and Ronja."

She shot him a subtle, suspicious glance, before turning to greet the couples. Based upon the thinning hairlines of the men and cropped bouffants of the women, they were older than Ronja and Peter by several decades. The men sprang from their chairs, greeting Ronja first and then introducing their wives. Ronja played her part with dainty handshakes, a tilt of her chin, and a pat of her long bouncy hair.

Peter removed her stole, swept her hair aside, and kissed the spot below her ear, the sensitive one that always weakened her. He handed the stole to the host who also offered to take Ronja's clutch, but she kept it tight against her body. It held her travel documents and the American passport she'd stolen from a tourist months ago, doctored with her own photograph, and painstakingly altered with the name and birthdate:

Sarah Ann Thomason, April 4th, 1928.

But most importantly, her clutch held the Dalahäst from Fredrik. Tonight, when Peter was asleep, she plotted to slip out at dawn, withdraw from the bank the money she'd been skimming from him, and flee to the airport.

But Fredrik's words kept pushing her heart, marching away her plans: *We'll start new.* Ronja touched her stomach. *The three of us.* How could she do this to him?

She eyed the men and listened to the women's chatter, her mind twisting. For once, Peter wasn't telling lies. Not exactly. Were they interviewing him for a job? His eyes peered at her over the lip of the tumbler holding his Scottish whiskey. *This isn't for fun*. But she was always his dazzling prop. He was the grifter. *No one would ever believe a face as beautiful as yours capable of a lie*, he always said.

He had no scripted lines for her tonight.

What are you doing, Peter?

Ronja flitted her eyes to the windows. They were dark, reflecting only the candlelight. Peter and the other guests carried on in deep conversation through the wine and spirits, the various courses of greens, appetizers, and the main course of salmon. She pushed her food around the plate, nodding along, inserting soft peals of laughter.

With every passing minute, she dared to take a tentative step into Fredrik's fairy tale. *Meet me at midnight.* But she was not *Ashenputtel* as her aunt Amelia had read to her in German. She was not a humble and pious Cinderella.

She merely sipped her favorite chardonnay, rather than down the glass, and Peter slid his hand on her thigh from underneath the table. "Are you feeling all right?" he said. "After this, I want to take you somewhere, *min lilla fågel*."

My bird. She remembered the first time Peter called her that. Two summers ago, they lay naked atop a yacht on Lake Mälaren. It was loaned to them that weekend by the couple they'd manipulated with their scheme of fake plans to create a string of luxury hotels. The next day she and Peter would be gone. The yacht would later be sold to rectify an empty bank account. "Tell me about your past, Peter, the real you," she'd said. Peter looked at her for a moment, and she saw a door open, a glimmer of his true self, before he slammed it shut. A breeze fluttered his hair. "The past doesn't tell you who I am."

She propped herself up on an elbow to cradle her head. "Then what does?"

Peter slipped his fingers through her long hair. "*Min lilla fågel*," he whispered, his eyes adoring her, "this moment does. You and I right now are a king and queen, making love on our yacht. This is who we are."

Peter now slid his chair from the table and set the napkin on it. "I'll be right back."

Ronja watched him approach the string quartet. He gestured over to her.

One of the men at her table leaned across and said in a low tone meant only for her, "Peter's a lucky man."

She pressed her lips into a smile and checked to see if anyone else had noticed the comment. "You'll have to forgive me for missing the details, but tell me again what your company sells?"

He smirked and leaned forward even further. “Don’t worry your pretty head with boring stuff.”

Ronja released her high-pitched laugh, the one she reserved for sexist remarks, and winked at him. “Such good advice.”

Peter returned to his seat and kissed her cheek. “Miss me?”

She settled her eyes onto his before they skirted around the room. The music, the shiny smiles, the glittery jewels, and the fine clothing. The quartet paused and then started a new song. The chords grabbed hold of Ronja. *Musetta’s Waltz*. She closed her eyes in sorrow. *Oh, Peter.* Peter had taken her to *La Bohème* last year at the Royal Swedish Opera House. Not for any reason other than *because I want to*.

He offered her his hand. She glanced around apprehensively, shaking her head.

“Please,” he said, his face tense with an insecurity she’d never seen before.

Ronja set her clutch on the table and accepted. He led her toward the quartet. Their steps were imperceptible as they swayed. He tucked their linked hands into his chest. She felt his breath on her cheek; it seeped inside of her.

It was 11:15 when Ronja excused herself to the restroom with the clutch secure in her possession. She cupped a hand over her mouth and stumbled through the dining area to the nearest lavatory. Once inside the small room, she emptied her meager stomach contents into the toilet. The taste was foul and acidic, and it burned her throat. She wiped her lips. Someone knocked on the door. “*En minut*,” she called out lightly and then lowered her face, gathering her courage.

At last, Ronja lifted her eyes to the mirror, in search of bravery in the reflection.

Chapter Sixty-Six

Ronja

Ronja abandoned her constricting heels. She secured them inside one hand, and in the other was her clutch. She skipped asking the host at the restaurant for her stole. No time to waste or call attention to her escape. She barely noticed the cold pavement, still wet from the rain earlier. The skies were cloudy and the wind wrestled her hair. The adrenaline that pumped through Ronja's blood warmed her skin.

It was less than a half-mile to Stockholm's palace. She would be early. Her heart bled out hope.

She sprinted down a cobblestone roadway, past the patios of outdoor cafés and the high-pitched, inebriated chatter of people lingering outside. Perhaps if they saw her, they'd wonder if she were being chased, upset, maybe even confused and lost.

Ronja cut through an alleyway, remnants of rainwater trickled down the concrete gutters, and it widened to a bigger pedestrian street where large windows displayed clothing and more outdoor cafés with sparse guests.

Finally, *Kungliga slottet* shone ahead when the street opened near the outer courtyard. Its lights burned to the heavens, a testament to its majesty. It was imposing not by its height, though it was grand, but how the ancient baroque architecture sprawled in the middle of a bustling city that overlooked the waterfront. As if everything else surrounding it were meant to be its accessories.

She mounted its steps on the eastern waterfront. The wind jostled the water, which lapped against the ships and boats. She turned and looked out upon her city of islands clustered together, an archipelago connected by bridges and lights. Ronja slunk down upon the highest step. She looked to the ships and said the prayer Melia taught her. "*Engel kommen sie, machen mich fromm, so das ich zu sie im himmel macht kommen*."

Make me pure.

Ronja opened her clutch and took out the Dalahäst. She rested it in her palm and offered it to the night sky. It grew into a magnificent creature, a horse that could whisk her away to magical lands, protect her from past iniquities, and of course, grant her heart's deepest wish.

She lowered it, kissed it, and set it on the steps.

Her love affair with a crown prince was beautiful as long as it remained in the confines of secret apartments, remote cabins, and inside a Porsche. As long as it remained safe inside her memories. Ronja placed a hand over her stomach. Over the possibility of their love lasting a lifetime.

She tucked the clutch deep inside her dress and left. Down each step, the weight of her decision grew. At the bottom, she turned back. The horse was now only a speck, but no less imposing as she bid farewell. "*Hej, då*." Ronja blew one last kiss and slipped into her high heels.

Her sobs came in painful waves. She ran blindly, needing to outrun this aching sadness.

"Ronja!"

She'd made it as far as the Norrbro Bridge when she heard her name. The Royal Swedish Opera house hovered in the near distance.

Her tears halted. She wiped them dry and backed away.

Peter closed the gap between them. She'd never seen his face this wild as he approached. It was chapped from his sprinting against the heavy winds. His eyes were stripped bare. Ronja continued retreating, the stone railing trapped her, and she gripped the cold ledge. His hot breath lunged at her.

She wanted to ask how he found her. But she knew. There, in his hand, was the Dalahäst. Ronja sprang for it. "Peter, no!"

He held it out of reach. "You think you're good enough for a *prince*?"

"Give it to me!"

"So you can betray me?"

"I would never betray you," she said, her voice low and controlled.

“What are you doing now, then?”

She turned brusquely.

Peter wrenched her arm and spun her to face him. “We need each other. There is never going to be anyone for me but you. I’m done with cons. I swear it. That’s what tonight was about. A steady job. A life together.”

She stared hard at him. What she saw in his eyes was anger, yes, but also the stinging fear at realizing the person you love was ending it. This couldn’t be love, could it? No, it had to be another one of his cons.

“Then prove it,” she said. “Put the horse back where it belongs.”

Peter searched her eyes, and in the split moment he released his guard, Ronja snatched the horse from his hand. He was fast though and dug his fingers into her flesh. She rammed her spiked heel into his foot.

Peter released her with a curse of agony and struck her cheek. Ronja stumbled, snagging her heel, and she tripped. Her head cracked against the stone railing. She lay on the damp ground disoriented, hearing the churn of the water below. Her eyes narrowed on the Dalahäst limp in her hand. Ronja tightened her fist around it with all her strength, feeling every edge and jewel embed into her skin.

His anguished cries hovered about, floating. Gruff and prying hands raked through her hair. She struggled to her feet and the world tilted. Peter’s horrified face blurred. He reached for her again, begging her name.

She seized her only chance. Ronja rolled herself over the ledge of the bridge. The swirling blackness rushed to meet her.

Acknowledgments

This book is a love letter to all the things that shaped me.

Minnesota has deep Scandinavian roots, and I hope I have honored all the Swedes who call it home, even though my own roots are German. I tucked little Easter eggs throughout these pages for my mother and my late grandmother, who gave me *kneophla,* caramel rolls, my *Engel Kommen* prayer, and tales of my brave great-grandmother Amelia, connecting me to another homeland.

To my dad, who hated cars but knew them inside and out from growing up and working on his family's salvage yard. Some of my happiest childhood memories were exploring the endless mountains of wrecked cars in search of adventure. The family rule was simple: *If you could start it, you could own it.*

This novel would not exist without my FIKA Writing Group. Chrissy, Jaimie, Jodi, Jamillah, Natalie, and Megan. I am forever grateful for our evenings at Keys Bakery, for your friendship, unwavering encouragement, expertise, and years of thoughtful, honest feedback.

To my editor, Jodi McLain, your insight, time, patience, and brilliance made this book shine. You are one of my most favorite humans, and I thank my lucky stars for you.

Jet, your artistic genius and expertise is unmatched.

A heartfelt thanks to my teachers, Kathleen Melin, Peter Geye, and The Loft Literary Center for developing me as a writer and for creating places where writers and artists in Minnesota and Wisconsin can learn, grow, and belong.

Jami J., my kindred spirit, thank you for your unwavering support from afar and for reading my books over the years with such care and kindness.

Stephanie V., thank you for being one of my dearest friends and my most trusted reader.

To the Wisconsin book group—Annie, Kate, Michelle, and Nicole, thank you for your time and for being keen readers in the final stages of this

book.

To Liz, thank you for helping make the Swedish translations authentic, and Julia, for your generosity in providing Stockholm photography.

To Bethany H., for sharing your knowledge of Swedish culture and for enriching this story with countless thoughtful details. More than that, you are the kind of writer I aspire to become.

Jessika G., you are my most glamorous writing bestie and never-ending well of love and support. Thank you for always reading, always cheering, always validating the journey, and never hesitating to say yes to a last-minute writing retreat. #Vegas!

John, my dreamy Southern California soccer star, I write love stories because of you. Thank you for always being my muse, my first reader, my best critic, and my "*Number One Fan!"*

And finally, to Adrienne, Eloise, Charlie, and Josie. You are everything to me, the very best part of my story.

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Becca is a Minnesotan whose journey has taken her from the Midwest to California, Mexico, New York City, and back again. She now lives in Minneapolis, where she practices as a pediatric psychiatrist and co-manages the wonderfully busy lives of her four children with her partner. Her creative nonfiction has appeared in *Intima*, *Pulse*, *Evening Street*, and *Months to Years*. She is also the creator of *Your Next Draft*, a digital publication and community dedicated to personal growth and the stories that shape us. When she isn't writing, or drinking far too much coffee, you'll likely find her running through Minnesota's seasons or paddleboarding one of the city's many lakes.



Stories don’t have to end at the final page. Follow my journey @beccabaisch and visit beccabaisch.com to subscribe to *Your Next Draft*. Beyond future book updates, you will receive monthly encouragement, interviews, deep questions, and creative insights designed for women who are committed to continuous personal growth.