



AGNES
RAVATN

SEVEN
DOORS

From the author of the award
winning THE BIRD TRIBUNAL.

Agnes Ravatn

The Seven Doors

Novel, 2019

Translated from the Norwegian
by Rosie Hedger

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Translation supported by NORLA

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Sunday 18th November

Berg slinks along the walls, just as the two surveyors had done the week before, as Nina pours coffee into the pot and finds a bowl for the dark chocolate.

Yes, Berg says eventually with the silky-smooth confidence that comes with a degree in law, click-clacking her way over to join Nina.

It'll demand a pretty penny, this.

She is wearing a tight, black suit and a cream blouse. Even in high heels, Nina towers head and shoulders above her.

I'd have preferred to keep the house, Nina replies, sounding more sombre than she had expected.

I can understand that, Berg replies. How long have you lived here?

It's my childhood home, Nina says, placing another log on the fire. We moved in when my daughter was born. That was thirty-five years ago now.

So many memories... Berg says, head cocked to one side reassuringly, while Nina's melancholy or genuine sorrow at losing the house gives way to irritation at Berg's fondness for uttering incomplete sentences.

She glances at the clock.

He'll be here soon, she says, but Berg gestures for her to relax. Nina snips a few withered leaves from the pots along the windowsill as she gazes out of the window.

Yes, this is a very particular case, this, the lawyer says, and Nina turns around.

A member of the local council being called upon to demolish their own house, I mean.

Mads was obviously prohibited from having any say in the case, Nina says, but yes.

They hear the front door open, and shortly afterwards he gallops up the stairs with Milja on his back. He comes to an abrupt halt when he catches sight of the lawyer.

Oh, it's you, he says, clearing his throat. He slides Milja down onto the floor and offers the lawyer an outstretched hand.

Mads Glaser, he says. It's very good of you to come out here on a Sunday.

I've been to Gingerbread Land, Milja announces proudly. Her plump cheeks are bright red. Berg smiles back ingratiatingly.

Yes, our grandchild is visiting us today, Nina says. But I'm sure we can pacify her with a little television. She nods at Mads, who ushers Milja into the next room.

Nina and Berg each pull out a chair at the dining table. Mads' grey-black hair goes curly when wet. He pulls off his woolly jumper and smooths his shirt before joining them.

Berg pulls a thick wad of documents out of her bag and places a pair of spectacles on her nose, spectacles that Nina intuitively suspects are just for show.

She leafs through her papers with well-manicured mother-of-pearl nails, then looks up at them.

A brief introduction to the legal side of compulsory acquisition, perhaps?

Yes, please, Nina replies, but Mads interrupts her.

No, he says, that's not necessary. As I said on the phone, we're prepared to accept a settlement out of court.

OK? Berg says, looking at Nina, who nods reluctantly.

Berg begins outlining matters, moving rather rapidly as she walks Nina and Mads through their rights now that a final decision has been made about the proposed road, which is set to traverse their living room.

Nina listens, her forehead slightly furrowed, demonstrating that she is following what is being said in spite of the many legal terms involved. She exchanges discreet glances with Mads, who rolls his eyes in a barely noticeable manner before getting up.

Coffee? he says, breaking Berg off mid-flow. He picks up the coffee pot, standing to her left and pouring her a cup, as if he were a waiter.

We can also ask that the council cover any moving costs, Berg continues. We can even demand that they cover the costs of things like new curtains, for instance, if the old ones won't fit in the new house. It all depends just how far they're willing to go.

Not all that far, I should think, wouldn't you say? Mads says, scratching his temple.

Will we receive any help in finding somewhere else? Nina asks, or will we be paid a sum of money and have to find something by ourselves?

Berg laughs initially, as if the question had been asked in jest, but quickly realises that Nina is quite serious.

You'll have to find something yourselves, yes, she replies with a quiet cough. And I'd start looking now, if I were you.

Good God, we'll spend every weekend traipsing around viewings and worrying about bidding rounds, Nina says to Mads, clearly not pleased at the news.

It's a toss-up between Haukeland and Nygårdshøyden, then, Mads says, rock paper scissors, come on, he says, raising a fist in Nina's direction. Which of us will be rewarded with the shortest commute?

You won't be standing for re-election? Berg asks.

He shrugs.

I never thought I'd hear myself say it, but I've started to miss all those blocked sinuses. When it comes to actually making a difference in people's lives, I can safely say that working in the ear, nose and throat department beats the local council, hands down.

Oh dear, the lament of the district health board rep, Nina says. But which of us has longer left to work? I'll only be attending presentations within a 100-metre radius of the faculty of humanities.

Well, it's just a case of starting to look, even if the demolition itself is a good way off. As you know, Berg adds, looking at Mads, I think we can secure a good deal if we make it clear that we're willing to move quickly.

Nina feels slightly queasy when she hears the word 'demolition', she brings her napkin to her mouth and coughs quietly.

When it comes to this house, I might even go so far as to say that the challenge will be finding something good enough, Berg says. If you're hoping for something equal in terms of standard and style, that is.

Hear hear, Mads replies.

That's if you don't make things straightforward for yourselves and move into the house on Birkeveien, the lawyer remarks.

Mads looks at Nina quizzically, who in turn looks at Berg.

You could avoid the search for a new house entirely that way, and you could simply invest the money you receive, she says.

Out of the question, Nina says firmly. A renovation project from, gosh, when were they built?

The 1950s, at the latest, Mads says. No, that's not a valid alternative for us.

Berg removes her spectacles. She brings her hands together with her fingertips touching as if she were some kind of mastermind, resting her elbows on the table as she leans in towards her clients.

Very well. Shall we make a plan that ensures the best possible result? she asks, and Nina nods bravely.

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They stand at the living room window and watch the black Audi, which Berg manoeuvres back and forth at a snail's pace for at least a minute before finally managing to turn it around.

It's surreal, the entire affair, Nina sighs as the car slips away down the hill in the early afternoon dusk. She catches sight of her own reflection, her eyes two dark spheres, the rain trickling down.

Yes, he says, his hand stroking her shoulder-length dark hair.

Is it just me, or have you been wearing black more often than not these days? he asks, removing a hair from her dress.

This is my first major life crisis, she replies. I need to mark it in some way.

He steps back and sits at the piano stool. He rests his hands on the keys and begins to play Couperin's 'Les Barricades Mystérieuses' at a slow tempo.

Stop! a voice shouts from the television room.

Thirty-five years, Nina says. Don't you feel even a little sentimental about it all?

He smiles downheartedly.

I've done all that I can do, he says, his eyes on the music. It wasn't to be.

I know, she sighs.

Now we just have to make the best of things. And secure a somewhat respectable settlement, at the very least.

She stands in silence. Gazes out at the allotment over the road. She'll miss it in the springtime. She pulls out a chair and take a seat.

Birkeveien, she says suddenly, turning to face him. Who's renting it from us at the moment?

A young single mother, he says without pausing his playing. She's been there for a few years now.

Don't you think we ought to get rid of the place at the same time?

What makes you say that? he asks.

I don't know, she says with a shrug. For simplicity's sake.

It might be a nice option for Ingeborg and the others in due course, he says.

So my childhood home doesn't matter but your aunt's old abode...

He lifts his hands from the keys and rubs his palms against his trouser legs. Looks at her.

I know, she says. I know. You did everything you could.

Jo says renting the place out is a good idea.

Jo, the housing market expert, she replies sardonically.

She walks over and sits down at the dining room table, takes a few crackers along with some cheese and fruit and puts it on a plate.

Strange, she says. I don't remember Aunt Lena's funeral.

Not that strange, really, given that you weren't there.

I wasn't?

She died when you went on that research trip to Copenhagen.

Milja bounds into the room and clambers up onto her grandad's lap. Here comes Pippi Longstocking, Mads sings, and pretends to play an accordion as Milja hits the piano keys at random.

What time did we say we'd drop off this sproglet? he asks.

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Milja holds Mads' hand and stares at one of the prehistoric-looking crocodiles, bewitched, as Ingeborg makes her way downstairs. The crocodile stands stock still in the water behind the thick glass and returns Milja's stare with a stiff, vacant expression.

Mummy! Milja cries with delight, letting go of her grandad. Ingeborg crouches down and accepts her bounding embrace.

Mummy, I saw a shark, Milja says with a grave expression, and Ingeborg raises her eyebrows appreciatively.

Grandad will show you the monkeys, she says, getting up, giving her father a meaningful look. Granny and I are going to have a chat in the café.

Mads looks at Nina quizzically as she is ushered upstairs by their daughter, she shrugs in response, looking puzzled.

They take a seat at the table in the furthest corner of the half-empty café.

Ingeborg drapes her grey wool coat over the back of her chair but keeps her scarf on, which has been wrapped around her neck using some intricate method.

Nina retrieves her purse and stands up.

What do you fancy?

Golden milk, Ingeborg replies.

Pardon me?

Ingeborg looks at her mother with resignation.

Soya milk with turmeric? she says.

Ingeborg, it's a hot dog stand. You'll be lucky to get a cup of tea.

Ice water, then.

Daughters are their own special breed, Nina thinks to herself as she queues to pay. She glances discreetly over at Ingeborg, who is absorbed in staring at her mobile phone as penguins waddle around in the background.

She ponders the Electra complex, Carl Jung's proposed female version of the Oedipus complex, in which young daughters fantasise about killing their mothers in order to fully possess their fathers. Freud never acknowledged the Electra complex as a genuine phenomenon, but she herself had thought about it on numerous occasions and wondered if Jung might have been onto something.

So, what did you want to talk to me about? Nina asks gently once she's returned to the table.

Ingeborg opens her mouth to reply, but her lips contort themselves before she manages to utter a word.

Nina furrows her brow as her daughter struggles to compose herself and assume a normal expression.

It is only now that she notices the dark circles under her daughter's eyes. Her hair has been scraped into a chaotic bun at the nape of her neck, and her shoulders are high and pointed.

We've got silverfish, she eventually says, her voice thick with emotion.

Silverfish? Nina repeats, doing her best not to laugh. My God, I thought you were ill!

Ingeborg stares at her mother in disbelief.

We've been up all night, she says. Eirik is hysterical.

But they're not doing you any harm, am I right?

There are people at the house as I speak, Ingeborg says, resigned. We managed to find somebody who was willing to come out at the weekend.

Everyone gets bugs of some sort every once in a while, though.

Silverfish! her daughter repeats shrilly.

So that was why we had Milja today, Nina replies cheerfully. You were on the hunt for pests.

We'll have to sell up, Ingeborg whispers, subtly looking around the room.

It's the sort of thing you'd be obliged to inform any buyer about,' Nina begins, but she is quickly hushed.

We need something bigger anyway, Ingeborg says. She rests her head in her hands and massages her temples.

The whole lot of us will be homeless before too long, Nina says.

We're a room short, Ingeborg says, glancing up at her mother.

Is that right?

Hint, hint, Ingeborg says.

Hint, hint?

Ingeborg sighs loudly.

You might be a professor of literature but you're oblivious to anything else, it seems!

Nina looks at her daughter with astonishment before she puts two and two together.

Six weeks, Ingeborg says. I'm exhausted every minute of the day.

But Ingeborg! Nina says, hugging her daughter across the table. That's fantastic!

Thanks, her daughter says feebly, looking up at her mother with tired eyes.

We have to tell your father, Nina says, craning her neck to see if she can see him outside.

I thought we might wait a bit, Ingeborg says. I wanted to see if you might be able to... talk him round a bit.

About what, exactly?

An advance on our inheritance, Ingeborg whispers, almost without making a single sound as she mouths the words.

Listen, Nina says, patting her hand gently. Do you remember Aunt Lena?

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Monday 19th November

Towards the end of the day she receives a message from Ingeborg. She's clocking off at 3pm, she writes. Could they take a look at the house on Birkeveien before nursery pick-up?

She glances outside. It's dry for once, the sun low in the sky. A walk would do her good.

She hasn't been there for years now, and can't remember the house number. She calls Mads, but there's no answer. She searches the street name in her email inbox and finds one result, an email she was copied into between Mads and their financial advisor four years ago. Birkeveien 61.

She finds the house on a map using her phone and vaguely recalls visiting Aunt Lena many years ago now, an attractive Bergen lady with a walking frame who lived in a house filled with steep staircases.

Ingeborg waits for her outside the hospital building, slim and gangly. She waves cheerfully when she catches sight of her mum and walks over to meet her just as an air ambulance lands on the helipad behind her.

How are you doing? Nina asks as her daughter bats the question away, excited at the prospect of a terrace house in Landås.

The fact that Ingeborg chose medicine, just like her father, had surprised Nina at the time, who hadn't ever felt that her daughter belonged in a job that required warmth and empathy. All the same, she was pleased that her daughter had chosen such a practical career

path. What is the point in all of this? she had often wondered as she had watched her students graduate, only for them to drift around in vague careers that spanned the culture and education sectors for unforeseeable periods of time.

Nina has pulled the map up on her phone and leads the way along Idrettsveien and Gimleveien, past Brann Stadium, until they eventually reach Birkeveien. They pass two nursery schools and one supermarket en route to their destination. There's something uncomfortably eager about Ingeborg, prowling like a cat, rosy-cheeked, loudly broadcasting everything that enters her head.

Cynical children, Nina thinks to herself, it's my punishment for something or other that I've done wrong in my parenting. But what?

I think we're here, Nina says eventually, stopping. She looks from the phone to the house number. Ingeborg lets out a gasp.

And what a house it is too, she whispers.

They're standing outside a small, ochre yellow semi-detached house, split vertically across three floors, red tiles on the roof and a front garden concealed behind a dense beech hedge of crisp, brown leaves.

Fourteen minutes and twenty-seven seconds, Ingeborg says excitedly, looking up from her watch. And with two nurseries en route. Mum...

She looks at her mother pleadingly.

It's ideal, certainly, Nina says.

And I do love the colour, Ingeborg says, her gaze lovingly fixed on the façade.

But we need to speak to your father first, Nina says, lifting a hand to curtail Ingeborg's excitement.

Ingeborg is halfway through the gate, and Nina realises that it's pointless trying to stop her.

A woman's bicycle with a child's seat on the back has been left leaning up against the wall beside the front door. There's no name plate to be seen. The gravel rustles as if she were wearing horseshoes as Ingeborg hurries to the corner of the house to get an idea of the what the back garden is like.

It's nice here? she says loudly, seeking her mother's validation.

It's family-friendly, in any case, Nina says, bringing a finger to her lips to hush her daughter in her excitement.

There's a light on upstairs, Ingeborg says, and before Nina can stop her, she's pressed the doorbell.

But Ingeborg... she says.

What? Ingeborg says, looking somewhat aggressive.

Someone lives here.

Yes. In our house.

She must be at work, Nina says. It's only quarter past three.

But I heard something.

I didn't hear anything, Nina says.

They stand there for a few moments. Nina can tell from the frosty mist that Ingeborg is breathing quickly.

We can hardly go barging in unannounced anyway, she says.

Ingeborg leans forwards and presses the doorbell again, holding it an extra-long time. Nina turns to walk back out onto the street, as well as to mark a distance to Ingeborg's persistence.

We can call or write, she says. Then come back in a few days' time. There's no great rush, after all.

Her daughter looks at her beseechingly.

Eirik booked an agent this morning. We're selling up as soon as we can, do you know how quickly a colony of silverfish multiplies?

In that same instant, someone opened the front door tentatively.

Ingeborg span around where she stood on the gravel.

A young woman gazed back through the gap in the door. Behind her was a serious-looking little boy, dark-eyed and dark-haired just like his mother.

I've seen you before, Nina thinks as she locks eyes with the woman, but she can't quite place her.

The woman looks at her unanticipated guests expectantly.

Peekaboo! Ingeborg says, an excited expression on her face as she peers at the boy, who clings to his mother's burgundy wool jumper.

The woman looks from Ingeborg to Nina and back to Ingeborg again.

Yes? she says.

Ingeborg Wisløff Glaser, she says. We're the owners of the house.

Ingeborg, Nina whispers.

The woman at the door furrows her brow.

This is my mother, Ingeborg says, nodding in Nina's direction as her mother takes a step back.

Hi there, she says in as friendly a tone as she can muster. It wasn't our intention to barge in, she begins, but she is interrupted by Ingeborg.

Could we have a little look around the house? she says.

The woman looks at Ingeborg with a puzzled expression.

Oh, Ingeborg says, turning to her mother. She doesn't speak Norwegian.

Excuse us, Ingeborg says emphatically, starting again, *we are the landlords*.

Yes, the woman says, I can understand you.

Ingeborg, you're making this sound like a razzia, Nina says under her breath.

Ingeborg gives her mother a confused look before turning back around to face the woman at the door.

I'm a specialist at Haukeland University Hospital, she says smugly, so this area is right up our street. We've got a little girl, she's three, she's going to be a big sister soon, so we're going to need all the play space we can get.

Nina shakes her head inwardly as she observes her daughter with growing discomfort. She might as well be donning a pith helmet, whip in hand.

The woman stands in the doorway, stiff and silent. The boy whimpers, his mother picks him up and places him on one hip, he clings to her, rubbing his nose against her neck.

Obviously you'll have a few months' notice, Ingeborg says impatiently. But before we terminate the contract, I'd love to see what it looks like inside.

If it's not convenient then we can come back another time, Nina interjects, with what she hopes is a warm, apologetic smile.

It's not really a good time, the woman in the doorway says.

Just a quick peek? Ingeborg says.

I'm sorry, she says, shaking her head.

How many bedrooms are there, can I ask? Ingeborg says.

The woman thinks about whether she should answer the question or not.

Three, she says eventually, and Ingeborg looks starry-eyed.

Ingeborg, Nina says, then turns to the woman: I'm sorry that we've disturbed you like this. We'll get in touch and arrange a time.

Does it have a fireplace? Ingeborg asks as Nina tugs at her coat sleeve to lead her away.

Please, the woman says, comforting her son.

I can assure you, Ingeborg continues unaffected, we really don't mind if it's messy.

Eventually it is as if the woman surrenders. She hesitates for a moment, then steps aside reluctantly. Ingeborg steps in, unabashed, and follows the woman inside and upstairs without removing her winter boots.

Nina sighs silently and walks in after them, up the narrow staircase, recognising the psychedelic red cyclamen wallpaper. She has a vague memory of having visited once, many years ago, probably when Ingeborg was a baby. Aunt Lena had visited them numerous times, but very rarely returned the invitation.

She thinks hard about where she might have seen the woman before as they reach the living room. The boy sits down on the floor beside a pirate ship.

It's like being in a museum, Ingeborg says. How long have you lived here?

Just over three years, the woman replies.

And you've never felt the need to change anything? Ingeborg says, gesturing towards the room. Impressive.

I'm not all that interested in interiors, the woman replies curtly.

Is it alright if I have a little look around? Ingeborg asks, and she nods.

Nina stands in the middle of the room, uncertain, while the woman looks down.

I didn't properly introduce myself downstairs, Nina Wisløff, she says, offering the woman an outstretched hand.

Mari.

Things are silent for a moment as Ingeborg rushes back and forth from one room to the next with her coat flapping behind her.

Have we met? Nina asks after a short while.

I don't think so.

She might be a little younger than Ingeborg, but older than most of her students.

No?

The furniture in the living room is just as she remembers it. Old-fashioned, Norwegian armchairs, a teak dining table, a narrow, threadbare old sofa. The bookshelves belonged to Aunt Lena, but the old encyclopaedias and book club novels from the 1970s are gone. Nina lets her eyes wander over the spines of the books that now fill the shelves, she sees works of poetry, philosophy, a surprising number of German titles, more contemporary fiction. Parenting books. A large collection of LPs. A record player has been placed on a table of its own over by the window.

The young woman's gaze follows Ingeborg as humming can be heard from the corner where the toys are kept.

How old is he? Nina asks.

He just turned three.

A lovely age, Nina says. I have a three-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter myself.

The woman says nothing. Nina stands there smiling, glancing in the direction of the kitchen. It's an original, untouched since the 1950s. Beside the kitchen table is a Tripp Trapp highchair and an ordinary kitchen chair. On the table is a pile of books, a stack of paper, a laptop, and three small, black notebooks. She's a student, Nina thinks.

Ingeborg comes downstairs, having been up to see the small attic space.

Do you remember what it says in your contract? she asks. How many months' notice you're entitled to?

No, I...

How quickly could you move out, do you think?

The woman looks at her quizzically.

We've got a bit of a situation on our hands, you see. Maybe we could pay you a little something if you managed to pack up in, say...

Ingeborg, Nina interrupts sharply.

But, the woman says, we don't have anywhere... my little boy Ask, he goes to nursery just along the road, we...

This is a decision for your father and I, not for you, Nina tells her daughter in a tentatively authoritative tone.

But Mum, Ingeborg moans, before turning back to the woman.

Five thousand?

I'm sorry we've disturbed you, Nina says. There's no need for you to see us out.

Ten thousand? Ingeborg says, as her mother nudges her downstairs.

The door slams shut behind them, and Nina tugs at Ingeborg until they are back out on the pavement.

Goodness, she was odd, Ingeborg says, prising herself free from her mother's grasp.

She was odd? Nina says. You were like a member of the gestapo in there, ready to deport her and take over the property!

It's just the hormones, Ingeborg says. Nesting, you've probably forgotten what it's like.

Nina says nothing, seething with shame at her daughter's behaviour and frantically trying to put her finger on where she had seen the woman before. If she happens to work at the university, the whole thing will be a catastrophe.

I'll come back with you to talk to Dad, Ingeborg says. *He* understands the need for haste.

I'll be the one who talks to your father, Nina says sharply.

He doesn't listen to you, her daughter replies.

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Mads is looking serene at the piano as they come upstairs.

And when exactly did you transform into a pair of torpedoes, hmm? he asks the two of them. Milja is about to give her grandad a hug but stops in her tracks when she hears his tone and hovers in the middle of the room, uncertain.

Nina makes her way into the kitchen with the food shopping without glancing over at him whilst Ingeborg, who is less sensitive to the nuances in his mood, heads in her direction and asks him the *exact* size of the house on Birkeveien.

Sit down, he says, nodding at the table.

Ingeborg pulls an iPad out of her handbag, which she passes to Milja before obediently taking a seat.

Nina emerges from the kitchen and sits down without a word.

Mads gets up from the piano stool and sits opposite them.

Firstly, he says dangerously quietly, if I don't pick up the phone on the first attempt, try again. Hm? Rather than charging ahead at full speed.

Ingeborg opens her mouth to object, but Nina kicks her under the table.

Secondly, he says, looking directly at his wife: What on earth were you thinking, taking this rapacious individual to Lena's house?

If you'd just let me explain... Nina says, but he lifts a palm and she seals her lips.

She said you were persistent and aggressive, Mads says to Ingeborg.

Who? Ingeborg asks.

Who? Mads repeats, chuckling under his breath. The poor woman you practically assaulted! The one who's been living in Aunt Lena's house for three years without making a single late rent payment.

Ingeborg, Nina says quietly, nodding at her. Tell him...

Mads looks at Ingeborg inquisitorially.

We've got silverfish, Ingeborg says gravely.

Nina shakes her head, resigned.

My God, Mads says, gawping and leaning back in his chair, rolling his eyes, who *hasn't!*

Not that, Nina says, the other thing.

He looks impatiently at his daughter and back again at his wife.

That I'm pregnant? Ingeborg asks.

Mads opens his mouth, stops, his eyes flickering back and forth between his wife and his daughter.

Is that true?

Yes, Nina says, staring insistently at Ingeborg waiting for her to validate the fact.

Mads leans over the table.

Is that *true*? he says, smiling, bashful, looking down. He leaps up, walks around the table, wraps his arms around her and shakes her, she starts laughing. Milja looks up from the screen, curious.

How far gone? How is it all going? he says, letting her go. He takes hold of her shoulders and looks her in the eye, stroking her hair.

I should have known, he says. Who glows like this in November, of all months?

Nina exhales with relief as Ingeborg regales her father with tales of her fatigue.

Birkeveien would be perfect for you all, Mads says. There are three bedrooms, you know, and plenty of space.

It's just a shame there's someone already living there, Nina says, interrupting.

He turns to face her.

Not anymore.

She looks at him quizzically.

Thanks to you, he says strictly, and Ingeborg looks at them hesitantly.

She asked to be released from her contract, he says. Clearly she'd rather live on the streets than risk running into you two again.

What? Ingeborg whispers, wide-eyed. She looks at her mother triumphantly, as if everything that had happened on Birkeveien had gone precisely to plan.

When I decided to hold onto the house rather than selling it, it was with you in mind, Mads says. And your family.

He breaks out in a smile.

Is it all in the bag? Ingeborg asks, looking to her father and then to her mother. Her eyes are no longer gleaming with shame at being scolded by her parents, but twinkling with desire.

We'll let you know when it's ready for moving into, he says. In the meantime, you can put the flat on Skuteviken up for sale. Make sure you get the silverfish to smile in the pictures.

He gets up.

Dad, please tell me you're not joking, Ingeborg squeals after her father, who is making his way out of the kitchen.

He returns with a chilled bottled of champagne and two glasses.

Nobody's driving today, are they? he asks.

But I can't drink, Ingeborg objects.

All the more for us, then, he says, cracking open the bottle with a pop.

Monday 26 November

The first half of the day consisted of a hair-raising strategy seminar at the university, a humiliating three-hour long session of groupwork, where they were supposed to brainstorm suggestions for improving the quality of their research.

When lunchtime eventually came around, she sneaked away and walked to the university library to pick up a book she'd reserved.

She bumps into a retired colleague she was always fond of by the entrance to the café and sits down with her. They immediately begin exchanging horror stories about past strategy seminars, and by the time she finally manages to tear herself away, the second part of the seminar is well underway.

She decides to skip the remainder, buys herself the soup of the day and finds a sheltered table where she can leaf through a newspaper.

She skim-reads the editorial and comments on page three, browsing the news section disinterestedly.

When she reaches page eight, she goes cold.

She recognises her immediately. It's the tenant from Birkeveien. She has longer hair in the picture, and she's smiling. But it's her.

She's gone missing.

Her name is Mari Nilsen. She's 30 years old.

She reads the short piece three times without drawing breath, her reading interspersed with fleeting recollections of the way she and Ingeborg had recklessly barged in just a week ago.

And now she's missing.

Nina brings a hand to her throat; it feels as if everyone can see her arteries fit to explode beneath her paper-thin skin.

Mari Nilsen has been missing since last Thursday. Three days after the unexpected visit. She had been visiting her parents on the islands of Tornøy. She had gone for a walk, but had never returned. The police have no leads.

She's from Tornøy, Nina thinks to herself, that must be why she seemed so familiar, perhaps they'd seen her when they'd been at their cabin in Oldervik, maybe she worked at the supermarket in the summer holidays, or at the weekends.

One theory is that she returned to Bergen, she reads, but there have been no sightings of her on buses or ferries.

The police are appealing to the public for leads.

But what about her son, Nina thinks to herself, where is he?

She picks up the phone and searches her name; women and girls of all ages appear, but none of them are her.

She glances up to check that nobody is watching her. She searches her name and 'Bergen', then 'Tornøy', and that narrows the search slightly, but nothing relevant appears.

She searches her name in the phone book online, adding the address on Birkeveien. No Mari Nilsen appears, she's not registered at the address.

A growing sense of unease takes hold, or worse than that, perhaps: guilt.

She should really contact the police and tell them about – tell them about what, exactly? About the two unpleasant intruders who had called at the woman's door three days before she was last seen?

She leaves the library, her gaze falters, she cuts across the square diagonally as she calls Mads. He doesn't pick up, and shortly afterwards she receives a text: In a meeting, anything urgent?

She enters the Faculty of Humanities building and goes up to her office, where she sits at her computer and continues her search. She turns up a long list of hits, but none of the Mari Nilsens she finds are the right one, not even on social media, not one Facebook profile is a match.

As she prepares to type her name into the work email system, she feels her pulse begin to race. The idea that she and Ingeborg might have shown their true colours in the company of a junior colleague or a former student makes her stomach churn. She is relieved when her search comes to nothing.

Her entire existence feels almost like a dream, though Nina knows all too well that she only just met her.

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She is on her way into the bathroom when Mads arrives home. It's half past eleven. He lugs his heavy work bag up the stairs and across the room and collapses on the sofa in his suit with a sigh.

Aren't you going to bed? she asks.

I think I need to sit up for a while, he says.

Can I get you anything? A drink, maybe?

He shakes his head before changing his mind. Do we have any beer in? he asks.

She goes into the kitchen and opens a bottle, handing it to him.

What a hopeless day, he says, pushing his spectacles up onto his head. My God.

She sits down diagonally opposite him.

I've tried calling you.

I'm sorry, he says with a sigh. I saw that. It's been non-stop all day, I visited the women's refuge, attended a seminar on welfare technology and then held a presentation on patient safety and user satisfaction, and that was just before lunch!

Have you seen the paper today?

Yes? he says. Actually, have I? I'm not sure, he says.

Did you see the picture of Mari Nilsen?

He looks up at her quizzically.

Who?

Mari Nilsen, our tenant, there was a picture of her in today's paper.

Oh, really?

She's... Nina begins, and her voice starts to shake. He looks up at her. She's missing, she says, and her voice cracks.

He furrows his brow and looks at her, puzzled.

Missing?

She nods.

As in...?

Gone. She's disappeared.

What in God's name... he says, sitting bolt upright. What happened?

I don't know, she says.

But what did it say?

Hardly anything, she says. She was visiting her parents on Tornøy last Thursday. She was supposed to be out for a walk, and then...

Was she from Tornøy? he asks.

I thought there was something familiar about her, she says, nodding. Maybe she worked in the shop.

Silence falls between them. Mads shakes his head. Nina observes him furtively, feels a sense of unease surge through her.

How did you end up in contact with her?

He looks at her.

It was Jo who knew about her. Well, a colleague of his, that is.

How long had she been renting from us?

Three or four years, Mads says, trying to work it out.

Was she a single mother?

That was my understanding, he says, taking a sip of his beer.

It can't have been anything to do with us, Nina says quietly.

What?

The fact she's gone missing all of a sudden? Ingeborg and I turning up at her door, I mean?

Nina, come on, Mads says, surely you're not worrying about that?

It was the very definition of an eviction.

Hardly.

But you know what Ingeborg can be like. She was awful, to be perfectly honest with you. If there's some sort of mental illness at play, our visit might have tipped her over the edge...

He says nothing.

The police haven't been in touch with you?

The police?

It would be perfectly natural under the circumstances.

Perhaps, Mads says. But hardly very useful. I've barely spoken to her. The rent has rolled into my bank account every month.

It looks like Ingeborg and Eirik will have to brace themselves to shack up with their silverfish for a little while longer, Nina says. A fitting punishment, you might say.

Why?

This Mari has to be found before she can move out! she says.

But she already *has* moved out, he says.

What? Nina replies, pale-faced.

I received a message on Wednesday saying the keys were on the kitchen table. I let myself in with the spare on Wednesday evening, and the place was empty.

But how could she have moved out in two days? After living there for three years?

Don't ask me, Mads says. Aunt Lena's furniture and things are still there, obviously.

Don't you think the police might be interested in looking at the house, to be on the safe side?

Well, yes, he says. That's probably a good idea. I'll call them first thing in the morning.

And maybe don't mention the way Ingeborg and I... she suggests, trailing off. There's no point in involving us any more than is necessary.

*

She should go to sleep, really, and Mads is breathing heavily beside her, but she can't put her phone down. She updates her search over and over again, checking every news outlet, but nothing new about the disappearance emerges.

She goes over their confrontation again and again in her mind's eye, looking for details, anything that might shed some light on what has happened.

She wakes in the middle of the night, possibly due to Mads' snoring, but possibly as a result of her dream about machines preparing to tear down the house while she and Mads are sitting at the dinner table, a bulldozer suddenly crashing in through the kitchen cupboard.

Her eyes open instantly, and then all of a sudden it hits her.

She grabs her phone and types it into the search bar.

It's her.

That's it.

Several images shine brightly on the screen.

Nina can hear her own heart beating.

Mari Bull.

She begins scrolling through the endless list of results, there are numerous photos of various kinds, with and without her violin, some action shots of her with the orchestra, a number of portraits, a record cover showing Mari Bull alone in a field of rapeseed. The results are mostly from Norway and Germany, concert write-ups, the odd interview.

It's her.

And she's been living in Aunt Lena's dusty house crammed full of furniture.

Nina turns to Mads. He's in a deep sleep. She couldn't wake him over this. She does it anyway. She elbows him in the side twice and he grunts and turns to face her, opening his eyes, looking for answers.

Mari Bull, she says.

Huh?

It's Mari Bull.

He looks at her, confused.

What are you talking about?

Mari Nilsen is Mari Bull.

He sits up halfway, open-mouthed as he looks at her.

Damn, he says slowly.

I'm right, aren't I?

You are, he says as it dawns on him too. We've seen her before.

Yes, in Grieg Hall, she says.

The Brahms violin concerto? he says. I thought there was something familiar about her...

Me too.

What happened to her? he says.

That's exactly what we don't know! Nina says.

No, I mean: where did she disappear to?

That's exactly the point, she says, vexed.

Not like that, Mads said. She was such a gifted performer.

Yes, she says.

But then she went quiet, he says.

Yes. And now she's disappeared all over again.

*

Tuesday 27 November

She stands in a haze of steam and smoke, frying meatballs and simmering spaghetti while Milja amuses herself at the kitchen table with her painting things. Ingeborg and Eirik are meeting with their agent to plan the sale.

She has taped a thick, textured sheet of card onto newspaper, dampening it carefully and patiently showing Milja how to dip the paintbrush in water and then in the watercolour paints to create a beautiful, flowing play of colours on the sheet of paper.

It took her granddaughter less than ten seconds to scrape the paintbrush so hard against the paper that it fell apart before mixing all the colours in the paint box together and taking great slurps of the filthy paintbrush water.

They didn't find anything of interest, Mads says, appearing at the door out of the blue.

Who? she says. What?

The police. They've gone through the entire house, he says, putting his bag down on the floor.

He places the keys on the kitchen worktop in front of her.

So it's ready for Ingeborg and the gang?

That's what they said, Mads says, hugging Milja.

So, what have you been painting, he says, sitting down. Your hands?

Milja sticks the paintbrush in the glass of water, then in the red paint, and finally into her mouth as she giggles cheekily.

Yuck, Mads says, ruffling her hair. Last one to set the table smells!

Saturday 8 December

How did it go at Grieg Hall the day before yesterday, by the way? Mads asks, following her up the creaking staircase into the attic.

She shrugs.

Let's just say that it wasn't exactly an operatic performance. There were just two people standing there, singing.

No castles? No doors and keys? Mads says, feigning shock on her behalf.

It's not exactly easy to get into the story when the whole thing is in Czech, funnily enough, she grumbles.

Hungarian, Mads says, correcting her. And you *are* allowed to read up on it in advance of going, you know.

Well, Nina says, I decided to read up afterwards instead.

Oh?

She glances discreetly down at the main floor of the house, then leans in towards her husband. She lowers her voice.

I met Niklas Bull, she says under her breath. The ex-husband.

Yes, you said.

And he told me that Bluebeard's castle was intended as a *nod* to Mari Nilsen...!

Mads casts a quizzical look in her direction.

Ok?

You know the opera?

Not on a plot level, no, Mads says.

No, OK. Well, it's not exactly a typical declaration of love. Perhaps that's what he was getting at. Or perhaps the idea was to scare her.

To scare her? Mads says.

Given that we know she's actually *gone missing*, Nina says, peering inside the bathroom. Alas, no bathtub.

A bathtub isn't a must for me, Mads says.

They make their way down the slightly crooked stairs once again and step into the largest bedroom. The bed has been beautifully made, with elegant rosettes on the ceiling above.

But tell me, Mads says, how does the story go?

Well, she says, sitting on the edge of the bed. There's Judith, that's her name, who has left her entire family, all in tears, to join hostile Bluebeard in his castle. In the darkness she can make out seven doors. Judith insists on letting light into the castle, whilst Bluebeard tries to insinuate that his castle is shrouded in darkness with good reason.

Mads sits down beside her.

The atmosphere between them is uncomfortable, to put it mildly, Nina continues. Judith reassures Bluebeard that she loves him, regardless of the secrets concealed behind those seven doors. Eventually, if not reluctantly, he hands over the key to the first door. The room behind it is revealed to be a blood-stained torture chamber.

Oh dear, Mads says.

Yes, certainly not a good sign. But on the other hand, a duke is within his rights to have a torture chamber.

Well, yes, in a sense.

But there still isn't enough light in the castle for Judith, so she is granted permission to open the second door. Behind it she finds a blood-spattered weapon store.

Aha.

Behind the third door is a storehouse of riches, and Judith is very taken by his many assets, even though she discovers all of his gold to be spattered with blood.

He doesn't seem too worried about hygiene, this Bluebeard, Mads says.

Nina stands up and walks over to the window.

We're looking right in on the neighbours from here, Nina says.

That goes both ways, Mads says.

They leave the bedroom and step into the main room, where they sit at the dining table as the others viewing the house pass by in a hum of conversation.

Behind the fourth door, Judith find a secret garden – incredibly beautiful, but also blood-soaked. Every lily and rose is speckled with it. Now Judith, finally somewhat suspicious, asks whose blood was shed in order that his garden should be watered.

And Bluebeard tells her...?

'Love me, ask no questions!'

This nod to Mari Nilsen is getting stranger by the minute.

The next door, let me think, Nina says, thinking for a moment. Oh yes, it's a window facing out onto Bluebeard's kingdom. They both look out over a beautiful landscape.

But?

Well, unfortunately clouds cast blood-red shadows across his kingdom, she says, waving an arm in the direction of the window.

Is everything alright here? a voice asks, and both Mads and Nina jump.

We're just admiring the view, Nina tells the agent.

I'm starting to see a pattern here, Mads says.

Yes, but behind the sixth door is a beautiful little indoor lake. What's this mysterious water? Judith asks him.

Let me guess, Mads says. Could it be blood?

Actually no, Nina says. It's tears.

Ah.

And at this point Bluebeard insists that the seventh door should remain locked forevermore.

But Judith doesn't agree to this, I imagine, Mads says, getting up.

Finally Judith has had enough, she accuses him of doing away with his first wives and watering his garden with their blood.

Judith the Master Detective! Mads says.

'All those rumours about you!' Judith shouts at him indignantly, 'They were all true!'

That's rumours for you, Mads says. Plus, it's a bad sign when someone has already been married a few too many times.

Ugh, Nina says, entering the kitchen. That's where us women always fall short, you know. Mimetic desire.

Mimetic what now?

We want what other women have. Gosh, has he really had *seven* wives? we think to ourselves. This Bluebeard must be quite the man!

They each perch on a bar stool.

Anyway. Judith is given the seventh key, Nina continues. Now it's Bluebeard who asks her to open the door. And just like that, what do they find themselves looking at? His first three wives, very much *alive*.

Oh? Mads says, genuinely surprised.

But whether they've got any life to speak of is another story. They stand there on show, on some sort of podium, draped in beautiful flowing robes, balancing heavy crowns on

their heads to the very best of their abilities. Bluebeard kneels out of respect and praises each of them one-by-one. And poor Judith...

Yes?

Judith grows jealous. My God, she says, looking up at them: I'm *nothing* compared to these women.

You women really need to stop comparing yourselves with one another, Mads says. We like you just as you are.

Now Bluebeard sets to work dressing Judith up in the same fancy robes and hanging enormous jewels around her neck as Judith begs him to stop. He places an enormous crown on her head as Judith weeps, no, no, she says, it's far too heavy! But there is nothing to be done other than to hold her balance there, up on the podium, suffering in unbearable luxury alongside his other wives.

And that's that?

That's that.

Hmm, Mads says, gazing into thin air with an expression of wonder on his face. Hardly surprising that Mari Nilsen legged it, I'd say.

He doesn't seem quite right, no.

But do you really believe that he might have something to do with her disappearance? Mads asks.

She shakes her head, no idea. She married quite young, Nina says. He must be ten years her senior. He obviously had the upper hand. She admired him, a renowned conductor, and she was a talented young woman, she felt chosen by him. And then she goes and falls pregnant by another man.

It's a form of rebellion, Mads says.

He falls silent.

I think the police should hear about all this, he says eventually.

All what? she says.

This. The betrayal, the deception, Bluebeard.

She cocks her head to one side.

I have my doubts about quite how much they'd consider a Bartók opera to be a red-hot lead, Nina says.

This is precisely why they need more literary types in the police force! Mads says.

Are you being serious?

Maybe you should have been in touch with them before now. If you're lucky, you'll run into the right investigator.

I'm sure the child's father must live here, she says. It was so resolute, the way she moved here when she was pregnant.

You don't think she was just trying to get away from Niklas Bull? Mads asks.

Or her parents, Nina says.

The agent glides into the kitchen in his shiny, well-polished shoes.

Lots of room for cooking up a storm in here, he says to Nina with an inviting smile, waving a hand across the kitchen as he speaks.

Nina? Mads says with a snort. That'll be me, I think you'll find.

The agent chuckles hesitantly and falls silent.

When was the house built? Nina asks, trying to be nice.

1750, he chirps, and launches into detail about the very particular engravings on the bannisters.

Dreaming of a career as a museum director now, are we? Mads whispers.

Friday 21 December

The room is empty and unrecognisable, every sound has a different ring to it; her voice when she speaks to Ingeborg on the phone has a harsh, metallic clang.

She's packed a few boxes and suitcases of essentials to take with them wherever they end up in the new year. The rest is in storage. They'll probably rent a flat while they wait to move into a new house. Berg tried to persuade the council to cover a week's stay in a hotel, but sadly to no avail.

She stands in her study with a stack of empty cardboard boxes and a roll of bin bags to hand, determined not to take anything with her to her new life that really ought to have been disposed of before now. She's not a sentimental person, so why haul a heap of cold memories along for the ride? she asks herself as she flicks through the stack of papers and folders containing anthologies and reading materials that she's carefully held onto since her days at university, most of which had lain untouched and unread for over thirty years. She forces herself to dispose of things with confidence.

Before too long the shelves stand empty, the drawers free from papers. The desk is due to be moved into storage as part of the last car load. She leaves the bin bags in the room; the council have agreed to provide skips and extra pairs of hands to help clear the house of anything they don't want to keep.

In a moment of decluttering intoxication, she finds her bag and empties the contents onto the floor. Old, crumpled receipts, lipsticks, toothpicks, tissues.

Underneath a pair of leather gloves, the serious face of Niklas Bull glares up at her. It's the programme for the Christmas Oratory performance. She picks it up, she hasn't thought about him since she was on Tornøy three days ago. He'd be OK, she'd probably spot him in the springtime with another young violinist by his side. She doesn't feel bad for him.

She lets her gaze wander over the list of performing soloists and halts abruptly.

Mezzo-soprano Marianne Beate Kielland.

It hits her like an electric shock, and she jumps.

Anne Kielland, he said.

That was what Jo had said she was called, the colleague that had given her the tip about a tenant.

Her throat tightens, she gasps for air.

He'd just lifted it from the programme.

In a flash she feels cold all over.

Jo, who has reached heady heights in his career.

Jo, who sometimes acts as if ordinary rules don't apply to him.

Jo, the oncologist.

She is sitting at the dining table in the dark, empty room when Mads comes home. In the light of the lamppost outside, wet fragments fall, melting into the pavement below.

Beside her is a glass and a half-finished bottle. She's spent hours trying to compose herself, but her heart hammers away inside her, she feels it in her stomach, her chest, her head.

Are you still up? he says with surprise and stops halfway up the stairs in his black suit and white shirt, his hair damp and ruffled.

Nina, he says. What is it?

Sit down, she says, and he climbs the final few stairs up to her, crossing the room with some hesitation before standing before her.

I know you're not going to believe anything I'm about to say. I'm not sure how I'm going to convince you.

He pulls out a chair, sits down.

I'm listening.

She takes a deep breath. Suddenly she doubts everything that she's felt so certain about all evening.

Mari Nilsen fell pregnant when her husband was away. You remember that, don't you?

Yes, Mads says, nodding.

Whilst she was in treatment for her cancer. And there's good reason to believe that the father...

Is her doctor, Mads says, completing her train of thought. I gathered that. But what makes you think so?

She was obsessed by that phenomenon, transference. It was because that was what she had experienced. She had attempted to understand herself and what had happened to her, and that's what she found.

I'm not sure... Mads says. You hear about it from time to time. But a child?

There's more, Nina says.

He looks at her.

I don't expect you to buy this straight away, she says, but hear me out.

He leans back, signalling to her that he's paying close attention.

The colleague that tipped Jo off about Mari Nilsen, she says, the fact that she needed a place to stay.

Yes?

She doesn't exist, Nina says, and Mads furrows his brow.

It was *Jo* that knew her, Jo wanted to find her a place to stay, she continues.

Mads looks as if he's waiting for her to say more before his expression quickly changes. He opens his mouth, freezes, then erupts in a brief, dismissive chortle.

Nina, he says. Stop now.

Just hear me out, please. Mari Nilsen had cancer. Jo is an oncologist...

There are hundreds of oncologists working up at Haukeland!

Jo lied to me about it, she says, about the colleague. Why did he feel the need to do that?

Nina! he says, setting his glass down on the table firmly. Seriously.

Nina holds her breath as his expression grows increasingly brooding and grave.

No, he says, his tone firm. He shakes his head resolutely, as if trying to shake the thought itself from his mind. He stands up.

Wait, she says.

It's late. Too late for all this nonsense, he says, knocking back the contents of his glass.

He has a son, Nina says. A son with no mother.

He halts on his way out of the room. He turns around slowly to face her before squeezing his eyes shut, doing all he can to prevent reality from filtering in.

He thumps a finger on the table top, pointing in her direction.

Forget about all of this, he says. He turns around and starts making his way upstairs to the bedroom.

Ok, I'll write to the health board, she says quickly. They can take a closer look at things.

He stops halfway.

People have lost their licence for far less, she says.

That's my brother you're talking about.

He turns around slowly.

The girl is dead, he says. What good will it do...

He stops.

She stares at him, open-mouthed.

Do you mean to say...? she begins, trailing off, feeling a tingling sensation spread from her eyes and down her body, all the way out to her fingertips and down to her feet.

She falls silent.

He comes back downstairs and returns to the table, pulling out a chair and sitting down.

Listen to me now, Mads says.

She nods, silent.

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I've known since the day we saw a photo of her in the newspaper, Mads says. The day after we got back from Oldervik. Jo rang me.

Nina sits stock-still in the dark room, her heart hammering so hard in her chest that it feels as if the ground is shaking.

He was out of his mind, Mads says quietly without looking at her. He started telling me about something that had happened a few years ago. Something that should never have happened at all.

He swallows, his gaze fixed on his hands.

It all just came tumbling out of him, Mads says, the lot of it. He'd spoken to her the day before her operation. He knew who she was, obviously, he'd been to several of her concerts.

He looks over towards the window, his face illuminated by the lamppost outside and the light of the overstated advent stars in the windows of the house across the road.

She had a real effect on him.

Deep lines cross his forehead.

You know what Jo's like, he says. He's so...

Sensitive, she suggests.

Yes. He is. He should never have become a doctor. Not an oncologist, at any rate! He should have gone into plastic surgery or veterinary medicine.

As if they don't see a whole range of fates, Nina remarks dryly.

He had performed her surgery, Mads continues. It had all gone well. That was that.

But then?

Then she reappeared in the department a month later for radiotherapy. They got talking. That turned into a coffee, and the tone changed between them, slowly but surely.

My God, she says. *A patient.*

Things got out of control.

He falls silent. Looks out of the window. Opens his mouth once again.

It all culminated in a night at a hotel together.

A hotel?

He nods.

She closes her eyes and shakes her head.

I can't wrap my head around it either, he says.

Was he in love with her?

He falls silent. Takes a deep breath as if to answer her, but stops in his tracks.

Yes, he eventually concedes. But it was short-lived, just a fleeting thing, he knew it was madness. He spoke about her with such genuine warmth and sorrow and fear, Mads says. I think there were a lot of factors at play. They had a lot in common. A passion for music...

Their age... Nina says sarcastically, but Mads' expression doesn't give anything away.

We'd been renting the place out to a Vietnamese family for a few years, he continues. Do you remember that? Back when Aunt Lena was in the nursing home. But they gave notice around New Year and moved out three months later. Then Jo came along and told me he had a potential tenant in mind, one of his colleague's nieces. He was straightforward about the fact that she was a single mother-to-be and needed all the help she could get. She moved in shortly afterwards.

Has she been paying rent? Nina blurted out. Not that it's the most important thing.

Every month. Then Aunt Lena passed away that summer, and I wanted to sell the house. Jo argued strongly against selling it at the time, he said it would be like throwing millions of kroner out the window, that I should hold off. But then he sold his share. I realise now that I should have been more suspicious at the time, he says with a brief, bitter smile.

He asked me to wait, surely I didn't want to kick out a heavily-pregnant tenant? You and I had talked about Ingeborg possibly returning from Oslo at some point and needing somewhere to live. Perhaps it was just as well continuing to rent it out in the meantime.

And the child is definitely his? she says.

I asked him the same thing. He had no reason to believe otherwise. The child even looks a little like him.

And then what happened?

She moved in, I only met her the once, when she collected the keys. She wasn't Mari Bull by then, so I didn't give it a second thought, didn't recognise her at all. And towards the end of the year she had a baby boy. Jo visited them initially and made sure all was well with them both. He didn't feel any particular happiness at the boy's arrival, he had hit the rocks trying to cope with his lies and double life.

Poor man, she says. She wasn't interested in the three of them being a family, then?

I don't think so. Well, perhaps. He tried to avoid the subject, did what he could to phase her out of his life bit by bit. She was kept somewhat at bay.

And then?

And then you two turned up at her door, it must have set something off for her. She thought you were Kaia at first, she was terrified, she wanted out immediately. She rang him again and again, he had promised to sort things out, to find something else for them, if she could just stay with her parents for a few days, just to give him a little bit of time.

Nina nods, that lines up with what Sigrid had told her.

Then he had spoken to her on the Thursday when she'd been out walking. She'd sounded different. Unstable. Very upset about an argument she'd had with her mother. Then she'd started talking about the two of them, she had demanded that Jo tell Kaia about them and move in with her and her son instead. She couldn't handle it anymore; things were too hard on her own. He had tried to explain that he couldn't, didn't want to, and then she had

threatened to expose everything. To Kaia, to his employer. Eventually he just told her: go ahead.

Mads takes a deep breath, looks down at the table.

She started threatening to take her own life.

And?

He begged her to stop, but she carried on, said she was going to do it.

He stops talking.

In the end, he hung up on her.

Nina sits there in silence.

He never heard from her again.

And?

Mads shakes his head.

And nothing. The night passed, and he still hadn't heard anything by the next day. He started to feel anxious, but he didn't make contact. He didn't want to give her false hope. He had started to imagine that he might be free from her clutches.

Which was true...

He had decided to tell Kaia everything regardless.

To beat Mari to it?

No, just to do it anyway.

But?

But when she was reported missing, he decided....

To take stock of things? she says sharply.

He's crushed, Mads says, looking up at her.

He's crushed? she splutters. Think of her family! Her son! *His* son!

I know, he says, I know, I do.

Not to mention Kaia, she says. The betrayal.

And when they found her the way they did, Mads says quietly, rubbing one hand over his face.

What happens now? Nina says.

What do you mean? Mads says, looking up at her.

What do we do? We can't just go around knowing all this and acting as if nothing is amiss.

Mads face darkens.

I promised Jo, he says, his gaze locked on her. He's so miserable. He knows it'll crush Kaia. He knows her best; he knows how she'll react. Causing more harm now everything's said and done, it's unnecessary.

How could he do something like this? she says.

You have to promise me, he says. You can't tell anyone. Not Kaia. No one.

And you've known about it all this time, she says. I've been prancing around like Nancy Drew while you've been playing me, laughing at me behind my back.

Laughing? Mads says. Are you mad? I've been terrified! Terrified for Jo, terrified about how things will work out for him, terrified for Mari Nilsen.

And terrified about what I might find out, she says, her tone steely.

He gives her a long, hard look.

Yes, he says. I've been afraid of that, too.

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Are you coming? he says from the top of the stairs.

She nods feebly.

Almost there.

He goes into the bedroom and leaves the door ajar behind him.

It's two o'clock. It's strangely quiet outside. Inside is just as quiet, besides the faint humming of the refrigerator. It strikes her that she ought to sit up at night more often; you miss out on something when you go to bed each night, she thinks to herself.

She refills her glass, right to the brim, as quietly as she can.

She can't seem to slow her heartbeat. Her stomach thuds with it, her throat too, she can hear the rush of it in her ears.

She thinks of Kaia.

How can she possibly not tell her?

How can she know this and not say anything?

He made her swear before going to bed. Swear never to say a word. It had felt as if they were two children indulging in a solemn game of sorts. She doesn't know what it involves, swearing something as a grown adult.

It's as if the news hits her again and again, no less overwhelming each and every time, everything he told her. It fades and returns once again, striking her over and over in waves.

She opens the lid of her laptop and looks to see if anything further on Mari Nilsen has come to light. Nothing.

She starts clicking through results, browses a series of images taken at concerts across Europe, she finds numerous old, digitalised local newspaper articles on the young prodigy, Mari Nilsen, a smiling eight year old, front teeth missing, a twelve year old, a sixteen year old, right up until she conquers Europe under the name Mari Bull, increasingly recognisable as the woman on Birkeveien.

She pictures Jo, always cheerful, always unshaven, surviving on charm and with the gift of the gab, impossible to dislike, especially for Kaia. She pictures Jo and Mari as they enter the hotel, making their way past reception together, or perhaps he entered alone.

Later he imagines them on Birkeveien. Jo dishing up lies for his brother, playing down the scope of things, she knows that from the diary. Jo, with promise after lie after promise after lie, keeping her warm, keeping her at bay, asking her to be patient, telling her they'd be together before long, all three of them, Mari would just have to wait that little bit longer.

Nina closes her eyes and tries to shake the image from her mind.

Promises and lies, until eventually she can take no more and ends everything.

She opens up German websites and sees older interviews automatically translated into a staccato, outlandish version of Norwegian. Mari Nilsen talks about her upbringing, her enthusiastic parents who unearthed her talent, sacrificing aspects of their own careers to lay the groundwork for her life, remarking on the fact that she was never pressured into practising, that it was always done with passion, always.

Suddenly it hits her: the willpower required to drown oneself, stepping out into the water and simply forging ahead, Virginia Woolf with her pockets filled of rocks, or taking a great leap out into the black water, feeling it fill your mouth, far too salty, the way it fills your nose, your stomach, your lungs, being underneath it, struggling and coming to the surface once again, then back under, then up for air. The last thing you see before finally sinking is the light in the window of the housing development where you grew up, far off in the distance. Behind one of those bright spots of light, your son lies in bed, sleeping peacefully.

Perhaps it's the same willpower required to practise five hours a day as a child, she thinks to herself. She slams the lid of the laptop closed.

She knocks back her glass and fills it once again.

Nobody can know. She already knows too much, she wishes she could erase it all from her mind, be ignorant, she should never have started asking questions. She can never talk to Sigrid or Toralf Nilsen again, never look them in the eye, mustn't ever run into them. She'll never be able to relax in Oldervik again.

She feels the faintest hint of sympathy she'd had for Jo in his anxious weeks slowly dissolve into nothing, transforming into aggression. It is as if reality begins to filter in: taking advantage of a patient in the superior role he held as a doctor. A terrified patient, a God-like man in a white coat.

Jo is just the tip of the iceberg. You read about it, she thinks, complaints of sexual assault made against doctors. But the thought of all those incidents that go unreported, the people who simply carry on. Because patients feel guilt. She knows she would. A voluntary assault.

She pours herself another glass, half-full, the bottle is empty. She pictures his face, his lupine sneer, his dishevelled hair, the man who gets away with everything. How many others had there been? she wonders. She recalls what Kaia said – it's never just the one.

She takes one deep breath after the next, can't seem to calm herself down, thinks of Kaia, what's the right thing to do, she has no idea what the right thing to do might be.

Her phone is in her work bag. She could call the police right now.

She tries to imagine what would happen if she really did make contact with Gro Vik, if she were to lay bare all that she knows. She is immediately filled with doubt, is this a police matter, is the investigation even still ongoing, now that Mari Nilsen has been found? What would the police do with information about the identity of the boy's father? It was still a case of suicide, after all.

She opens her laptop once again.

Pulls up the Health Board website.

She looks around for a moment before finding the search box, then types 'complaint'.

A series of results appears, and she quickly finds the right link before clicking on it.

She skims the section, the text boxes are greyed out, and eventually she finds the part that deals with patients who wish to make a complaint, or next-of-kin who wish to lodge a complaint on behalf of a patient. The advice is to contact the county commissioner.

She lifts her glass. Kaia. How would she take it? Nina wants to stop herself, and yet she doesn't. Kaia, she thinks to herself, she deserves to know. To know what kind of man she's married to, no matter how painful that realisation might be for her. She has to know. Nina would want to know.

She places her glass down hard on the table and looks up the county commissioner website.

She selects the Hordaland regional pages and is immediately faced with an error message telling her to select the new region. She clicks on Vestland and is sent to another empty webpage.

She feels a sense of relief, a sinking sensation within. That's not the idea. The entire regional reform is attempting to hamper her efforts.

All of a sudden, she pictures little Ask and his grandparents, in the house on the development, infinitely despondent, no answers to their questions. Blaming themselves and each other for not having stepped in earlier, for not having read or understood the signs, for having left their daughter to sail her own sea.

She goes back to the home page and types 'county commissioner complaint patient' and is redirected to the correct form.

It's just a case of entering the information.

She lifts her glass to her lips and knocks back the contents before placing it down and starting to type, pressing the keys softly, silently.

She quickly and concisely outlines the situation, the relationship that developed between the named doctor and patient, the child that was born, dating everything in simple, matter-of-fact prose.

Her finger shakes as she presses 'send'.

The pain in her stomach almost causes her to lurch forwards and is quickly followed by overwhelming nausea.

An error message is returned: this field and that one hasn't been filled in to a satisfactory standard. She quickly glances at the page, identifying the issue and correcting it before submitting the form once again.

Yet another error message: Page cannot be loaded.

She clicks refresh and everything disappears without warning, everything she's written, everything gone.

She feels herself sinking, sighs heavily. She lets her head fall back.

She closes the lid of the laptop just as the bedroom door opens and Mads sticks his head out.

Are you coming?

I'm coming now.

She stands up. Her knees are quaking, a relieved tremble. She doesn't need to do it. Nothing will happen if she just lets things be, she won't see all hell let loose, lives won't be destroyed.

Everything can carry on as it was.

She lays the trout on the worktop, dill and fennel seeds, garlic, lemon, butter. Looks out. A sudden shift to blue skies. The others change into their walking gear, preparing to climb the most child-friendly of the peaks in the area.

She thinks of Kaia, Jo, the ticking time bomb between them that might crack open and explode any day. It all depended on how cold he is, how good he is at suppressing things, at justifying them. He's obviously taken great pains to cover his tracks, presumably referring her to another doctor when things had started heading in the wrong direction, given the way the officer in charge had never found him out.

She chops herbs, her gaze fixed on the lawn outside, then jumps as the blade slips and slices through the nail of her index finger. She places the knife down.

She is burdened by an unease that refuses to leave her.

As she watches the group disappear into the distance, head to toe in outdoor gear as they make their way around the bend in the road, she finds her phone.

She looks through her call log and finds the number she's looking for before clicking on it, nervous as she hears a click and the sound of a throat being cleared. The voice at the other end belongs to a woman on the switchboard, Nina realises after a moment of confusion. She introduces herself and explains in the simplest terms she can that she had been called by a young female case officer the previous day but that she can't recall her name, would it be possible to find out who it was, if she's there?

The woman on the switchboard utters a brief, hoarse chortle, as if the thought alone is far-fetched, but she asks her to hold for a moment.

As silence filters from the microphone, she opens the lid of her laptop and types 'salivary gland cancer' in the search field. She places her mobile on speakerphone and sets the phone on the table, scrolling down the list of results.

Yes, hello? a voice says, unexpectedly breaking the silence, and Nina jumps as she grabs the phone.

Are you the person I spoke to yesterday? she says. My name is Nina Wisløff.

Yes, that's me, the person on the other end says, and Nina recognises her voice. What can I help you with?

I asked you to delete a complaint, Nina says.

Yes, that's right.

Is it possible to reverse that, by any chance?

Unfortunately not, the woman says. You'd have to submit a new complaint.

She feels her heart sink.

But you mentioned that the doctor in question hadn't been treating the patient, she says.

Silence falls at the other end of the line, a silence that Nina hopes is rooted in a sense of doubt on the part of the case officer.

I *could* take a quick look at my notes, the woman reluctantly concedes after a short pause, yes I have them just here. One moment, please.

Nina's gaze wanders over her laptop, and she clicks on an Oslo University Hospital link about the treatment of salivary gland cancer. She skims the text on the page. If things are like so, the treatment is like so, et cetera et cetera. For a growth located beneath the chin, treatment would involve an operation, then a six-week course of radiotherapy, the same treatment Mari had undergone, followed by regular check-ups afterwards, every other month initially, then every third month after that, all of which were to be conducted in the ear, nose and throat department.

She freezes. At that precise moment, the case officer pipes up.

This is a little imprudent, the woman says, but OK. There was talk of a doctor by the name of Glaser. But his name wasn't Jo.

Thank you, Nina whispers, and she brings the hand holding the phone to her chest, holding it there.

She pictures her face clearly. The way she had stiffened in the doorway in front of them as Ingeborg had introduced them as Glaser.

Hello, the voice at the end of the phone says. She ends the call.

She can sense him standing in the room behind her.

What is it? he says. You look as though you've stumbled across a dead body.

She turns to face him.

I thought you'd gone out with the others? she says.

I had a phone call I needed to take.

He sits down opposite her.

Who were you talking to? he asks in a mild tone.

Telesales.

He glances at the screen, raises an eyebrow.

What are you reading about now, then, eh? he asks cheerfully.

You were her doctor, she whispers.

What? he says.

It was you...

He looks at her, open-mouthed, his face frozen with a cheerful, quizzical smile on his lips.

The boy, Ask, she says, then has to gasp for air. Is he *yours*?

His expression changes.

What are you saying?

He must be, of course he must, she mutters under her breath. She feels everything beginning to break away, tiny pebbles at first, each of them disappearing and making way for larger rocks, breaking and smashing against one another on their way down, down, down, until eventually the biggest boulders start to shift, toppling, tumbling, until everything has come crashing down.

Nina, he says. What is all this about?

She sees him grow pale. His face darkens.

Her head in her hands, she presses her fingertips hard along her brow ridge, squeezing her eyes tight shut.

Everything you told me about Jo. It was you all along.

I'm so sorry, he says finally, without looking at her.

Four years? she says, looking up at him. How could you do it, all this time?

He remains silent.

And then to lay the blame on your brother, she says, unable to look at him. What kind of person are you?

But I stayed with you, he says eventually. Even though she wanted...

She bursts into bitter laughter.

Oh, thanks! she splutters. I'm sure that had nothing to do with the fact you'd have lost your job if it had all come out? You'd have lost your licence!

He looks down.

It was always out of the question, he says eventually. It's always been you, always will be.

He lets out a hiccup that rings hollow.

Cut it out, she snarls. She brings her hands to her head, feels the ground beneath her feet shifting, revolving in waves, the nausea rising up from within her.

What happened? she whispers.

I don't know, Nina. I don't know.

How did it happen?

He looks up, shaking his head.

She came alone to receive her diagnosis, he says. There were seven of us, seven doctors and nurses facing her there, all alone at that first meeting when she received the news. She was so small, all by herself, white with fear.

And then, what? Nina says.

We had a brief conversation the following week, the day before her operation. She was alone then, too. Then I performed surgery on her, and it all went well. I looked in on her briefly the following day, and that was that.

And then?

She started seeking me out. Over and over again. At work, long after her operation, while she was undergoing radiation, when I no longer had any part to play in her treatment. She'd sit in the corridor waiting for me to pass by. Just to say hello.

She looks at him.

Or in the canteen, he says. As if by chance. It happened on numerous occasions, she turned up all over the place, just to see me, or for me to see her.

He takes a deep breath.

On one occasion she stopped me, trembling with nerves, telling me she was convinced the cancer had spread. I don't know if it was just a pretext or if... it seemed genuine. I needed to calm her down. She had so many questions, and nobody had the time to answer her.

And?

We started talking. I was on a break. I tried steering her onto a different track, she was locked onto the idea, she sensed the disease everywhere. I told her we'd seen her perform at Grieg Hall. Brahms. I asked if she'd been able to practise at all, if she had her violin there with her. She was just looking over music, she said. The radiation field, he says, bringing a hand to the left side of his throat, it was exactly where her violin sat, it had started to hurt.

He falls silent.

And then, she says.

That repeated itself. She would appear. We would talk. Her appetite for human contact was insatiable.

Insatiable, she says, mimicking him in a whisper.

One evening I'd been working late and was on my way home when I bumped into her at the top of Fløenbakken. She told me she was taking a walk, but I knew.

She'd found out where we lived.

God knows how long she had been standing there, he says, pacing back and forth, up and down.

And you invited her in.

He swallows.

Into our home.

He closes his eyes.

What were you thinking?

He shakes his head, he doesn't know.

A patient?

She was going to be OK, he objects, and she laughs, flabbergasted by what he sees as an apology.

So what happened?

I told her it could never happen again. I realised that it had to be some sort of reaction, some signal that I needed a break. That was a good while before the election. I told the party that I was ready to take up a role, if that was something they'd consider.

You already knew she was pregnant by that point.

Yes, he nods. She told me in the spring during her first check-up, the nurse had left the room for a moment. You can imagine – I was aghast. She needed help, she was going to get divorced, move out. She asked me to help find her somewhere in Bergen.

And what exactly did she have in mind?

As I said, he says. She hoped we might... but I made it very clear that was out of the question.

And?

And so she moved into the house on Birkeveien. We had minimal contact, she lived there rent-free, obviously, but otherwise she got by on her own.

And then?

Then the boy arrived. He... I visited them when they got home from the hospital.

Who was with her for the birth?

She was alone.

And? she says, feeling a lurching sensation in her chest.

And nothing, he says. I felt nothing. Only remorse. Remorse and unease.

Don't lie to me, she says with a hiccup.

It's true. There was nothing there. I knew she thought that everything would change when I saw him, that we'd be a family. But all I wanted was to come home. Forget everything.

Forget everything, she repeats.

After that, I saw them as infrequently as possible. The odd practical job around the house would crop up every now and then, which I always took care of, but we never had...

She waits.

A relationship, he says eventually. After that, I mean.

He looks up at her.

It's the truth.

And then you went around for the next three years acting like nothing was amiss, she says.

It was easier than I had imagined it would be, he says with a bleak smile. All I wanted was to forget about it, forget that it had ever happened, just to be with you and Milja, to focus on my work.

It almost worked, she whispers.

You should never have mentioned the house to Ingeborg, he says quietly. Mari became...

So it's our fault, Nina says sharply, and he turns around.

No, obviously not. God no.

He's silent.

But she had just accepted reality, he says. She was there. She had a child, a job, she was happy with her life, she was in the process of reuniting with her ex-husband. And then you two turned up and rattled the foundations.

She stares at him in disbelief.

You blame me, she says, her voice shaking.

No...!

Can you hear yourself?

I'm just saying everything was fine, it was all going well. Then, out of the blue, I get a hysterical phone call.

What did you do?

She just wanted out. I helped her, she didn't have many possessions, I moved them to a storage unit for her, it was a small job. Then I asked her to go to her parents' and take things easy.

And then?

That was that.

She shakes her head.

No, she says. You spoke to her on that Thursday.

It was just a brief meeting.

Meeting? she says.

He looks at her quizzically.

You were at Solstrand...

He falls silent, slowly reddening.

He gazes out into thin air; things begin to dawn on her.

You met her here.

She was hysterical, he says firmly. I had to calm her down.

You talk about her as if she's a child, she says quietly, a child that needs calming down.

She threatened all sorts, he says. Threatened to tell people everything, to take her life if I didn't...

If you didn't do what?

What?

She was going to tell people everything if you didn't do what?

She wanted me to leave you, he says.

So there *was* a relationship, she says slowly.

No...

She has to laugh, at the lies trickling forth without end. At how helpless he is.

What have you done? she whispers suddenly, turning to face him.

He looks at her, a strange expression on his face, his eyes transparent, his gaze hollow.

The realisation dawns on her slowly.

She'd never have taken her life anywhere there was a risk she'd be discovered by her parents, or her son, for that matter.

Every lead ends here.

Her lungs, she says, and her voice doesn't sound like her own.

They never checked her lungs.

Nina, he says, faraway now.

You took a bath, she says slowly. As you always do, as you always like to.

Nina.

Everything was fine. You had some wine. But then she started up all over again.

Demanded you leave me, threatened to expose you...

No, he whispers.

It was bathwater, not seawater. Wasn't it? In her lungs, in her stomach.

She sees him shaking his head.

And then you dressed her, she says, her voice distant.

Dressing a wet, limp body. That can't have been easy, can it? Driving her down to the jetty just in front of her parents' place, heaving her up there and dropping her in? You knew they'd had an argument, a fragile artist, it was never completely out of the question that she'd take that step.

Are you mad, Mads says, reaching a hand out towards her, as if to stop her.

I could call the police here and now, she says.

He looks at her, terrified.

She hasn't been cremated yet, she says. What with the power cut yesterday, the bodies are piling up at Møllendal Crematorium today.

He appears in front of her, the image of him becoming clearer to her as his expression changes.

In a few hours, this will all be over, he says coolly. She'll be gone, turned to dust, and you can forget it all, everything can carry on as before.

She gets up.

Don't go, he says, and he stands up too, raising a hand. She steps back, scared, he's large, he'd easily overpower her, they're alone, he could do it all over again.

He looks at her, aghast.

Nina! he says. I could never do anything to *you*... He reaches a hand out in her direction.

The same hand that had held her head underwater.

It's like you said yesterday, he says. What did you call it? *Hamartia*?

She nods slowly.

Missing the mark? A result of our limited power of judgement?

Mads...

It isn't about morals or blame, that's what you said. It's about tragic error. You know me. I'm not a bad person?

She gives no reply.

To err is human, isn't that what they say? We have no concept of the full scope of our actions.

Slowly she shakes her head.

You can decide, he says. Me in prison, the house gone; you could paper the walls of your bedsit with the double-page spreads all about you. Living alone, wallowing in malice. Your family splintered, Ingeborg, Milja – lives ruined.

He walks towards her.

Ingeborg, he says. She's only in the first trimester. A shock like this could...

He stops.

What's the point? he says. When we could just let things go?

She tries to think her way through the options, to gain some kind of oversight. If he were to turn himself in, perhaps that would lead to a reduced sentence. She couldn't be dragged into things, she didn't know anything about it, he's acted alone...

She takes one step after another, moving back before stopping in the corner, by the old stove.

I know how good you are at adapting to things, he says. You just have to tell yourself the right version of events.

Her legs can no longer bear her weight and she collapses in a heap in the corner.

Do you really think it's better that her family thinks she was...? He stops. Do you think they'd find any comfort in that?

They think it's all their fault, she rasps. They think they drove her to it.

He says nothing.

She sits on the wooden floor, motionless, heavy.

Everything has been shattered.

She sees everything floating past her as she remains rooted in position, feeling her body sink further and further down. She can't help but picture her, there in the bathtub, naked, underwater, face down, her hair like a dark, heavy blanket over the back of her head, arms flailing to begin with, then limp, eyes bulging.

She doesn't want to see it, she squeezes her eyes tight shut, doesn't want to see it, would rather pluck out her own eyeballs than see that.

He slinks down by her side.

Just think what I was willing to do, he whispers, to keep us together, us. This. I know how wrong that sounds, but still, think about it.

She feels a faint tremble spread throughout her body.

Soon we'll be in our new house, he whispers, stroking her knee. You know how much we've been looking forward to it. A new start, he says.

Who knows about any of this? she whispers.

Nobody, he says.

Jo? she repeats through her tears.

Nobody.

He lied about who found us a tenant, she says, looking at him.

I asked him to do that, Mads says. He doesn't know what it's about. You can be sure of that.

No witnesses? she asks slowly. Nobody who's seen anything they don't understand, only for it to fall into place for them at a later date?

Nobody, he says.

What if they were to find something on her phone...

He shakes his head.

She had another phone, he says. Unregistered.

Where did you learn all this? she mumbles.

She gets up slowly, makes her way over to the window and keeps her eyes on the road. The others could be back any minute, they've been gone a long while now.

She turns to face him.

Can you live with this? she asks him.

I can, he replies after a moment. He looks at her, a grave expression on his face.

Silence fall between them, she can hear nothing but the sound of his breathing.

Can you? he asks, hesitant.

She says nothing.

He comes up behind her.

I know what I'm asking of you, he whispers, his lips brushing against her hair.

She brings a hand to her mouth to conceal a sob.

I don't think I can bear it, she whispers, shaking.

We'll help each other through it, he says. He turns her around and looks at her, taking her head in his hands and holding her still, their gazes locked on one another.

I know you can do it, he says.

She frees herself and makes for the sink, splashing her cheeks with cold water. She wets a cloth and wipes the kitchen table.

Are you OK? he asks, and she nods, taking a deep breath.

She clears her throat, relaxes her shoulders.

Mads fills the tank with fresh water and measures out ground coffee. She stands on her tiptoes and pulls out the cake tins before arranging slices of Christmas cake on a plate.

Here they are, he says, his eyes on the road. Eirik and Milja appear around the bend, Milja on his shoulders. Jo and Kaia are just behind them, walking hand-in-hand.

She dries her eyes with her fingertips and finds a jug for orange squash.

Actually, what about some hot chocolate? she says, looking over at Mads.

Yes, he says, smiling, Milja would love that.

She takes the milk from the fridge, cocoa powder, sugar, bends down and finds a pan. She concentrates on taking slow, deep breaths, tries to compose herself, slowly, slowly.

Have you seen that one before? Mads asks, nodding in the direction of the window. She stands by his side. Kaia and Jo and Eirik with Milja on his shoulders all step to one side, letting a car pass them by as it rolls onwards in the direction of their front yard.

No, Nina says, finding a whisk.

Strange, Mads says. He lifts a hand and waves at Milja through the window; she waves back from where she sits on her father's shoulders.

As Nina whisks cocoa powder with sugar and a little water until the powder breaks up and the mixture starts to bubble, another car appears further down the road.

Where's Ingeborg? she asks, nodding at the four of them outside.

She opens the door into the hallway.

Her walking boots are there on the hallway floor, untouched.

Mads... she says slowly.

The first car stops in the front yard, its doors swinging open.

Behind the second car, a third now appears, all three with tinted windows. Jo and Kaia stand in the ditch by the side of the road and observe the passing convoy with surprise.

Mads? she repeats, he looks at her, the paper-thin walls of the house. She crosses the kitchen and opens the door leading to the guest bedroom.

Ingeborg is sitting on the bed. She gazes into the distance, phone in hand, trembling.