Anne Elvedal

*The Game of Death*

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Translated from the Norwegian

by Rosie Hedger

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**Rebekka**

**Chapter 1**

A big, fat, dead fly is lying on its back on the windowsill, waiting to embark upon its final journey. Its days of flying free and gorging itself on poo and dead animals are long past. Now it, too, will become a meal for one creature or another. I pick it up. It’s so dry and crisp that bits of its wings fall away, so I hurry to the cage on the floor. I drop it between the bars, and as it hits the bottom, the wings crumble to something resembling ash.

Maisie runs over and sniffs at it. I wait for her to help herself, but instead she starts batting at it playfully. Perhaps the fat fly is so well-done that it’s become burnt with a nasty smell about it, and immediately I regret forcing such an undignified end on the insect, tossing it into the cage of a grey mouse where it was destined to end its days as a plaything. Perhaps it wasn’t even properly dead yet. Perhaps it had been lying there in wait for its soul to leave its body and float up to fly heaven, or to be born again as another fat fly altogether; I doubt a fly could be reincarnated as an elephant. But maybe.

The suffocating heat doesn’t just burn flies to death; it also causes all sorts of strange thoughts to enter my head, too. I rub my eyes. I can’t wait for the summer holidays, to get away from this place. Away from the weirdly tropical nights that rob me of my sleep and leave my bedsheets soaked through. I turn to look at my bed and start counting. Six tops. Four skirts. Three pairs of shorts. Three jumpers. Four pairs of jogging bottoms. A bikini. No, two bikinis. And one, two, three jackets. It’s all neatly folded on my bed, and I wonder if it’s going to be enough for all the things we’re going to do besides sitting on the motorbike. Walks on the beach, exploring the towns, meals out, a hike in the mountains, maybe, plus cookouts by our tent, and a gig. Dad said he really wanted to go to a gig, we need to go to a good old-fashioned Irish pub, he’d said. I add two pairs of white trousers to the pile before picking up my new, yellow top, removing the price tag with my teeth and pulling it on.

Maisie squeaks and I smile at her. ‘How do I look?’

She says nothing, she’s already lost interest in the dead fly, so I open the cage and lift her out. Rub my cheek against her soft fur, nuzzle my nose against hers. There’s a strong smell about her, urine, maybe. Mum told me it was a waste of money when I spent my savings on her last year, a mouse doesn’t live for long, she’d said. And now she’s started complaining again, it’ll never survive the summer, she says. I glance out of the window. Not a cloud in the sky today, either.

Two gentle knocks wrench me from my thoughts, and Dad sticks his head around the door. ‘Morning Rebekka, you’re up early.’

‘I’m starting at eight today.’

‘Another exam?’ He scratches his head, ruffling his medium-length, fair hair, which he always wears scraped into a low ponytail, his worn-out old clogs tapping against the parquet floor as he steps inside.

‘No, it’s the last day of our ‘Helping in the Community’ elective, so we’re going to be making waffles at the care home.’ I follow his gaze, which wanders in the direction of the pile of clothes on the bed. ‘And no, I’m not taking all that, I’m going to be packing *smart*.’

‘Packing for what?’

‘What do you think?’

He raises his invisible eyebrows inquisitively, and I know he’s doing his best to tease me.

‘Don’t suppose you fancy three weeks in Ireland this summer, eh?’ I ask, playing along.

‘But that’s not for another…’

‘Ten days. I know. But Mum said I had to plan things now to make sure I don’t pack my entire wardrobe, like you thought I had last year.’ I pout at him and he smiles, but it’s not the smile I know. Not wide and warm with a glint in his blue eyes. I start to wonder if he’s joking after all. ‘Is something wrong?’ I ask.

He plunges his strong hands into the pockets of his grey jeans, and I realise there’s something about his tone that isn’t quite right.

‘Actually, I need to speak to you about something…’ he begins, but I cut in.

‘Have you found any gigs for us to go to?’ I ask, pulling out my phone. ‘I read about a band that does covers of The Irish Rovers, it’s here somewhere…’

‘Rebekka,’ he says, interrupting me, and my name settles in my gut like a heavy weight. ‘I’m sorry, but we’re going to need to postpone this year’s trip.’

‘Postpone it? Until when?’

His hand emerges from his pocket, he scratches a greying sideburn, it makes a rasping sound, and as he searches for the right words, I think to myself that it makes no difference to me if we go later this summer, I’ve got no plans besides celebrating finally finishing another year at school.

‘I don’t mind if we go now or later,’ I tell him. ‘As long as we’re back by the middle of August, when school starts back. The rules about attendance are different in upper secondary.’

He sighs. ‘I can’t leave The Barn this summer.’

I look at him. Wait for him to break into a smile and say *gotcha!* before bounding in my direction, picking me up and tickling my stomach, making me howl and beg him to stop, hollering that I’m not three years old anymore. But he just stands there.

‘What do you mean? No trip?’ I say.

‘I’m so sorry.’

‘But we always go away in the summer. And you promised we’d go abroad this year…’

‘I can’t leave The Barn right now, I’m sorry. But maybe you and Mum can find something fun to do instead?’

Maisie nips my finger and I jump, dropping her to the floor.

‘Woah, be careful there,’ Dad chuckles, scooping her up in his big, strong hands before carefully placing her back inside her cage.

And it strikes me then how different Dad and I are. The only thing I could think to spend my savings on was a little mouse, while he spent all his buying an old barn back in the day. He turned it into a car repair workshop where he helps young people who’ve struggled at school or work or with family for whatever reason. Troublemakers. Trash. Losers. People with hidden resources, as he calls them. People who steal his time. Because there’s always something going on at The Barn. I’ve barely seen him these past few months.

He closes the cage door, his tone a little bolder now. ‘Look… we’ll go to Ireland next year, OK? This summer is a bit different, that’s all.’

‘What’s different, exactly?’

He hesitates for a moment and I see it now, an unfamiliar sense of unease in his eyes.

‘Not everyone has it as good as you, you know,’ he replies with a smile.

I turn away from him, look at the brown shelf of knick-knacks above the bed. It’s packed with shells collected on all of our trips, which we’ve been taking since I first started school. The first two years we went by car, but the others were on his motorbike. The black BMW, a 1956 model. The thing he says he’s proudest of having created. Apart from me, *obviously*. And The Barn. But it’s clear that I’m not top of the list after all. One trip a year. That’s what I get from Dad.

‘Can we sit and talk about this?’ he asks.

I walk straight past him, run downstairs and slam the front door in reply.

**Chapter 2**

When I reach the care home, I lock myself in the toilet. Feel annoyed that I don’t just have a normal lesson right now where I can hide at the back of the class. Instead I have to nod and smile as I volunteer with a bunch of old people who don’t even remember my name. Pretend that everything is fine. Serve waffles and coffee with a smile. Talk about the weather, the unusual summer that nobody can seem to stop going on about. The heat arrived early this year, way back in March, and it’s showing no signs of letting up. The rest of the country’s overcast skies can’t seem to force the relentless band of high pressure over Trøndelag to move on. And it’s certainly unusual weather for our tiny village of Hommelvik, with its idyllic location on Trondheim Fjord.

Three months have passed now and it hasn’t relented at all. Scorching temperatures above thirty degrees, night and day, have suddenly become part of our daily life. It is as if we’ve been sealed inside our own heat bubble. The entire town has been transformed into some sort of hellscape, if the people living a few miles along the road in Trondheim are to be believed, though they also claim that Hommelvik is so ugly that crows flip onto their backs as they fly overhead. *The city folk are just jealous*, Dad tends to say whenever it comes up. *Jealous because we’ve got it all: water, woodland – and the nicest kids around*.

I’m never going to talk to him again. Never.

I blow my nose and flush the toilet. Look at myself in the mirror and feel glad I didn’t put any make-up on this morning. Regret the fact that I ran here when I catch sight of two patches of sweat under the arms of my new top.

I’m not going to say a single word to Dad all summer. And maybe I won’t go to Ireland with him next year after all, either.

When I walk into the lounge, Iselin is sitting at the piano singing an old song I don’t know. A few white-haired ladies with rollers in are sitting on the sofa, singing along. It’s always the same. Everybody flocks around Iselin, no matter what she’s doing. It doesn’t help that I’m much better than she is at school, she’s always been ten times more popular than me. Even though we’re cousins and both the same age, we don’t look like one another at all. She’s small and slim with big boobs while I’m flatter in every respect. Darker. Like my dark, straw-like hair, which I realise I’ve forgotten to brush. Hers is blonde and beautiful and pinned in a plait as tight as the short, blue skirt that accentuates her pert bum.

I head for the kitchen and make a start on the waffle batter. I crack the eggs and end up spending ages picking bits of shell out of the bowl. It’s so muggy. I turn the fan to its highest setting. I should have worn a skirt instead of shorts, I think to myself. My trainers feel clammy. The tiny pieces of shell are impossible to retrieve.

‘Again?’ a voice behind me says, and I turn around to see Iselin skipping into the room, an expression of displeasure on her tanned face. ‘Have you really bought *another* top just like mine?’

It’s only now that I see she’s wearing her yellow top.

‘I didn’t know you had one like this,’ I reply, sounding less than convinced, but she snorts.

‘You did so. Put something else on.’

‘I can’t go home now. I’ll be marked absent.’

‘Find something in the laundry room. There’s a basket of clothes in there that don’t belong to anyone.’

‘Are you being serious?’

She rests her hands on her hips. ‘Yes, Rebekka. I’m being serious.’

I give up fishing around inside the bowl for the pieces of eggshell. ‘Can you finish this batter?’

I make as if to leave but she bursts out laughing.

‘Oh my God, pull yourself together, I’m joking,’ she hiccups. ‘Do you really think I want you walking about in some ugly, old, lace blouse, bringing shame on our family?’

She might just as well have added, *your face is bad enough*.

I can’t bring myself to respond. I bury my head back in the bowl and make another attempt to retrieve the annoying pieces of eggshell.

‘Let me do that.’ Iselin pushes me to one side before I can object. She grabs a teaspoon and retrieves every last piece of shell without issue. ‘When are you two leaving?’ she asks.

‘Hm?’

‘You and Uncle Børre. When are you leaving for Ireland?’

‘Oh, that…’ I say, then hesitate. Can’t bear the idea of her smug smile if I were to tell her the trip is cancelled. ‘A few weeks,’ I say, and wonder if I might be able to persuade Dad to go after all. I mean, why not? We could just go for a week, or a weekend, even.

She falls silent, and instantly I regret lying to her. I know she hasn’t been on a single holiday since Auntie Lina fell ill.

‘I’ll finish the batter,’ I tell her.

‘Make sure it’s not too runny.’ She throws the spoon down and opens a cupboard door before grabbing two coffee cups and filling them from the full pot by the coffee machine.

‘What are your plans for the summer?’ I ask, then smile, aware that this is a sensitive subject for her, but still keen to work out if I’ll be spending the whole summer alone or not.

‘Work.’ She places the coffee pot back down and adds a dash of milk to each mug.

‘You can’t spend your entire summer working at the petrol station, surely?’ I reply.

‘I can. Do you know how much I’ll earn?’

‘What about Norton, don’t you two have any plans?’

She glares at me. Norton is her boyfriend. He’s a few years older than us, and they’re always together. I’ve barely even said hello to him.

‘Of course we do,’ she says, then walks out with a cup of coffee in each hand. ‘I’m going to see Mum.’ She stops in the doorway. ‘Straight up and down, like an ironing board, that’s what they say about you.’

‘Who?’

‘All the boys.’

And with that, she leaves.

I decide to take my time with the waffles. I should be in the lounge, really. Chatting with one of the ladies in rollers, hugging them, looking at old photos, but not now, I feel sick.

I knock back a large glass of water. I can hear a helicopter in the distance. Must be the air ambulance on its way to collect someone who’s fallen ill in all this heat, had too little to drink, maybe. They’ve been banging on about that at school and in the newspapers, how important it is that we drink enough water, so we don’t end up dehydrated. The old people here all have a checklist to keep track of how much they’re drinking each day. Even so, more have probably died than usual, though not when I’ve been around, fortunately. The only reason I know that’s the case is because I’ve noticed one wrinkled face being replaced by another, like the grey-haired guy with the long beard who appears in the doorway now. He’s new. A pair of braces hold his beige trousers in place over his bulging belly, and he’s carrying a folded-up newspaper under one arm.

‘Mmm, smells good,’ he says, smiling. ‘You’ve always been so good at making waffles, my darling.’

I’ve no idea who he thinks I am, his wife, his daughter, maybe even his sister? Either way, I hand him a plate and make up my mind to head over to the care facility. Dad might pop in to see Auntie Lina on his way to The Barn, and we can have that chat after all. I can persuade him to take our trip later in the summer.

I hurry along the corridors. The care facility is at the opposite end of the building. Auntie Lina’s flat is on the ground floor, at the far end of one of the wings. An attempt to give the youngest resident the best chance at some sort of private life.

I knock at the door and hear Iselin’s voice: ‘Come in.’

I find them in the bedroom. Auntie Lina hasn’t got up yet, she’s still in bed wearing her thin, cotton pyjamas, her long, fair hair in a plait to one side. Iselin is standing at the wardrobe, trying to choose her an outfit for the day. She holds up a pair of trousers that receives a hasty downvote.

I try to conceal my disappointment that Dad isn’t here, and hand over a plate with two waffles and jam. ‘Waffles, anyone?’

‘Mum doesn’t eat waffles anymore, they’re too hard to swallow,’ Iselin says, holding up a pair of trousers that receives a thumbs down from Auntie Lina.

‘Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t know,’ I tell her.

Auntie Lina gives me a lopsided smile and beckons me over. Auntie Lina, so funny and robust, who collapsed in the fruit and veg department of the local supermarket two years ago, an orange squeezed tightly in one hand. In the blink of an eye she lost the ability to walk and talk. She suffered a stroke before she even turned forty and ended up paralysed down her right-hand side. Fortunately, her mind is as sharp as it ever was, but paralysis of her mouth and throat means she can’t speak, so she communicates using a tablet computer with a robotic female voice that says anything she types with her left hand. Her *back-up voice*, she calls it.

‘I’m sure I can manage a little,’ the voice says.

Iselin sighs and takes the plate from me, setting to work cutting the waffle up into small pieces.

I make my excuses, telling them I need to go and put on some more waffles, then leave them to it, wondering if I should call Dad, but as I step out into the corridor, it feels different somehow. It’s quiet, *too* quiet. The small talk and bustling hubbub of the carers who help the residents with their morning routine have gone. All I can hear is the squeaking of my own shoes.

Several carers are standing by the kitchen whispering, but when they catch sight of me, they fall silent too. They give me such strange looks that I turn around, hoping that it’s someone behind me they’re staring at, but there’s nobody there, and I wonder if I’ve done something wrong, if I’ve forgotten to unplug the waffle iron or if the old guy in braces that I served waffles to has choked on them.

The one with the biggest bum breaks the silence. ‘Have you spoken to your dad? The air ambulance is over at The Barn.’

**Chapter 3**

I run. Through the red-hot streets. Ignore every warning Mum has ever given me over the past ten years, everything she’s ever said about steering clear of The Barn. I try calling Dad again and again, but there’s no response. I try running faster, but my legs won’t carry me as fast as my mind is moving, so as I fly down onto the path that runs along the river, I trip and fall flat on my face. I scrape my knees and the palms of my hands on the gravel but heave myself up and continue my sprint.

It’s probably one of the troublemakers who’s had some sort of accident. Maybe a bonnet has dropped on their head or they’ve cut themselves on one of the tools. If the air ambulance is even really *there*, of course. Those old gossips are always spreading rumours that turn out to be untrue.

But as I reach the suspension bridge, I see that they were right.

The air ambulance rises over the high fences that surround The Barn and flutters off like a giant, shimmering, yellow bird. I sprint through the woods at the end of the fence and slip out onto the open area just in front of The Barn, an isolated little dead-end.

I come to an abrupt halt. Cough up phlegm and gasp for air as I try to get my bearings. There are two fire engines, but the red building is still in one piece. There are several firefighters in front of the entrance, busy investigating something lying on the tarmac in a pool of water. I can’t see what it is, can only make out a wheel, is it a motorbike? There’s paper strewn all over the place just beyond it, some sort of packaging, or that’s what it looks like anyway, maybe from the equipment the paramedics used. There are burnt items of clothing too, overalls. A clog.

I glance elsewhere. Something familiar, a police car, and I spot Uncle Øystein, chatting with an older couple wearing matching dressing gowns. He catches sight of me and makes his way over.

‘What’s happened? Who’s been hurt?’ I ask, thinking to myself that Dad must have gone with whoever’s been injured in the helicopter. Things probably happened so fast that he lost a shoe in all the commotion. ‘Where’s Dad?’

Uncle Øystein pulls at his wrinkled uniform shirt. ‘Børre’s been in an accident,’ he says.

I see his thin lips continue to move. Hear his slow, monotonous voice as he explains that the BMW went up in flames. That Dad had been burned. That the couple in the matching dressing gowns were having breakfast on their patio a good way along the road when they heard him screaming and came running only to find him on fire. They’d put the fire out using a hose that now lay curled up on the ground beneath them. Dad is on his way to hospital in Trondheim.

‘It’ll be OK,’ Uncle Øystein says. ‘It’s all going to be OK.’

Of course it’ll be OK. This is Dad we’re talking about. I just hope his hands haven’t been hurt too badly, it would be the end of the world for him if he wasn’t able to fix up old cars and motorbikes.

Uncle Øystein has to go to tell Auntie Lina what’s happened and asks a colleague to drive me to the hospital. I sit in the back seat like some sort of criminal and plan everything I want to tell Dad. Of course it’s fine for us to postpone our trip and go next year instead. And I’m not angry at him.

Mum is waiting to meet me in reception. She’s wearing a floral blouse, it’s a poor match for her sad smile.

‘How’s Dad?’ I ask.

‘They’re looking after him,’ she says, giving me a long hug. ‘We need to be strong now, love.’

She takes my hand and sees my scrapes. ‘Oh no, what happened?’

‘Nothing.’

Her long hair is as dark and straight as mine, and she gathers it up into a bun on top of her head, then asks a nurse for some bits and pieces to treat my scrapes. I get the impression she’s glad to have something to do as she takes her time cleaning the palms of my hands.

‘Were Dad’s hands injured?’ I ask.

‘I don’t know, love. We’ll have to ask the doctors.’

‘Can I speak to him?’

Mum pushes her spectacles up the bridge of her small, button-like nose. ‘They’ve given him a lot of medication and hooked him up to a ventilator, but I’m sure we’ll be able to go in and see him soon.’

We take a seat in the waiting room, which smells of sour milk. Mum puts an arm around me and asks if I’d like anything to drink, but I can’t face the idea. All I want is to talk to Dad.

A nurse comes over and tells us he needs to be flown to the burns unit in Bergen, but that it’s so busy at the moment that there isn’t an air ambulance available to take him. A few hours later they tell us he’s not stable enough to fly. They want to wait until the morning.

That evening, we’re finally allowed in to see him, but Mum tells me she wants to go in first. I stay where I am in the waiting room. Watch the nurses as they pass by. Patients. Relatives. They whisper. Stare at me. I pick at the plaster on my hand. By the time Mum finally comes back, she says they’re thinking about operating on him and that it’s best if I wait before going in to see him.

I don’t want to wait. I want to talk to Dad. It’ll be OK.

‘Did you ask the doctor about his hands?’ I ask.

‘I forgot. We’ll ask when we next see them.’

She strokes my cheek.

‘Dad’s strong,’ she says.

We sit in the waiting room all night, and I pray even though I don’t believe in God. I beg him to let Dads hands be OK. He could cope with some burns to his body, but his hands not working? It would be too much. Please, God. I’ll do even better at school. Help more around the house. Won’t slam doors behind me. I’ll believe in you.

A doctor wants to speak to us in the early hours. We’re shown into a room with tired-looking old chairs that groan when Mum and I sit down in them. The doctor is a short woman wearing red clogs. That must be a good sign. Dad’s always wearing clogs.

‘Are his hands badly hurt?’ I ask.

The doctor scrapes a chair along the floor and sits down opposite us, pressing her lips together.

‘I’m afraid I have some bad news. Børre has blood poisoning, which has led to organ failure. We’ve done all that we can, but unfortunately there’s nothing else that can be done.’

Mum squeezes my hand so hard that my scrapes sting, and all I can think about is what might have happened if we’d been rich. We could have flown Dad out to the US, the doctors there must be much better. The doctor in front of us tells us they did all they could, but that’s not true. It’s not true that they can’t do any more than they’ve already done.

I want to spit on her red shoes.

We’re allowed to go in to see him before they turn off his ventilator, but when I finally step into his room, ready to tell him everything that’s been running through my mind, I feel sure we’re in the wrong place. The grey sideburns and ponytail are all I recognise as I look at the man lying in the bed in front of us. His head has become swollen. His face is red, as if someone has ripped away the top layer of his skin, and there are small, fluid-filled, larve-like blisters all over his cheeks. His eyes are half-open, and no longer blue, there is a grey veil over them, and I feel something in my bones. Know that there’s no point in saying goodbye or telling him anything at all, because he’s no longer with us. His body and fists wrapped up in white bandages streaked with blood are just an empty shell.

As Mum strokes his hair and kisses his cracked lips, I stand by the bed in silence. The ventilator hisses rhythmically, and I have to swallow to stop myself from throwing up.

Nobody told me that death is so ugly.

Afterwards, we drive home. I don’t want to leave Dad, but the waiting room belongs to someone else now.

Mum grips the steering wheel and stares straight ahead, a hard expression on her face. I dig my nails into the grazes on my palms, but feel nothing,

*Why did you stop me from speaking to him!* I want to scream at her, but I can see how hard she’s trying to keep herself from bursting into tears.

Uncle Øystein and Iselin stop by with lasagne, but I don’t want to see them. I lie in bed, my curtains drawn, but whenever I close my eyes, I see his bloated, burned face. Hear the hissing of the ventilator.

That evening, a woman from the funeral home comes to see us. She’s tall and looks down at me. The blue spots of her blouse all merge together into one.

‘Do you want to place anything in his coffin?’ she asks me.

The only thing I can find is a shell. The one we chose last year, when Dad and I went to Geiranger together. An ordinary, white shell, more like grey, really, and a little less than perfect. I should have written something. Everything I never had the chance to say to him before his machine was turned off.

I pray more often.

Every night.

I ask Him to turn back time. Back to when Dad was standing there in my room in his clogs asking if we could sit down and talk about the trip that wasn’t going to happen. And I see myself agreeing. We sit down at the kitchen table. He makes us a drink and some sandwiches, makes a smiley face with slices of cucumber and pepper. We reminisce about our trips and laugh about the time I went into the wrong tent, and he says we can probably go away this summer after all. Then we talk some more. I ask if I can take my moped licence, even though Mum doesn’t want me to, and Mum joins us, too. She hasn’t gone to work after all, she’s left some of the other nurses to look after her crazy patients. Instead she sits in the kitchen with Dad and me and we drink juice together. They talk over each other, telling me all about the day I was born, a rainy day in March, just in front of the house in the back of Dad’s 1970 red Opel Record, which had refused to start up. Mum laughs, loud and hoarse, and pats Dad’s bum playfully. And I’m embarrassed, and Dad bursts out laughing when he sees me pulling a face. We talk for hours, so long that I’m late for my waffle-making session at the care home, and Dad arrives much later at The Barn. Maybe he doesn’t go at all. And there’s no accident.

But every time I open my eyes, I’m lying in my bed, one day closer to the funeral. I didn’t agree to that conversation. Mum was at work. It was just Dad and me at home. I was the only person who could have stopped him from going to The Barn. I was the only one who could have prevented the accident from happening. By just agreeing to have a chat. But instead I ran downstairs and slammed the door behind me, shouting to the universe that I never wanted to speak to him again.

Dear God. You’re a devil.

The day arrives. The one I’ve dreamed about for a year. The day we should have been leaving for Ireland. But I don’t put on my bike gear or sit on the back of the BMW; instead I force myself into an itchy black dress and sit down in the first row of the boiling hot, overcrowded church where everything around me melts into one. The smell of sweat. The sound of crying. Everyone apart from me. *What’s wrong with her*, they’re probably whispering behind me, the gossips.

Just in front of us, Dad is lying in a white box covered in red roses.

How can we be sure that it’s him?

That my shell is in there?

Perhaps the coffin is just as empty as I feel inside.

It’s lowered down into the black earth outside. In front of a white cross with his name on. *Børre Stav*. It must be someone else. The strange man who lay in the hospital bed.

‘Ashes to ashes, dust to dust…’

As the priest tosses dry earth onto the lid of the coffin and I try to push persistent thoughts of dad’s burned face from my mind, a familiar scent enters my nostrils. A combination of soap and oil, the same smell that always emanated from the bathroom after Dad had returned from The Barn and washed his hands. The scent is so intense that I grab Mum’s arm to stop me from losing my balance and tumbling down into the hole myself.

**Chapter 4**

The whining of Maisie’s wheel grates at my ears. The clock on my phone shows that it’s afternoon. The sheets are drenched, and I haul myself out of bed and into the bathroom, which is just opposite my bedroom. Hope that a shower might wash away my headache, but when I close the door, I realise that something is different. Dad’s dressing gown, which usually hangs on the back of the door, is gone. I go over to the sink. His toothbrush has disappeared too. I open the cupboard. His electric razor, all of his things, they’re gone.

I run downstairs, into the kitchen. Mum’s teacup is on the table along with a half-completed crossword. I hear something in the living room and am just on my way there when I catch sight of the naked fridge door. The pictures of Dad and I from when I was little. On the slide. At the cabin. On the motorbike just outside The Barn. They’re gone, all of them.

‘Mum?’ I find her leaning over a stack of cardboard boxes in the living room. ‘What are you doing?’ I ask.

She straightens up and smiles at me, wearing the floral dress she sewed herself. ‘Oh, I’m just tidying up a bit, love.’

The sofa is filled with Dad’s worn-out old jeans and t-shirts, as well as his dressing gown. His toiletries are on the dining table, along with his guitar. On the floor are piles of car magazines and motor manuals. Mum picks up a few and places them in a box. Quickly, decisively, like always, she always has to be doing something, always one step ahead.

‘The pictures on the fridge,’ I begin, but she stops me.

‘Later, maybe,’ she says, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose, as if trying to push back the tears that are on their way. ‘But not now, love.’

Her kind eyes look small behind her spectacles. She tries to smile it away, but the sadness is seared into the blue of her eyes.

‘Did you want anything?’ she asks, nodding in the direction of the boxes.

I want to object. She can’t clear away his things the day after his funeral, surely?

But if it means she’ll cry less at night, maybe it’s for the best.

I open a box, and the first thing I catch sight of is the picture of us on the motorbike in front of The Barn. Dad is smiling at me so happily, ready to leave on our trip. I close the box.

‘I don’t know, I…’

‘You don’t have to,’ she says. ‘Dad had so many strange things.’

Did he? Curiosity grips me and I open another box. I’m surprised. ‘What’s all this?’

She leans down to look. ‘Oh, Dad’s old records. LPs, you know?’ She laughs. ‘That’s how we played music when we were your age.’

There must be at least forty records there. I pick one up. ‘The Cure’, it says on the cover.

‘I’ve never seen these before,’ I say.

‘Uncle Øystein collected a few boxes from the office in The Barn. There’s so much in there we need to go through.’ She sighs, as if it’s an insurmountable task.

I pick up several records. Some of the cardboard sleeves are faded. There are a few old t-shirts with different band logos on them. Black, every one of them.

‘Can I have them?’ I ask.

‘The t-shirts?’

‘All of it. These and the records.’

‘Of course, but you might not think much of the music.’ She picks up one of the records and studies it with a distant expression. ‘We listened to this one the summer we first met. It was just as hot then as it is now…’

She’s mentioned that a lot over the past few months. That the only time in history that it’s been this hot and dry in our village was the summer that she and Dad started going out, back in 1991.

She looks as if she’s about to say more, but then I hear footsteps on the veranda and a familiar, cheerful-sounding man’s voice says: ‘Hello?’

Uncle Øystein’s smiling face appears in the doorway. ‘We’ve brought some coffee cakes. Iselin made them.’

‘Hi, Auntie Vivi.’ Iselin appears from behind his back, and Mum puts the records back and accepts a hug and the bag filled with cakes.

‘Oh, lovely,’ she says, smiling, casting a glance at Uncle Øystein’s police uniform. ‘I thought you were off work today?’

‘I need to do the late shift. The case files are heating up, just like the weather these days,’ he says with a chuckle, removing his police hat.

His fine, red hair is flat against his head, a good representation of what he’s like, really. No powerful emotions, just a flat voice delivering the same dry, old jokes. The only thing not flat about him is his clothing, which always looks crumpled.

Mum forces a laugh.

‘We’re just having a bit of a tidy,’ she says, nodding in the direction of the boxes.

‘Have you found it?’ Uncle Øystein asks her.

‘No. It must be gone.’

‘What?’ I ask.

‘Dad’s phone,’ Mum explains. ‘It probably disappeared in all the chaos at The Barn, but it doesn’t matter.’

‘My colleagues investigating the case haven’t found it either,’ Uncle Øystein says.

‘Investigating the case?’ I repeat. ‘Don’t they think it was an accident?’

‘Of course it was an accident,’ Mum replies.

‘But the police are duty-bound to investigate any accidents,’ Uncle Øystein says, as if rattling off a phrase from a textbook. ‘And the BMW engine, it was always playing up.’

Mum smiles away the tears that are beginning to show. ‘Coffee?’

‘Oh, perfect! Coffee is the best antidote to this heatwave, if you ask me!’ Uncle Øystein says, stifling a yawn, before they both disappear into the kitchen.

Iselin stands there. She’s wearing a short, yellow summer dress, and her hair has been plaited in two complex braids she must have spent hours doing. I haven’t actually spoken to her since the accident. I’ve been avoiding her, haven’t been able to face speaking to anyone, I’ve just gone around in the same pink tracksuit I’m wearing now, and during the funeral yesterday I spent most of my time staring at the floor and holding my tongue.

Luckily she speaks first.

‘What’s that?’ she asks, pointing at the records.

‘Dad’s stuff.’ I close the lid of the box, and it strikes me how little I actually know about Dad. I thought he only liked Irish music, and now there’s a box right here in front of me that might just as well belong to a stranger.

Iselin fiddles with one of her hair ties. ‘Do you want any help tidying up?’

I cast a glance in the direction of the kitchen and hear the clinking of coffee cups.

I lower my voice. ‘Want to come to The Barn with me?’

She squints at me, a little cynical now. ‘Why?’

‘We’re going out,’ I shout towards the kitchen as I pull her with me.

**Chapter 5**

‘How many times do I have to say it?’ Iselin moans. ‘His phone isn’t here.’

We’re standing close to one another, just inside the closed front door at The Barn. I let my gaze wander in the direction of the workshop before us. There are car parts and tools everywhere. Spanners. Sockets. Drills. Screwdrivers. All over shelves and old chests of drawers. It’s so long since I was last here, and everything feels so unfamiliar. Smaller. But the smell is the same. Oil. Metal. Exhaust fumes. Smells that trigger fragments of memories, from the time before I started school and Mum suddenly found out that it wasn’t good for me to be here with all of these troublemakers. Memories from when I sat on the floor sorting screws. Or drawing - cars, mostly. When I held the hose for Dad as he washed the BMW. When he squirted water at me. When we played hide-and-seek behind the old cars.

But there’s also an unfamiliar smell here.

A burnt smell.

‘Maybe they haven’t been looking hard enough,’ I say, and step to one side so she won’t realise that I’m trembling.

In the middle of the room on the solid concrete floor, four eyes glare at us. The makes are all I recognise. The black one without a bonnet is a Buick Wildcat. The red cabriolet is a Chevrolet Impala. Both are rusty and missing several parts, they must be fifty years old, at least. Two silent veterans sitting on the details of what happened here. Everything I’ve been wondering. Everything I ought to know.

‘We’ve looked everywhere,’ she says.

‘We?’ I say, turning to look at her, and she gazes at me, looking miserable.

‘Well, yeah, I was with Dad the day the accident happened,’ she says. ‘Your mum asked us to look for it. And it’s not here. I promise.’

I stare at her. So Mum gives *her* permission to be here, but I’m told off on the rare occasion that I sneak here in the hope of having some time alone with Dad?

A scratching sound causes me to turn my gaze to the small kitchen area in one of the far corners of the workshop, where a tired-looking, brown leather sofa has been pushed up against the wall. Behind it is a tall, narrow staircase leading to the loft, where I remember nobody was allowed to go.

Iselin follows my gaze and wraps her arms around herself.

‘Come on, we’re going,’ she says, but I head further into the windowless workshop, can’t be bothered to explain that the whole thing with the mobile was a lie and that I just wanted to see what it looks like here now. See *what*’s here. See if there are more boxes filled with unknown fragments of Dad’s life.

My sneakers echo on the concrete floor beneath the high ceiling and I try not to think about the fact that it was here, actually *here*, that he started dying. Instead I march purposefully in the direction of the office in the other far corner of the space, beside the locker room, and stop in front of the dirty windows. His motorbike gear is hanging up on the back of the door, and I picture Dad poking his head out, surprised to see me here, only to break into an enormous, warm smile and enthusiastically show me round.

But that doesn’t happen.

So I head into the office, and Iselin follows.

‘I just want to have a look around while I’m here,’ I tell her.

Iselin leans against the door frame and looks down at her phone.

‘Hurry up, then,’ she grunts, and I think to myself that if everything had been as it was before, she’d have objected loudly, commented on how ugly my tracksuit is, maybe, but she’s reined it in, and I wonder how long this will last.

The office is smaller than I remember. An untidy shelf with folders of various colours. An old desk overflowing with stacks of paper, and on top of it all, a well-used mug, the words on the side almost entirely faded now: *World’s Best Dad*. On the wall behind the desk is a large picture of him beside his BMW. He must be around my age and is grinning proudly. His hair is in a ponytail, but there’s no sign of any sideburns.

The office chair complains when I sit on it. There’s a worn patch of floor beneath it, from all the hours his clogs must have rested there. I open a drawer. It’s filled with nuts and bolts and other thingamajigs I don’t know by name. The other drawers are also full of tat. All apart from the bottom one, the biggest one. There are books inside. On the top of the pile: a travel guide to Ireland. A reminder of how things could have been right now. Me, on the back of the motorbike, my head nestled safely against his back as we whizz along through the green landscape all around us.

The book looks brand new. I leaf through it to see if he’s circled anything he thought we should do, but it’s devoid of any notes, and the spine is stiff, as if this is the first time it’s ever been opened. I pull the other books out of the drawer. Car manuals. But at the very bottom, something else. A wooden board. I pull it out.

‘What’s that?’ Iselin asks, waking up and gazing at the board with curiosity as I hold it in one hand.

‘I don’t know,’ I say. ‘Is it some kind of game?’

I place it on the table, and together we study it more closely. The board is made of a thick plank of wood and looks old, really old. Light-brown in colour, it looks slightly tatty, its splintered corners almost entirely worn away. Large, black, elegant block letters have been painted onto the board, the whole alphabet over two lines, and on a third line, the numbers 0 to 9. In the top corners are the words *Yes* and *No*.

‘Isn’t that a… no. Forget it.’ Iselin stops herself.

‘A what?’ I ask.

‘I don’t know, nothing.’

‘Say it.’

She hesitates.

‘Come on,’ I say. ‘What is it?’

‘It looks like one of those, oh, what do you call them… one of those boards people use to communicate with the dead. I’ve seen it before, in a film. But it looked a bit different to that one.’

‘But what’s it doing here?’

She looks just as confused as I feel.

I lean in a little closer to the board, stroke a finger over the letters, surprised at how warm they feel, then the room goes dark.

‘Hey, what are you doing?’ I look over at Iselin, but I’m surrounded by nothing but darkness. ‘Turn the light back on! Iselin?’

‘It wasn’t me!’ she whispers, right beside me. ‘Oh God… there’s someone else here…’

I get up and pull my phone out of my back pocket, turn on the torch and try to hold it steady. Catch sight of her big, dark eyes.

‘Maybe it was somebody in the loft?’ she whispers and turns her own phone torch on too. She directs the beam of light into the workshop through the window, but it only reflects back at us.

‘Hello? Is anyone there?’ she calls.

I listen. All I can hear is the hum of a fridge.

‘The power can’t have gone out,’ I point out, attempting to settle on some explanation.

‘Maybe someone saw us coming here and decided to try and scare us?’ Iselin says, getting herself worked up at the idea. ‘The people who work here, they’re all crazy.’ She shouts into the workshop: ‘Hello! That’s not funny!’

‘We’ll go and turn the light back on,’ I tell her, and we hurry over to the entrance.

Iselin holds onto my arm, pushing me ahead while she shines her torch all around us.

‘Are you complete cowards or what?’ she bellows.

I find the switch on the wall. The fluorescent lights overhead flash a few times before revealing the truth, that it’s just us and the silent old veterans here.

‘They probably legged it back outside,’ Iselin fumes.

‘Maybe I didn’t push the light switch hard enough when we came in,’ I said. ‘Maybe it turned itself back off, and…’ I get no further before a high-pitched noise tears through the room, and I howl.

I stop abruptly when I realise that the noise is coming from Iselin’s phone, and she stifles her laughter before replying to a message.

‘I have to go,’ she says. ‘Norton is waiting for me at the petrol station.’

‘Do you need to go right *now*?’

‘Mhmm. We’re going for a ride before I start work. Is that OK?’

She can’t leave me here, not now.

‘Yes, yes, of course,’ I tell her, not expecting her to invite me along.

Ever since Norton turned eighteen in the winter, they’re been zooming around on his motorbike together, a Norton, of course, which he got after spending a short while at The Barn a few years ago. He was probably struggling at school because of dyslexia or something, getting into trouble and all that, but Dad helped him to get back on track, and now he’s getting top marks at college and plans on training to be a PE teacher. One of the many happy endings after spending time here, which most people have forgotten because there have been so many less favourable episodes.

‘You haven’t told Norton that we’re here?’ I say.

‘No.’

‘And you didn’t tell Mum, either? Or Uncle Øystein?’

‘No,’ she replies with a groan. ‘Stop being such a child about things. Don’t you trust me?’

I pull my gaze away. Down. Realise that I’m standing on a large stain on the floor. And in that moment, I realise that it was here that the BMW caught fire. This was where Dad burned.

‘I’m going now too,’ I say, bounding towards the small doorway.

‘What about the board?’

‘What about it?’

‘Aren’t you going to put it back, so your mum doesn’t realise that you’ve been here?’

Her phone beeps again. ‘Sorry, I have to go.’

She disappears out of the door and I look over at the office. At the motorbike leathers on the back of the door, as if it were him hanging there, abandoned. I have no idea when Mum was last at The Barn, whether she knows what’s here, but even so, just to be cautious, I run back into the office and grab the board lying on the desk. The heat of the letters creeps through my skin, and I look down at the worn-out surface covered in symbols. *Yes* or *No*.

I grab a carrier bag from the shelf and stuff the board inside it.

**Chapter 6**

I decide to take the path along by Homla on my way home. The river the village was named after. There’s hardly any water left in it. The pool by the suspension bridge just down from The Barn is so small and shallow that it’s no longer possible to swim there.

The bag with the board inside dangles from my handlebars and fills me with a strange sense of hope, but also with questions, because what was Dad doing with something like this? I’m immersed in my own thoughts when I suddenly hear the clanking of bottles and a man comes rushing towards me on his bike. I have to turn sharply to one side to avoid crashing into him. It’s Bottle Man. A weirdo around Dad’s age with wispy, fine hair and stained jogging bottoms. Through summer and winter alike, he cycles around on a dilapidated, old, red woman’s bicycle with a metal basket on the handlebars, collecting any empty bottles he can find to take them for recycling, spending the change he receives in return for them on who knows what. When I turn around to look at him, I meet his piercing gaze, then he pushes harder on his pedals and flees around a curve in the path, his ancient, orange headphones on his head.

I push harder on my own pedals, too. Off the path and onto the roads. Past gaping windows. Dry, brown, singed gardens. The graveyard. I avoid looking at it. Take the route through the centre of the village to clear my head as the bag bumps against my knees. Iselin and Norton aren’t at the petrol station. I cycle along the main street. There’s nobody to be seen, they’re probably cooling off by the water’s edge, which is just beyond the shimmering train tracks that extend around the bay. Not that there was really that much to do around here before the heatwave. The old folks at the home love to talk about how many shops and businesses there were around here back in the day, when Hommelvik was a leading industrial hotspot with a timber mill and a boat-building yard. Now the supermarket is practically all that’s left, and I take the cycle route that weaves its way behind it, making my way up the little hill to Mogjerdet. I pull up in front of the only blue house on the estate. A two-storey block that dad grew up in along with one of the labourers from the timber mill, my grandfather, who drank so much homebrew that it ultimately spelled the end for him.

It’s silent inside the house. Neither Mum nor Uncle Øystein are here. The living room has been tidied up and the cardboard boxes have been packed away. Dad’s armchair is the only thing of his that remains. It’s positioned with its back to me, looking out of the window, and I picture him sitting there on the evenings he didn’t spend at The Barn, his head brimming with thoughts I didn’t involve myself in, or with his guitar on his lap, singing some Irish tune or another. ‘The Unicorn’. The lullaby he used to sing to me when I was little. A song about one of the most beautiful creatures of them all, which never made it onto Noah’s ark because it was too busy playing in the rain. Mum had wondered if I’d wanted to play it at the funeral, but I’d declined, I wanted to keep it for myself.

I go over to the chair, run my fingers over the blue velvet before quickly spinning it around.

The chair is still empty.

I take the carrier bag and make my way upstairs. I stop in front of Mum’s bedroom, which is between my room and her sewing room. Listen carefully.

She’s sobbing quietly tonight, too.

I go into my room, close the door behind me. I place the bag on the bed. I stand there and look at it for a while before taking the board out. Now I can smell something on it too. Something sour. Or burnt, maybe?

I sit on the bed and start searching online, and it’s not long before I find out that Iselin was right. It’s the kind of board people use to communicate with the dead. A spirit board, also known as a Ouija board. It looks older and more homemade than the ones being sold online, they all have symbols like moons and suns and stars on them.

I pick up the board, but the sour smell makes me feel sick. Or is it the thought that Dad might have used it? For what?

I place it back inside the bag and shove it under my bed.

Instead I look in the two cardboard boxes that Mum has left in my room. Dad’s old LPs and t-shirts are lying in one. A record player and two small speakers are inside the other.

I connect them. Pick up a record. I don’t know how it’s supposed to work at first, but a quick search helps me to figure it out. I play several records. It makes a grating sound. A few records are really bad, but others are OK. Good, actually. I lie down on my bed, under the lightweight, summer duvet and listen to them over and over again. Wonder which record Dad listened to the most. What his favourite song was.

When I wake up, the music has stopped. It’s silent. Even the birds outside are quiet. I try to find my phone to see what time it is when I catch the scent of something familiar – that combination of soap and oil – and I jump when I see a man sitting by my bed. He’s in the desk chair. I blink a few times to check that it isn’t just a pile of clothing that looks like a figure in the darkness, but it *is* a man. A man with thick, greying sideburns, and medium-length hair in a ponytail. And when he turns to look at me – an anguished expression on his burned, bloated face, his eyes alive with a deep-rooted sense of fear – I let out a terrified howl.

I don’t stop until Mum barges into my room at speed.

‘Rebekka! What’s wrong?’

Mum looks all around as she stretches her arms out in front of her, as if she were waiting for someone to attack, no doubt unable to see a thing without her glasses on. ‘What is it, Rebekka?’

When I look back at the desk chair, Dad is gone.

‘It… was just a nightmare,’ I stutter.

‘My God, I thought someone had broken in…’ she says, her slender shoulders relaxing.

My poor Mum. She seems so worn out, standing there in her thin nightdress, wearing just one sock. Her hair is all in a tangle.

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,’ I say, grabbing my phone, pretending to busy myself with something.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ she sighs. ‘Do you want me to get you a glass of water?’

I shake my head and lie back down in bed.

‘I just want to sleep,’ I tell her, turning my back to her, and I hear her stand there for a while before she shuffles back out.

As she closes the door, I jump up and out of bed. I pull up the blind so the bright summer evening light can filter in.

I push the desk chair under my desk and leave the door ajar before sitting on top of the bed with the duvet wrapped around me. Don’t dare close my eyes. Don’t dare even move.

I sit there like that.

All night long.

Just me and the creaking walls of the house.

**Chapter 7**

At around seven o’clock I hear Mum locking the bathroom door, and I make my way down to the kitchen. I turn on the local radio news station, where yet another a panel of experts is busy arguing about whether the summer heatwave is part of a natural cycle of events or the result of man-made climate change. The presenter tries making a joke about all the homebrew equipment in the region doing something to the atmospheric pressure, but the humourless researchers remain silent.

I go to fetch myself a glass of water, do my best to hold it still under the tap, but it slips from my grasp and lands in the sink with a crash, and in that same moment I hear Mum’s voice behind me: ‘You can’t go running the water for that long.’

She comes marching into the kitchen. She’s wearing make-up and a floral blouse. Her hair is loose, neatly combed. Her thick-rimmed glasses are firmly planted on her nose.

‘You need to remember that there are water supply restrictions,’ she warns me, turning off the tap.

‘Where are you going?’

‘To work.’ Her tone is exaggeratedly animated, as if to underline that it’s obvious she’d be off to work now. ‘It’ll be good for us to have something to do,’ she says, pulling a lunchbox she presumably prepared yesterday out of the fridge. ‘Did you manage to get back to sleep after your nightmare?’

I hide my shaking hands behind my back. ‘Mmm.’

‘That’s good. Iselin’s free today, isn’t she? You two could pop down to the shore. I’ll transfer you some money so you can get yourselves something nice to eat.’ She sticks her lunchbox inside her leather bag and kisses me on the cheek. ‘Don’t shower for too long, remember. I’ll see you at dinnertime.’

And with that, she’s gone.

I take a long shower, trying to wash away my headache, the nightmare, because that’s what it was, just a dream. I scrub my skin until it’s red raw, but I can’t scrub Dad’s anguished, swollen face from my memory, it’s burned itself into my retinas, and then an idea forces its way to the forefront of my mind. The idea that there might be a way to tell him everything I never had the chance to before his ventilator was turned off. And if I can say those things, perhaps his burned face will stop haunting me?

I go to my room and pull the bag out from under my bed. I place the spirit board on top of the duvet, then jump when I see a large mark in the middle of the board, as if the letters have melted together. When I look closer, I can see that it’s a butterfly. I try shooing it away, but it doesn’t budge. Carefully I pick it up, and it moves its wings, but sits still in my hand, and I feel a warmth creep into my skin.

I hurry to the window and pop it out through the gap. Once outside it gives a few quick flaps before fluttering away.

I go back to my bed and take a picture of the spirit board, then send it to Iselin. *Want to try it?*

It’s an hour before I receive a response. She’s here. When I open the front door, she doesn’t seem to register the fact that my pink top is almost identical to the one she’s wearing.

‘Did you bring the board home?’

I nod.

‘Why?’

‘Because I want to try it.’

‘Are you mad?’

I shrug. ‘I’m just curious. And I’ve read online that you shouldn’t do it alone.’

Iselin blinks quickly two or three times.

‘It’s not dangerous,’ I tell her with a smile, maybe mostly to reassure myself. ‘What’s the worst that can happen, eh?’

I can see that she doesn’t want to do it, but I also know that she doesn’t want to risk being thought of as more cowardly than me.

‘OK,’ she says. ‘We’ll do it in the bathroom. In that film I saw, they said it had to be completely dark.’

Ten minutes later we’re on our knees on the cold tiled floor. The door is closed and the light is off. A stubby candle illuminates the spirit board in front of us, and in the middle of the letters is a glass turned upside down.

I read aloud from my phone, instructions I found online: ‘We need to place a finger on the glass.’

I put my right index finger on the glass. Iselin hesitates. The flicker of the candlelight casts dark shadows across her face. She does the same as me.

‘Then what?’ she asks, trying as hard as she can to appear relaxed, just like I’m trying to do.

I read on: ‘It says that first you have to say that you want to make contact with positive forces, and that negative forces aren’t welcome.’

‘Well, go on then, say it.’

The candle flickers.

‘And stop breathing over the candle!’ she blurts out.

‘I’m not!’ I tell her, and I can hear that my voice is giving away just how nervous I really am.

We both stare at the flame flickering before us.

‘Just say those things,’ she whispers. ‘Hurry up.’

I place my phone down and launch into it before my brain gains the upper hand. ‘We only want to communicate with positive forces…’ It feels so silly saying it out loud. ‘Negative forces aren’t welcome,’ I add.

The glass is still.

Iselin shuffles.

I try to remember what else it said in the instructions.

‘Is there anyone here?’ I whisper.

The glass remains still.

‘Say it louder,’ Iselin says.

‘Is there anyone here?’ I repeat, louder this time.

The candle stops flickering.

‘Is there anyone…’ I begin, but stop when the glass suddenly moves, and I have to stretch my arm so that my finger remains in contact with it. Slowly it glides to the left side of the board and stops on *Yes*.

Iselin opens her mouth without making a sound.

I press my finger harder on the glass so she won’t notice that I’m shaking.

She nudges me. ‘What do we do now?’

I shake my head.

‘Ask who it is,’ she says, but I can’t say a word, so she takes over. ‘What’s your name?’

The glass doesn’t move.

‘What’s your name?’ she asks again, but the glass remains stock still.

‘You ask.’ She nudges me again and I swallow. My throat feels so tight.

‘What’s… what’s your name?’ I whisper.

The glass starts moving slowly across the board, first to one letter, then to the next. I read the word it spells out to myself: H E L P.

‘Oh my God,’ Iselin whispers. ‘Are you moving the glass?’

‘No. Are you?’

‘No!’

The glass vibrates gently. I feel a headache coming on and suddenly need the toilet.

‘Why do you need help?’ I whisper to the glass.

The glass moves again. Quickly from one letter to the next.

‘What’s he saying?’ Iselin asks.

‘Don’t be scared.’

Iselin sends me a stern look. ‘I’m not scared.’

‘That’s what the board said,’ I tell her. ‘Don’t be scared.’

‘*You’re* the one who’s scared,’ she snorts. ‘Look at you, you’re shaking.’

I press down hard on the glass until my fingertip turns white. ‘I’m not.’ My face is prickling.

‘Ask what he’s called again,’ Iselin says.

I hesitate.

‘Surely you want to know if it’s Uncle Børre you’re talking to?’ she continues.

I straighten myself up. Don’t dare do it, but I have to.

‘What’s your name?’ I blurt out, loud and clear.

The glass moves again, and when it stops on the letter B, I feel a burning gaze at the nape of my neck and leap to my feet, jump over towards the door and turn on the light.

‘This is stupid,’ I say. ‘Do you want to go down to the shore?’

**Chapter 8**

Norton is standing on the driveway as we make our way outside. He’s leaning against his motorbike, a silver-grey Norton Big 4. There’s a fishing rod poking out of his motorcycle pannier.

‘Is Norton coming down to the shore too?’ I ask her, surprised that she’s invited him along.

‘No, he and I are going for a ride instead. It’s so hot.’

Norton waves and she waves sweetly back at him. Standing there beside his motorbike, he’s the spitting image of Dad in the picture hanging up at The Barn. Except the fact that Norton’s hair is short and brown, and he’s always wearing exercise gear.

‘See you later, then?’ I say.

‘I’m working later,’ Iselin replies.

She runs over to Norton. Kisses him and giggles before putting on the red vintage helmet he passes her. Norton revs the engine a few times and I see the cloud of dust they leave in their wake, hearing the roar of the engine as it fades in the distance.

I toss my towel down on the grass and cycle to the supermarket.

It must have been Iselin who moved the glass, I think to myself. Of course it was. But something tells me that not even she would mess around with something like that at a time like this.

It’s quiet and cool in the supermarket. A few pensioners prop themselves up against their shopping trolleys as they wind their way around the shop, selecting the few items they need. Everything is moving so, *so* slowly, and it strikes me how unfair everything is; why couldn’t one of them have died instead of Dad? They both already have one foot in the grave.

My headache is making it painful to blink, and I grab a cold can of cola. I change my mind and go for an ice tea instead.

‘You can’t put that there!’ a hot-tempered voice growls.

It’s Adolf, our grumpy old next-door neighbour, she’s been working in the supermarket since the day she was born. She shoves me aside and puts the cola back on the right shelf. Her name is actually Adolfsen, but she’s got such a strict system when it comes to the items on the shelves here, everything has to be lined up perfectly. Some people claim that she’s got a funny black moustache just like her namesake, that she shaves it every morning. I can’t see any moustache, just a wrinkled old face.

‘Anything else?’ she snorts.

‘No.’

She takes the bottle of ice tea from me and makes for the till. Her back is stooped, as if she were using her head to butt anything out of the way that might be blocking her path. She scans the bottle and waits for me to pay. I fumble as I try to pull my bank card out of my pocket with her glowering at me in her usual way.

‘I never liked your father,’ she says. ‘But it’s sad he went the way he did.’

I concentrate on pulling out my card and paying. Even though Adolf lives in the house next door to ours, she’s barely spoken to me before today, apart from giving me a hard time if I’ve ever disrupted her messed-up system here at the supermarket. She’s never acknowledged me. Never smiled. Maybe because I once rang her doorbell during a game of ‘chap door run away’ when I was younger, and she flew into a rage because I knocked over a flower pot on her step. Dad forced me to go and apologise afterwards, but she wasn’t any the nicer to me for it.

‘Nothing good has ever come from The Barn,’ she whinges. ‘Everyone who comes in here says so. It’s just been one misfortune after another down there. It’s brought shame on the village, so it has!’

One of the pensioners behind me in the queue nods in agreement. All of a sudden it feels as if everyone in the supermarket is staring at me. Reproachful. And I’m sure I can hear them whispering amongst themselves: *Oh, she’s the daughter of that idiot who burnt to a crisp down at The Barn*.

I grab my ice tea, want to hiss back that it’s true what Dad sang about in The Unicorn, the beautiful always die first. The ugly and mean people are left behind. The ones who mean nothing to anybody. Adolf’s only grandson died last winter, and her daughter never visits her.

But instead I mumble thanks, of all things, and on my way out I bump into Bottle Man, who comes bounding through the door clutching full bags of empty bottles.

‘Watch where you’re going!’ I snap at him before hopping on my bicycle.

I want to go swimming, but I can’t face the prospect of more dirty looks, so instead I traipse around restlessly, up and down the streets for hours as I wonder if I might have been moving the glass myself. I could smell Dad when I was standing by his coffin, saw him by my bed, I feel his burning gaze at the nape of my neck all because I so badly want to talk to him again. Is it really possible to want something so badly that you actually start to see it?

Mum’s white Opel Astra is parked on the driveway when I get home that evening, and when I place my hand on the bonnet and feel that the engine is cold, I realise that dinner will be too.

It’s silent in the house.

‘Hello? Mum?’

I make my way into the kitchen. I’m surprised not to see any leftovers on the table. I head further inside, but she’s not sitting at the table doing a crossword either. She must have gone to bed early today, too. A sign that she wants to be left in peace. I shuffle upstairs. I push down my bedroom door handle gently before slowly opening the door, irritated by the way it creaks, afraid that I might wake her.

I’m ready to dive into bed myself, but as I step foot in my room, every single cell in my body explodes. My room is unrecognisable. My desk has been turned inside out. My chair is upside down in one corner of the room. There are books and papers all over the floor, torn to pieces. My wardrobe is wide open with my clothes scattered all around. My little shelf has been broken in two, and all of my shells are scattered across the floor. My bed is a mess, with the sheets and duvet ripped off, and there on the edge sits Mum, her spectacles resting in her lap.

Her eyes are red and puffy.

I want to speak, but the words feel stuck.

Mum sighs deeply before standing up and placing her spectacles on her nose.

‘It’d be good if you could tidy up after yourself,’ she says, stroking my cheek. ‘Things will get better, Rebekka. I promise.’

She slides past me and I want to grab her, shout that there must have been a break-in, that she has to call the police, but as the door closes behind me, I realise my arms are hanging by my sides and my lips are sealed. I’ve done nothing but stand and stare at the sight before me, paralysed.

At that moment a shadow emerges from beneath the bed and I leap back – until I realise that it’s Maisie. I grab her and hug her tight, don’t know which of us is shaking the most. I lean down and peer under the bed. The bag containing the spirit board is lying just where I left it. It’s the only thing in the room that’s been left untouched.

**Chapter 9**

All of the shells have been crushed to pieces. I try gluing them back together. The shell from the beach in Lofoten. The snail shell from Stavern. The mussel shell from Kristiansand. They’re all in such a state that I have no choice but to give up. I throw them away and fill Maisie’s water bottle. Her cage had been turned on its side and left in one corner of the room, but now she’s happily running around inside her wheel as if nothing had happened. I want to run too, away from all the questions that are sending my pulse racing: who’s done this, and why?

I spend hours tidying up.

All the while I have a sense that someone is watching me.

I open the door several times to check if my mum is standing outside, spying on me, but she’s not there. There’s no burglar hiding inside my wardrobe either, and no ladders outside my bedroom window to suggest that somebody might have climbed up and in.

I don’t touch the bag with the spirit board inside it.

And when Mum finally goes to bed, after a quick goodnight at my bedroom door, I go downstairs. I check the windows and doors. There’s no sign of any break-in. And I know that I locked the front door behind me when Iselin and I left. I tried the handle, just to double check, just like I always do.

I collapse onto the sofa. It’s still light outside, but soon it’ll be dusk, for a short while at least, then night will follow, just as bright as before. The dark never truly takes hold outside.

I try watching TV, but I feel a piercing gaze from the walls around me, so I check behind all the doors yet again. Inside every cupboard. Underneath the sofa. I even check the fridge and freezer. There’s no one here.

I want to sneak into Mum’s room, into her bed, under her duvet, and feel her prickly legs against mine, like I used to when I was younger. But instead I close all the curtains, turn on all the lights and lose myself in a game on my phone.

I jump at the slightest sound. A mosquito buzzing around my ears. The fridge humming. The tap in the bathroom dripping.

I don’t sleep, but I pretend to be dozing when Mum gets up at around seven to go to work. I wonder about sending a message to Iselin, but I spend two hours trying to work out the right words to use and end up not sending anything at all. I hop in the shower to get my head straight, but I feel dizzy and realise that I have to eat something, I can’t remember the last time I ate.

I pull on the same clothes as I wore yesterday to avoid going back into my bedroom, but on my way downstairs I suddenly stop in my tracks.

I’m not alone.

A strange guy is making his way towards the kitchen. He’s tall, and wearing a pale linen shirt and shorts, with a straw hat on his head. He stops too, stares at me.

I stare back at him.

His eyes are pale green. His eyebrows are much darker than his curly, blond hair, which sticks out from under the brim of his hat.

I wonder if it’s best for me to run back to the bathroom and lock myself in, or to head for the bedroom and jump out of the window, but all of a sudden Iselin appears behind him.

‘Hey, the door was open and we could hear you were in the shower.’

My gaze shifts from Iselin to the guy staring at me. I try to wrap my head around how the two of them have suddenly become *we*.

Iselin forces a smile. ‘This is Martin, by the way. His mum is one of my mum’s friends.’

‘Could I get a glass of water, please?’ His voice is deep but smooth, with a sing-song northern dialect, and I can’t get a word out before he carries on: ‘I’ll fetch it myself.’

He boldly makes his own way into the kitchen and Iselin bounds in my direction looking upset. ‘Guess what? He’s going to be staying with us all summer, no warning, just like that!’

‘But why?’

‘Because Mum arranged it with his mum. So now I have to spend all summer babysitting!’ she barks.

‘Babysitting?’ I repeat. ‘He looks older than both of us.’

I hear the glasses clinking in the kitchen and she lowers her voice. ‘He’s the same age, but he’s been in hospital for a few years.’

‘Hospital?’

‘A *psychiatric* hospital in Mosjøen or somewhere like that. So now he needs to get away from it all and make some new friends.’ She pulls a face. ‘Mum says it’s an urgent situation. They discharged him yesterday, and Dad doesn’t have the guts to do anything but agree to whatever she says.’

I hear the tap running in the kitchen and lower my voice too. ‘Why was he in hospital in the first place?’

‘No idea. But he didn’t say *a single word* to me on the way over here. And have you seen his stupid hat?’ she hisses. ‘I mean, I’m supposed to be working this summer, I don’t want him hanging around Norton and I whenever I have any free time.’

‘Your mum can’t force you to hang out with him.’

‘But what else am I supposed to do?’ She pulls a miserable face and I know what she’s fishing for.

‘I’m busy,’ I tell her, doing my best to sound firm.

‘Doing what?’

I search for a good excuse, but at once I feel the same piercing gaze from the walls around me burning at the nape of my neck.

‘It’d do you good to have something to do, anyway,’ she says, taking me by the arm. She smiles teasingly. ‘Maybe he can help you lose your virginity this summer?’

‘Ha, ha.’

‘Please, Rebekka. Help me out here!’ She shakes my arm and I rub my neck; it’s burning. ‘Do you know what happened yesterday?’ I blurt out. ‘My room was trashed.’

She gasps. ‘Was there a break-in? Last night?’

‘No. Not a break-in. It happened after we used the spirit board.’

She laughs. ‘Oh, come *on*. Is that the best excuse you could think up to avoid helping me out?’

‘It’s true! The doors and windows were all fine, and it was *just* my room. Everything had been thrown around or broken. The only thing left untouched was the spirit board under the bed.’

All of a sudden she looks serious. ‘Don’t joke about that.’

‘I’m not!’

‘Did you two forget to say adieu?’ a dark voice chips in, and we both spin around.

Martin is leaning against the panelling with a glass of water in one hand, and I’m unsure how long he’s been standing there.

‘Adieu?’ Iselin splutters. ‘What language do you speak, exactly?’

‘It’s important to say adieu before one leaves,’ he continues, impervious to her sarcastic tone. ‘Otherwise the door is left wide open.’ He smiles. There’s a dimple in his left cheek.

‘What door?’ I blurt out before Iselin has a chance to speak.

‘The door to the Other Side. The dimension of The Dead,’ he says.

‘And how exactly would you know that?’ Iselin replies mockingly.

‘I thought everyone knew that,’ he says, taking a big gulp of water as he holds her gaze.

‘And what happens if you don’t close it?’ I ask.

‘Anyone could come through,’ he replies.

‘Anyone?’

‘Not just positive forces.’

‘Oh my God, what a load of nonsense!’ Iselin says, rolling her eyes without caring that he can see.

‘I don’t think Rebekka thinks that it’s nonsense that her room was trashed,’ he says. ‘That would be enough to scare me to death.’

He meets my gaze, so direct that I look down. There’s a yellow stain at the bottom of his linen shirt.

‘Don’t listen to him,’ Iselin says, and I know she wants to add *he’s crazy*. And maybe he is, but even so. What he says offers some explanation as to why my room was trashed.

‘How do *you* explain my room being left in such a state, then?’ I ask Iselin.

‘Maybe your mum wanted to check if you’d started drinking or smoking,’ she says with a smirk, and I want to tell her that I found Mum perched on the edge of my bed, all cried out, but I let it be. I don’t think Mum would want other people to know about that side of her.

‘Did you two make contact with anyone yesterday, then?’ Martin asks.

His eyes, there’s something about them.

‘It might be a good idea to check who, if so,’ he continued. ‘Just so it doesn’t happen again.’

‘Are you some sort of expert on all this, then?’ Iselin says, no longer trying to hide her dislike for him. ‘Mr Ouija, or something?’

I wait for him to say something, but he falls silent. I nudge Iselin.

‘Maybe it’s a good idea for us to try once more?’ I say. ‘Just so I can sleep easy in my own room again.’ I make out as if I’m joking about the last part, but perhaps she can see through me, because she sighs.

‘Fine,’ she says. ‘For your sake.’

‘Can I join in?’ Martin asks.

‘It’s not for wimps,’ Iselin says.

‘Maybe you should give it a miss, then?’ he replies, and I bite my lip to keep myself from smiling.

We make our way into the bathroom. Iselin lights the candle. Martin sits down opposite us and gazes at the spirit board with interest.

‘Whose board is this?’ he asks. ‘It looks old.’

I hesitate.

‘We found it at The Barn,’ Iselin blurts out.

Martin says no more. He doesn’t ask what The Barn is, and I wonder how much he heard before he came here, about Dad, about me. Maybe he was told to ask as little as possible. Not to pour salt in an open wound and all that crap.

‘Everyone has to place a finger on the glass,’ Iselin says, and we do as she says.

Three fingers on the glass. His nail is longer than mine.

‘What was your father’s name?’ he asks.

I glance up at him. Even in the dark, his eyes are pale green.

‘Børre,’ Iselin says, elbowing me. ‘Come on. I can’t remember what we’re supposed to say to start.’

I turn my gaze back inwards and focus on the most important thing in this moment.

‘We only want to communicate with positive forces…’ I begin, but I get no further before the glass starts moving, flitting from one letter to the next:

H-E-L-L-O.

I look at the others. Iselin looks just as much on her guard as I am. Martin’s head is bowed, and his face is hidden by the brim of his hat.

‘Ask what he’s called, then, go on,’ Iselin whispers. ‘He only answered you last time.’

I clear my throat, doing my best not to reveal how hard my heart is beating inside my chest.

‘What’s your name?’ I ask, as loudly and clearly as I can. Determined not to be the one who chickens out first this time.

The glass moves again, a little more slowly this time. I read the letters aloud: ‘H-e-l-p-m-e.’

‘That was what he said last time,’ Iselin points out. ‘Ask what he needs help with.’

‘No, ask who it is again,’ Martin says. ‘We need to know if it’s your father we’re in contact with.’

Iselin glowers at him, she hates being contradicted.

‘What’s your name?’ I ask, no longer sounding as firm.

The glass starts moving. First to the letter T, and my shoulders drop. Just for a moment, though. As the glass starts moving from one letter to the next, it forms two recognisable words before it stops, and I can no longer hide the fact that my finger is shaking on the glass.

Iselin tugs at my arm. ‘What name was it? I didn’t catch all the letters.’

I can’t say a word, feel sure I must be mistaken.

Martin steps in: ‘The Unicorn.’

‘So it’s someone else we’re in contact with,’ Iselin says, seeming almost relieved.

‘We need to ask this person to leave,’ Martin says. ‘And tell them that we need to speak to your father instead.’

Iselin places a hand on mine. There’s no doubt that she can feel it shaking. ‘Rebekka, we don’t *have* to do this.’

‘We do,’ I say, pushing her hand away. ‘I mean… let’s keep going. We’ve come this far.’

‘Agreed,’ Martin says, and Iselin swallows her objections, she doesn’t want to be the first to chicken out either, so she places her finger back on the glass.

‘Say that you want to talk to your father,’ Martin says.

I take a deep breath. Our gazes are all fixed on the glass.

‘What do you need help with?’ I ask.

Both of them look at me with surprise, but neither can get a word out before the glass slowly moves from one letter to the next, and when it stops on the final letter, Iselin pulls her hand away as if she’s been burned.

The ground opens up beneath me.

‘*I was murdered*,’ Martin says. ‘He says he was murdered.’