Trude Teige

Until We Meet Again By the Sea

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In memory of Grandma Anna and Grandma Petra.

~

'There are times when you'd give a whole month away from fifty kopecks, and others when you wouldn't give up half an hour for any price.'

Anna Karenina, Leo Tolstoy

PROLOGUE

It all started with a phone call one April day in 2023, in rush-hour traffic on my way home from work. A woman introduced herself as Anna Borch and asked whether I was the granddaughter of Tekla Bjerke, to which I said yes. She'd wanted to get in touch for a long time, she said. 'Do you remember your grandmother having a friend called Birgit Johansen?' she asked.

My phone wasn't in hands-free mode, so I told her I'd call her back as soon as I got home.

Birgit had often visited Grandma and Granddad on the island where they lived, and in the summer, she would visit alongside several of Grandma's friends. I remember Granddad taking the boat to Kragerø to collect them. Well before he was due back, Grandma would take me with her out onto the breakwater, and when we spotted the boat, she would get up and wave with her entire body, catching the mooring lines and throwing her arms around the necks of her friends as soon as they set foot on land. They would stand clinging to each other for ages.

The last time I saw Birgit was just before she died. I visited her when I found out Grandma had kept a big secret her entire life.

When I got home, I called Anna Borch back, anxious to know what she wanted from me. It turned out that Birgit was her great aunt. Birgit had never had children, but she and Anna were close. That was why Anna was astounded when the head of the Norwegian Intelligence Service unexpectedly turned up at Birgit's funeral. He told a wild story about her, about how she had been an American agent in Moscow just after the war. Anna and her family were amazed because Birgit had never mentioned anything of the sort.

Anna was also interested in another of Grandma and Birgit's friends. Her name was Nadia, and she was originally from Ukraine. Did I remember her? Of course. Nadia was one of the friends who used to visit in the summer.

Anna works as a nurse for the International Red Cross in Dnipro in Ukraine, and a while ago, she met a ninety-seven-year-old woman in a bomb shelter. When the woman realised she was Norwegian, she took both of Anna's hands in hers and told her, eyes shining, that as a young woman during the war she'd been taken prisoner and sent to a labour camp in Norway to work for the Germans. Anna told her about Nadia and mentioned that she'd come to Norway after the war. But the woman in the bomb shelter didn't think that could be right. No one had travelled from the Soviet Union to the West just after the war. Anna wondered whether Nadia

might also have arrived in Norway at some point during the war, and she couldn't stop thinking about the amazing story she'd been told about Birgit. She wanted to find out more about both Birgit and Nadia, and she wondered whether I could help.

People have contacted me on occasion since the book about Grandma, *Grandma Danced in the Rain,* was published*,* and more people have done the same since Granddad's life was the subject of *Granddad Breathed with the Sea*. At first, it was interesting to hear that other people had similar family secrets. But eventually I started to feel like some sort of therapist for people who needed to talk about the consequences of silence and secrets.

The enquiry from Anna was different. It concerned someone I'd known personally, two people I had a connection to.

I now know much more about the fates of Grandma's friends. They are different, but the friendship they shared gave them hope, courage and strength when they needed it most.

Oslo, 27 June 2024
Juni Bjerke, Tekla's granddaughter

PART 1

January–July 1944

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Bodø, Northern Norway, 11 January

Birgit Johansen set her two suitcases down on the wharfside, pulled her bucket hat firmly over her ears and wrapped her shawl tightly around her neck. Snow lashed at her face, making it difficult to keep her eyes open, and the wind was so ferocious that it took her breath away. She could see more than hear that the wharf was a hive of activity. Hoists and ropes creaked, crates slammed down, and orders were bellowed in both Norwegian and German. Although it was early in the afternoon, there was no daylight, and the darkness was only penetrated by the lights from the ferry she'd arrived on and warehouse floodlights.

The hospital in Bodø had needed nurses, and she'd pictured a bombed-out town where she could really make a difference. She'd wanted to get away for a while, preferably far away from everything that reminded her of Ilya. It was only on the train across Dovre to Trondheim, on her way to Mosjøen and then on the ferry to Bodø that it really dawned on her how far away from everything she knew she would actually be. But by then it was too late to change her mind.

Now here she was, in the middle of an icescape, north of the Arctic Circle, surrounded by strangers. What had she been thinking? That the further away she went, the lesser the grief would be?

'Excuse me, can you tell me where the hospital is?' she asked a passer-by.

He pointed into the driving snow. 'Straight ahead, up the hill, and to the left. It's huge, you can't miss it, even when it's like this.'

'Does it take long to walk there?'

'Well… ten minutes usually. Longer in this weather.'

She kept close to the snowbanks, as then she knew she was following the road. And while she walked, she marvelled at the whistling and howling around her. She'd never heard such a din. It was as if the town itself were wailing.

Birgit ducked her head and trudged onwards, but soon she could no longer carry her suitcases and instead started dragging them behind her, leaving deep furrows in the snow. That worked for a while, but then she had to stop, her fingers frozen even though she was wearing thick gloves. She rubbed her hands together and shoved them in her pockets.

As she stood there, she realised where the wailing was coming from. Black chimney shafts stood among the ruins, serving as organ pipes through which the wind could play a disharmonious lament. She passed houses in ruins, houses with broken windows and no roofs.

Hardly any buildings were unscathed, and squat barracks had been set up between them. Two trees in a garden reached skyward like enormous burnt-out matches. Oddly enough, the white picket fence facing the road was intact, but stone steps led up to nothing.

She'd thought much of the town would have been rebuilt by now, almost four years after the bombing. They said the target had been the Norwegian Broadcast Corporation transmitter located here. It was so powerful that when the king fled Oslo and Quisling took power, even though the corporation's headquarters were in Marienlyst, people from across the country had nevertheless been able to listen to uncensored and genuine radio broadcasts for a few weeks.

Three children played by the side of the road, building snow holes and laughing as if life and the weather were completely normal. Then they stopped and stared at something behind her. She turned, and out of the driving snow came a shadow that grew bigger and bigger and slowly took the shape of a grey throng. Men walked two by two in columns, clad in tattered coats with hats pulled down to their eyes. They were supervised by German soldiers and passed by so close that she could have touched them. Several stumbled, and one man struggled to stay on his feet and had to be supported by two others. Birgit stared in surprise at his hat. The flaps were folded down and fastened under his chin. She recognised it by its distinctive, pointed top. Ilya had told her about the budenovka, which was referred to as the revolution hat and was a symbol of the Red Army. Now she could see that several of the men wore such hats.

What on earth? Were the Russians here?

It was a long procession, of what had to be over a hundred men. The man bringing up the rear lagged behind. He looked at her and held out his hand. 'Food?' he asked in Norwegian.

Birgit shook her head. *'Vy russkiy?'* Are you Russian?

He gave her an astonished look. *'Da. Ty tozhe?'* Yes, are you?

She shook her head but was unable to say anything more before one of the German soldiers jabbed him in the back with the butt of his gun, making him stumble forwards. When the man straightened up, he met Birgit's gaze. Her stomach clenched. She had never seen such desperation before.

*

Her long journey north had started almost six months ago, one day when she had been walking arm in arm with her friends Tekla and Annelise down Stortingsgaten in Oslo.

Birgit had pointed at the large banner hanging beneath the windows of the parliament building. DEUTSCHLAND SIEGT AN ALLEN FRONTEN. 'That's not true,' she said. 'The Germans aren't winning on all fronts anymore.'

The swastika flag fluttered atop the parliament in the mild September breeze, and German soldiers stood guard at the entrance.

'That's just Allied propaganda,' Annelise protested.

'How can you say that?' Tekla asked.

'Dad reads German newspapers. They say something completely different.'

'Maybe it's the Germans putting out propaganda,' Birgit said.

Birgit and Tekla had both grown up in Kragerø, while Annelise was from Oslo. Her family had a summer house in the Kragerø archipelago, and the three girls had spent time together every summer for years. Tekla still lived in Kragerø, while Birgit and Annelise were freshly trained nurses and worked at the National Hospital in Oslo.

'Come,' Annelise said, pulling them with her into a side street.

'Where are we going?' Tekla asked.

Annelise stopped by a door. A red flag with a black swastika hung over the entrance, and several women were on their way inside. 'Soldiers are dying all over Europe, and there's a shortage of nurses,' Annelise said. 'I've been thinking about it a lot recently.'

'I haven't,' Birgit said. 'I could never work for the Germans.'

'It's the Red Cross sending nurses out into the field, not the Germans, and they help *anyone* who needs care,' Annelise replied. 'Go on, come inside. It won't hurt you to hear what they have to say.'

Birgit raised her eyebrows and gave Tekla a questioning look. Annelise pinched their arms, and they reluctantly followed.

They entered a large room with rows of seats, and right at the front was a stage with a podium. Then Birgit spotted a woman she recognised. 'Look,' she said, nudging Annelise.

'Who's that?' Tekla asked.

'It's Matron Gundersen,' Birgit replied. 'Is she a Nazi? I'd never have thought so.'

Her nurse's uniform had been replaced with a green skirt and a green single-breasted jacket with a brown belt. On her left arm was a square with the Black Sun on a white background, and she wore a side cap. Everyone watched as she approached the podium and stood there silently for a few seconds, scanning the crowd. 'Let's be honest. The war has a cost. Young men, Norwegians too, are risking their lives to ensure that we have a good future. Europe

is burning, and there is a severe shortage of medical personnel.' She raised her voice. 'You can make a difference.'

Some people in the first row started to clap, and several others joined them, including Annelise.

'Esteemed colleagues,' she said in a low voice before pointing dramatically out of the window and raising her voice again. 'It is out in Europe that the decisive battles are being fought. This is not about politics or ideology – it's about compassion and loving thy neighbour. I encourage you all to enlist in the service of good.'

As soon as Gundersen had left the podium, Birgit stood up. Annelise grabbed her arm. 'Where are you going?' she whispered.

'Outside. I can't breathe in here.'

'Me neither,' Tekla said.

They left the meeting together, but Annelise stayed.

'What is Annelise thinking?' Tekla exclaimed once they were back out on the street. 'Would she seriously consider enlisting as a military nurse?'

'She hasn't said a single word about it to me,' Birgit said, 'but you saw how she got swept up in it all. She even clapped.'

'Where on earth did she get that idea?'

'Her father. I'm sure of it. I have dinner with Annelise's family occasionally, and sometimes it's really uncomfortable because her father insists on reading aloud from books and articles. Everything's about how dangerous the Soviet Union is, and how the Germans are going to protect us. "Jewish Bolshevism, that is what we must fear, that is what we must fight alongside the Germans"', Birgit quoted. 'And the last time I was there, her brother had a storm trooper's uniform.'

'You're joking. Harald Friedman is a Nazi? I'd never have thought that about him,' Tekla said.

'Me neither. I've always liked Harald, but both he and Annelise are letting their father get in their heads.'

Tekla had been visiting an aunt in Oslo for the weekend and needed to catch the bus back to Kragerø. The two girls embraced, enjoying the moment, not wanting to let go. They were at war, and it was never easy to tell when they might see each other again.

As Birgit walked through the Palace Park and onwards up Gyldenløves gate towards Ilya's flat in Frogner, she tried to shake off the sense of loss and consoled herself with the

knowledge that when she was with her Russian teacher, everything else seemed insignificant. He was so full of humour and life. Every time she saw him, he took her into an unknown and exciting world, and she loved her time with him.

'Birgitushka,' he said effusively when he opened the door and his arms in one and the same movement and embraced her.

They went into the biggest of the two living rooms. Ilya sat down and filled his pipe with tobacco. 'New supply,' he said, lighting it. 'I found a gardener who grows tobacco.'

Birgit told him about the recruitment meeting and described how uncomfortable it had been.

'Anyone who enlists as a nurse that way will become part of the German war machine,' he said, puffing on his pipe.

'Right! I don't know what Annelise is thinking. I could never betray my country,' Birgit said.

'Let's think about something else.' Ilya set down his pipe in an ashtray and looked through a pile of records. 'Ah, Rachmaninoff's piano concerto number three.'

The sound of the piano and orchestra soon intermingled with the smell of the smoke, and Birgit felt at peace. Ilya walked over to the bar cabinet and poured two glasses of vodka, as usual. Despite the rationing, he never wanted for vodka. Or at least that's what he called it, but it could have been Norwegian bootleg liquor, for all Birgit knew.

Ilya listened to the music with his eyes half closed. He had once been affluent, that much she knew, because he had told her about the sizeable residence he'd had in the centre of Petrograd. The city was called Leningrad now, but he insisted on using the name it had had when he lived there. During the October Revolution in 1917, when the Bolshevik Party took power, he had fled to Norway. His big flat was situated in one of Oslo's most upscale areas. He used one living room to paint, with finished and half-finished paintings propped against the walls. In the living room they sat in now, piles of books and newspapers sat on tables, chairs and on the floor.

The tempo of the music picked up, and it was almost as if the piano were laughing, Birgit thought. Her heart fluttered when Ilya opened his eyes, met her gaze and smiled warmly.

The first time she had met him, when she came to learn Russian two years ago, he had played classical music for her. The music, the stories in the books he read to her – which she was eventually able to read herself – and all the stories about his life in Petrograd created a longing in her. What she longed for, she didn't know, but it was like arriving in a new place and feeling at home. And as she learnt to speak the language, she felt different: more alive, more self-confident and more herself.

A couple of years before the war, a Cossack orchestra had given a concert in Kragerø. Birgit had just read *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy, and the novel had made a deep impression on her, taking root in her in a way she hadn't experienced with other books. And, at the concert, she found that the Cossacks told similar stories about joie de vivre, passion and sorrow. The acrobatic dance, the music, the black and red national costumes with the big fur hats, the swords they carried, the supple, athletic male bodies and, not least, the polyphonic, alternately melancholic and merry singing – everything was strange and beautiful and had moved her deeply. No, more than moved, she felt seduced, and the music, just like the novel, amplified the unrest that had been growing within her recently. She longed to experience something new and different, to travel and get away from small-town life. And when Annelise had said she planned to train as a nurse, Birgit had thought that was it, her ticket out into the world. To Oslo, at least.

It was entirely by chance that she ended up taking Russian lessons from Ilya. One day, when she had been flicking through Aftenposten in the nurses' office, her eyes had landed on a small advertisement. Private Russian lessons, it said. The very next day she found herself standing nervously outside Ilya's door. The man who opened the door was as big as a Siberian bear, she'd thought. His hair and beard were greying, his chest was broad, and he was older than she'd expected. She had pressed her lips together to suppress a whimper when he grabbed her hand and, with a big smile and a deep voice, said: *'Dobro pozhalovat'!'* She hadn't known what this meant back then, but she'd felt very welcome.

A couple of months ago, he'd taken her to a café to meet other Russians, and she'd realised he played a central role in the Russian exile environment in the capital. When she was in one of the cubicles in the toilet, she had overheard a conversation between two of the Russian women.

'There's something between them,' one said. 'I can see it in the way he looks at her.'

'But she's so much younger than him. He could be her grandfather.'

'That doesn't bother him. He's had so many women, and age has never mattered to him.'

'True, and I don't know any woman who'd say no.'

They laughed and left. Birgit sat for a moment on the lid of the toilet.

Had so many women. No one would say no. She herself had had no one. Not in that way. He was a social animal and a ladies' man. She would have to be careful.

For the last month, Ilya had insisted on dancing. Something happened to her every time he gently pulled her close to him. His hand stroked down her back, and several times she'd seen something different in his gaze. She'd started dreaming about him too, about his eyes, his smile,

his big hands, his deep voice, and when she woke up, she remembered everything. Just thinking about it almost made her blush. But every time she had a lesson with him now, she arrived with a fluttering sensation in her stomach, and it had been a long time since it was just because she was looking forward to the lesson.

She watched him as he got up and put another record on the gramophone. 'I'll teach you the steps for this dance, Birgitushka,' he said, flinging his arms wide. 'It's Strauss, and we are going dance a Viennese waltz.'

He released her long fair hair from its ponytail, took one of her hands in his, and guided the other to his back. 'Turn your head, lift your chin, lean back. Yes, like that!'

She was slim, a little over five seven, and almost engulfed by his arms. He lead her around the living room for a while, but then they were in the dining room, and then the hall. A tingling sensation made its way from her stomach all the way down to her toes when she realised where he was taking her, and she put up no resistance when they danced into the bedroom. The music was far away, his breath was close and warm against her throat, and she closed her eyes when he unbuttoned her blouse, whispered the pet name that only he used and undressed her, undressed himself. He lay down next to her on the bed, propped himself up on his elbow and smiled. 'My word. You're so beautiful, Birgitushka.'

Slowly he caressed her with his fingertips, across her hips, down the outside of her thighs, back again, up to her throat, combing his fingers through her long hair with his eyes fixed on hers. His eyes sparkled when he kissed her, his breathing quickening as his hand moved to the inside of her thighs and gently pushed her legs apart. Nothing could stop him, stop her. She put her arms around his neck and pulled him on top of her.

They lay in bed talking. He went to get vodka and insisted that she try his pipe, laughing when she was overcome by a violent cough. Maybe it was the alcohol, maybe she'd become someone else, someone completely different to who she'd been only a little earlier, because she couldn't stop touching him. And although he was her first, her hands and her body knew exactly what to do with him. She laughed quietly when he asked how she could make love with him like he'd never made love with any woman before.

She never got tired of listening to him talk about life in Russia, about his dacha, about the Red Square in Moscow. He told her in detail about the Bolshoi Theatre and the productions there. I'll go there one day, she thought then. He danced ballet in the middle of the living room, saying it was Swan Lake, making her double over with laughter. When he came to the final act,

he slowly collapsed and lay quite still for a few seconds before rolling onto his back and laughing loudly.

Later in the evening, when it was time for her to leave, he held her and whispered: 'There is only one happiness in this life, to love and be loved. Remember that, Birgitushka.'

She went to bed in her lodgings that evening filled with memories of his body, remembering the desire in his eyes, and feeling his big hands, which were so soft. She had never felt more alive.

We belong together. I don't care about the age difference. We'll walk arm in arm in the Palace Park, sit together in cafés and restaurants, laugh if we see people giving us strange looks. But my parents, what will they say? she wondered. No, I won't worry about that. I'm an adult, I do what I want, and I'll love Ilya as long as we both live. There is only one happiness in this life, to love and be loved.

Three days later, when she was on one of the wards, Matron Gundersen came to tell her there was a man who wanted to talk to her. 'I told him you can't have visitors during work hours, but he insisted. He's sitting in the corridor and refuses to leave.' She squared her shoulders disapprovingly. 'Well, off you go to talk to him. But make it quick.'

Out in the corridor, one of Ilya's closest friends got up, moved towards her and gripped both her hands. 'Birgit,' he said. Then he just stood there and swallowed, a heaviness in his gaze.

'Is it… something to do with Ilya?'

'Ilya has left us.'

'Left? But … has he left town?'

'The woman who cleans for him found him dead in bed this morning.'

She stood staring at him for a moment before pulling herself together and smoothing her apron. She couldn't cry, someone might see her, patients, relatives, colleagues or – God forbid – Matron Gundersen. 'Thank you for letting me know,' she whispered.

'I know you were close. You were like a daughter to him,' said Ilya's friend.

The funeral service had taken place the same day Annelise left for Germany. Birgit sat alone in a pew at the back of the church. The ceremony was beautiful and sad, and it struck her that he must have made all the decisions himself: the classical music, the poem that was read and the songs for the Russian male choir. As his casket was lowered into the ground, she slipped out.

Never again would he open his door and say *dobro pozhalovat* in his deep voice, never again would he dance with her and be a clumsy ballet dancer, never again would she press her

head against his chest. As she left the chapel, she was unable to hold back her tears. She felt lonely in a way she never had before, abandoned by Ilya, and at the same time by Annelise. The two people who had meant the most to her since she came to Oslo were no longer in her life.

She'd taken on extra shifts, tried to bury her grief and loss in work, but after a couple of months she'd been signed off sick and gone home to her parents in Kragerø. Her childhood home was by the sea, and even though it was almost autumn, the weather was warm, and every day she sat on the wharfside, full of sorrow and unsatisfied longing. Her father asked what had happened, but her mother didn't. She was waiting for it to blow over on its own, as usual. They'd never been close.

Tekla arrived on the third day. Birgit hadn't felt up to contacting anyone, not even her. But when Tekla put an arm around her without a word, without question, it was a relief to have someone to lean on. After a while, Tekla pulled a bottle of wine and two glasses out of her bag. 'I nabbed it from Dad's wine cellar,' she said with a chuckle, because it wasn't the first time. Then she grew solemn. 'So, what happened, Birgit?'

As they sipped their wine, Birgit told her about Ilya. 'It's like something's broken inside me.'

'Better days will come,' Tekla said. 'You have to believe that.'

'Aren't you going to comment on the age difference? React to how old he was?'

Tekla gave her an astonished look. 'Were you afraid I would? You know, that wouldn't have occurred to me. I'd never judge my best friend. In any case, the heart wants what it wants.'

'Thank God I have you,' Birgit said.

'Would you have judged me if I were in your situation?'

'No.'

'Well, there you go. And we'll always be here for one another, right?'

'Always.'

The land and sea breeze had picked up. 'Were you together, you and Ilya? Officially, I mean?'

Birgit pulled some hair away from her mouth. 'It only happened… you know… one time. But when I was with him, I felt… how to put it? Different, or I was… What was I?' Birgit squinted at the sun. 'I was more everything with him, I think. Stronger, happier, funnier, smarter, prettier.'

They watched the ferry chugging towards the mouth of the fjord.

'So… what will you do now?' Tekla asked.

'Something meaningful.'

'You do that every day.'

'Yes, but everything's changed now. Ilya's gone, Annelise's made a horrendous decision and is gone too. They've both left a void.'

'How are you feeling about Annelise?'

'It's hard to have a friend who's cooperating with the enemy.'

'We can judge what she's doing, but not her,' Tekla said.

'You've always been generous. I find it more difficult, but we'll see. In any case, the void needs to be filled with something that can give me new strength. I need new purpose, I think.'

'And I suppose that isn't something you can find here?'

'In Kragerø? Good Lord, no. What would that be? Getting married and becoming a small-town wife with a house and four kids, like my parents want? No, you know what, that would be unbearable.'

Tekla smiled. 'Typical you. You've always gone your own way, looking for new experiences and challenges,' she said, pulling Birgit close.

The silence was only broken by hoarse cries from seagulls and the sound of water lapping at the seashore. They sat quietly for a while, holding one another, until Tekla side-eyed Birgit. 'I can hear the cogs turning. What's going on in that head of yours?'

'Well…' Birgit hesitated. 'I mean, they're looking for nurses in Bodø. They've not got a lot of people, and I think I could make a bigger and more significant difference there than in Oslo. They were bombed at the start of the war.'

'You want to move to Northern Norway? That's awfully far away.'

'Maybe that's precisely why,' she said, thinking: That's what I'll do, make a clean break, seek out new challenges and find a new purpose. In Bodø.

*

The long procession of prisoners and German soldiers became a shadow that disappeared into the driving snow while Birgit struggled with her suitcases.

A month after Ilya's funeral, a lawyer had contacted her. He thought he was delivering a joyous message. It turned out that Ilya had left his flat to her.

'No… but… no,' she had stammered.

The lawyer had probably thought the confusion was the result of her being overwhelmed. 'Yes, it's quite true,' he said with a smile.

'I don't want it.'

He had seemed irked by such foolishness. 'It's in his will. You can't say no.'

She'd lost Ilya but inherited most of what he owned – and couldn't think about it, didn't want anything to do with it. That became yet another reason to get away. The lawyer had rented out the flat for her and made sure that Ilya's friends got what was bequeathed to them. She hadn't even been back to the flat, couldn't bear to smell all the old books that would give body to her memories. But the lawyer had collected some of the things that meant the most to her. She had put them in her suitcases and brought them to Bodø.

Suddenly, she noticed that someone had drawn level with her. A voice asked: 'Do you need help?'

A young man with a knitted hat pulled all the way down to his eyes and his coat collar folded up to his ears peered curiously at her. 'Where on earth are you going with those heavy suitcases in this weather?'

'I'm trying to find my way to the hospital.'

'Are you sick?'

'No, I'm due to start working there.'

He took both suitcases and carried them all the way there and up the hospital steps, where he opened the door for her. 'After you,' he said, bowing and waving his arm in a gallant gesture. 'What's your name?'

'Birgit Johansen.'

'I'm Sven Svendsen. Maybe I'll see you around,' he said with a smile. 'Good luck with the job.'

'Thank you so much for your help. It was truly a stroke of luck that you came across me. What would I have done without you?' she said, smiling back.

'Oh, honey, did you carry those heavy suitcases all the way from the boat in this weather?' said the woman waiting for her just inside the door. 'The custodian was supposed to meet you.' She held out a hand to Birgit. 'I'm Pernille Stokke. I'm the matron.'

'Birgit Johansen. Luckily, I met a man who helped me with my cases.'

Then the door opened, and the matron levelled a stern look at the man who came in. 'Where've you been?'

'I was supposed to meet…' He pointed at Birgit. 'Is this her? The southerner who was supposed to arrive on the boat? I… well, I was running a bit late, and–'

Stokke cut him off with an annoyed huff. 'This is Rasmussen, the custodian,' she told Birgit. 'Take her suitcases up to her quarters,' she told him before once again turning to face Birgit. 'Nurses' quarters are on the second floor. Everything has been made ready for you. We'll meet in the nurses' office in the surgical department once you've unpacked. It's on the first floor of the west wing.'

Rasmussen took a suitcase in each hand and headed for the lift. The entrance was in the centre block, and as she tried to keep up with the custodian, who had a long stride, she peered along the long corridors to the east wing and the west wing. They passed a door, and she managed to catch a glimpse of a dayroom with a couple of pipe-smoking, robe-wearing men in deep armchairs in front of tall windows. How nice. It almost looked like a living room in a normal home.

'Have you been to Bodø before?' Rasmussen asked in the lift.

She shook her head. 'I saw the ruins. Was much of the town destroyed?'

'More than half of it,' he said and opened the lift door for her. 'But they've built barracks for people. And then there's the Swedish Quarter.'

'A Swedish quarter?'

'Prefabricated houses the Swedish Red Cross gave the town after the bombing.'

'How many rooms are there here?'

'Um, just over thirty, I think. Some single and some double. You'll have one to yourself.'

On the second floor, he lead the way into the west wing and opened a door. Birgit stepped into an entryway with wardrobes on both sides, so narrow that there wasn't room for her, the custodian and the suitcases all at once. The room at the end of the entryway was small but pleasant, with a sofa bed, a table and a dresser. A painting of a landscape hung on the wall above the sofa, of mountains climbing steeply from the sea.

Rasmussen pointed at the blinded window. 'You can see the whole town from here when it's light outside,' he said.

Birgit unpacked her clothes, put Ilya's books and records on a shelf, and hung a Russian icon on the wall next to the mirror in the small entryway. She leant forwards. It smelled faintly of pipe tobacco. Do you think I'll do well here, Ilya? she thought. Will I find new purpose?

Matron Pernille Stokke gave Birgit a tour of the hospital. Facts and figures poured out of her. 'The building is one hundred and thirty-six metres long and has three floors, a basement and an attic. We have one hundred and fifty beds.'

'How many staff are there?'

'There are ten doctors, three junior doctors, thirty-two nurses and almost as many nursing students,' she rattled off.

There was something about the melodic Northern Norwegian accent. Everything Stokke said sounded simple and straightforward. But at the same time, there was a sharpness in her gaze. It was clear she didn't miss much. She took Birgit along the long corridors in the east wing and the west wing on both the ground and first floor. All the while, the matron maintained a manner that was testament to her pride in the hospital, because she didn't *walk*, she strode. And when she told Birgit that the hospital had been called the granite palace during the Renaissance because the outer walls were made of beautiful granite from a local quarry, Birgit couldn't help but think of Matron Stokke as the countess.

2

The labour camp in Langstranda, Bodø, 10 February

Nadia Vlasik stood shivering at the narrow window in the barracks as she looked out at the clouds hanging heavily over the landscape surrounding the camp. It had stopped snowing, wasn't that windy anymore either, and she could see all the way to the sea, where the waves crashed against the shore as if the storm still raged within them. The barracks were on the edge of the camp, next to the tall barbed-wire fence. Although the landscape was covered in snow, the limited daylight made the landscape grey and drab. It was like the people around her, she thought. Grey people, grey days, grey life.

For two months she had lived in this camp, and all she'd done was sleep, eat and work at the fish factory Frostfilet for ten hours every day or night, six days a week. She was constantly tired and cold, and in the evening, she lay curled up on her cot while thinking about her brother, father and mother. Were they alive? Was the war over in Ukraine? Her longing for home was such that she felt physically ill, and she could picture the distress on her mother's when she'd learnt that the Germans had taken her. She doesn't know where I am, no one at home knows where I am, she thought as the lump in her throat grew.

*

She had been feeling both elated and anxious as she ran to school that morning at the end of August, the day her life changed so dramatically. The old man in the neighbouring house had shouted to tell her the Red Army was beating back the Germans.

Seven months had passed since they'd learnt that Stalingrad had been razed to the ground. A hundred thousand soldiers and civilians had been killed, but the Russians had reclaimed the city. Would the Red Army chase the Germans through Dnipropetrovsk, out of the city and west, all the way back to Germany? She was feeling both elated and anxious because that meant the war could soon be over. But at the same time, she was afraid there would be hostilities and even more death and suffering. Both her father and her brother, Andrey, had joined the Ukrainian nationalists, and a couple of months had passed since she and her mother had heard from them.

Nadia was out of breath as she tiptoed into her teacher's house, where students of various ages sat gathered in the living room. The teacher said nothing, just gave her a pointed

look and continued to talk and write on a board balanced on a chair. Moments later, they interrupted by orders being shouted outside. The teacher went over to the window. Nadia and the other students stayed where they were, but when she brought her hand to her mouth and looked horrified, no one could sit still.

Outside, Nadia saw a procession of emaciated, dirt-covered men. A dust cloud formed as their feet dragged on the dry road. Some wore Soviet uniforms, others civilian clothing, and they walked under the watchful gaze of German soldiers. Among the men she glimpsed someone who looked familiar, a young man who was stooped over, eyes fixed on the ground.

'No, no,' Nadia whispered, running for the door. The teacher grabbed her before she could get outside.

'What is it, Nadia?'

'Andrey, my brother, he's one of the prisoners. I have to–'

'You'll stay here,' the teacher said firmly. 'It could be dangerous to show your face right now.'

Tears streamed down Nadia's cheeks. She felt no better when the teacher embraced her. But then she let her go and went back to the window, standing quietly and contemplatively for a few seconds before opening it and starting to sing a well-known Ukrainian folk song.

Blow, wind, to Ukraine
where I left a girl
where I left brown eyes
Blow, wind, at midnight

Both the prisoners and the German soldiers looked at the teacher by the window. Nadia watched her in amazement, watched as she took a deep breath before concluding in a steady voice.

The Red Army is coming
approaching from the east
Friends, victory is near
Soon you will all be free

She's making up words, she's also heard the news about the German retreat, Nadia thought. But what if some of the German soldiers understood Ukrainian? No, none of them were reacting.

Where was Andrey? Her gaze slid from face to face, and there, there he was, and he spotted her. She raised her hand, and he waved back. But he had to keep walking, and soon he was out of sight.

They'd only just sat back down again when they were once again interrupted. This time by the sound of boots stomping, and someone pounding on the door. A German officer appeared in the doorway along with some soldiers and an interpreter. *'Alles raus! Jetzt!'* Everyone out. Now.

Had they heard the song? Was that why they'd come? The officer stared at the teacher. All the colour had drained from her face, and she gestured cautiously towards the door to signal to the students that they should do as ordered. Outside, they were lined up, and the officer moved along the row, scrutinising them. Nadia could smell his rank breath as he leant towards her and asked what her name was. Four of the boys, along with Nadia and a girl called Daria, were picked out.

'Come with me,' the officer said, starting to walk.

'Where are we going?' Nadia asked.

The officer didn't answer. 'You'll be given food, a place to live and a job. Doesn't that sound good?'

'No, I don't want that.'

'Your family will pay the price if you refuse.'

'But Mother… I need to tell Mother,' Nadia said.

'Your teacher will tell her.' He turned to look at her. 'Right?'

She nodded. 'Yes, of course,' she said quickly.

A truck with other young people their age in the back pulled up, and they were ordered to get in. The teacher tried to push her way towards Nadia and Daria, but she was stopped by a soldier. 'Be strong, the war will be over soon, it'll be fine,' she managed to shout before she was shoved so hard that she fell over. The truck started to move, and Nadia watched the teacher get up and stand solemnly, arms hanging by her sides. Soon she was out of sight, and not long afterwards the buildings of their hometown were too.

*

There were fifty women in the barracks where Nadia lived. Some of them lay sleeping in their cots after working shifts at the factory down by the sea. Nadia looked on as five others sat in a corner watching some small children. Most of the children's fathers were also forced labourers,

but Nadia had noticed one of the mothers being shunned because her child's father was German. A girl who was around sixteen or seventeen years old paced back and forth, rocking a baby who wouldn't stop crying. Only a few weeks had passed since she'd given birth, and she looked just about ready to drop. Nadia walked over to her. 'Let me help. I can take him while you get some rest.'

The girl gave her a grateful look. Nadia took the child and started walking back and forth. 'Shh, shh,' she whispered, humming while she walked along the row of cots.

'What a lovely voice you have,' said one of the women. 'I know that song. My mother used to sing it to me when I was little.'

'Could you sing louder? It's so beautiful,' said another.

Mother sang it to me, too, Nadia thought, and as she continued to walk back and forth with the child, she sang louder. Conversation stopped, and several people started to sing along, forming a chorus of clear yet muted voices. The boy's eyes slid shut, and Nadia tiptoed over to his mother, laying him down next to her before returning to her post by the window. That was when she smelled food. Russian Tatiana stood frying something in a pan on the stove. A small group of women sat around her. Nadia hadn't been there long when she was warned against getting on the wrong side of Tatiana. The Germans had made her a kind of middle manager. The women around her were referred to as her "court". They didn't have to work at the factory. Instead, they cleaned and cooked at the houses of German officers in the town. The Eastern workers weren't allowed to take fish from the factory, but Tatiana always had something to fry up.

Nadia tried to think about something other than food, averting her gaze and looking out the window. The faint daylight they had for a short while on days when it didn't snow was waning, and soon the darkness outside was pitch. Eventually, all she could see was her own reflection, a narrow, grimy face and long, fair curly hair that had once been so thick as to garner compliments, but that now hung limp, plastered to her scalp after hours of wearing a kerchief at the factory.

Was that really her? She looked so old. She looked like her grandmother.

One day at a time. I'll be fine. Isn't that right, Babushka? she said to herself.

She closed her eyes and felt her grandmother caress her cheek. Everything passes, she heard her say. The good and the bad. That's why we need to enjoy the good while it lasts and endure the bad, because that too will end.

Grandmother had said that the day the attacks started in Dnipropetrovsk, when they had sought refuge in the cellar. It was a terrible raid, with planes flying low over the town and

dropping bombs that made the house shake. Mother said nothing. It was Grandmother who had comforted her. 'My darling Nadia, did you know that your name means hope?' she'd whispered as the booming outside came closer. 'As long as there is hope, everything will be okay. And when everything seems hopeless, you must travel in your thoughts to a place you can find hope again.'

That same moment, there had been a terrible explosion. Parts of the house collapsed, and Nadia and her grandmother were trapped where they lay next to one another. After a while, Grandmother had asked Nadia to sing, and she had sung songs Grandmother loved until someone came and dug them out. She had only broken her arm, but Grandmother was severely wounded, and a couple of days later she died.

I can travel home in my thoughts, Nadia thought as she stood by the window thousands of kilometres from Ukraine. She flew over the snow-covered landscape, over the high mountains, over the sea, to late summer, the best time of year back home, where the fields overflowed with ears of golden corn that swayed in the wind as far as the eye could see.

3

The fish factory, 23 March

The walk from the camp to the factory was a little under a kilometre, and Nadia and Daria walked far back in the column of over two hundred workers on their way to the night shift. Nadia stomped hard on the ground with every step she took, trying to rile herself up. I hate snow, she said in her head. I hate fish. I hate the Germans. But she felt nothing, no matter how hard she stomped. She didn't cry anymore either, didn't laugh, and the despair she'd felt on arrival was almost completely gone. She was just numb.

March had brought with it mild weather, and they walked through snow and mud on their way to the factory. It was a slog, and she knew she ought to feel the need to scream, protest and curse this existence. But she didn't scream, no one screamed, no one dared protest, everyone just walked in silence in the long procession of women and men, from the camp to the factory, from the factory to the camp, there and back, there and back, day after day.

In the changing room at the factory, Nadia tied her apron, put on her kerchief and made sure it covered her hair before going into the big hall. Just then, the doors onto the wharf opened and carts of fish crates from the boats were rolled in, bringing with them an ice-cold draught and the smell of sea salt.

Nadia hoped she'd be the one weighing the fish, but the shift leader pointed her towards the row of tubs where the fish were to be cleaned. Within only a few minutes, the water would numb her fingers, and the cold from the water spilling from the tubs down onto the floor below the low platform they stood on would rise up and chill her legs, too.

Nadia saw that Daria had been luckier in her assignment to the filleting station. Before they left the camp, she had complained of a sore stomach, and now her face was twisted in pain. Nadia had asked whether it was "that time" of the month, but it wasn't. Nadia had asked Tatiana to let Daria off. But she'd snorted and sent her off to the factory.

There were always people off sick. They got colds and fevers from standing in the draught and working in the cold with freezing hands, they got eczema or sore arms and pain in their backs and legs from standing for hours. But Tatiana did what the Germans asked, sent everyone who was able to work, because all the factory management cared about was keeping the pace of production up. Everything they produced – the fish filets, fishmeal, canned goods and

cod liver oil – was sent to German soldiers on the continent, while the factory workers were patted down every day to make sure they weren't smuggling fish out.

One of the soldiers charged with making sure no one slacked off stopped next to Daria. Nadia hadn't seen him before, and he had a different uniform to the German guards. People were saying that the new guards who had arrived recently were Norwegians. Suddenly he shouted: *'Schneller!'* Daria pressed her hands to her stomach and doubled over. The guard grabbed her and pulled her outside. One of the other women tried to stop Nadia from running after them, but she wrenched herself out of her grasp. In the corridor outside, Daria had fallen to the floor.

'*Sie ist krank*. She's sick,' Nadia said. 'She can't work today.'

The guard turned and squinted at her. 'Back to work!' he said brusquely in German.

'Send her back to the barracks. Clearly she can't work today.'

'No.'

'I'm begging you, please.'

Another soldier in the same uniform appeared and said something in a language she didn't understand, probably Norwegian, but even so, she could tell they disagreed. The second soldier walked over to Daria and asked her to get up, but she groaned and squeezed her eyes shut.

The soldier dragged her to her feet. '*Hilf mir*. Help me,' he said to Nadia.

They helped her outside, where the Norwegian shouted an order to another soldier, and shortly afterwards, a car arrived. 'You can go with her,' he told Nadia.

'Where does it hurt, Daria?' Nadia asked when they were in the backseat.

Daria put her hand low on her abdomen on the right side.

'The doctor at the camp will examine her,' the soldier said.

'My brother…' Nadia searched for the German word for appendix. 'He needed surgery,' she said. 'He also had right-sided abdominal pain. What if this is the same thing? It might be urgent. Is there a hospital in the town?'

He gave her a pensive look before nodding and saying something to the driver. Nadia held Daria and looked out the window. The landscape was flat, but on the other side of the fjord she could see mountains with strange formations. It looked like a passing giant had taken bites out of them. As they drove, she saw tanks, guns and bunkers in several places. Daria whimpered as they drove, but luckily it wasn't far to the hospital. The town seemed quite small, Nadia thought as they stopped by the entrance to a huge stone building.

'You're going with her, right?' the Norwegian soldier asked when two men came out with a stretcher for Daria.

'But what about the work? I'll be in trouble if–'

'I'll take care of that. Go on,' he said.

I feel something, she thought as she ran after the stretcher. I'm scared, scared to lose the only friend I have here.

4

The hospital, same day

Birgit attached the trefoil pin all nurses wore to her stiff white collar and put her white apron on over her pale blue uniform dress. Then she tied her cap at the nape of her neck and pushed some stray hairs underneath. She looked in the mirror, straightened up, quickly smoothed her hands over the apron and pulled the white cuffs down over her wrists. She paused for a moment in front of Ilya's crucifix, leaning in and closing her eyes as she breathed in the smell of pipe tobacco, before heading out, down the stairs to the surgical department and into the nurses' office, ready for the night shift.

'We have a new patient. A German soldier,' said the doctor on duty. 'He was in a car accident. Several people were injured, and the field hospital doesn't have enough space to care for them all.'

Birgit hadn't seen a single German patient at the hospital since she'd arrived, but they weren't far away, because they'd built a small, temporary hospital on the tennis court, a dedicated field hospital – or *Ortslazarett*. They'd had many German patients at the National Hospital, and the hospital had been under the administration of the Nasjonal Samling government. Here in Bodø it seemed as if the hospital were a protected area, and that neither the Germans nor NS had any hand in how it operated.

The doctor was interrupted before he could continue. The head of the surgical department, chief physician Kristian Heyerdahl, stood in the doorway. 'One of the Eastern workers has been brought in,' he said. 'Can you assist?' he asked Birgit, who was closest.

An Eastern worker? Birgit thought as she followed. What does that mean?

A thin girl lay moaning on the table in the examination room. She was around sixteen or seventeen years old, and another girl stood next to her, holding her hand. Heyerdahl immediately began to examine her, and when he pressed down on the right side of her abdomen, she gave a muted shriek.

'Hm,' he said. 'There might be something going on in her lower abdomen. Inflammation of the ovaries or something like that. Or she might be pregnant. Do you speak German?' he asked.

The girl shook her head.

'Where's she from?' Birgit asked.

'Soviet, I expect,' Heyerdahl replied.

'Vy russkiy?' Birgit asked her.

'Niet.'

'But you understand Russian?'

'Yes.'

'Where are you from?'

'Dnipropetrovsk in Ukraine.'

'And what's your name?'

'Daria.'

'Daria,' Birgit said with a soothing smile. 'We need to know whether you might be pregnant.'

'No, no, I'm not.'

Birgit turned to Heyerdahl. He was looking at her with an eyebrow raised and a questioning gaze.

'She isn't pregnant,' she said.

Heyerdahl continued to examine the girl, who grimaced and whimpered every time he pressed down on the same area on her lower abdomen. 'It's probably appendicitis. We need to prep her for surgery,' he said.

Birgit showed the friend out into the corridor, where she could sit and wait. *'Spasibo,'* she said, taking Birgit's hand in both of hers. They were ice-cold.

'Don't worry, she'll be fine,' Birgit said before hurrying to the operating theatre.

After the operation, she went out and sat down next to the girl on the bench in the corridor. 'Your friend has had her appendix removed and will make a full recovery, but we need to keep her here for a few days,' she said quietly in Russian.

'Thank you.'

The girl's shoulders shook, but she didn't make a sound.

Birgit gripped her hand. 'Oh, honey, you're so cold.'

'It's because of the work with the fish.'

'What's your name?

'Nadia.'

'How old are you?'

'Almost seventeen.'

'How have you ended up in Norway, so far from home?'

Birgit listened in astonishment as Nadia told her about her journey from Ukraine to Norway, about how she was an Eastern worker at the fish factory in Langstranda outside town, and about how she lived in a big labour camp. The story was dramatic, but her voice was flat, and she showed no emotions. 'You were threatened into coming all the way from Ukraine here to Northern Norway to work for the Germans?' Birgit asked.

'Yes.'

'How many Eastern workers are there at the factory?'

'A lot. Eight or nine hundred, perhaps.'

'What? And how many of them are women?'

'There are around a hundred and fifty of us from the Soviet Union.' She got up. 'I have to get back to the factory now. If I don't, I might get into trouble.'

'You mean you might be punished for being gone?'

'What do you think?' she said, giving her a long look.

'Is there anything I can do?' Birgit asked.

'It's war. It is what it is.'

'It must be hard to be so far away from home, in a foreign country.'

Nadia tucked a fair forelock behind her ear and gave Birgit a defiant look. 'I'm like the ears of corn back home in Ukraine. They bend in the wind, but they don't break easily.'

Then she turned and walked along the long corridor. Birgit watched the frail figure with the cold hands and marvelled at where she found her strength. 'Will you come back tomorrow?' she shouted after her.

Nadia turned and shrugged, then disappeared off down the stairs.

Heyerdahl was washing his hands when Birgit came back into the operating theatre.

'So you speak Russian?' he said, reaching for a towel.

'Yes.'

'Do you speak other languages too?'

'Yes, German and English.'

'A multilingual nurse, then. Hm… Apropos the Russian… Well, it might not be good for you if the Germans get wind of it. They're fairly sure they can trust the staff, but not so much patients and relatives. You never know what side they're on.'

'Yes, I know, and I wouldn't have spoken Russian had it not been necessary.'

'You'll be looking after the Eastern worker. I'll make sure she's in a private room so none of the other patients hear you talking to her.'

5

The fish factory, following day

Maybe being up here in the north will be easier once spring comes, Nadia thought. It was breaktime, and she was sitting on a pallet against the wall of the wharf, looking out across the sea. Crates from a fishing boat were being brought ashore, several other boats sat waiting their turn, and a large German cargo ship was almost fully loaded and ready to head south.

Just over three months had passed since the first time Nadia had seen the sea.

From their hometown of Dnipropetrovsk, they had been taken by truck to a railway station and herded into livestock wagons. There they had sat huddled together for almost twenty-four hours before they arrived at a transit camp on the outskirts of Szczecin, a seaport on the Oder River. Nadia had never seen so many people in one place. People said there were five thousand prisoners there. Most of them were Soviet soldiers captured by the Germans, but there were also civilian men and a few women. Daria and Nadia had stayed in that camp for three months, and every day Nadia walked around looking for her brother, Andrey, but she didn't find him.

Early one morning, they were ordered onwards, and they had travelled aboard a large ship that constantly roiled and rolled. Daria was both scared and seasick, but Nadia found the movements soothing, a damper on the fear of what awaited them. Nadia and Daria knew one another well from school, but they had never been close friends. Now they were all they had.

A German soldier told them the ship was on its way to Oslo in Norway, and she had asked whether Norway was also at war.

'At war? No,' he had said, laughing. 'The Norwegians have surrendered.'

How could they surrender their country? They could only be cowards, these Norwegians, she'd thought.

The day they arrived in Oslo, it had been sunny, and a thin layer of snow had covered the pavements and roofs. In several places she saw German banners and swastika flags, but there were no bomb craters, bullet holes in the walls, burnt-out buildings or ruins. It was like stepping into another world. On their way from the ship to the railway station, people stopped on the pavements to look at them. While they'd been in the camp in Szczecin, they'd been given German military coats and boots. Nadia pushed her long hair under her hat, pulled it down low and walked with her head bowed through the streets of Oslo. At one point, she looked up and met the gaze of a woman standing on the pavement. She quickly took a couple of steps forwards

and handed Nadia a packed lunch, saying something in a foreign language. 'Thanks,' Nadia replied in Ukrainian. A warm feeling blossomed in her chest. 'See, we'll be fine,' she said, giving Daria one of the two open sandwiches. 'There's no war here.'

*

A big, fat seagull landed on the railing not far from where Nadia sat on the box outside the factory. 'Clearly you're not wanting for anything,' she whispered. 'Clearly you aren't hungry. Life is easy for you.'

The seagull cocked its head.

'And you're free,' she continued. 'You can do what you want, fly where you want, and not just in your head.'

Seven or eight Russian men sat a little further away. One of them was called Alexander Abramov, she knew, the one gesticulating eagerly and speaking in a low voice with an intense expression. Nadia had noticed him. He seemed like a leader of sorts in the group of men that often gathered to talk during the breaks. He had medium-length dark curls that he constantly ran his fingers through, and an energetic body language. Normally he was charming, but today he seemed angry, and she heard him mention something about the working conditions and pay. Why should they have board and lodging deducted and pay an Eastern worker fee of seventy per cent? The Norwegians who worked at the factory received full pay. It was unreasonable. What was the point of calling it pay when they were left with as good as nothing?

The seagulls kept close to the fishing boats. They filled the air with hoarse cries, but the one on the railing was silent. 'Maybe you're lonely like me?' Nadia whispered to it.

'Are you talking to that seagull?' said a voice in German behind her.

She turned. It was the guard who had driven Daria to the hospital. He smiled warmly and came closer. 'How is your friend doing?'

Nadia told him that she'd had her appendix removed.

'Just as well she was taken to the hospital then.'

'Yes. Thanks for the help.'

He brushed off her thanks. 'I'm Harald. I'm Norwegian.'

Why was he telling her his name, as if they needed to be introduced to one another? And why was he introducing himself as Norwegian, as if it made him better than the German guards?

'I'm Nadia, and I'm Ukrainian,' she said, looking out across the sea, hoping he'd leave. But he kept standing there. She turned her gaze to the mountains in the south. Then the clouds

parted just above one of the mountaintops, and sunlight cascaded through the gap, down the mountainside and across the sea. Nadia was overwhelmed by the beauty of it all. The surface of the water glittered and flashed like thousands of stars. 'For a long time I wondered whether there was any sun this far north,' she said.

'Really?'

She didn't look at him but could heard from his voice that he was smiling.

'It's just been dark, snowy, cold and windy since I arrived.'

'Polar night,' he said.

'What's that?'

He explained it was the time of the year when the sun didn't rise above the horizon. They didn't really get proper polar night in Bodø, even though the town was north of the Arctic Circle. But for a month in the winter, the sun didn't rise above the mountains in the south, and it felt like polar night. 'It's been a hard winter, and when the snowstorms are almost constant, it's dark anyway,' he said. 'But spring will be here soon. It's nice when the days start to get lighter and warmer. And in the summer it's light almost all the time because then the sun doesn't dip below the horizon at night. We call that midnight sun.'

'What a strange country,' Nadia said, getting up. Her break was over. The seagull looked at her before flapping its wings and flying out across the sea.

'Shall I make arrangements for you to visit your friend at the hospital?'

'You can do that?'

'Of course.'

'Thank you.'

'Would you like to go to the cinema one evening?'

Nadia gave him a surprised look. 'The cinema?'

'You owe me, you see, since I helped your friend.'

'Would I be allowed to go to the cinema?'

'I can organise it. After all, you're not a prisoner, you're a worker. As long as you're back at the camp by eleven, it's fine.'

He smiled as he looked at her. She was wearing a dirty, thick woollen jumper with her apron on top and her kerchief tied tight around her head. 'Wear something nice, yeah?' he said casually.

She went back to work and thought: Something nice? Was he serious? And how would someone like him react if she, an Eastern worker, declined the invitation?

6

The hospital, 25 March

Birgit was on her way in to give a patient a bedpan when she spotted the thin Ukrainian girl, the one called Nadia, going into her friend's room. She quickly dropped off the bedpan and followed after her.

Daria clung to Nadia. 'I want to go home,' she sobbed.

'All wars end, and once this war is over, we'll go home,' Nadia said.

Birgit stood in the doorway. They were so pale and thin. Their hands were red, and Birgit could see that their skin was dry and chapped. Daria had to be a head shorter than Nadia. She had dark hair and blue eyes, whereas Nadia had golden curls and brown eyes. The contrast between hair colour and eye colour was striking in both of them, and Birgit thought they were beautiful even though it was hard to see at first glance since they seemed so exhausted. Many of her colleagues at the hospital talked about how awful it was for the Russian prisoners in the prison camps in Bodø, but no one had mentioned anything about female Eastern workers.

Nadia wiped Daria's cheeks. 'We are two plants that have been pulled up by the root and put in barren earth,' she said.

So typically Russian, painting pictures like that, Birgit thought. But no, she wasn't Russian, she was Ukrainian. There was a difference, but the languages were quite similar.

'Some plants thrive everywhere. They can even push their way up through cobblestones and cracks in rock, places you wouldn't think anything could grow,' Nadia continued. 'We're like those. We'll get through this, won't we?'

Birgit got them both a glass of cordial and left them alone. But as she saw to other patients, she kept thinking about the two girls and Nadia's analogy with the plants in barren earth. They were so young, thousands of kilometres from everything they knew and held dear, sent here as slaves. What had they seen, experienced and be subjected to on the journey from Ukraine to the far north of Norway?

When Birgit came back an hour later, Nadia sat bent forwards, singing quietly with Daria's hand in hers. She'd thought they seemed downtrodden, but it struck her that there was a difference between them. Although Nadia's gaze was resigned, she nevertheless sensed a strength in her, that she wasn't someone who'd let herself break easily.

But Daria is someone very close to breaking, she thought as she listened to Nadia comfort and try to encourage her friend.

Daria fell asleep, and Birgit walked with Nadia to the main entrance. 'Her wound is healing well,' she said. 'Your friend will be back on her feet in no time and ready to be discharged.'

'I'd hoped she would be kept here a while. You know, I've been so scared for her. It seems as though she's reaching the end of her rope. Can you talk to her, give her courage? Maybe she was supposed to end up here with you, someone who speaks Russian and cares. The last time we met, you asked whether there was anything you could do. You can help Daria, right?'

'I'll try to lift her spirits,' she promised.

Birgit stopped in the doorway. Nadia turned and waved once she reached the road. Birgit waved back. Was it truly impossible to do something for these girls who were worked like slaves without anyone seeming to care?

7

The hospital, 27 March

The sun hung low in the sky, shining in through the tall windows and illuminating Daria's bed. Birgit was almost blinded when she opened the door to her room because of the way the sun was reflecting off the pale green linoleum and the white walls. One of the night watchmen had told Birgit that Daria had been up and wandering back and forth along the corridor at night, and that she had seemed out of it when they took her back to her room.

Birgit tiptoed over to her. Maybe she was sleeping? She was like a sparrow, arms and legs as thin as twigs. The bright light made her face even paler, but she wasn't asleep. She was crying soundlessly.

'Are you feeling sad?' Birgit asked, setting a glass of water down on the nightstand.

Daria didn't reply.

Her wound was clean and free of infection, and soon there would be no medical reason to keep her at the hospital.

'Tell me what's making you sad,' she said.

'I don't want to go back to the camp and the factory,' Daria whispered, gripping Birgit's arm. 'Can you help me get out of it?'

'I know you're feeling down, but unfortunately I can't do anything about that specifically.' Birgit put a hand on her arm. 'Life will go back to normal, Daria, and then you can eat as much good food as you like and sleep in a normal bed, you won't have to work with fish and live in a camp, you can go wherever you like and go home to your family in Ukraine. You have to focus on that, not what's hard.'

It was at that moment that she noticed a movement in the doorway and turned. Sven Svendsen, the man who had helped her with her suitcases the day she'd arrived in Bodø, was leaning against the door frame, watching her. 'Hello there,' he said, crossing his arms.

'Oh, hello again. Can I help you with something?'

'I'm here about the patient,' he said, nodding towards Daria. 'Isn't she well enough to be discharged now?'

'Why are you asking about that?' Birgit asked, surprised.

'It's the factory manager at Frostfilet who's asking. He wants her back at work.'

Dear Lord, he's working for the Germans, Birgit thought. How long had he been standing there? Had he heard her speaking Russian?

Birgit tried to adopt a light tone. 'Oh, I see. No, unfortunately she's not quite ready yet.'

'No? In that case, I'll come back in a few days. Have you settled in okay here at the hospital?'

'Yes, I'm doing fine, thanks.'

Sven Svendsen stood for a moment. It looked like he was going to say something, and Birgit thought desperately about what she would say if he'd heard her speaking to Daria.

'Would you like to go out some evening?' he asked. 'We could go to the cinema or a café?'

'We have a lot of patients. I'm always rushed off my feet, so I'm so shattered by the time I've finished a shift that I'm not great company.'

'Maybe some other time, then?'

'We'll see,' she said, forcing a smile that he returned before giving a short nod and leaving.

*

Chief physician Kristian Heyerdahl peered at Birgit over the top of his glasses when she came into his office and curtsied. 'Ah, what can I do for you, sister?'

'Well, I… it's just, I'm worried about the patient from Frostfilet.'

'Wasn't her wound healing nicely?'

'It's about her mental health,' Birgit said, telling him that a Norwegian who worked for the Germans had come to ask whether Daria could be discharged.

'That must have been Sven Svendsen.'

Birgit nodded and told him what Nadia had said about the conditions at the factory and in the camp where they lived. 'Daria is depressed and malnourished. She needs nutritious food and rest to regain her strength. I don't think it would be good for her to be discharged now.'

'So… what would you suggest?'

'I can take care of her. She has no appetite, but I can make sure she eats, try to encourage her and get her to look on the bright side.'

'The Germans won't accept her staying her longer than absolutely necessary.'

'If you, as the chief physician, were to say that the patient isn't well enough to be discharged, that there have been complications–'

'You want me to lie?' Heyerdahl gave her a pointed look.

Birgit swallowed. She'd gone too far. Asking a doctor to lie to the Germans? What had she been thinking?

'Well… I thought…' She stumbled over her words. 'I mean… isn't lying acceptable when you're doing it with the best of intentions?'

Heyerdahl sat silently, sizing her up. Birgit's cheeks burned. Then he cracked a smile. 'I quite agree,' he said. 'I'll see what I can do for our Russian.'

'She's Ukrainian,' Birgit said. 'There's a difference.'

'You certainly know a lot about the Soviet Union. Have you studied Russian?'

'I've taken some private lessons.'

'I see.'

Birgit got up but stopped by the door. 'There's something else I wanted to mention. Daria and her friend, Nadia, have made a big impression on me. They're only sixteen or seventeen years old and alone in a foreign country. There must be something we can do for them. And what about all the other women working at Frostfilet. How–'

Heyerdahl interrupted her. 'We can't get mixed up in how the Germans run the factory and treat the workers there,' he said firmly. 'Frostfilet is a prestige project for them, and they wouldn't respond well to criticism.'

Birgit curtsied and opened the door.

'And for God's sake stop curtsying,' Heyerdahl said. 'I know that's how they do things at the National, but I can't say I like it.'

She looked at him over her shoulder and saw to her relief that he was smiling.

8

The hospital, 31 March

The hospital lobby looked like a warzone. There had been an explosion at the port, so it was all hands on deck. Seven or eight men lay on the floor, and more and more injured people were being brought in, some screaming in pain, others unconscious. Heyerdahl and four other doctors walked around examining them. Who needed the most urgent care, and who had more minor injuries that the nurses could take care of?

They had been trained to deal with such situations, and everyone knew what to do. Porters, the custodian, the stoker and other non-medical staff even helped carry the patients onwards to the operating theatres and wards. Matron Pernille Stokke stood in the middle of it all, giving the nurses instructions for various tasks in an authoritative voice. The door opened again, and two men carried in a boy who was missing half his leg. Heyerdahl hurried over and asked them to set him down on the floor. Birgit saw that the boy's eyes were open, but his gaze was unfocused. He's in shock, he needs urgent care, she thought. Heyerdahl gave him a shot of morphine and shouted for a stretcher. Two men came running, and he told them to take the boy to one of the operating theatres. Matron Stokke asked Birgit to go with them. A tingling radiated from her stomach all the way out to her fingertips. This was it. The experienced theatre nurses were busy with other patients. Birgit had started training to be a theatre nurse at the National Hospital and continued with it in Bodø, but this was the first time she would be primarily responsible for assisting a doctor during an operation.

The boy couldn't be more than ten or eleven years old. He was riddled with splinters, earth and dirt, wet with snow, and his leg was bleeding, but not much, because a belt had been tied around it just below the knee, above the place where the leg had been torn off. While Heyerdahl examined him to ascertain whether he had other significant bleeding or head trauma, Birgit prepared the mask and ether, and the boy was put under.

'Arterial forceps?' Heyerdahl asked, holding out his hand, palm up, without looking at her.

With practised movements, he used the forceps to clamp the main artery and tied a rubber hose around the leg. Then he cleaned the surgical site before cutting away dead tissue.

'I need enough soft tissue to pull over the stump,' he murmured pensively, as if to himself. 'Saw?'

He made an incision on the side and cut the leg a few centimetres further up.

'I need help to ligate. Is that something you can do?' he asked Birgit after a while.

'I've only done it once before.'

'You'll do fine,' he said and asked her to sit down next to him. The big lamp illuminated the boy's leg while they closed the blood vessels by tying pieces of suture around them. They worked in silence, sitting shoulder to shoulder in the smell of ether, green soap, iodine and blood.

'There,' Heyerdahl finally said, getting up. 'Now we wait a few days before closing the wound.'

The chief physician took off his blood-spattered coat, dropped it in the laundry basket and washed his hands. He reminded her of the Norwegian king, tall with a narrow face, a long, narrow nose and eyes situated close to the root of his nose. He stopped in the doorway. 'Well done,' he said with a quick nod.

*

'Lord, I'm shattered,' Birgit exclaimed, kicking off her shoes just inside her door.

'Me too,' Lillian said, flopping down on the sofa.

Lillian was a Bodø girl and one of the nurses Birgit had got to know best. They often spent time together in the evenings when they were free. They had just finished an eighteen-hour shift.

'How's it going with the boy who lost his leg?' Lillian asked.

'He's stable, luckily. Here's hoping it doesn't get infected.'

'Where did you get them?' Lillian pointed at the gramophone records on the shelf.

'From a friend.'

'Maybe we can get a gramophone. Then we can listen to music together.'

She leant towards a photograph hanging on the wall.

'And who's this you're with?'

It had been taken in the summer of 1939 on the wharfside at home in Kragerø. Tekla, Annelise and Birgit stood with their arms around each other, wearing light summer dresses, the wind blowing their hair in their faces. They laughed as they looked at the camera.

We were so happy, Birgit thought. Little did we know what was coming.

Her gaze lingered on Annelise. She had been so disappointed with her when she chose to enlist as a military nurse, but Tekla hadn't judged her. You can judge her for becoming part of

the German war machine, but she'll alleviate pain and care for those who are dying. People are people no matter where they come from, she'd said.

Birgit told Lillian that they were her two best friends.

'Here in Bodø you'll have to make do with me,' Lillian said, glancing at Birgit with a smile.

Suddenly they heard loud shouts. Both of them ran from the room and looked over the railing in the stairwell. German soldiers were coming through the main entrance on the ground floor, led by Sven Svendsen.

'Oh!' Lillian exclaimed. 'I forgot…' Birgit didn't hear the rest because Lillian flew down the stairs. Birgit followed and saw her run into the nurses' office in the surgical department. Moments later she reappeared with a piece of paper in her hands and jogged into the west wing. She pinned up the paper on the innermost door. As she did so, Sven Svendsen and the German soldiers came up the stairs from the ground floor. He shouted orders, and the soldiers' boots pounded against the floor as they went from room to room along the long corridor. A man with a walker pressed himself against the wall, terrified. They tore open doors, and a female patient on her way out of one of the rooms was pushed aside. But they didn't stay long in any of them. Clearly they were looking for someone or something.

Lillian stood with Birgit outside the nurses' office. One of the soldiers called for Sven Svendsen and pointed at the notice on the door. He came towards them at a brisk stride. His stern facial expression was replaced by a smile when he spotted Birgit. 'Oh, hello there.'

'Hello.'

'Who's the patient with tuberculosis in the room at the end of the corridor?'

'A fisherman who came in a couple of days ago. He's in isolation,' Lillian replied. 'He'll be transferred to the tuberculosis sanatorium in Saltdalen as soon as possible. No one can go into there without protective equipment. Shall I get you some?'

Svendsen stood thinking for a moment. 'No, it's fine. What about the Eastern worker? Surely she's better by now?' he asked Birgit. 'It's been a week since her surgery.'

'According to the doctor, she's not ready to be discharged yet, unfortunately. There have been complications, an infection in the wound,' she lied.

He waved to the soldiers. *'Weiter!'* he shouted. 'See you later,' he said to Birgit as he turned and left.

The moment Svendsen and the soldiers were out of sight, Lillian leant on her thighs and exhaled. 'I'd forgotten to pin the notice to the door,' she whispered to Birgit.

'I didn't know we had a tuberculosis patient. When–'

'Don't ask. How do you know Sven Svendsen?'

Birgit told her he'd helped her with her suitcases the stormy day she arrived in Bodø. 'I've since learnt he works for the Germans.'

'A dangerous man. Look out for him, and God forbid he finds out you speak Russian and you're lying about the Eastern worker,' Lillian said. 'Someone ought to put a bullet in him. I might even do it myself one of these days,' she added heatedly.

9

Bodø, same evening

Nadia had been to the cinema at home in Dnipropetrovsk once, when she was thirteen. A well-to-do uncle who had moved to Stalingrad and was high up in the ranks of the Red Army had been home visiting her mother and invited Nadia and her brother. The building was magnificent, with ornate pillars, marble walls and lovely, soft chairs. The cinema in Bodø was in a barracks with rough wooden walls and rickety chairs.

Harald had bought a cone of raspberry sweets. After months of fish and tasteless gruel, the tart flavour exploded in Nadia's mouth and made her think of her grandmother's raspberry bushes. She sucked the sweet with her eyes closed and was transported home in her mind, a child again, her family sitting at the long table in the garden beneath the cherry trees, barbequing, the smell of smoke and grilled meat in her nostrils. Aunts and uncles, grandparents, her mother, father and Andrey – everyone was there. She drank raspberry juice, the adults drank homemade cherry wine. When the sun went down, her grandfather got out his bandura, and everybody sang. Mother had the most beautiful voice, and late in the evening, before everyone went home, she would sing Ave Maria. She'd dreamt of being an opera singer when she was young. All her life she'd sung for and with Nadia, and when Nadia got older, both of them sang Ave Maria for the family. 'You've inherited your mother's beautiful voice,' her grandmother said. 'Maybe you'll be the one to sing at the opera one day.'

As a child, she would lie down in her grandfather's hammock when she got sleepy. The sound of music, laughter and conversation would fade slowly into the background, and she would fall asleep and barely stir when her father or Andrey, who was six years older than her, carried her to bed.

She sucked hard on the raspberry sweet and thought about how she was once the happiest child in a safe world. Have the Germans been hounded through the streets now, or have there been more attacks in Dnipropetrovsk? Andrey and Father, are they alive? And what about Mother? She had to be frantic with loss and concern.

'Are you asleep?'

She opened her eyes. Harald was smiling at her. He's handsome, she thought. Nordic, dark blond hair, blue-green eyes, tall and athletic.

She returned his smile. 'No, I just… well, the sweet, it's the best thing I've tasted in a long time.'

'Here, have another,' he said.

The lights were switched off, and everyone quieted down. Before the film itself started, they were shown footage of marching soldiers. Harald told her they were Norwegian soldiers in Oslo home on leave from the Eastern Front.

'What are Norwegians doing on the Eastern Front?' she asked, surprised.

'They've enlisted in the German army.'

Norwegian soldiers have gone to Ukraine to fight *against* my people? she thought, and then: Harald is no better than them.

She pushed the thought away and looked back at the footage, where the soldiers were met with adulation in the streets. Some girls gave them flowers, which they tucked into their breast pockets.

'Where's that, and who's he?' she asked as a thickset man greeted a soldier before giving a Nazi salute.

'That's the Norwegian prime minister, Vidkun Quisling, in front of the palace in Oslo,' Harald replied.

Suddenly several people in the hall coughed or sneezed at the same time. Some laughed, and others stamped their feet. It was a spectacle, and Harald turned around. Nadia could see that he was annoyed. She heard angry voices, then a door was opened and two young men were thrown out.

'What was that about?' she asked.

Harald patted her hand. 'Just some troublemakers. Nothing to worry about.'

When he took his hand back, she could still feel his touch on her skin.

People appeared on the screen, and the film started. It was Norwegian and had the title *The Missing Sausage Maker*, Harald said. It was a comedy, and the plot was easy to follow. Nadia relaxed and laughed along together with Harald and everyone else in the hall at the funny, thin protagonist with the long arms.

To think I'm laughing. We're laughing *together*, soldiers and civilians, Germans and Norwegians. And one Ukrainian.

When they came outside, Harald gripped her arm. 'Come,' he said, pulling her after him.

'Where are we going?'

'Wait, you'll see.'

After a short walk, he stopped in front of a door. 'We're going to a bar.'

'A bar?'

'Well, sort of. It's more of a pub.'

It was full of people, and the air was thick with loud laughter and shouts. Harald found an empty table for them by the wall before going over to the counter and returning with two small glasses.

'What's this?' Nadia asked.

'I don't know what it's called in German, but try it.'

It tore at her throat, her eyes watered, and she started to cough. Harald laughed. 'You need to take small sips,' he warned her.

She wiped her eyes and looked around. Some of the soldiers were wearing the same kind of Norwegian uniform as Harald, but most of them were German. Women sat at all the tables. Nadia noticed that one German had his hand on the thigh of the woman next to him. He gave it a squeeze, and the woman smiled at him.

She carefully sipped the liquor. The contrast with everything she'd eaten or drunk in recent months couldn't have been greater. A warmth spread through her body, making her feel relaxed and lightheaded. 'This is unreal,' she said.

'What is?'

'That I've been to the cinema, that I'm sitting here like there isn't a war on, that life is totally normal.'

Harald watched her solemnly, and she could still feel the pressure from his hand on her skin when she met his gaze.

'I can make life easier for you,' he said.

'I'm a slave, you're a guard,' she said, regretting her words at once as his gaze hardened.

She couldn't get on his bad side, couldn't forget he was a Nazi, that he had all the power, power over her as well. 'Sorry,' she said quickly. 'I seem ungrateful. That wasn't my intention.'

She breathed a sigh of relief when he smiled.

'But it'll make a difference for you, knowing me,' he said. 'Don't you see?' He leant towards her. 'There's a lot I can do for you. Is there anything you need?'

'Yes… food and clothes.'

'Consider it done.'

He walked briskly to the counter and came back with a waffle, which he put down in front of her. 'It's a roe waffle.'

Her stomach rumbled when she took her first bite, and she closed her eyes as she chewed. When she opened them, Harald was watching her, face solemn again. 'You're so beautiful,' he said.

She was wearing the dress she'd been wearing the day the Germans had taken her from the school. It was dark green and too thin for the season, she was freezing, but it was all she had. Nadia could feel herself blushing at the compliment and quickly changed the subject. 'Tell me about yourself.'

Harald was twenty-five, studying medicine and from Oslo, he told her. His father was a doctor, his mother a housewife, and he had a younger sister.

There was a lightness about him, she thought, like he had no worries in his life.

He interrupted himself. 'Look at me babbling away. Your turn. How old are you?'

'I've just turned seventeen.'

'What do you dream of doing when the war's over?'

Nadia looked down into her glass for a few seconds. 'Before I can start dreaming, I need to get my life back.'

'We all do.'

She couldn't restrain herself. 'You're free, you can go wherever you want, do whatever you want, and you're living in your home country. There's a big difference between us,' she said, looking away.

'But surely you dream about something?' was his only response.

'Back home they always used to say I have a beautiful singing voice, and my grandmother thought I could become an opera singer.'

'See, you do have a dream.'

'Is it your dream to become a doctor?'

He shook his head.

'No?' she asked, surprised.

'I've always dreamt of becoming an artist.'

'Why don't you, then?'

His eyes hardened again. 'I'm expected to follow in my father's footsteps and take over his surgery. But what I really want to do is go to Paris and study fine art. I bet you could study opera there, too.'

It had to be the liquor making it so easy for her to picture Paris, both of them together in places she'd read about, by the Eiffel Tower, in a roadside café, and she could see herself standing by a grand piano, singing.

Harald glanced at his watch and got up. 'I hope you've had a nice time and not longed for home during this time we've spent together.'

When they were outside, he took her arm and walked her all the way back to the camp.

10

Bodø, 6 April

It was time for Daria to go back to the camp and back to work at the factory. Birgit stood with her on the hospital steps, waiting for the car that was coming to collect her. Heyerdahl had done what he could to ensure she stayed as long as possible, but now the hospital was full to bursting, and they needed her bed. People in Bodø lived so close together that illness spread easily, and they were dealing with a major outbreak of diphtheria. The patients had infections in their throats and airways, and a little girl had recently died when the bacterium attacked her brain. The diphtheria patients had to be isolated, so now there were patients lying in the corridors, and all the staff were working long shifts and rushed off their feet.

'You'll be fine, and besides, you aren't alone. You have Nadia. She'll be glad to have you back,' Birgit offered by way of comfort, putting an arm around her.

'You don't know what it's like,' Daria replied through tears.

A car pulled up in front of the entrance, and Daria got in.

'A lot of people think the war will be over soon,' Birgit said. 'Then you can go home. Focus on that. Don't give up hope, Daria.'

The car started moving, and Birgit waved, but Daria just stared at her without waving back, her face pale and drawn behind the glass.

Lillian had come out as well, and together they watched the car drive out of sight.

'We have to be able to do more for her and the other women working at the fish factory. Everyone calls them forced labourers, but in reality they're slaves.'

'Listen, you need something else to think about,' Lillian said. 'We're going to borrow two bikes and go for a bike ride, and we can go to Dad's shop so you can see whether he has a nice fabric for that coat you've been talking about making. We're off shift, and spring has finally sprung. Come on!'

Birgit had only ventured down into town a couple of times since she arrived in Bodø. Those times it had been dark, cold and snowy. But now it was the April, and almost all the snow had melted.

The town teemed with life. The sound of children whooping, yelling and laughing mixed with the noise of cars, trucks, motorcycles and creaking horse-drawn carts.

'Pew, pew!' a child's voice shouted nearby. 'You're dead!'

It was a boy around the age of eight or nine. He had a homemade toy gun in his hands and was aiming it at another boy, who dramatically toppled over right next to Birgit but got up just as quickly. 'I'm not dead, I'm just injured,' he shouted, sprinting around a corner.

Children are children, even in the ruins of war, Birgit thought, glancing at a young pregnant woman hanging laundry out to dry on a clothesline. Everything she could see would have been commonplace were it not for the ruins and all the Germans – walking, driving and cycling – disturbing the idyll.

'I could swear there are more Germans here than in Oslo,' Birgit said.

'Yes, there are more Germans than ordinary people here,' Lillian laughed. 'This is *Festung Bodø*. The Germans are scared the Allies will invade Norway by sea. They've built forts along the coast, huge bunkers, guns and air defences, and there are mines everywhere, so people have to watch where they're walking.'

They cycled side by side down towards the wharf. 'Look,' Lillian said, jumping off her bike.

A trench, around five metres wide and just as deep, divided the town lengthways. There was barbed wire along the edges.

'It's only possible to cross at the very top and bottom of Sjøgata,' she said. 'It's supposed to stop the British from getting past and heading inland. People need to take big detours to get where they're going. People are referring to the crossing points as the Eye of the Needle and the Pearly Gates. Typical Bodø humour,' she added with a lopsided smile.

Maybe it was the air, the moderate breeze that no longer nipped at her earlobes, or the glittering sea bereft of whitecaps and the sun rising higher in the sky every day. Or maybe the spring made more of an impression here in the north after the hard winter. It was difficult to say, but suddenly Birgit was overwhelmed with joy as she cycled behind Lillian. She felt like she was floating. The cord securing her braid had slipped off, releasing her fair hair so that it streamed behind her. It reminded her of the summer two years ago when Tekla and she had taken the ferry from Kragerø to Jomfruland for a bike ride. On the outside of the island, with a view of the open sea, they had had a picnic. Tekla had brought a bottle of red wine from her father's wine cellar, and they'd drunk and laughed at nothing. It had been like the war didn't exist. Tekla dreamt of working with horses, and Birgit was well underway with her nurse's training. They'd talked about boys, neither of them having a boyfriend, and Tekla thought it was because they were so picky. 'I won't have just anyone, and neither will you,' she'd said. It had to be true love, that much was for certain. 'Every time he sees me, he can't help but smile, and I should feel my heart beat faster every time he enters the room.' She'd pointed at the small waves lapping gently

at the pebble beach. 'Listen! The sea is kissing the land today, and that's how I want to be kissed.' Then she had raised her glass. 'Cheers to the fatherland and to love!'

'Cheers to the fatherland and to love!' Birgit had agreed.

Now she had the same feeling of good things to come, and when Lillian let go of her handlebars, lifted both arms and whooped, Birgit pedalled past her. 'Yoohoo!' she shouted. 'You'll never catch me!'

The happy memories evaporated at the sight that greeted them when they rounded a bend. Round huts sat on a plot of land behind a barbed-wire fence. Birgit knew it had to be a Russian camp and jumped off her bike. 'Can we get closer?'

'No, you're not allowed to stop, we have to keep cycling,' Lillian said.

Sparse smoke rose from pipes sticking up from the gently sloped, almost flat roofs. Some of the huts looked like the slightest puff of wind might knock them over, and Birgit noticed that earth and clay had been pushed halfway up the walls, which were made of thin sheets of plywood.

Birgit wheeled her bike past. How could people live this way? Some of the doors to the huts were open, and several men sat in the openings, staring out at nothing, skinny and silent. They didn't seem to notice the two young women who were passing.

'Come on, the Germans are watching us,' Lillian said.

Two soldiers approached the fence. 'You're not German, you're wearing storm trooper uniforms,' Birgit said, surprised. 'Do they have Norwegians guarding the Russian camps?'

Birgit was quiet and contemplative as they cycled back into town. She no longer wanted to lift her arms and fly. 'Here's Dad's shop,' Lillian said, jumping off her bike, but then she just stood there, looking at the door. A CLOSED sign hung in the window.

They went around to the back door, which was also locked. Lillian knocked. Not a sound could be heard from within. 'Dad!' she shouted, knocking again.

A few moments later, they heard the sound of a key being turned, and Lillian's father appeared in the doorway. 'Quick, get inside,' he said in a hushed voice.

Inside, he pulled Lillian into a room. Birgit heard them talking quietly, and after a minute or so, they came back out.

'Lillian says you speak Russian?' her father asked.

Birgit nodded, and he ushered her into his office. On a sofa bed lay a thin man in a dirty shirt with big sweat patches.

'He's a Russian prisoner. He was out back when I went to put the rubbish out earlier, whirling around looking totally confused,' he said. 'Lillian, go keep watch.'

Lillian went through to the shop, and Birgit hurried over to the man. 'What's your name?' she asked in Russian.

'Ivan.'

'Did you escape from a prison camp?'

'Yes, you have to help me.'

'Are you in pain? Are you injured?'

'You have to help me, I don't want to die,' he said desperately. 'They'll shoot me if they find me.'

Birgit brought a hand to his forehead. He was cold and clammy. She carefully probed under his jaw with her fingers. His lymph nodes were a little swollen. Then she asked him to open wide. 'Have you been bleeding from your nose?' she asked, and he shook his head.

'What's wrong with him?' Lillian's father asked.

'I don't think it's diphtheria because he doesn't have any white coating in his throat. He most likely has an airway infection, but he should be examined by a doctor.'

Lillian appeared at the door. 'Sven Svendsen and a group of storm troopers are coming. They're going door to door,' she said quickly.

'Won't Svendsen find it suspicious that the shop is shut in the middle of a clear afternoon like this?' Birgit asked. 'Wouldn't it be better for everything to seem normal? We don't want to risk him breaking in.'

Lillian's father agreed, and Lillian ran to turn the sign in the window and unlock the door.

'We need to hide him,' Birgit said, looking around. The office was clearly also used as a storeroom, because there was a stack of cardboard boxes in one corner, and hats, coats, shirts and rolls of fabric lay on a table. She explained to the Russian that he had to hide. His eyes were wide. She wasn't sure whether he realised what was about to happen. Suddenly he grabbed her arm. 'Help me, I don't want to die!' he screamed.

'You have–'

He kept screaming: 'Help me, help me! They'll shoot me!'

Birgit grabbed his forearms, but he resisted. Quickly she lifted her hand and slapped him. Then he stopped screaming and just gaped at her in terror.

'If you scream, you will die,' she said quickly. 'You need to do what I say. Understand?'

Birgit breathed a sigh of relief when he nodded, and Lillian's father helped push him under the sofa before they piled some boxes in front of and on top of it and draped clothes over everything. Then they hurried out into the shop as Birgit said a silent prayer that the Russian would be quiet when Svendsen turned up. She asked Lillian's father to get out rolls of fabric for her coat, and when Sven Svendsen and the soldiers arrived, Lillian and Birgit were hunched over them at the counter.

Sven Svendsen wore a stern expression, but when he spotted Birgit, he lit up. 'Oh, hello again! Birgit, isn't it?'

'How can I help you?' Lillian's father asked.

'We're looking for an escaped Russian prisoner,' Svendsen replied.

'Russian prisoner? The only thing that doesn't belong here is me, and I'm not Russian, I'm a southerner,' Birgit said. 'That's what you call people like me, isn't it?'

Svendsen hummed. 'Yes, and we're sceptical of southerners, but I have nothing against southerners like you.'

'That's good,' she replied and pointed at the rolls of fabric on the counter. 'I can't decide which colour I want for the new coat I'm making. What do you think? Which colour suits me best?'

Svendsen came over and stood next to her. He picked up several pieces of fabric, taking some of them over to the window and looking at them in the daylight. 'This one,' he said finally, handing her one in crimson. 'It'll go well with your fair hair.'

'You have good taste,' she said with a smile.

He looked away from her and around the shop. 'Are there any more rooms?'

'Just a combined office and storeroom,' Lillian's father replied.

Svendsen went over to the office door, opened it and looked in. Birgit held her breath and glanced at Lillian. She bit her lip and looked at the floor.

Svendsen headed for the exit. 'You folks have a nice day, then,' he said to them, but it was Birgit he looked at when he bowed and left.

'That was a close one,' Lillian's father exclaimed when the door closed behind Svendsen and his escort.

'You were flirting with him,' Lillian said to Birgit. 'He's very taken with you.'

'Urgh, he is not.'

'In any case, it was very quick of you,' Lillian's father said. 'But make sure you're careful around him.'

He gave his daughter an enquiring look. 'You know what you have to do?'

'Yes,' Lillian said.

The sun was starting to dip below the horizon, the sky above them cloudless as they cycled back to the hospital. But dark clouds were rolling in from the sea, and moments later there was a deep rumbling followed by a flash of lightning. People hurried through the streets. They were almost all men, and almost all of them were going the same way. 'Where are they all off to?' Birgit asked.

'Home. A lot of the people who've lost their homes live in huts outside town or with family in the countryside, and the men commute to work in the town.'

'What about the people who lost their homes and didn't have anywhere to go?'

'They stayed.'

'Then where do they live?'

'On top of each other, as it were.'

'More Bodø humour?'

'Yes,' she said with a smile, one that vanished almost instantly.

Birgit followed her gaze and spotted some soldiers. Their boots pounded the pavement, and they were led by a thickset man in a German uniform with a wide leather belt, a tall hat, jodhpurs and tall leather boots. Four soldiers followed right behind him, and two men with their hands tied behind their backs were pushed along between them.

The girls jumped off their bikes.

'Who's the German at the front?' Birgit asked.

'Chief of the Gestapo, Holck.'

'Where are they going?' Birgit asked.

'To Heyerdahl's lodgings at the hospital. The Germans have requisitioned his house.'

'I heard about that. What are they using it for?'

'It's just called the Gestapo House now. They interrogate people there. And apparently Sven Svendsen is one of the people doing Holck's dirty work.'

'Dirty work?'

'Several people have been crippled in the basement there.'

The company turned onto the property, and the two men were pushed through the door. The first heavy raindrops fell just as Birgit and Lillian parked their bikes and ran up the hospital steps.

'There's something I need to do. See you later,' Lillian said with an apologetic expression as they reached the first floor. She hurried along the corridor, and Birgit saw her knock on Heyerdahl's office door.

A letter had arrived for Birgit. The envelope was stamped with the German eagle, and underneath it said: *TOWARDS BRIGHTER DAYS*.

You are much too far away. I miss you, Tekla wrote.

I hope you can visit home in the summer. If you do, we can go to Jomfruland. There's more wine in Dad's cellar. War or no war, we must live!

Birgit smiled to herself and sat down to write back, but she was restless and couldn't concentrate. She was thinking about the escapee from the Russian camp. What would happen to him, and what about the two Norwegians who had been taken to the Gestapo House?

She didn't see Lillian the rest of the evening, and in the end she went to bed but lay awake. Then, suddenly, there were sounds from the lift. She looked at her alarm clock. It was almost one in the morning. The lift went down, but not long after, it came back up. She went out into the entryway and carefully cracked open the door. Lillian came into view. She went over to the stairs and looked down before hurrying to the attic door and looking both ways along the corridor, waiting and listening. Then she opened the door and waved at someone. Out of the lift came Heyerdahl, Rasmussen and Lillian's father. They were supporting the Russian from the shop between them.

11

The hospital, 10 April

Despite being on night shift, Birgit felt quite energised. It had been a quiet night without much running around. She stood for a moment on the hospital steps, breathing in the clear, cold morning air while she buttoned her coat and put on her hat and gloves. It had been raining all night, but now it had let up. Lillian had explained to her where the labour camp accommodating the factory workers was, on Langstranda, two or three kilometres from the hospital. She'd warned her against going there and said she wouldn't be going with her. Everyone she asked about the Eastern workers said the same. It was dangerous to get mixed up in how the camp was run. But she couldn't stop thinking about the two Ukrainian girls and had decided she wanted to see the camp with her own eyes.

Around a hundred metres from the camp, she got off her bike. In an open, flat area, a good distance away from the fish factory, sat twelve to fifteen long barracks behind a tall barbed-wire fence. There were more buildings on the outside. They had to be for the Germans, Birgit thought, stepping aside when a truck passed. The man in the driver's seat waved his arm as if trying to shoo her away.

Outside one of the barracks, two women were hanging laundry out to dry. Bed linen, dresses and several small garments that looked like sleepsuits.

Goodness, were there children in the camp, too?

Lillian had said that the workers at the fish factory were treated better than the Russian prisoners. They might not be referred to as prisoners, Birgit thought, but they're doing forced labour, they're slaves taken from their home countries and brought here against their will. They're not free.

The woman continued to hang up small garments, a whole line full.

How many children are there, and were they born here? she wondered.

As she stood considering whether she would be able to get anywhere near the factory down by the sea, she spotted a long column of people, a couple hundred or so, maybe more, walking up towards the camp. Workers who were done for the day, she realised. They must have been on the night shift.

When she looked back at the camp, a solider stood staring at her from next to one of the small buildings outside the fence. Then he marched towards her. '*Verschwinde!* Get out of here!' he shouted.

At the same moment, the gate into the barracks area opened, and the truck came back out. When it was alongside her, it stopped, and the driver jumped out. Without a word, he took her bike, lifted it into the truck bed and asked her to get in.

'What the hell are you doing here?' he asked.

Birgit ignored the question.

'Do you work for the Germans?'

'Yes,' he replied, mildly irritated. 'You have to make a living somehow.'

'Are you often in the camp?' she asked.

'Now and then.'

'Will you be back here soon?'

'Why are you asking?'

'Next time you go in, can you take something in for me and give it to one of the Eastern workers?'

'Jesus, you must be mad!'

Birgit told him she was a nurse and was worried about one of the women in the camp, that she'd met a couple of them at the hospital. 'I so want to do something for them.'

'I don't want any part of it. It's too dangerous. Yesterday they arrested the father of a boy who'd thrown packed lunches over the fence of a Russian camp.'

'But can't you just–'

'Don't you hear what I'm saying?' he interrupted. 'It's out of the question. But you're right to feel bad for the female Eastern workers,' he added, somewhat calmer. 'Some of them even have children.'

'How many children are in there?'

'Don't know. A whole load of them.'

12

The hospital, next morning

When Birgit started the early shift, she was told Heyerdahl wanted to talk to her. 'I'm told you were involved in a matter where there was a need for an interpreter the other day,' he said without preamble when she came into his office. 'It would be unfortunate if anyone were to get wind of this incident.'

Birgit nodded. 'Of course.'

'For all involved,' he continued. 'Including you.'

'I know. I won't be telling anyone about it.'

'Tell me a little about yourself. Where are you from?'

'I'm from Kragerø,' Birgit replied, surprised by the turn the conversation had taken.

'And your family?'

'My father is a grocer. My mother is a housewife but does a little work in a nursing home kitchen.'

'Siblings?'

'An older brother.'

'What does he do?'

'He works for my father. But why are you asking–'

'Are any of your family members of NS?'

'Absolutely not,' Birgit replied. 'They're good Norwegians.'

'Are you a member of the Nurses Organisation?'

'No, I left when all the board members were replaced with NS members appointed by Quisling. I am *not* a Nazi sympathiser. And I think I can prove it.'

Heyerdahl raised his eyebrows.

'I know the escaped Russian prisoner is in the hospital attic. I know the Germans consider it a grave offence to conceal a prisoner. But you can trust me. I'll keep my mouth shut.'

Heyerdahl put his elbows on the armrests and pressed his fingertips together.

Birgit told him what she had seen. 'It is him this is about, the Russian prisoner in the attic, right? You need an interpreter.'

'Every now and then something happens that gives us the chance to make a difference. As doctors and nurses, it is our job to care for *all* people. We have to do what is required of us. Even when it costs us.'

He gave Birgit a thoughtful look for a few seconds.

'The Russian is proving difficult to manage. He isn't quite himself, and we can't talk to him.'

'If my Russian skills might be of use, I'm happy to help. I want to do what I can.'

Heyerdahl gave a slow nod. 'Meet us in the attic at midnight tonight.'

*

It was five to midnight when Birgit leant forwards and breathed in the scent of the crucifix. I've found what I came for, she thought. This means something, this life in Bodø.

In the attic, she paused for a moment while her eyes adjusted to the dark. At the end of a long corridor she could see a light. She moved towards it and cautiously pushed open the door. Lillian, Heyerdahl and Rasmussen were standing around a table illuminated by a reading lamp. 'Ah, there you are,' Heyerdahl said.

Birgit couldn't help but notice that he was being more familiar with her now. The room looked like a store for mattresses and old hospital equipment. It couldn't have been more than eight to ten square metres. The Russian lay on a mattress on the floor. She went over to him. 'How are you, Ivan?' she asked in Russian. 'Are you in any pain?'

He jerked his head from side to side and moaned a response. Quietly at first, then louder and louder.

'What's he saying?' Heyerdahl asked.

'That someone will come to get him.'

The Russian started to scream and wave his arms around.

Heyerdahl grabbed the bag on the table, dug out a syringe and filled it. Rasmussen more or less had to lie on top of the Russian so that Heyerdahl could inject it, and then the man relaxed.

'He puts us all at risk,' Heyerdahl said. 'We can't keep him here. Rasmussen?'

'We can't just let him go when he isn't himself.'

Everyone stood in silence, looking at the Russian.

'We transport patients who die and are to be buried elsewhere than in Bodø,' Birgit said after a few moments. 'Is that an option? Could he be sent out of town to somewhere he can recover?'

'In a casket, you mean?' Rasmussen said.

'Why not?'

'Hm,' Heyerdahl said. 'There's a thought. What do you think, Rasmussen?'

'Maybe. I know a farm we can use. It's deserted. But he'll have to be heavily sedated so we can be sure he won't wake up.'

Heyerdahl looked at Birgit. 'This is the point of no return. You realise that?'

She nodded.

'You are now part of the BRG, the Bodø Resistance Group, hospital division. You'll interpret for us when there is such a need,' he said, opening a concealed door in the wall. 'This is a secret room. There's space to hide here if necessary. Sometimes the Germans come to the hospital and search for escaped prisoners or resistance fighters, but they've never come up here. There is also a radio behind the wall. You and Lillian will be jointly responsible for listening to London. You'll note down what is said and drop the notes in various places around town in what we call dead letterboxes. You'll be told in advance where they are. The location will vary. The content of the notes will be published in the illegal newspaper Fridom. They don't know who has the radio or is delivering the notes, and you don't know who is collecting them. Lillian will show you the ropes. What you'll be doing entails great risk. Do you understand the implications of this?'

She met Heyerdahl's solemn gaze and thought about the two resistance fighters who had been taken to the Gestapo House. That was what Heyerdahl meant, risk of being caught, risk of being arrested, risk of God knows what that they did to people in the basement there.

'I'm ready,' she said.

13

The fish factory, 9 May

Crates were brought crashing down onto the workbenches where the women stood ready to filet, clean, weigh and pack the fish. Cart wheels creaked as they were rolled across the concrete floor, the fileting machine hummed and screeched, water swelled in the big tubs, and loud voices shouted in both the production hall and out on the wharfside. But despite all the noise, Nadia could hear the sound of marching soldiers approaching. The steel toes of their boots pounded against the ground, and moments later, a small army of guards arrived with the factory manager. The workers looked at each other, whispering among themselves. What was this? It was rare that the factory manager himself spent any time on the factory floor. Conversation died, water was switched off and the fish lay still in the tubs, the fileting machine stopped, and two men on their way in from the wharf with a cart full of fish crates stopped in the doorway. A soldier shouted to the men in the cold store to come through. The women wiped their hands and took the opportunity to warm them in their armpits.

'A serious situation has arisen,' the factory manager said. 'We have recently identified tampering during packing and weighing. The issues with the cooling equipment motor are the result of sabotage, and the contents of a crate of fish checked in Hamburg were destroyed.'

His gaze swept over the workers before he bellowed: 'Someone used the crate as a toilet!'

One of the kapos translated into Russian. Nadia looked at Alexander Abramov. He had recently gone to the management and complained about the working conditions. When he came back, they could see that he had been beaten. He now stood looking at the floor. Had he taken his revenge? No, he wasn't that stupid. He was the first person they'd suspect of sabotage.

The German factory manager went over to him and leant forwards so that their faces were only a few centimetres apart. 'One of our kapos has disappeared,' he said. 'Would you know anything about that?'

'No,' Abramov replied.

It was quieter in the production hall than it had ever been before.

'We have commenced investigations and have absolutely no reason to believe the kapo has run off,' the factory manager continued. 'In fact, he was very conscientious in his performance of the duties we gave him. We will find out what happened to him and who is responsible. They will be punished.'

Then he turned on his heel and marched out with the soldiers behind him. The machines were switched on, and work started up again. The woman whispered to each other. Was it not strange that the kapo had simply disappeared? Had someone really killed him? Daria said it was good if he were dead, he was very disliked, but Nadia thought that would be the worst thing to have happened. That would only lead to reprisals for everyone. Even those who hadn't been involved risked being punished if they didn't find out who the guilty party was.

Five days after the scene in the production hall, the factory manager returned. He went straight over to Alexander Abramov. 'You're suspected of murder,' he said and ordered the soldiers to seize him.

When he was taken out, Abramov resisted and yelled that he was innocent. Nadia glanced at the men he usually ran with. They were having a heated discussion in low voices.

'Settle down!' shrieked one of the guards.

14

The labour camp, 3 July

Everyone at the barracks knew that Nadia had been out of the camp with a Norwegian guard several times in recent months. The only person she'd told was Daria. That meant it was the person closest to her who had snitched. 'Harald and I are just friends,' she'd told her, but Daria had shrugged and said he was bound to be expecting something in return.

Her head was full of questions she couldn't find answers for. What did a privileged man like him want with someone like her? Should she stop going out with him, deny herself benefits, food, new clothes? And if she said no, would he react by making life more difficult for her? No matter how she looked at it, it was just as crazy. Besides, she liked him, and he seemed genuinely happy to spend time with her. He was funny, and it was liberating to get out among people who didn't live like her, to be able to eat and drink, to get a sense of a normal life. Why shouldn't she say yes to a man who made her laugh and forget all that was difficult for a while, even if he worked for the Germans? The last time they had gone out, he had given her a small bottle of perfume. He had opened it and dabbed a little behind each of her ears before leaning close to her and breathing in: 'Mm, you smell so good'. He had been so close that his breath had tickled her throat.

Nadia had showered and washed her hair at the factory after her shift ended. She had stood in a queue for the communal showers in the basement of the factory for over half an hour. There was always a queue, and often she couldn't be bothered, but today she had to be clean and smell nice.

Harald had got her a dress. It was dark blue with small white flowers and had a line of white buttons from her chest down to her waist. She put it on and looked in the mirror. I look almost like myself now, she thought.

'Where did you get that dress?' Daria asked.

'Does it matter?'

'Hm, I see. Just make sure you don't end up like them,' she said, nodding towards the mothers in the corner.

Several of the women were scowling at her. She noticed as she buttoned the dress. Some of them had stopped talking to her. But she refused to feel ashamed. And wasn't it easier to endure their judgement and envy than feel like she was worth nothing?

Harald was waiting in a car at the gate. Her stomach fluttered when he jumped out and opened the door. 'You look so beautiful,' he said.

'Thank you for the dress. Where are we going today?'

'You'll see.'

They drove out of town and up to where they had a view of the town, the sea and the islands. Harald had brought a blanket and a picnic basket. In it were slices of German bread made of sourdough with butter and egg on them.

'Ta-da!' he said, lifting a bottle of homemade wine into the air with a wide grin.

'Where did you get all this?' she asked.

'I have my contacts,' he said, pouring two glasses.

Silence fell between them as they sampled the wine, which made her palate tingle and filled her with warmth. It was a good silence, like between friends. They had gone out several times now, so they no longer felt the need to fill silence with words. She chewed every bite of the picnic with rapt attention, unable to remember when she had last eaten butter or eggs.

'I'd never seen the sea before I was… before I left Ukraine. But I enjoyed being on the sea when we were on the ship to Norway, liked the constant movement. But then we arrived here, and it seemed as if the sea were enraged for months.' She pointed out to sea. 'But look at it now. It's friendly now, so calm and not dangerous at all.'

'I like the mountains best,' Harald said. 'Before the war, I used to go on long hikes in the mountains, spend nights under the open sky, fish in the lakes and fry what I caught on a campfire.'

He put a hand on her back, rubbing slowly up and down.

'What do you want? What are you expecting of me?' she asked, turning to him.

'I'm not expecting anything,' he said. 'I've met a girl I want to be with. You make me happy.'

'A lot of the women at the factory look down on me because I go out with you. You're no better than the Germans in their eyes, and they consider me a traitor.'

'But you and I are friends, not enemies,' he said, taking her hand. 'Don't worry about it.'

'Easy for you to say.'

She lay back. He propped himself up on his elbow and drained his glass.

He's so handsome, she thought as he leant over her and looked at her in that way that made her stomach flutter and made her feel cherished. And when he smiled and kissed her, she thought: He's the only thing that makes this unbearable life bearable.

But I have to push his hands away.

She ran her fingers through his hair.

He mustn't undress me.

She didn't protest when he gave her an enquiring look before pulling up the skirt of her dress and running a hand up her thigh.

PART 2

October 1944 – July 1945

15

The hospital, 30 October

Birgit and Lillian looked at one another in shock as they took off their headphones.

'The Germans are burning Finnmark so the Russians arrive to…' Birgit gestured hopelessly, '… nothing.'

'Maybe they'll burn everything here, too,' Lillian said.

They put the radio in the hidden space behind the wall. 'We have to put our faith in the Russians. They've come to liberate us,' Birgit said.

Since the summer, most of the news from London had concerned what was happening on the continent. The Allies had taken Rome and landed in Normandy, and Paris had been liberated. But in recent days, it had concerned what was happening in Northern Norway. They'd followed the advance of the Soviet forces through Finnmark since hearing that they'd crossed the Norwegian border into Finnmark. Now Hitler had ordered everything to be burnt down while the German troops withdrew.

Birgit and Lillian took turns delivering the notes to the dead letterboxes in various places around Bodø. This evening it was Birgit's turn, so she put the envelope containing the notes in a specially sewn cloth pouch against her stomach, under her clothes.

'Good luck. Be careful,' Lillian said.

It was overcast, and because of the blackout, the darkness seemed impenetrable. Birgit stood outside the side entrance to the hospital until her eyes got used to the dark. She knew where she was going. It wasn't far. The dead letterbox was behind a loose stone in a garden wall a couple hundred metres from the hospital. As she passed the Gestapo House, she heard music and loud voices. The front door opened, and in the light from inside, Birgit saw two men come out. A moment later their faces were illuminated when one of them lit a match and held it to the other's cigarette. Maybe the Germans had more important things to think about than keeping watch in the town.

She hurried onwards, glancing over her shoulder. She was only ten to fifteen metres from the letterbox when someone suddenly stepped out of the shadows. Sven Svendsen planted himself in front of her with his hands behind his back.

'Christ, you scared me,' she exclaimed, forcing out a laugh.

'That wasn't my intention.'

'And now you're in my way,' she said, trying to sound teasing.

'I'll stand in the way of whomever I want,' he replied, smiling back.

The smile took the sting out of his words but didn't stop Birgit's heart from pounding. He crossed his arms, still smiling. 'What are you doing out this late?'

'I needed some fresh air. Sometimes I need a break from patients and sickness.'

'Do you know who I am, and what I do, Birgit?'

'No, I don't really know you, even though I've met you two or three times.'

'I control everything that happens in this town.'

'Goodness, that's quite the job,' she replied, laughing again.

His face grew grave. 'Yes, and that's why I have to search you.'

Slowly, she raised her arms. She tried to breathe normally as he pressed his hands against her shoulders and ran them down her back and along her sides. The thin envelope in the cloth pouch was almost imperceptible under all her layers of clothes. He won't feel it, she thought, concentrating on breathing normally as his hand ran over her stomach. Then he continued, hands lingering on her hips before moving on to the inside and outside of her legs. He finished by shoving them into her boots. 'As you were,' he said, patting her on the shoulder, letting his hand sit there for a few moments. 'Couldn't we arrange to go out one day?'

'That would be nice, but there's still so much to do at the hospital. I have almost no free time.'

'What about next week, then?'

'Unfortunately I'm on evening shift then,' she lied. 'But I'll see you around.'

He stood watching her, and she waved cheerily as she rounded a corner. There, she stopped and took a shaky breath.

A patient who had come in the week before had had burnt hands. This had happened during an interrogation by the Gestapo, and apparently it had been Svendsen who had inflicted the torture. The patient hadn't been in any state to say anything about what Svendsen had done to him and had been transferred to the asylum.

She walked past the wall where the envelope was to be delivered, taking a path that allowed her to circle back and check whether she was being followed while she assessed whether to abort her mission. No, people had to know what was happening in Finnmark. Refugees from the north were on their way south. They would have to be ready to receive them. She slowed down, stopped, pretended to drop her bag and pick up its contents while she looked around. She couldn't see anyone. While she was crouched down, she opened her coat and pulled out the

envelope full of notes. Quickly, she prised out the stone in the garden wall, shoved the envelope through the gap and pushed the stone back into place as she stood up.

16

The labour camp, 5 November

Daria had been out in the evening several times recently. But when Nadia asked where she'd been, she didn't want to talk about it, and Nadia really missed the confidence they'd shared during the journey from Ukraine to Norway. Although they were different, it had been good to have someone to talk to, someone who came from the same place, who missed and longed for the same things.

Nadia watched Daria as she got dressed.

'Where are you off to this evening?' she asked.

Something had changed. Her face had got harder. There had never been anything hard about Daria. It was as if she had become someone other than the anxious girl who had stood crying on the truck bed the day they'd been taken from school back home in Dnipropetrovsk.

Daria took out a lipstick.

'Where did you get that?'

Daria looked in the mirror and applied the red lipstick. 'Why shouldn't I have nice things, too? There's really no difference between what I'm doing and what you're doing.'

'You're spending time with Germans. That much is clear.'

'And you're with a Norwegian Nazi.'

'But Harald is my boyfriend. Do you have a boyfriend? Or…' She trailed off, gazing enquiringly at her.

'Or what?' Daria asked, annoyed.

'Do you have… several?'

Daria tossed her head and didn't answer.

'But to be one of those women who–'

Daria cut her off. 'Who what?'

'You know what I mean.'

'You're one to talk. Your situation is far worse than mine.'

'What do you mean?'

'You've been throwing up every morning recently,' she said. As she turned to leave, she stopped and looked at Nadia over her shoulder. The hardness in her eyes disappeared, and Nadia saw who she'd always been, someone delicate and vulnerable. 'I'm just doing the same as you, Nadia. I'm trying to feel human.'

Nadia ran a hand over her stomach. How could she have been so stupid? How could she return home to Ukraine with the child of a Nazi? The shame of it. What would her mother say? No, she'd just be happy to see her, she thought. If she were around to see her. Maybe she was dead, her and Andrey and Father. Maybe they'd never see each other again.

Nadia lay down, pulled the blanket over her face and cried silently.

*

Harald's face was pale and drawn. Despite usually making such an effort with his appearance, he was unkempt. His uniform jacket was buttoned wrong, and it was dirty.

They were in the German pub in town. She hadn't seen him in over a month. He'd been transferred and given charge of a guard battalion in a Russian camp where the prisoners built railways and roads.

Should she tell him now? Yes, she had to. Soon she would no longer be able to hide her stomach. He went up to the counter and came back with two beers. She said she didn't want any, and he downed most of one glass in one long gulp and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His hands were dirty, and there was grime under his fingernails.

'How are you?' she asked.

'Oh, tip-top,' he said with an ironic grimace before draining the glass. 'What do you think? You're not the only one this war's taking its toll on.'

'How is it at the new camp?'

He leant towards her, looked her in the eyes. There was something going on with him that she hadn't seen before. 'It's hell,' he said in a low voice.

There was something different in his voice, too. Something abrupt and sharp.

'How so?'

'I neither can nor want to talk about it.'

'So…' she said hesitantly. But he didn't look up from the glass, seemed completely absorbed in his own thoughts. She reached over the table and put her hand on his arm. 'Harald?'

Then he looked at her, and she held his gaze, a strange gaze that was no longer warm or cheerful. 'There's something I have to tell you.'

'Oh?'

'I'm… you're…' She stumbled over her words.

'What?' he asked impatiently.

She took a deep breath and quickly said: 'You're to be a father.'

He stared at her without a word.

'Say something,' she prompted.

'But… no, you can't be, I can't have that, not now.'

He jumped up, drained the second glass while standing, and without so much as looking at her, he left.

'What about Paris?' she wanted to shout after him. What about your dreams, our dreams? But she couldn't move, just sat there, abandoned, numb and cold. After a while, she got up. Her throat felt tight. She couldn't breathe.

He'll be waiting for me outside, she thought, grabbing her coat. Of course he will. He wouldn't just leave. He's not like that.

With quick steps, she walked through the pub and outside. Harald was nowhere to be seen.

17

The hospital, Christmas Eve

Lo, how a rose e'er blooming, from tender stem hath sprung. The old Christmas carol rang out from the hospital lobby, travelling up the stairwells and along the corridors, where the doors to the rooms stood open. The mixed choir stood on the stairs, the piano had been wheeled out from the day room, and the patients who were fit enough sat on chairs set out for the occasion. Others had been rolled down in beds and wheelchairs, and nurses and doctors lined the walls.

Amid the cold of winter, when half spent was the night.

A small Christmas tree had been decorated with lights and baubles. Birgit thought it looked a bit sad without the traditional Norwegian flags. She looked at the clock on the wall. Her parents and brother would be on their way home from church now. She didn't often miss home, but now she had a lump in her throat, could almost smell the pork ribs and hear the crackling from the fireplace when they got home from church and into the warmth. She had received Christmas cards from both them and Tekla. Her mother wrote that everyone was well, but that Christmas wouldn't be the same without the entire family at home.

Tekla was in love. *He is simply the best,* she wrote, *and he kisses me like the waves kiss the shore. Do you remember what we talked about in Jomfruland, about how we wouldn't have just anyone, how he'd have to be kind and generous? That's what he's like, and he can't help but smile every time he sees me. But you're the only one who knows about him. We need to keep it a secret.*

How strange, Birgit had thought. Why did it have to be kept a secret?

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year up there in the far north. I miss you, dear Birgit. Love from your best friend, Tekla.

Suddenly the front door opened, and three German officers came in along with the chair of the hospital board, the Nazi mayor, Aronsen. One of the officers came to stand next to her and whispered: '*Es ist ein Ros entsprungen*. That's a German carol.'

Heyerdahl was standing by the entrance to the east wing. Birgit saw him eye the Germans. But they had little to fear today. There were no Russian prisoners or resistance fighters hiding in the hospital attic or on the wards. Rasmussen appeared next to Heyerdahl and whispered something in his ear. The doctor's face didn't change. He just whispered back with his eyes trained on the floor, and when Rasmussen went along the corridor, he followed.

The choir sang *Silent night, holy night*, and the German officer once again leant towards Birgit. 'This is also German. *Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht*.'

Heyerdahl came back, caught Birgit's eye, jerked his head slightly and started to walk back along the corridor. She followed him.

'We have a new patient,' he said.

Birgit acknowledged this with a nod. 'And where is this patient?' she asked.

'In the kitchen. You need to try and get Aronsen and the Germans to leave. We can't have them wandering around in here right now,' he said in a low voice. 'The patient is in a bad state, and we need to get him in the lift and up into the attic straight away.'

'But how am I supposed to–'

'I'm sure you'll think of something,' Heyerdahl said and left.

Birgit stood there, flummoxed, watching the Germans help themselves to the small cakes. The kitchen had been saving its supplies in order to bake something nice for Christmas. The dishes were almost empty, and several of the patient hadn't had any yet. Mayor Aronsen wrinkled his nose. 'Are there no more cakes?' he asked Birgit.

'No, unfortunately I don't think so,' she replied.

'I'll go check with the kitchen. There must be more. The German officers must taste the Norwegian Christmas cakes,' he said in annoyance and started to walk towards the stairs.

Brigit racked her brain. He couldn't be allowed to go down to the kitchen. She hurried after him. 'Mayor Aronsen, I have an idea. Wouldn't it be nice if the choir could sing for the German patients at the field hospital as well?'

'Oh, that's a marvellous idea, sister.'

'Then I think they should go at once before heading home to celebrate Christmas with their families. I can ask them.'

'Good, do that.'

Birgit walked over to the conductor. 'You're to perform for the German patients at the field hospital.'

'What?' The conductor gave her a horrified look. 'No way.'

'It was the mayor's decision,' she lied. 'Surely you don't want to pick a fight with him?'

He eyed the Germans for a few seconds before nodding mutely.

At the field hospital, the *Ortslazarett*, the choir got in position, and the conductor guided one of the men forwards to stand in front of the others. Birgit realised he was blind. Several of the German patients welled up when the man sang. But what caught Birgit's attention was the lyrics. This man, who couldn't see, who couldn't know how the Germans were reacting, was singing a Christmas carol that in wartime became a protest.

The German officers smiled and listened. They didn't understand the language, but Birgit thought she saw Mayor Aronsen's jaw clench when the song reached its crescendo.

A flame of freedom lights the way
And hope shines bright across the land
See the light o'er valley and mountain

*

Lillian was waiting for Birgit in the lobby when she returned to the hospital. But it was only when they were in Birgit's room that she explained there was a Russian prisoner in the attic. Two acquaintances of the cook had brought him in via the kitchen entrance. They were plumbers and had found him in the back of their truck after they'd been in one of the camps.

The Russian had been laid down on a mattress, and Heyerdahl knelt next to him, stethoscope to his chest. A heap of dirty clothes lay on the floor. The man was naked but covered below the waist with a sheet. His collarbone and ribs jutted out, his knees, shoulders and chin were sharp, his eyes somewhat sunken and his head shaved.

Heyerdahl draped the stethoscope around his neck and got up.

'It'll be difficult to tell whether he has internal injuries until he regains his faculties a bit and can tell us whether he's in pain.'

He asked Lillian to fetch water, soap, bandages, ointment and iodine as well as clean clothes and warm blankets.

'Birgit, try talking to him,' he said, and she crouched down, breathing through her mouth because he stank of sweat and his breath was sour. It was only then that she noticed the bruises on his face. He also had several infected wounds on his hands, arms and feet. 'You're in the hospital,' she said in Russian.

The man moaned.

'Ask him whether he's in pain,' Heyerdahl said.

The man slowly answered by bringing a hand to his ribs. Heyerdahl gently probed the area, and the man grumbled.

'He's broken several ribs. That's consistent with the bruises. He's been grossly mistreated,' Heyerdahl said, making sure there weren't fractures elsewhere. His lower legs were dimpled with finger marks. 'Famine oedema,' he concluded before pressing his hand to the area between the man's ribs and groin. 'There's no abdominal distension.' Finally, he listened to the

man's lungs. 'Severely malnourished, debilitated and potentially concussed,' he concluded. 'But the pneumonia is the most pressing issue.' He got up and eyed the Russian contemplatively.

Lillian came back with the equipment. 'Do you think he'll recover?' she asked while she and Birgit started to wash him. Some of his wounds were infected and had to be cleaned before they could apply the ointment and bandages and dress him in clean clothes. As they did this, the Russian lay with his eyes closed, but every now and then he whimpered softly.

'It's impossible to say,' Heyerdahl replied with a deep crease between his eyes.

Birgit took the man's hand. 'You're safe now,' she said in Russian.

His grip was weak, but she could feel it. He didn't want to let her go.

18

The labour camp, New Year's Day 1945

Where had Daria got to? Nadia lay in bed, tossing and turning while she waited, hoping Daria would be back soon so she could sleep. She'd given up on talking to her about where she went, what she was doing. But she hadn't stopped worrying about her and waiting for her when she went out. She was like an anxious big sister. Outside, the wind howled, amplifying her sense of disquiet. Then the door crashed open, snow and cold wind blowing into the barracks. Nadia sat up in bed and saw Daria standing in the doorway. 'What's happening?' someone shouted. 'Close the door!' shouted another. Daria seemed to be rooted to the spot. Nadia ran across the room and only just reached her before she collapsed. 'Can someone help me?' she shouted.

'Jerrybags can help themselves,' replied someone from the darkness. One woman nevertheless came to the rescue, and together they carried Daria to her cot.

'Daria?' Nadia whispered.

She didn't reply.

'Daria, have you been drinking? Are you drunk?'

She switched on the light closest to their cots, to protests from several others, but she didn't care. Quickly, she pulled off Daria's hat, gloves and boots. Daria groaned and blinked, and Nadia saw how she tried to focus on her face without quite managing.

She wasn't wearing tights or socks. How odd. Quickly, Nadia pushed her dress up and found blood on her thighs. Daria's whimpering became crying.

'Are you in pain?'

'Yes,' she replied, barely audible.

'Where does it hurt?'

Daria closed her eyes and slowly shook her head.

'I'll get the doctor.'

'No,' Daria moaned. 'He's German… never again…'

Nadia sat helplessly. The barracks had settled back down, but someone was snoring and a child was crying. She crawled into the cot and lay down behind Daria, stroking her hair.

'I'll look after you,' she whispered into her neck.

'Sleep now. I'm here. Everything will be okay.'

19

The hospital, 10 January

Snow lashed against the dormer, and outside a storm raged, yet another storm, as was often the case at the start of a new year. They all mustered out on the Atlantic, snapping at each other's heels and chasing each other towards land, tearing and pulling at everything in their path. The day before, the roofs on a couple of the buildings down by the wharf had been stripped away, and several boats had been smashed to smithereens.

How were Nadia and Daria? Were they made to walk back and forth between the camp and the factory in this terrible weather? Birgit wondered this as she sat on the floor and watched over the Russian prisoner.

It was in that moment that she saw something move out of the corner of her eye. It was the Russian's hand. His palm was turned up, fingers bent, and slowly he pushed his hand out to the edge of the mattress. Birgit took it.

For just over two weeks, Birgit and Lillian had taken turns watching over him, caring for him and feeding him intravenously. His condition was stable, his breathing seemed easier, and in the last twenty-four hours his fever had finally started to break.

His eyelids fluttered, and slowly, he opened his eyes. They were pale grey like morning mist and framed by long, dark eyelashes. It was hard to tell how old he was. He might have only been in his twenties, but his hollow cheeks, emaciated body and shaved head made him seem much older.

'I'm Birgit. I'm a nurse,' she said, wetting a cloth and bringing it to his lips before wringing it out again and laying it on his warm forehead. 'What's your name?'

He tried to say something, but only air escaped him. Carefully, she pushed a piece of plastic tubing between his lips, and he managed to suck down a small sip from the water glass. 'Alexander… Abramov,' he whispered.

'You're safe now, Alexander. We'll look after you.'

He didn't look away from her as she explained that he was being kept hidden at the hospital.

'Sleep now. I'll stay with you.'

As she checked his pulse, he fell asleep, and she lay down next to him on the mattress. Someone was keeping watch below, she knew, in case the Germans came. This had happened more and more often recently. German soldiers and storm troopers going from room to room,

looking for resistance fighters who had gone into hiding, but so far they had only checked the wards.

She was awoken by something pressing against her head. It was his hand, and she quickly sat up.

'I'm here,' she said, bringing a hand to his forehead, which was warm and clammy. When she started to take her hand back, he grabbed it. *'Spasibo. Ty krasivaya.'* You're beautiful.

'I take it you're feeling better?' she said with a smile.

'The Germans… they're looking–'

'Don't be afraid. You're safe here.'

'How did I get here?'

'Someone brought you here.'

'I don't remember that.'

Then Lillian came in. 'This is Lillian, another one of the good people helping you. She'll stay with you for a while now, but she doesn't speak Russian.'

'Will you come back?'

'Yes, I promise.'

20

The fish factory, 15 January

Nadia stretched and pressed her hands against the small of her back. The sour smell of fish waste was making her feel unwell. She brought a hand to her mouth, gulping and swallowing hard as she tried to avoid breathing through her nose. Suddenly, she felt dizzy. She clutched the edge of the bench for a few seconds before sticking her hand in the cold water and drawing it across her forehead.

She was about five months along, she thought. For the last couple of months, she had been experiencing increasingly intense pain in her pelvis. The doctor at the camp had concluded that she had pelvic girdle pain and given her crutches.

'An die Arbeit!' shrieked one of the Norwegian guards, coming her way.

What is wrong with these people? she thought, glaring at him. He was someone's son, perhaps someone's boyfriend, and had she met him under different circumstances, during peacetime, at a party, in a park, at a café or something, and he had smiled at her, she'd have thought he was cute. Now he was just a bully.

'Du sollst arbeiten!' he shrieked again, coming to a stop with his face right in hers, expression threatening.

But he neither hit nor slapped her, as she'd seen him do to others.

After Christmas, several of the German guards at the factory had been replaced with Norwegian guards, and the Norwegians were always on their case if they didn't work quickly enough.

Where is Harald? Maybe he's gone home to Oslo? she thought. Why haven't I heard anything from him?

During the autumn and winter, the rumours of the German retreat in the east and the advance of the Allies had galvanised the forced labourers. Their body language was more energetic, and there was an anticipation of sorts in their facial expressions. The relationship between the prisoners also changed as the rumours that the Germans were losing ground everywhere reached them.

The notion that there would soon be an end to this miserable life stopped the women from quarrelling as much, and they stopped scowling at each other. The women with children

got help from the others, and the shift system at the factor was adapted to the childcare situation. Children were children, no matter their fathers, and Nadia was no longer an outcast.

She picked up another fish filet and put it on the scale, just managing to fill the crate with the prescribed nine kilos when the shift-change signal sounded. She climbed down from the small platform she was standing on, into the water running over the cement floor. Just then, her pelvic pain made her feel dizzy. The woman who stood next to her came to her rescue, and she clung to her until the pain abated.

Nadia walked slowly from the factory to the camp, leaning heavily on her crutches and clenching her teeth so she wouldn't cry because of the pain and exhaustion.

At the barracks, she collapsed onto her cot without taking off her outer layers. She just wanted to sleep, but she couldn't. She had to go straight back out again to see Daria. She'd been distant and quiet, barely saying a word since the night she'd come home with blood on her thighs, and three days ago she'd been transferred to the "madhouse".

Daria was lying in bed with her eyes closed. Her thin body barely registered under the blanket covering her from her toes to her chin. Nadia sat down on a chair, set aside her crutches and brought a hand to her forehead. She was so clammy. Did she have a fever?

'Daria,' she said. 'I'm here now. Are you asleep?'

Daria opened her eyes. Then she turned her head and met her gaze. 'Nadia,' she whispered.

Nadia caressed her cheek, relieved that Daria's gaze was clear, and she smiled for the first time in ages.

Finally, Nadia thought, the tide is turning, she's on her way out of the dark. 'Not long now until we head home,' Nadia said. 'They say the war will be over soon.' But as she spoke, something changed in Daria's eyes. Her gaze faltered and her eyes slid closed again.

'Daria?' she asked, giving her a gentle shake.

Why the sudden shift? She'd been completely present. Nadia shoved her arm under the blanket, searching for Daria's hand. The bed was sodden. She pulled her hand back to see her fingers were covered in blood. She tore the blanket aside and discovered the mattress was bloody. Had she started to bleed again so long – two weeks – after the rape? That was when she found the knife. Nadia grabbed her crutches and shouted to a man that he needed to run and get the camp doctor before hobbling back over to the bed and slapping Daria's face as she called her name in despair.

A hand gripped her shoulder. The German doctor asked her to move. He brought his stethoscope to Daria's chest and listened. 'She has a pulse.' He ran out and came back with two men carrying a stretcher between them.

'Where are you taking her?' Nadia asked.

'To the hospital. She needs a blood transfusion.'

Nadia grabbed her crutches and followed as quickly as she could.

'Can I come? Daria needs me.'

The doctor gestured in the affirmative.

Two nurses came running into the examination room along with a doctor. One was Birgit. 'Nadia, is that you?' she said fearfully and spotted Daria, who lay lifeless on the table. 'What's happened to Daria?'

'She…' Daria swallowed. 'She's cut her arteries.' She brought a hand to her mouth, smothering a sob.

'Come.' Birgit took her out into the corridor with an arm around her shoulders. 'You'll have to wait here, but the doctor will do everything he can to save Daria. I'll be back as soon as I know more.'

The minutes felt like hours, but even so, not a lot of time had passed when the door opened and Birgit came out. She sat down next to Nadia and gently pulled her close. Nadia laid her head on her shoulder. She didn't need to ask – she'd seen it in her eyes.

'It was too late,' Birgit said. 'She'd lost too much blood.'

Now I'm all alone, Nadia thought, letting the tears fall. She no longer had anyone who knew her, anyone who know where it was she came from, anyone who longed to return home to the same place. Slowly, she got up and picked up her crutches. 'Can I see her?'

For a long time, Nadia had prayed to God every evening, prayed that he would protect her father and Andrey, prayed for the strength to endure, prayed that the war would end, to survive and get to go home. But it didn't help at all, so she'd stopped praying. Now she mumbled: 'Dear God, bless Daria, take care of her soul'.

Everything they'd been through together flashed before her eyes. Andrey's face when he spotted her as the prisoners passed the school, the journey west by livestock wagon, her first glimpse of the sea, the march through Oslo and the woman who gave her a packed lunch. But she also saw the hardness in Daria's eyes when she realised there was no difference between what she'd done and Nadia's relationship with Harald.

'Daria did what I did. She met someone who gave her a sense of normalcy. You don't think about how much closeness with other people means before you have no one to love you, to touch you, to hug you and stroke your hair and say nice things,' Nadia said. 'Daria and I were different. She was so fragile, but we felt the same, that we were worthless, and we wanted the same thing, someone who would make us feel like something more than a workhorse.'

'What happened to her?' Birgit asked.

'She would go out with the Germans. One evening she was raped, I believe, and abused, and afterwards she was never herself again.' Nadia stroked Daria's hair. 'She never spoke about it.'

'And you? How are you doing?' Birgit asked, but Nadia just shook her head.

'How far along are you?'

'About five months, I think.'

'Are there any other pregnant women at the camp?'

'Yes, and around forty children.'

'That many?' Birgit gasped. 'And is your child's father German?'

'No.'

'Is he one of the Eastern workers at the camp?'

Nadia shook her head and cupped Daria's cheek. Then she leant over and kissed her forehead.

'If I'd cared more, done more for her…' A small sob burst out of her. 'But I've had my own things to worry about. Daria, *moya luba produga*.' My dear friend, she cried.

21

The hospital, 25 January

Alexander Abramov was lying on the mattress in the dark, staring up at the sky through the dormer, when Birgit and Lillian came in. 'The stars are out this evening,' he said.

Birgit quickly climbed onto a chair and drew the blackout curtain before switching on the ceiling light.

'How are you feeling, Alexander?' she asked.

'Good, thanks. You can call me Sasha. All my friends call me Sasha.'

For the past week he had eaten well, but he could only tolerate small quantities of food at a time. His hair had grown out into a dark mane. It was so dark it was almost black, and it gave him a different aspect. By now he was looking after himself, washing himself, brushing his own teeth and shaving every day. He had even asked for aftershave, which Lillian's father had got for him. Sasha had laughed when Lillian arrived with it and said he wanted to make an effort when he had such beautiful women taking care of him. Although he had only put on a few kilos, he looked completely different. His pale grey eyes were bright, and he smiled often. But the muscle atrophy meant he was still weak. Lillian and Birgit exercised with him every day, and it was that time again. They put his arms over their shoulders, held him by the waist and helped him up. Birgit could feel his ribs against her hand, and his sharp pelvis against her side. Before long, his face was shiny with sweat, but they continued to back and forth from the door. 'You're really making progress,' Lillian said. 'Twenty times across the room, that's a new record. You're starting to regain strength in your legs.'

Birgit translated. Sasha smiled and wiped sweat from his brow. Lillian needed to get back to the ward. As she closed the door behind her, he covered his face with both hands, chest heaving.

'It's okay,' Birgit said, kneeling down next to him. Suddenly he leant forwards, resting his forehead against her shoulder. 'There, there,' she whispered, rubbing his back. 'You'll be fine, Sasha. *Moy drug.*'

His tears, his thin fingers around her upper arms, his forehead against her shoulder, his entire body so close to hers, the smell of aftershave – it felt like she was in the midst of his pain. It was suddenly so very palpable, and all she could say was: 'There, there…'

'Sorry,' he said after a few moments. 'Sorry.'

'There's nothing to be sorry for.'

He leant back. 'You're an angel,' he said.

'Tell me about yourself. Where in Russia are you from?' she asked to divert him.

'Moscow.'

Sasha was twenty-five years old, the youngest of seven siblings. He had almost finished music school when he was called up for military service and sent to war.

'So you're a musician. What instrument do you play?'

'The violin.'

'Are you good?'

'Not bad,' he said with a smile.

'Who's your favourite composer?' she asked.

'I don't have just one, I have many.'

'I really like Rachmaninov.'

He gave her an astonished look. 'You know classical Russian music?'

'A bit.'

She could see that he was exhausted, so she stood up. 'I'll come back later.'

'Are you sure the Germans won't come looking for me here?'

'Don't you worry about that.'

'I want to go home,' he whispered, eyes closed.

She stood with her hand on the door handle, watching him. *My friend*, she'd called him. It was unprofessional, too personal. It's just because he's Russian, she thought, because I can talk to him like no one else can. I give him something only I can, and that's why I'm getting to know him and feel closer to him than my other patients.

*

They no longer needed to watch over Sasha at night, but even though Birgit was tired after her evening shift, she went up to see him. He was sleeping restlessly, mumbling incoherently. 'Don't… No, I haven't… Please.'

Birgit carefully shook him. 'Sasha?'

He opened his eyes, looking at her in confusion.

'It's me. Birgit.'

Then his gaze softened. 'Birgit.'

She gave him water and plumped the pillows behind his back and head.

'Spasibo.'

'You were having a nightmare,' she said. 'Do you want to talk about it?'

'No, it's too awful.'

'I can handle it.'

'Why should I talk about it?' he asked warily.

'Often it helps to share difficult things with others.'

He looked at her and rubbed his chin. 'I feel like an old man, someone who's lived for a long time.'

He had been taken prisoner as a soldier in the Red Army on the Eastern Front. They hadn't had a chance to get away from the German troops, he told her, it had been an inferno of fire, smoke, bullets and shells. Afterwards, dead bodies had lain strewn around him. The survivors had been taken to a camp. 'Really it's wrong to call it a camp,' Sasha said. 'It was just a large area surrounded by barbed wire and watchtowers, without any real shelter from the rain, snow, wind and cold. I was one of the lucky ones,' he said. 'I was sent on to the seaport of Szczecin.'

There were rumours they'd be sent to Norway to work in agriculture. 'Edvard Grieg's country. I love Grieg's music, and I imagined the country would be like his music.' He gave a fleeting smile. 'And it is, with its fjords and mountains. I'd also read about the polar voyages of Roald Amundsen, and I knew Fridtjof Nansen had helped Russia and Ukraine during the famine in 1921. Finally the future seemed brighter, I thought. And everything I'd heard turned out to be true. It *is* incredibly beautiful here.'

'But?'

'There is evil here, too. In the camp I was at before I came to Norway, everything was so ugly and grim, and the evil was just kind of to be expected. But here, amid the beautiful nature, the contrasts are so great that the evil seem more incomprehensible.'

First, he had been sent somewhere near Lillehammer, Stalag 303, the main camp for Soviet prisoners in Southern Norway. In the autumn of 1943, he was sent to Frostfilet in Bodø. Life at the camp near the factory was freer, and he liked the nature, with the spectacular mountains rising steeply up from the sea in formations the like of which he'd never seen. But during the winter, more and more workers got sick. The cold gave them airway infections and pneumonia.

'There was a group of us who talked about organising and entering into some sort of dialogue with the management to try and get better conditions,' he continued. 'I went to the factory manager. He was furious, pointed at his dog and said it was worth more than me. Then he forced me to my knees, and the soldiers poured buckets of cold water over me.'

'Did you run away from the factory?'

'No, they sent me to another camp. I was the first person the factory management suspected when they found signs of sabotage. Machines had been tampered with, faeces was found in one of the fish crates, and one day a kapo disappeared.'

He pressed his lips together. 'I was confronted with analyses of a shipment to Germany. Someone had killed the kapo and shoved him in the fish grinder. They didn't find out how it had happened or who was responsible. But what they feared most of all was an uprising among the workers, and they needed someone to punish, as a warning. So I was the scapegoat, and they transferred me to a camp outside town.' He hesitated for a moment before adding: 'Most of the prisoners there were sick and emaciated. That was where they put those of us who fell into disfavour, those of us who protested and opposed them.'

How is it possible that people are being treated that way? Birgit thought. Here in Norway, in a country not directly at war?

Sasha stared contemplatively at the ceiling for a few seconds before continuing. 'You know, the hunger and the thirst, the kicks and the blows, they cause physical pain, and that's degrading, but the worst thing is everything I can't do, what makes me human. The freedom to go where I want, eat when I'm hungry, sit around a table and talk, get fired up, angry, provoked, make toasts and laugh, or go to the theatre and to concerts. And worst of all, I can't play the violin. I've lost a part of myself.'

'The war is coming to an end. Soon you'll be able to play again.'

'But when? As long as I'm here and the Germans are in power in Norway, I can't be sure I'll survive. Escaped prisoners get shot. I need to get away. Can you help me?'

'It isn't up to me. Besides, you're not strong enough to get over the mountains to Sweden in the middle of winter. It's like crossing the North Pole.'

Birgit directed the conversation elsewhere. 'I've met a couple of girls who work at the factory. One of them recently killed herself, and her friend is pregnant. I think about her all the time and so wish I could do something for her and the other women. Not to mention the children. What's the labour camp in Langstranda like?'

'No child should live in a labour camp. But it's difficult for someone from the outside to do anything for them.'

'Yes,' Birgit sighed. 'I realise that. But tell me, what happened when you ran?'

'I knew I wouldn't last long, I could hardly walk, and I thought it didn't matter whether I died of malnutrition and sickness or was shot. I had nothing to lose by running, so one

afternoon I snuck onto a Norwegian truck and lay under a tarp. What happened from then until I came around here in this attic, I don't know.'

'You were brought to us on Christmas Eve,' Birgit said with a smile.

'A Christmas present,' he said, smiling for a moment. 'I was lucky. I met good people.' He held her gaze. 'People like you.'

Birgit looked down when he lifted his hand and cautiously ran his fingertips over her cheek. *'Birgitushka, moy drug.*' My friend.

Then he lay back and closed his eyes but didn't let go of her hand. She imagined how he must have looked before the war, with longer hair and more muscle, how he looked when he played the violin and the emotions in the music were reflected in his face, the intensity in his pale grey eyes, how he tossed his head when the tempo picked up, drawing his bow across the strings in quick, agile movements. And when the music was soft and warm, surely then passion was written all over his face.

When he was sleeping peacefully, she went down to her room. She looked at the crucifix, leant forwards and breathed in. The tobacco smell seemed fainter now.

She was exhausted, her entire body ached, but sleep wouldn't come, and she lay tossing and turning. The images of Sasha with his violin were like a film in her head, accompanied by one of Rachmaninov's symphonies, which Ilya had played for her. But it was no longer Ilya she thought about. It was Sasha, slowly running his fingers down her cheek.