

**THE
END
OF THE
OCEAN**





THE END OF THE OCEAN

A NOVEL

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To Jesper, Jens, and Linus



CHAPTER ONE



SIGNE

Ringfjorden, Sogn og Fjordane, Norway, 2017

Nothing stopped the water. You could follow it from the mountain to the fjord, from the snow that fell from the clouds and settled on the peaks to the mist that rose above the ocean and again became clouds.

The glacier grew every single winter. And every summer it melted, releasing drops, drops that became streams, which found their way down, driven by gravity, and the streams accumulated, becoming waterfalls, rivers.

We were two villages that shared a mountain and a glacier. We had them for as long as we could remember. One side of the mountain was a vertical wall, where the Sister Falls descended. They crashed straight down for 711 meters toward Lake Eide, a deep green body of water after which the village was named, Eidesdalen, and which provided fertile growing conditions there for animals and human beings.

Eidesdalen, Magnus's village.

They couldn't see the fjord in Eidesdalen; they weren't accustomed to having the taste of salt on their lips. The salt was not carried by the wind and they could not smell the ocean. But they had their water, the water without taste, the water that made everything grow—and later Magnus said that he had never missed the ocean.

On the other side of the mountain it was milder, less harsh. Here the water accumulated in the River Breio, the salmon river, the water ouzels' river, the freshwater mussels' river. It forced its way through a crevasse in the landscape, forming this chasm with millions of drops every second, in waterfalls, in streams, and in calm, smooth stretches. When the sun shone, it became a luminous ribbon.

The River Breio continued all the way to Ringfjorden, and there, in the village at sea level, the river met with salt water. There the water from the glacier became one with the ocean.

Ringfjorden, my village.

And then they were together, the water from the glacier and the water from the ocean, until the sun absorbed the drops once more, drew them up into the air as mist, to the clouds, where they escaped the force of gravity.

I'm back now. Blåfonna, the glacier that once was ours, has forced me to return. There is no wind when I reach Ringfjorden. I am obliged to use the engine to travel the final stretch, and the clattering sound drowns out everything else. *Blue* glides through the water and leaves only small ripples in its wake.

I can never forget this landscape. "It has created you, Signe," Magnus once said. He meant it had imprinted itself in me, the way I walk with my legs slightly bent, as if I were always confronting a hill. Nonetheless I am surprised now when I see it again: the summits, the falls, the vertical meeting the horizontal.

People travel here from far away to see this landscape and find the sight to be "beautiful, fantastic, amazing." They stand on ship decks as large as football fields while enormous diesel engines spew out

exhaust fumes. They stand there and point and gaze at the clear blue water, the bluish-green hillsides where fragile houses cling tightly to 45-degree-angle slopes. More than 1,000 meters above them are the mountains, the earth's stripped, sharp edges, breaking against the sky, with a sprinkling of white that the tourists love. "Wow, it's snow," they say, whether it's winter or summer.

But the tourists don't see the Sister Falls or Sønstebø's summer farm on the mountain. They have long since disappeared. They can't see the River Breio, which was the very first to go, before the ships arrived, long before the Americans and Japanese came with their telephones and cameras and telephoto lenses. The pipes are concealed underground, and the damage inflicted on the wildlife by the excavation work has slowly been concealed by vegetation.

I stand there with the tiller in my hand, moving slowly as I approach the village. I pass the power plant, a huge concrete building all by itself down by the water. It is heavy and dark—a monument to the dead river and waterfall. From there the cables stretch out in all directions, some of them cross over the fjord. They have even received permission for that.

The engine drowns out everything, but I remember the sound of the power lines, the soft humming, in wet weather, water against electricity, a crackling. It has always given me goose bumps, especially in darkness, when you can see how it sparks.

All four of the moorings for visitors at the wharf are vacant. It's too early for tourists—the moorings are used only in the summertime, so I can take my pick. I choose the spot farthest out, mooring the craft astern and at the bow and put out a spring line to be on the safe side; the wind from the west could blow up without any warning. As I pull the throttle control completely astern, I can hear the reluctant gasps of the engine shutting down. I close the hatch to the saloon and place the bunch of keys in the breast pocket of my parka. The key ring is a big cork ball that ensures it will float—it produces a small bulge over my stomach.

The bus stop is where it has always been, outside the consumer

co-op. I sit and wait—the bus comes only once an hour. That’s how it is here; everything happens seldom and must be planned. I have just forgotten about it after all these years.

Finally it appears. I am accompanied by a group of adolescents. They come from the high school that was built in the early 1980s, the new one, the nice one, one of the many things the village could afford. They talk and talk about tests and homework assignments. I can’t help but notice their smooth foreheads, soft cheeks; they are astoundingly young, without any marks whatsoever, without the traces of a life lived.

They don’t even bother to glance at me. I understand them well. For them I am just an aging woman, a little shabby and unkempt in a worn-out parka, with gray locks of hair sticking out from beneath a knitted hat.

They have new, almost identical hats, with the same logo in the middle of the brow. I hasten to take off my own and put it in my lap. It is of course full of fuzz balls. I start picking them off one by one and my hand fills up with lint. But there’s no point, there are too many of them to remove and now I don’t know what to do with them, so I end up sitting there with a loose mound in my hand. Finally I release it down onto the floor. The wool floats weightlessly down the aisle, but the adolescents don’t pay it any mind, and why should they look at a clump of gray lint?

Sometimes I forget how I look. After a while you stop caring about your appearance when you live on board a boat, but once in a great while when I see myself in a mirror on land, when the lighting is good, I am startled. Who is she, the person in there? Who in the world is that skinny old biddy?

It is strange—no, surreal, *surreal* is the word—that I’m one of them, the old people, when I am still so completely myself through and through, the same person I have always been. Whether I am 15, 35, or 50, I am a constant, unchanged mass. Like the person I am in a dream, like a stone, like one-thousand-year-old ice. My age is disconnected

from me. Only when I move does its existence become perceptible—then it makes itself known through all its pains, the aching knees, the stiff neck, the grumbling hip.

But the young people don't think about my being old, because they don't even see me. That's how it is, nobody sees old ladies. It has been many years since a young person looked at me. They just laugh youthfully and openly and talk about a history quiz they've just taken, the Cold War, the Berlin Wall, what grades they got. And nobody mentions the ice, not a word about the ice, about the glacier, even though it should be what everyone is talking about here at home.

Here at home—do I really still call it *home*? I can't fathom it, after having been away for almost 40 years—no, soon 50 years. I came home only to clean up after a death in the family, to grieve the compulsory five days after the funerals, first my mother's, then my father's. A total of ten days is all the time I have spent here during all these years. I have two brothers here, half brothers, but I hardly ever speak with them. They are my mother's boys.

I lean my head against the bus window, look at the changes. The area is more built up, the buildings closer together; a new construction project consisting of white prefabricated houses with small windows clings tenaciously to the hillside. The bus passes the indoor swimming pool. It has a new roof and there is a big blue sign at the entrance: Ringfjord–Water Fun. Everything sounds better in English.

The bus climbs upward, inland, and a couple of the young people get off at the construction site at the top, but most of them remain seated. We ascend, the road changes, narrows, becomes full of potholes, at almost the exact same time we drive into the neighboring municipality. This is where most of the young people get off. Apparently they still don't have a high school out here, still don't have an indoor swimming pool, here in the town of Eidesdalen, the little brother, the loser.

I get off with the last of the young people, stroll slowly through the center of the village. It is even smaller than I remember. The general store has been shut down. While Ringfjorden has grown,

Eidesdalen is a fraction of its original size. But it's not for Eidesdalen's sake that I have come today, I can't cry for Eidesdalen anymore—that battle is over, it ended many, many years ago. It is now the ice that has brought me here, Blåfonna. I take the dirt road leading to the mountain.

Even the national newspapers write about it. I have read the articles again and again and can hardly believe the words. They are extracting ice from the glacier, pure, white ice from Norway, and marketing it as the most exclusive ingredient: to be put in a drink, a floating mini-iceberg, surrounded by golden liquor. But not for Norwegian customers, no—it is for those who have really deep pockets. The ice is to be shipped to desert nations, the homes of oil sheiks, and there it will be sold as if it were gold, white gold, to the wealthiest of the wealthy.

It starts snowing, winter's final spasm, April's way of thumbing its nose, as I climb toward the mountain. There are little pools of frozen water on the road, rimmed with crystals. I put my foot down against the thin surface ice covering a small puddle, shatter it, hear it break—but it's no fun any longer, not the way it once was.

I grow short of breath. It's steep and farther than I remember.

But I finally reach it, finally I see the glacier. Dear, dear Blåfonna.

All glaciers melt, I know that, but it's something else witnessing it. I stop, just breathe. The ice is still there, but not where it used to be. When I was a little girl, I walked from the edge of the glacier almost all the way to the mountain cliff where the waterfalls disappeared below, where the glacier and the waterfalls were connected. But now the glacier is located high up on the mountainside. It's a long way, 100 meters perhaps, between the cliff and the blue tongue. The glacier has moved, as if trying to escape, get away from humans.

I continue climbing through the heather. I have to feel it, have to walk on it, touch it again.

Finally I have ice under my feet, every step makes noise, a slight crunching sound. I keep going and now I can see the extraction area,

the gouges in the grayish-white glacier, and deep gashes in the blue interior, where the ice has been cut away. Beside it there are four large white bags that are full, ready for pickup. They use chain saws, I've read, chain saws that are not lubricated, so the pieces of ice won't be sullied by oil.

Nothing should surprise me anymore, all the things human beings do. But this, this tears something open inside of me, because Magnus must have sat at a board meeting and smilingly approved this, maybe even applauded it.

I walk closer. I have to climb to come right up against it, as the gouges were made where the glacier is the steepest. I take off one mitten and place my hand against the ice—it is alive beneath my fingers, my glacier, a huge, calm animal that sleeps. But it is a wounded animal and it can't roar—it is being drained minute by minute, second by second, it is already dying.

Too old to cry, too old for these tears, but nonetheless my cheeks are damp.

Our ice, Magnus, our ice.

Have you forgotten about it, or did you perhaps not even notice that the first time we met it was with melting ice from Blåfonna in our hands?

I was 7, you were 8, do you remember? It was my birthday and I was given a present of water, frozen water.

All life is water, all life was water, everywhere I turned, there was water. It gushed from the sky as rain or snow, it filled the small lakes in the mountains, lay in the form of ice in the glacier, it flowed down the steep mountainsides in thousands of small streams, accumulated into the River Breio, formed a flat surface in front of the village in the fjord, the fjord that became the ocean when you followed it west. My whole world was water. The ground, the mountains, the pastures were just tiny islands in that which actually was the world. I called my world Earth but thought that it should actually be named Water.

The summer was so hot, as if we lived somewhere else entirely.

The heat didn't belong here, and how the English tourists staying at our hotel sweated, sitting outside in the big garden under the fruit trees, fanning themselves with old newspapers. They said that they never imagined that it could be so hot here up north.

When I awoke, the bed was empty, Mommy and Daddy were already up. I used to sleep between them; during the night I tiptoed into their room and lay down in the middle of the double bed. They asked if I'd been dreaming, but that wasn't why.

"I don't want to be alone," I said. "I want to be with somebody."

They must certainly understand that; they slept here with somebody every single night, but regardless of how many times I came in, they didn't understand. Every evening when I went to bed, they reminded me that I had to sleep in my own bed all night, not just half the night. I said that I would, because I understood that was what they wanted me to say, but then I woke up anyway. Every night I sat up and felt how empty the bed was, how empty the room was, and then I tiptoed in—no, I didn't tiptoe, young children are no good at tiptoeing, especially not me. I just walked, without thinking about how I was making noise, without thinking about how I woke them. I walked across the cold floorboards into their room, where I always climbed in from the foot of the bed, because then I could push my way down in between them without having to crawl across either of their big bodies. I never needed a duvet because their bodies, on either side of my own, were warm enough.

But on this particular morning I was lying in bed alone—they were up, but because it was my birthday I couldn't get up with them. I knew I had to lie there quietly, I remembered it from last year, that on your birthday you're supposed to lie still and wait for them to come. But the itchiness, I can still remember the itchiness, how it erupted in my arms and feet—the intolerableness of the waiting, that it was almost not to be borne, that perhaps it would have been better not to even have a birthday at all.

"Are you coming soon?" I asked cautiously.

But nobody answered.

“Hello?!”

I was suddenly afraid they wouldn’t come, that they had gotten the day wrong.

“MOMMY AND DADDY?!”

Or that they’d forgotten all about my birthday.

“HELLO, MOMMY AND DADDY!!!”

But then they appeared, carrying a cake and singing. They stood on opposite sides of the bed and sang in their high and low voices, in perfect unison—and then all of a sudden it was too much, all of it. I had to pull the duvet up over my head and stay in bed even longer, even though I really wanted to get up.

When the song was over, I received presents—from Mommy, a shiny ball and a doll with a mouth that smiled a terribly broad smile.

“It’s creepy,” I said.

“No, it’s not,” Daddy said.

“Yes, it is.”

“I thought it was so cute when I saw it in the store, and it was the biggest doll they had,” Mommy said.

“They didn’t need to make it with a smile like that,” I said.

“You have to say thank you,” Daddy said. “You have to say thank you to Mommy.”

“Thank you. For the doll. That’s creepy.”

I always spoke my mind, said what I thought, and maybe they were irritated but never enough to try to make me change my behavior. Or maybe it wasn’t all that simple to change it.

I remember the doll and the rest of the presents I received. I am pretty sure that I got all these things on this day: two books about flowers from Daddy, a herbarium, also from him, and a globe that lit up from both of them. I thanked them for everything. So many presents. I was aware that nobody I knew received as many, but nobody I knew had a mother who owned an entire hotel with almost a hundred rooms, either. There were eighty-four, but we always said

“almost a hundred,” and we also had our own private wing—we just called it “the wing,” with three living rooms and four bedrooms and a kitchen and even a maid’s room.

She had inherited all of it from my grandfather, who died before I was born. There were pictures of him, of old Hauger, hanging everywhere. Everyone called him that, even I did. Mommy had also inherited his name, Hauger, a boring name, but nonetheless she kept it. She never took Daddy’s surname, Daddy’s Oslo name, because you can’t just rid yourself of a name like Hauger, Mommy said. Then you would also have to change the name of our hotel, Hauger Hotel, and she couldn’t do that. Because our history was in the walls, all the way back to the year it was built, which was written above the entrance in numbers carved out of wood: 1882.

I was given cake, both in the morning and during the rest of the day, so much cake that my stomach couldn’t contain all the sweetness. I also remember that feeling that I was 7 years old and so full of cake that it felt like my chest would burst, but I kept eating all the same. Family members came by and they all sat together at a table in the garden—Mommy’s entire family: grandmother, the aunts, the two uncles by marriage, cousin Birgit, and my three boy cousins.

The guests talked and carried on noisily, but I made the most noise because I couldn’t sit still, not then, not later, and I had a loud voice that Daddy said could carry all the way to Galdhøpiggen. He always smiled when he said this, all the way to Galdhøpiggen, Norway’s highest mountain. He was happy that I shouted so much, he said, proud of it, but Mommy was of another opinion. She said that my voice cut right through to the bone.

I made so much noise that I didn’t hear the truck. It was only when Mommy asked me to come to the courtyard that I understood that something was up. She took my hand and led me around the corner, while she waved at the guests and said that they had to come too. She laughed in their direction, and at me, but there was something unusual about her laughter. She laughed the way I usually laughed,

wildly and a little too loudly, and I laughed as well because I felt that I had to.

I turned around and looked for Daddy. I found him, way in the back of the crowd of guests, alone. I wanted to hold his hand instead, but Mommy was pulling too hard.

Then we turned the corner and I jumped. I didn't understand what I saw: the entire courtyard was white, and the light reflecting off it sparkled, making me squint.

"Ice," Mommy said. "Snow, winter. Look, Signe, it's winter!"

"Snow?" I said.

She stood beside me and I could tell that something about this was important to Mommy, about the snow, which was actually ice. But I didn't understand what it was, and now Daddy had also come over to stand beside her, and he wasn't smiling.

"What's this?" Daddy asked Mommy.

"Do you remember," Mommy said to me, "that you said you wished your birthday was in the winter?"

"No."

Mommy continued, "That you cried when Birgit had her birthday and it snowed? And you wanted a snowman, do you remember?"

Daddy said to Mommy in a hard voice, "Have you driven it all the way down from the mountain?"

"Sønstebø brought it for me. He was going to pick some up for the fish landing station anyway," she answered.

I turned around and discovered Sønstebø, the farmer from Eidesdalen. He was standing beside the truck, looking at me, smiling. I understood that he was waiting for something from me. Behind him stood his son, Magnus.

There you were, Magnus. I knew who you were before, because you sometimes came with your father on his truck when he delivered ice. But nonetheless, I think of that moment as the first time I saw you. You stood there, barefoot, your feet brown from the sun and dirt, and you waited for something—like all the others, you were

waiting for me. You reminded me of a squirrel, with round, brown eyes that noticed everything. You were just 8 years old, but you noticed that something was at stake, I believe, something that wasn't said—that somebody needed you, or would come to need you. That's how you were. That's how he was.

"So Sønstebø had to make an extra trip?" Daddy asked softly. "All the way from the mountain?"

I hoped that he would put his arm around Mommy, the way he did sometimes—put it around her and squeeze her against him. But he didn't move.

"It's Signe's birthday, she wished for this," Mommy said.

"And what does Sønstebø get in return?"

"He thought it was fun. He loved that I wanted to do it, he loved the idea."

"Everyone loves your ideas."

Then Mommy turned to face me. "You can make a snowman, Signe. Wouldn't you like to do that? We can make a snowman, all of us!"

I didn't want to make a snowman, but still I said yes.

I slipped in my good shoes and almost fell, my balance was off on the white surface she called snow, but Mommy grabbed hold of me and kept me on my feet.

The moisture and the cold penetrated the soles of my shoes, hard granules of ice spilled across my feet and melted against my thin knee socks.

I bent down, took a fistful of snow in my hands, and tried to make a snowball, but it was like nib sugar, it just disintegrated.

I looked up. Everyone was watching me, all the party guests were watching. Magnus stood completely still, only his eyes moved, his gaze going from the snow to me and back again. He had never received snow for his birthday—it was probably only hotel daughters who received that—and I wished he wasn't here to see this.

But Mommy smiled, smiled as broadly as the doll, the largest in

the store. And again I tried to make a snowball—I had to manage it, there had to be a snowball. I had to make a huge snowman, because I didn't remember that I'd wished for a winter birthday. I couldn't remember that I had ever spoken with Mommy about this, or that I had cried on Birgit's birthday. But I had, and now Daddy was angry with Mommy. Maybe I had said that I wanted a doll too, and forgotten about it. It was my fault, all of this—that I was standing here and that my feet were so exceedingly cold, with ice water dribbling through my fingers, that everyone was standing here and behaving oddly around me, that the dry courtyard was turning muddy and vile, that Daddy looked at Mommy with a gaze that I didn't understand, and that he put his hands down into the pockets of his trousers in a way that made his shoulders narrow. And also that Magnus was here. I wished with my entire pounding 7-year-old heart that he hadn't seen me like this.

That's why I lied. For the first time in my life I lied. Some children can lie—they do it without thinking twice. It's easy for them to say that they didn't take the cookies from the jar or that they lost their workbook on the way home. But I wasn't that kind of child, just like I was not a child who liked to imagine things; make-believe games and pretend worlds were not for me. And maybe for that reason, lying wasn't either. I had so far in my life not been in situations where I needed to lie, and I had also never considered the idea that it was actually possible, that a lie could solve something.

But now I did it. The lie pushed its way forward because it was my fault, all of this, I thought, with cold toes and wet knee socks, with the cake pressing against my chest, rising toward my throat, my mouth and I had to stop the look in Daddy's eyes, that's why I lied. I had to get him to take his hands out of his pockets and reach for Mommy.

I thought through the lie in a flash, made it up in my mind before I performed it. In a quiet voice I hoped sounded genuine, I said, "Yes, I remember it, Mommy. I wished for a birthday in the winter. I remember it."

And to make it really respectable, to make the lie fully plausible, I filled my hands with rotten nib sugar snow and held them out to Mommy, to Daddy.

“Thank you. Thank you for the ice.”

Now, I thought, now everything will certainly be fine. But nothing happened. One of the guests cleared his throat softly. My cousin tugged at my aunt by her skirt, peered up at her, but all the adults just looked at me and waited, as if something more was supposed to happen.

That was when he came over to me from the truck, Magnus, his feet moving quickly against the ground.

“I’ll help you,” he said.

He bent down; the hair on his young boy’s neck was close-cropped and his skin tan. He took some ice between his hands and made a snowball that was much nicer than mine.

Those bare feet of his on the ice, it had to be freezing cold, but he didn’t seem to care because now we were making a snowman together—out of the rotting, melting snow. And I no longer noticed all the others around us, all those still standing there watching.

“We need a nose,” he said.

“You mean a carrot,” I said.

“Yes, a nose.”

“But it’s actually a carrot,” I said.

And he laughed.

CHAPTER TWO

DAVID

Timbaut, Bordeaux, France, 2041

The heat trembled above the road in front of us. It shimmered on the hilltop, like water, but disappeared when we came closer.

We still didn't see any sign of the camp.

Above us the sky was blue. Not a single cloud. Blue, always blue. I'd started to hate that color.

Lou slept against my arm, rocking gently as the truck drove over bumps in the asphalt. It had been a long time since anyone had done any road maintenance. The houses we passed were abandoned, the fields dry and scorched brown by the sun.

I turned my face toward Lou, sniffed at her head. Her soft, little-girl hair smelled of acrid smoke. The sour smell of fire was in our clothes too, even though it had been many days since we left Argelès. Since we became half a family.

Twenty-two days, no, twenty-four. Already twenty-four days had passed. I had lost count—wanted perhaps to lose count. Twenty-four

days since we ran out of Argelès. Me with Lou in my arms. She cried. I ran until we could no longer hear the fire. Ran until the smoke was just a haze in the distance. Only then did we stop, turn toward the city, and . . .

Stop, David. Stop. We are going to find them now. They are here. Anna and August will be in the camp. Because this was where Anna wanted to go. She had spoken about the place for a long time. It was supposed to be decent. Here there was food and electricity from solar panels. And not least, there was water. Clean, cold water from a faucet.

And from this camp it was supposed to be possible to continue north.

The driver put on the brakes. He drove onto the side of the road and stopped. Lou woke up.

"There," he said, pointing.

In front of us was a military-green tarpaulin fence.

Anna. August.

The driver let us out. He mumbled "good luck" and drove away in a cloud of dust.

The air hit us like a hot wall. Lou blinked toward the sun, clinging to my hand.

The fireball in the sky sucked every drop of water out of me. The asphalt was burning. It was so hot it had to be on the verge of melting.

My phone was broken. My wristwatch had been bartered away. I didn't know what time it was. But the fence before me still cast a short shadow, so it couldn't be more than 3.

I walked quickly. Now we would find them again. For sure they had arrived here before us.

We reached the entrance. Two guards wearing military uniforms sat by a table. They looked at us without seeing us.

"Papers?" one of them said.

"I'm looking for someone," I said.

"Papers first," the guard said.

"But—"

“Don’t you want to go inside?”

I placed our passports in front of him, but left Anna’s and August’s passports in the bag. The guard didn’t need to see that we had them. He would certainly start asking questions.

He leafed quickly through the pages in my passport, stopped at the photograph. I was startled every time I saw it. The guy in the photograph—was that me? Such round cheeks, almost chubby. Had the camera distorted my face? No, that was just how I was at the time. Stout, not fat, merely in good health. Or maybe just normal, actually. Maybe that was how we all looked before.

He picked up Lou’s—it was newer, but Lou grew so fast. The child in the passport could have been anyone—four years old when the photograph was taken. Smiling. Not as serious as she is now.

I had braided her hair this morning. I was good at it. Brushed it and divided it into two identical sections, with a sharp part in between. Then I quickly made two tight braids that hung down her back. Maybe it was because of the braids we had finally been picked up by a driver. Now I hoped they distracted people, so they wouldn’t notice how dirty she was, and thin—so they wouldn’t notice her seriousness. She seldom smiled, my child. Before she was the kind of child who was always jumping, running, skipping. But now the braids just hung down her back, completely motionless.

The guard continued looking at me. Clearly he was comparing me with the photo in the passport.

“It’s five years old,” I said. “I was only 20.”

“Do you have anything else? Other papers that can confirm your identity?”

I shook my head.

“This was all I managed to take with me.”

He looked at the picture one more time, as if it could provide him with answers. Then he took out a stapler and two light-green slips of paper. With practiced movements he stapled them onto random pages in the passports.

He held them out to me. "Fill these out."

"Where?"

"Here. On the forms."

"I mean . . . where? Do you have a table?"

"No."

I took the passports. He had left mine open at the page with the green form.

"Do you have a pen, then?"

I tried to smile. But the guard just shook his head in resignation. His eyes did not meet mine.

"I've lost mine," I said.

That wasn't completely true. It wasn't lost—the ink was used up. Lou had been crying so much the other night on the road, sobbing softly with her face hidden in her hands. I let her draw. She drew thick blue lines of ink on the back of an old envelope we found on the side of the road. Drew pictures of girls in dresses and colored in the skirts. She pressed the pen down so hard that it made holes in the paper.

The guard rummaged through a box on the ground. He pulled out a battered, blue, ballpoint pen with a broken plastic casing. "I want it back."

I had to fill out the forms standing up. I had nothing to lean the passports against. My handwriting came out wobbly and strange. I tried to hurry. My hand shook. Occupation. Last place of work. Last place of residence. Where we had come from. Where we were headed. Where were we headed?

"The water countries, David," Anna used to say to me. "That's where we have to go."

The drier our own country became, the more she talked about the countries in the north, where the rain didn't just come once in a great while during the cold months, but also in the spring and summer. Where long-term drought didn't exist. But where instead the opposite was true: the rain was an affliction, arriving in storms. Where rivers flooded over and dams burst, abruptly and brutally.

“What are they crying about?” Anna said. “They have all the water in the world!”

Where we lived we had only the salty sea, which was rising. That and the drought. That was our flood. Relentless.

At first it was called the two-year drought, then four. This was the fifth year. The summer seemed to be without end.

People had started leaving Argelès back in the autumn of last year, but we stayed put. I had a job to attend to; I couldn’t leave it, the run-down old desalination plant that converted the sea into fresh water.

But the power came and went, the stores were emptied of food staples, and the city became emptier, quieter. And hotter. The drier the earth became, the hotter the air. Previously the sun had applied its forces to evaporation. When there was no longer any moisture on the earth, we became the sun’s target.

Every day Anna talked about how we should leave. First straight up north, while it was still possible, before everyone closed the borders. Then she talked about different camps. Pamiers, Gimont, Castres. This one near Timbaut was the last.

As she talked, the temperature rose. Refugees from even farther south passed through our city, stayed a few days, traveled on. But we stayed.

I stood there with the pen in my hand. Where were we headed?

I couldn’t answer this by myself. I had to find Anna and August first.

The man behind us in the line bumped into us but didn’t seem to notice. He was tiny and shriveled, as if he didn’t fill out his own flesh. There was a dirty bandage around one of his hands.

The guard quickly stapled the green form into his passport. The man accepted it without another word. He already had a pen in his hand and stepped aside to write.

It was my turn again. I gave the guard the passports and the forms with the ten pieces of information that were supposed to be everything he needed to know about Lou and me.

The guard pointed to the item at the bottom. "And here?"

"We haven't decided yet. I have to speak with my wife first."

"Where is she?"

"We were supposed to meet here."

"Supposed to?"

"Will. We have agreed to meet here."

"We've been asked to ensure that something is written in all the fields."

"I have to speak with my wife first. I'm looking for her. I said so."

"Then I'll put *England*."

England, smack in the middle between south and north, still habitable.

"But it's not for sure that it will be England where we . . ."

Anna didn't like England. Didn't like the food. Or the language.

"You have to put something," the guard said.

"So we won't be committed to it?"

He laughed a curt laugh.

"If you should be lucky enough to be granted residency, you must take whatever country you get."

He leaned over the form and wrote quickly: *Great Britain*. Then he gave me back my passport. "That's everything," he said. "At night you must stay here, but during the day you can come and go as you please, both inside and outside the camp."

"Understood," I said.

I tried to smile again. I wished he would smile back. I could have used a smile.

"You'll be assigned a spot in Hall 4," he said.

"But where can I ask about my wife? And my son? He's just a baby. His name is August."

The guard raised his head. Finally he looked at me. "The Red Cross," he said. "You'll see them as soon as you enter."

I wanted to give him a hug, but instead just mumbled "Thanks."

"Next, please," he said.

We walked quickly through the gate. I pulled Lou behind me. As soon as we were inside, I became aware of a sound: crickets. They were sitting in a tree above us, rubbing their wings together feverishly. There was no water, but they kept it up, as energetically as hell, did not give up. That was perhaps how one should take this. I tried breathing more calmly.

The camp consisted of some huge old warehouses spread out across a flat field. Big trees cast shadows. They still had leaves; the roots must go deep. A sign on the wall informed us that the place had once been an awning factory. Sunshades for All Your Needs, it read. No doubt they'd done good business.

We continued walking in through the camp. Between the buildings were a dozen or so military tents and just as many barracks. They were set up in straight lines and all of them had solar cells on the roof. There was no trash anywhere. People sat here and there, resting in the heat. Everyone was clean and wore clean clothes.

Anna had been right: this was a good place.

"There," I said, pointing to a flag that was flapping on the roof of a barracks a short distance away.

"What country is that from?" Lou asked.

"It's not a country, it's the Red Cross. They know where Mommy and August are."

"Do they?"

"Yes."

Lou held my hand, with her dirty, sticky child's hand. Anna used to nag her about washing her hands. The same ritual took place before every meal. *Remember to wash your hands, remember the germs.* If she could see Lou now.

We turned a corner, and Lou came to an abrupt halt.

"A line," she said softly.

Damn.

"We're good at that," I said, trying to make my voice sound cheerful.

During the past year everything was rationed. We stood in lines for a gallon of milk. For a cut of meat. For a bag of apples, every other kind of fruit. The lines for fruits and vegetables were the longest. There were so few bees, so few insects. They had disappeared gradually, but when the drought came, it accelerated. No insects, no fruit. I missed tomatoes. Melons. Pears, plums. Digging my teeth into a juicy plum, cold from the refrigerator . . .

Lou couldn't remember a life without lines. And she was the one who had come up with the idea that we could sit in line, instead of standing in line.

The first time she sat down, it was from sheer exhaustion. She was whining. On the verge of tears. But when I sat down beside her and said we were on a picnic, she laughed.

Sitting in line had now become routine for us. The lines were a place for games. Outings in the country. School. Dinner parties. There were especially a lot of the latter. Lou loved games about eating.

I gave Lou a cookie, the last one I had in my bag. She crunched on it and smiled.

"There's like a yellow cream inside," she said, showing me the dry, grainy cookie.

We kept playing through the first course, the main course, dessert, and cheese. For a few moments I managed to think only about the game.

But mostly I looked for Anna. Waited. She could appear at any moment. Walk toward me with August in her arms. He would smile with his mouth open, showing his four teeth. And she would hold him out to me so I could take him, hold him, while she hugged me. Lou would also join in. All four of us would stand like that, together.

Then the door to the barracks opened and it was our turn.

The floor was clean; it was the first thing I noticed. A hard, wooden floor, without a speck of dust. There were several cables coiling across the barracks floor. And it was cooler in here. A fan on the wall droned loudly.

A woman who was half-hidden behind the monitor of a desktop computer smiled. She pointed to two chairs in front of the desk.

I quickly explained our case: that the family had been split up when we left the south, but that we had agreed to meet here. "It was my wife's suggestion," I said. "She wanted us to come here."

The woman started typing on the computer. She asked for the names and birthdates of both Anna and August and asked what they looked like.

"Look like?"

"Do they have any special characteristics?"

"No . . . Anna has brown hair. She is quite short." It suddenly sounded like I thought there was something wrong with her. "I mean . . . relatively short. Five foot two, I think. And pretty," I hastened to add.

The woman smiled.

"She has brown hair that gets blonder in the summertime. Brown eyes," I said.

"And the child?"

"He's . . . an ordinary baby. He has four teeth and still doesn't have much hair. Perhaps he has a few more teeth now, actually. He was cranky the last few days. I believe his gums were itchy."

What more should I say? That he had a tummy I liked to bury my face in? That he laughed loudly and shrilly? That he howled like a foghorn when he was hungry?

"When did you last see them?" the woman asked.

"When we left," I said. "The day we left Argelès, July 15."

"The time of day?"

"Midday. Lunchtime."

Lou had stopped looking at me now. Instead she pulled her legs up beneath her, leaning her head toward her knees.

"What happened?" the woman asked.

"What happened?"

"Yes?"

Suddenly I didn't like her prying.

"What has happened to many people," I said. "We had to flee, we were some of the last people to leave the city. And we got separated."

"Was that it?"

"Yes."

"And you haven't heard from her since?"

"How could I? The network is down. Telephones don't work. But I've tried. Otherwise I wouldn't be sitting here now!"

I drew a breath. I had to calm down, couldn't start screaming. Be positive. Show that I'm a good guy. Besides, I liked the woman—in her fifties, a narrow face. She looked tired, working hard for others all day, that kind of tiredness.

"We agreed—" I said as clearly and calmly as I could. "We agreed to come here. That was our plan."

She looked at the computer again and typed something more.

"Unfortunately, I can't find them registered here," she said slowly. "They're not here. And neither have they been here."

I looked at Lou—had she heard anything? Maybe not. She was sitting with her forehead against her knees, making it impossible to see her face.

"Can you check one more time?" I asked.

"There's no need," she said flatly.

"Yes, there is."

"David, listen . . ."

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Jeanette."

"Okay, Jeanette. Surely you have a family of your own. Imagine if we were talking about your people."

"My people?"

"Your family. Your loved ones."

"I have lost somebody too," she said.

She had lost somebody too.

Of course she had lost somebody as well. Somebody she searched for, somebody she would maybe never see again.

"I'm sorry," I said. "What I mean is that you are the one with access to the records." I pointed to the computers. "Isn't that what you do? Find people?"

Find people. It sounded childish. I was a child to her, for sure, a child with a child. I straightened up. Ruffled Lou's hair, tried to look paternal.

"We have to find Anna. She's her mother," I said, gesturing to Lou. "And her brother," I hastened to add. She mustn't think that I'd forgotten about August.

"I'm sorry, but you've been separated for twenty-four days," she said. "Anything could have happened."

"Twenty-four days isn't that long," I replied.

"Maybe they've ended up in another camp," she said. Now there was something comforting in her voice.

"Yes," I said quickly. "That must be what happened."

"I can put in a missing person notice," Jeanette said. She smiled again, really trying to be pleasant. And I responded just as pleasantly, thank you, that was kind of you. I wanted to show that I could do this too. I sat stiffly, holding my arms tightly against my body. I hid my elbows from her, hid the rings of sweat on my T-shirt. I looked at Lou again.

I still couldn't see her face. She was sitting just as stiffly as I was, with her face pressed against her knees. Afterward she had marks from her knees on her forehead where the fabric of her trousers had created a faint grid pattern on her smooth skin.

I didn't take her hand. I wanted to run. Scream. But I forced myself to walk calmly.

The crickets. They don't give up. They can take this.

I am a cricket.

CHAPTER THREE



SIGNE

I should fix something that needs fixing; on a boat there is always something to be taken care of, to be oiled, coiled, sealed, cleaned, or secured. On a boat you never have time off. Or I should pay a visit to the hotel, say hello to my half brothers. I should—I've hardly seen them since they took over the hotel. But all I do is sit here in the saloon drinking tea, unable to move. I have been home, here in Ringfjorden, for a full twenty-four hours now, and all I do is sit here listening.

The rat-a-tat-tat of the helicopters—the sound has been there since this morning, back and forth over the mountain, from the glacier to the defunct fish landing station and back. The fish landing station has been reopened for this new business: there the ice is chopped and packaged before being shipped out.

The rat-a-tat-tat sound rises and falls, no longer a sound, something more physical, something lodged inside me. The vibrations shake the water of the fjord, the deck, and send shivers down my spine.

Maybe people in the village complain about this, maybe they write

to the local newspaper, whining letters to the editor. Because they must have something to say, they must have some kind of opinion. I haven't spoken to anyone yet, haven't asked, but now I get up and go to the store.

I nod to the woman at the cash register, who doesn't appear to recognize me. And I don't remember her face. I am one of the few people who left the village, one of the few who chose another life. Signe Hauger, the journalist, the author, the professional activist. People here have perhaps not read anything by me, but they have certainly heard about me. At least they have heard the gossip, even though that was many years ago, when I chained myself to a barricade in protest and was put in jail.

But she doesn't recognize me, no, because she nods back indifferently. I should ask her what she thinks about Blåfonna, about the helicopters. Most people like sharing their personal opinions. Perhaps I can engage her in some idle chatter. It's a strange expression, *idle chatter*, as if small talk required no effort whatsoever. I don't have the strength for this kind of social banter, whether I know the other person or not. But today I am going to ask about something specific, so that's different. All the same, I can't bring myself to walk straight up to her—that would seem strange, unnatural. I decide instead to wait until I pay for my groceries.

I start picking out the things I need—bread, juice, dishwashing liquid, canned goods, tea. As I'm doing this the bell above the door jingles faintly. The door opens and two elderly women enter.

They engage in some chatter, though it's more industrious than idle. They carry on as if they were being paid for it, but they're not talking about the helicopters, or about the ice—apparently nobody is talking about Blåfonna. It takes me a while to realize who the women are; their voices give them away. We went to school together and they sound astonishingly similar to how it was when they were girls, the rising and falling intonations, the laughter.

I step out from behind the shelf. Not saying hello would be foolish, and maybe they know something about the glacier, maybe they actually care. But a name and a flood of words causes me to stop.

Magnus.

They've started talking about him, and one of them turns out to be his sister-in-law. He has moved to France, she says with obvious envy. He only comes home for board meetings, he's apparently not planning to step down as chairman of the Ringfallene Company yet. He loves that job, but is otherwise enjoying his retirement down there, playing golf and attending wine-tasting events. It is apparently wonderful—she actually uses that word, *wonderful*. I stay put behind the shelf.

Wonderful. Yes indeed, I can imagine. I saw him once a few years back, from across the street in Bergen. I'm sure he was on his way to a meeting—he was wearing a suit, carrying a briefcase and an overcoat, the standard uniform of Norwegian adult businessmen. He didn't see me, but I had time to study him. A life of plenty had made a visible impact on him: the biggest part of his body was his stomach. He had turned out like many others from our generation—an upholstered body in an upholstered existence, in our wonderful new world.

I wait until they have finished chatting, wondering whether they will say anything more about him. But now they seem to be talking about their own grandchildren, trying covertly to outdo one another with stories of these young people's achievements, and the closeness of their bond, how often they see them, and not least how much their adult children rely on them, the grandmothers, to keep the wheels of daily life turning smoothly. And they don't stop. One can apparently talk about grandchildren indefinitely. I sneak away from my basket, toward the door, opening it carefully, so the bell won't make too much noise.

"I know that I love you," I used to say.

"I love you," Magnus used to reply.

"Is the word *love* an absolute or does it have degrees?" I asked once.

We were lying close together in bed, as our heartbeats slowly normalized. I think we were at his place—we usually were.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Are there degrees of love or is the word itself so strong that it's always absolute, always 100 percent?"

"You are at any rate the only person who can turn language's most emotional word into something theoretical," he said, smiling, while stroking my arm.

"But if there are degrees," I said, "wouldn't the verb *know* make it stronger? Isn't my sentence actually stronger than yours, when I say that I know I love you?"

"You mean that you love me more than I love you?"

"Yes. I think maybe that's true," I replied, snuggling up against him even closer.

"I don't believe that."

"*Know*. It adds a certainty to the expression that makes it stronger."

"You want me to take this seriously?"

"I want you to take everything I say seriously."

"Fine. Then I may as well say that it opens up room for doubt. The words *I know* leave room for the possibility that a time, a period, a moment may arrive in which you actually no longer know. And you also imply the opposite—that the state of *I don't know* exists. And the downgraded *I believe*. While my version, on the other hand—"

"Yes, let's hear about your version, my beloved Magnus."

"Three simple words, Signe. Three words that are a cliché. But also the truest, because I am not looking forward, or backward, or toward anything else but us."

"But you."

"What?"

"Anything else but you. You are not referring to anything but your own feelings," I said.

"Fine," he said.

"So you're saying that I'm qualifying my feelings?"

"I'm saying that I love you."

"Is that different from thinking it? You think you love me."

“Right now, I think you wear me out.”

“Words. Are. Important.”

“Words. Are. Important. For. You.”

“I am going to be a journalist,” I said, smiling. “So you’ll have to learn how to live with it.”

“You weren’t planning to become a journalist when I chose you.”

“It was in the cards, though.”

“Maybe it was.”

“And by the way,” I said, “were you the one who chose me? Does the man choose the woman? The positive force choosing the negative? I always thought I was the one who chose you.”

“Dear de Beauvoir. I give up. You chose me.”

“Yes. I chose you.”

“Can we go to sleep now?”

“Yes. Good night,” I said.

“I love you,” he said.

When I get back from the store, the helicopters are silent, but another sound has taken over: the sound of loading. A guy wearing overalls is driving a forklift back and forth from the fish landing station to a small cargo ship in the harbor. Containers of ice are stacked on European pallets, he lowers them on board, the forklift moves with careless, sharp movements, and a solid banging sound can be heard when they strike the inside of the ship and disappear into the cargo hold.

Then there is silence. The forklift is parked beside the wall by the fish landing station and everyone leaves the harbor. Tomorrow the skipper will come, start the engine, take the ice, my ice, our ice, and transport it south—to other countries, to people who have never seen a glacier, never held snow between their hands—and there it will melt in glasses, in drinks, there it will be destroyed.

Magnus doesn’t need ice, he has his swimming pool and his plump wife, Trine. She was already around when they were engineering students, I remember. I wonder if he fell for her already there and

then, maybe even before we broke up. No doubt he has grandchildren who come to visit, and wine tastings. He doesn't need ice cubes, probably only drinks red wine—Bordeaux, Burgundy, Beaujolais, bubbling drops with a fruity hint of plum. But nonetheless he has signed off on this.

The cargo ship bobs in the water, the ice lying within. Tomorrow it will be shipped away, tomorrow it will disappear.

Magnus is behind it. He doesn't have to be, yet he is, he is behind it and nobody cares.

I'm the only one who cares.

The cargo ship is right over there, no one is guarding it.

Magnus is responsible, and I am alone in this—but I am the only one who can destroy it.

I am nearly invisible—a small, gray woman wearing a knitted cap covered with fuzz balls, I am old, old as stone, like Blåfonna.

I can't destroy everything, but I can destroy this.

I can't shout about everything, but I can shout about this.

I can dump the ice in the ocean and disappear.

CHAPTER FOUR



DAVID

Lou clung to me tightly as we walked from the Red Cross to Hall 4. Her sticky little hand did not let go of me. It felt like she had not let go of me since we left home. She never objected to anything, did everything I said and didn't let go.

Being alone with a child is like being a person and a half. It is completely different from being alone with a girlfriend. A girlfriend is just as old as you are, or almost, anyway. She can satisfy her hunger pangs on her own. Make sure she's hydrated. Change her underwear. She can hold you, hold you tightly, so she holds you up. She can carry half the burden. When you're alone with a child you are always the one doing the holding.

The hall was located right behind the sanitary facilities. A huge, run-down factory, divided up into long corridors and small cubicles by old awning cloth that had been hung from the ceiling—striped yellow, blue, and red fabrics, cheerful colors.

There were beds in all the cubicles. Most of them were empty.

The floor was clean and the doors were open—a refreshing draft cooled off the hall.

“Look,” I said. “Number 32. That’s ours.”

Our own little nook, with two military-green cots, a metal cupboard, and a plastic box for storage. There were sheets on the beds and a bottle of antibacterial hand wash for both of us. Maybe there wasn’t enough water for handwashing.

“The walls are made of cloth,” Lou said, touching the striped awning cloth with her hand.

“Isn’t it nice? Like a theater,” I said.

“No. Like a tent. It’s like we’re on a camping trip,” Lou said as she finally let go of me. “This can be our camping table.” She pulled the plastic box out between the beds. “And this is the tablecloth.” She pulled her dirty handkerchief out of her pocket and placed it on the box.

I tossed our bag into the cupboard. It occupied only half the space.

Everything we owned in half a cupboard. I used to own an apartment, a small flat-screen television, a cell phone, easily fifteen T-shirts, at least seven pairs of pants, eight pairs of shoes, a heap of socks that were never matched and folded in pairs, a table, four chairs, a couch, curtains, cutlery, two good knives, a cutting board, a bed, two children’s beds, an entire shelf of books, a calfskin wallet, two potted plants that Anna took care of, three flower vases, bedding for four, a solid heap of towels, most of them faded from the wash, two warm jackets, three scarves, four hats, five caps, two half-empty bottles of sunblock, shampoo, dishwashing liquid, a dishwashing brush, a toilet paper rack, cleaning bucket, mop, seven washrags, a changing table, diapers, moist towelettes, two floor mats, a poster with a picture of Manhattan before the last rounds of spring flooding, a wife, two children . . .

I pushed the door to the cupboard shut.

In the cubicle opposite ours I caught a glimpse of the old man from the line. He was lying down with his face to the wall.

I started making up the beds. The mattresses were thin and wrapped in sticky plastic that smelled of disinfectant. One sheet underneath, one on top. No pillow. Lou could continue using her sweater for a pillow. She had done that during the days we were on the road. She liked rolling something up to put under her head when she slept.

At that moment the man in bed moaned. I could hear him writhing in pain. The bed emitted a metallic squeak. And he wailed—a soft whine of suffering.

I went out into the hallway between the cubicles. The man didn't notice me. Again he writhed in pain and turned his bandaged hand over.

I ventured into his cubicle. He didn't react as I drew close to him. The bandage was brown with filth and on one side of it there were yellow stains where pus had oozed out. He smelled bad, rancid and a little rotten. All of him, or perhaps just from the hand. He moaned again and opened his eyes, stared straight at me.

"Sorry," I said. "Didn't mean to disturb you."

He sat up. His movements were stiff, his eyes glassy with pain.

"Do you have any . . ." he asked, holding up his hand. "Something or other. Just so I can get some sleep?"

I shook my head and pointed to the bandage. "How long has it been since you had that changed?"

At first he didn't reply. He looked down at the filthy dressing.

"My daughter dressed it."

"Your daughter?"

"She's a nurse."

"But was that long ago?"

"I don't remember."

"It has to be changed."

Fortunately the man didn't object and let himself be led. I held Lou by one hand, with the other I guided the man gently forward.

I asked where he came from. What his name was.

"Francis," he mumbled in reply. He'd made his way here from Perpignan.

That made me happy.

"We're almost neighbors," I said. "We're from Argelès."

He didn't reply to that, perhaps didn't think it was very close and he would be right about that.

We reached the first-aid barracks. No line here. We were admitted immediately and welcome by a nurse in a bleached white uniform. She smelled of soap. The room was cool, the air dry. A box on the wall emitted a low humming sound; there was air-conditioning in here as well.

Francis sank down into the chair she pulled out for him and placed his hand on her lap. We stood right behind him. The nurse carefully loosened the bandage and he whimpered. There were tears in his eyes and his face twisted.

As the bandage was slowly unwound, the odor intensified, the stench.

"Go sit over there," I said to Lou.

For my own part, I couldn't refrain from watching. The wound was deep and festering, more yellow than red, a long gash in his flesh. The color of the skin around it was a sickly color, grayish.

"Wait a minute," the nurse said, leaving the room.

A little time passed. I tried talking to Francis, about Lou and me, about how we were supposed to meet my wife here.

He nodded in response but said nothing about himself.

Finally the nurse returned with a doctor. They had clearly already conferred, because the doctor sat down with the man immediately, took his hand in his lap and studied the wound.

"How did you get this?" she asked softly.

The man looked away.

"I cut myself . . . on a saw."

"A saw?"

"I was going to saw some wood. Didn't have an ax."

"This is not a cut from a saw," the doctor said. "It will be easier for me to know what to do if you tell the truth."

He raised his head and gave her a look of defiance, but then suddenly relented. "A knife. Three weeks from yesterday. Three weeks and one day."

"You were lucky," the doctor said. "Had the cut been an inch or so higher up, it would have done some serious damage."

"Lucky?" Francis said and I could hear him swallow. "I don't know about that."

"I'm going to give you antibiotics," the doctor said after a moment. "And you must come in every other day to have the wound cleaned."

"What's the point of that?"

"The antibiotics will get rid of the infection."

"And the point of that?"

"Of what?"

"Getting rid of the infection."

"Do you want to lose your hand?"

He said nothing more.

The doctor surrendered her seat to the nurse, who poured disinfectant over the wound with expert hands and rubbed in an ointment.

Francis was no longer concerned about hiding his pain. Now he swore robustly.

"Hush. The child!" I said.

"Sorry," he said.

"That's okay," Lou said from her corner. "Daddy says things like that too."

Francis laughed.

The nurse brought another bandage, which she wrapped carefully around his hand.

"It's too tight," Francis said.

"How's that?" the nurse tried.

"Still too tight."

"I'm loosening it now."

"It feels like it's stopping all the blood circulation. You're going to give me gangrene."

"It must be wrapped snugly."

"It must be that damn ointment. It stings."

"When you clean a cut, it's supposed to sting," Lou said softly from her corner.

He peered up at her. All of a sudden there was something boyish about him.

"You're right," he said. "I'd forgotten about that." He stared down at his hand, wrapped in the white gauze bandage that contrasted sharply with his dirty skin, and said nothing more.

"Does it feel all right?" the nurse asked.

"Yes," he said. "All right."

Then he discovered the old bandage. It was lying on a steel tray on a table beside the nurse. "What are you going to do with it?"

The nurse looked at him, uncomprehending.

"With the bandage."

"What do you mean? The old one?"

"Are you going to throw it out?"

"Yes, of course."

Francis didn't reply.

"Look here," the doctor said, handing him something blue in a transparent wrapper. "You can cover the bandage with this when you bathe."

He made no move to accept it, so I reached out and took it for him.

"Are you relatives?" she asked.

"No, we just live in the same hall."

"Do you know whether he has anyone?"

I shook my head.

"Keep an eye on him, would you, please."

Francis moved sluggishly on our way back to the hall. As we walked away from the first-aid barracks his pace slowed more and more, until finally he stopped walking altogether.

"I just have to . . ."

He didn't say anything else but turned toward the first-aid barracks again. Then he walked quickly back and disappeared inside.

"What's he doing?" Lou asked.

"Wait outside," I said.

She released my hand and went to stand beside the barracks. I walked over to the door and opened it a crack.

The first thing I heard was a scratching sound. The room was empty, the nurse had left, but Francis was standing in a corner. He was busy digging through a trash bin and didn't notice me. Then he evidently found what he was searching for: the old bandage. He quickly stuck it into his pocket with a furtive movement. I ducked away from the door and hurried back to Lou.

"What did he do?" she whispered.

But at that moment he came out. His steps were lighter.

"It feels better already," he said. He turned toward Lou and suddenly he smiled. "That's a good one you've got there," he said to me.

I pulled Lou close to me and nodded.

"Yes, she's a good one."

The first night in a bed in twenty-four days. When I closed my eyes, an image of the faces of Anna and August flashed through my mind. I fell asleep before I could think anymore.

But then the dreams came. Worse than before, maybe because I slept so deeply. I was falling, no, sinking through water. Toward the bottom, and I let myself sink, I didn't struggle against it. I would soon run out of air, my chest contracted, but nonetheless I did nothing to get back to the surface again. I couldn't breathe. Mustn't inhale, mustn't fill my lungs, mustn't drown.

The surface above me—light blue, a shimmer of bubbles where I had fallen. That is where I am headed. That is where I have to go. But all I did was sink.

I woke up with a jerk. Drew a breath. Filled my lungs. Air. Around me it was light. It was morning already.

I turned over and lay in bed watching Lou as my breathing calmed. She was sleeping on her back with her arms sticking out and her legs splayed in opposite directions, like a starfish. She was in constant movement—took up room, demanded space. When she was sleeping she forgot to make herself small.

We'd had her far too soon. I knew we shouldn't have started having children so early. I was only 19, and Anna had just turned 20. We blamed it on the water crisis, on the shortages that came along with it. Because everything was in short supply, condoms as well. I was happy about that, that Anna blamed the crisis and not me, given that I had actually promised to pull out in time.

She asked me if we should get rid of it. If I was sure, she could manage, she thought, if I didn't want to have the baby.

And I didn't want to have the baby. But I didn't want to get rid of it either. Get rid of it, like it was a thing. I got angry because she used those words. We argued. Her belly grew. We argued some more. Then it was too late.

Then there she was, the little child, pink and wrinkled up like a raisin, and the life I had had before suddenly felt like it had belonged to somebody else.

Morning sounds around us in the hall. Hushed voices, footsteps, the igniting of a cooker, a bed creaking as somebody got up.

I let Lou sleep. Her internal clock was turned upside down—she went to bed far too late in the evening. I had been so strict about the bedtime business before, back when there were things to show up for—work, school. But after the school closed, we started letting Lou stay up later. There was no reason not to.

I would straighten this out now. When Anna arrived, I would enforce a clearer schedule. Set bedtimes, set mealtimes. Maybe we could also practice reading a bit. Maybe there were books here. She had missed out on many months of school already.

Lou's body twisted and she rolled over on her back. Her mouth opened, she was breathing rapidly, fearfully, her eyes were moving

behind her eyelids. What does one dream about when one is a little girl who doesn't know how life will turn out?

She whimpered loudly. "No . . ."

She twisted and turned again, her crying grew louder. It was so defenseless, so full of pain. The tears trickled out of her sleeping eyes.

"Don't . . . stop . . ."

I leaned forward quickly and shook her.

"Lou. Lou?"

She turned away from me, still in the dream.

"You have to wake up, Lou."

I took her child's body, warm with sleep, into my arms, lifted her up. She resisted, as if she wanted to stay in there.

"Lou, please."

I stroked her hair, dried the tears on her cheeks.

Finally her eyes fluttered open. She stared up at me. For a second she was far away, and then suddenly she sat up, ready to run.

"It's burning, Daddy, it's burning!"

"Lou, no." I took hold of her. "No, sweetie, it was only a dream."

"But it smells of smoke. I can smell it. We have to get out of here!"

She turned toward her clothes, snatched up her shorts, started pulling them on.

I stood in front of her, bent my knees, so my face was level with hers. Gently I took hold of her shoulders.

"It's not smoke, sweetie. There's no fire."

"But I can smell it!"

I sat down and pulled her up onto my lap, feeling how she tensed all her muscles.

I held her tight, spoke softly, "Take a whiff. What do you smell?"

She sniffed quickly. "Smoke."

"Try again."

She sat completely still, sniffed again. "Smoke."

"Give it one more try."

She didn't sniff anymore. She just breathed more calmly. "Nothing," she said finally.

"Nothing," I said.

Her body was relaxed now.

I leaned my face toward her head. Sniffed. Yes, it smelled of smoke, but it came from her hair, her clothing. The way I also stank. "You know what we get to do today?" I said.

"No."

"We get to take a shower."

"A shower?"

"Yes. We get to shower every Tuesday."

"Is it Tuesday today?"

"Yes. So we get to take a shower."

"We need it."

"Yes. We need it."

Lou held the towel she'd been given with both hands. Then she opened it, like it was a present, the stiff creases from the folds still in place. She lifted it to her face. "It smells of soap."

I felt my own towel. The stiff fabric was rough against the skin. A clean, pure scent.

"You have to go there," I said, pointing to the Ladies sign.

"And what about you?"

"I'm going to the men's shower."

She nodded. I could see that she didn't want to be alone, but she didn't make a fuss about it.

"Remember to wash your hair," I said. "Use one spurt to get it wet and then work it into a lather using both hands." I demonstrated with my fists in my own hair. "And then you have to use the next two spurts to rinse it. Get all the soap out."

"I will."

"Remember that you only have three spurts. First one. Afterward, two."

“And get all the soap out of my hair.”

The shower had no heating unit, but the water from the first spurt was lukewarm anyway. It never really got cold in this heat.

The spray hit me on the back of my head, hammering against my skull. I tried to absorb the sensation of each individual drop against my skin, taking pleasure in every one.

Then the spurt of water abruptly came to an end. I turned toward the showerhead. A little water was still trickling out, less and less, until there was no more.

One tenacious drop hung there. Finally it dripped off the shiny head and fell to the floor. Then nothing more.

There was a soap dispenser on the wall. I was almost a little moved by it, that someone had remembered that we needed soap too. I pressed it. Liquid soap in the palms of my hands. I rubbed my hands together, worked up a lather.

I soaped myself thoroughly and for a long time. Hair, neck, hands, feet, crotch, and behind.

The lather was slippery against my skin, removing all the grease. Removing the ash.

I had never been so dirty before, so sticky, so dry, so stinking of sweat. And smoke.

For a moment I didn't think of anything else, not even of Anna, not of August, just about the soap, the water, about how it was like getting my body back, shedding a layer of skin.

I did as I had told Lou to do, using the last two spurts to rinse my body. The soapy lather lay in soft heaps on the floor by my feet. I quickly dried myself off. The towel was rough against my skin. It felt good, turning a light-brown color when I rubbed my arms with it, massaging away dead skin cells.

Then I took my clothes out of the bag. They were just as dirty, just as smelly. I would have to ask if we could wash them too.

Beneath the clothes were Anna's and August's passports. I picked

up Anna's and held it in my hand, as I had done so many times in the past weeks. The cardboard beneath my fingers was slippery. I opened it.

Anna wasn't smiling in the photograph. It was black and white, making it difficult to recognize her. You couldn't see that her hair had a golden tint. Or that there were green flecks in her eyes. Or that she had one of those quick strides, as if she were a bit busy. And cheerful, even when she was feeling the opposite.

But it was the only photograph I had.

I lifted the passport to my nose, sniffed it. It still smelled of smoke.

I was clean now. Had washed the fire off me. I had removed the memory of her when I washed the smell of smoke off me.

Abruptly I hugged the T-shirt against me, inhaling the acrid smell of smoke. She was still there, she and August. They were still here.

CHAPTER FIVE



SIGNE

I take a shower in the cubicle between the saloon and forepeak cabin, listen to the pump running, taking care not to splash too much on the bulkhead, directing all the water into the tub underneath me because there is no drain in the room. My body feels quick and agile as I soap myself—primed, as if I were 20 years old again. Afterward I fill up the tank with water from the faucet on the dock—it has to be completely full. I have to be able to stay away from land until they stop searching. To be on the safe side, I also fill up two 20-liter jugs and stow them in the afterpeak, enough water to be out at sea for weeks, while they are searching, if they search. If they realize that I am responsible, they will perhaps search for me—people in the village have seen me, know *Blue*, know my story. They can put two and two together.

During the final hour before the sun goes down and people leave the quay, I just wait, seated on deck, having a cup of coffee and forcing myself to eat calmly—a few slices of bread with pepper mackerel. The food tastes better than anything I've eaten in a long time. I chew slowly, looking at my father's old house. He lived down here by the harbor once

upon a time, but now the house is empty. When he died, I sold it for a song to someone who wanted to use it as a vacation cottage. Apparently they aren't there much. The windows are dark, empty squares.

The house is just as silent as the harbor is now, because now everyone has left and I am alone.

I jump ashore, walk toward the cargo ship, a heavy vessel of iron with patches of rust along the seam welds. I hop lightly from the quay down onto the deck, landing almost without a sound.

The door to the wheelhouse is locked, but otherwise all the doors are open. They haven't even thought about locking up, can't imagine that something could happen, here, deep in the bowels of the fjord. Bowels, something shameful—a dark inside, where nobody really cares, where everything that has meant something to us has slowly been developed, exploited, where the rivers, waterfalls, and grazing lands have disappeared. Nobody cares. Neither do they care about whether Blåfonna is also destroyed—they don't want to hear, don't want to see. They are like him, all of them, his entire generation, my generation: they just want better wines, larger vacation cottages, faster internet connections.

I go down into the cargo hold—it's cold, a freezer is humming. I find a switch, blink at the bright light, at the frost vapor from my mouth. The containers haven't been properly secured, they have been left out on the floor. I walk over to the closest one, stroke the hard plastic. They must be expensive, cast in one piece, shiny, royal-blue, hard plastic. These will not decompose for 450 years, maybe 500 years, maybe even longer, longer than a plastic bottle, longer than a disposable diaper, a pair of sunglasses, a Barbie doll, a fleece-lined jacket. Much, much longer than any human being.

I open the top one. I have to tug at the lid, already frozen shut. Inside it is the ice, vacuum-packed in an extra layer of plastic, protected by a thick lining of white insulation material. For a moment I run my hand across it, feeling the cold beneath my fingers; then I put the lid back in place.

The first container is surprisingly light. I carry it up the ladder,

fling it toward the iron deck, feeling the reverberation under my feet when it lands. I don't worry about trying to be quiet and take the lid off all the way, then yank the blocks of ice out of the plastic, my fingers tingling. I pull out a pair of gloves I remembered to bring along and then I hurl the ice over the railing, down into the fjord.

The second one also goes overboard easily, the third, the fourth, but then it becomes too difficult, I can't manage any more. There are far too many containers.

I look at the crane on the quay—maybe I can use it. But there is no key in it, so I go down into the cargo hold again. I stand facing the containers, looking at them. I can't manage all of them. I step closer, my gaze sliding across the broadside, and there I notice a splice apart, no, an opening—there is a hatch. Farther up on the bulkhead I spot a button. I press it, and the hatch responds immediately, sliding open with a loud creak.

Now I can lift the ice directly out—the fifth, the sixth, the seventh, soon I lose count. I fling the containers onto the floor. They're not going into the water, although they will perhaps end up there anyway, to join the mountains and islands of plastic in the ocean and slowly decompose into microplastic, disappear into the digestive system of a fish, be served up on a plate to be eaten by a human being, who eats his or her own garbage, the way we all eat our own garbage every day.

The plastic feels hard beneath my fingers when I remove the lid of yet another container. I lift it, carry it toward the hatch, flip it over, and dump the huge white blocks out into the water, where they hit the surface with a gentle splash. The ice bobs on the surface—white, shiny cubes against the pitch-black water, amid the uneven yellow reflections of light from the lampposts on the wharf. Sweat trickles down my back, but my hands are cold inside my gloves, so frozen that I have lost all feeling in them. The sensation is painful, but satisfying.

The ice blocks lie in the water like small icebergs, just the upper portion of them visible—that's how it is with floating glaciers, more below the water than above. But these won't harm anyone, won't

destroy. I am the destroyer here, because the water is warm and the ice will quickly melt. When the skipper comes to start the engine in a few hours, the blocks will already be smaller, but nonetheless the salt water will have ruined them. This ice can never be used as ice cubes—it can never, ever be served on a sheik's table, in a crystal tumbler, in a drink, in Saudi Arabia or Qatar.

Ice that melts, ice that melts in salt water, I am a part of it now, a part of what is taking place at all times. I am compounding the changes. I laugh, startled by the sound of my own laughter, an unfamiliar croaking like a frog. They are dying, the frogs, being wiped out in silence, without the world caring. One-third of the world's species are in danger of extinction, but nobody thinks about it. Nobody thinks about the frog, as it moves through the world's marsh landscapes, always in contact with water—slimy, modest, not disgusting enough to be hideous, not strange enough to be amusing. Just odd, how it croaks, how it hops, how it flees from humans.

Finally I am almost finished. My back is aching, 20 kilos of ice in every container, so heavy, too heavy. I count rapidly, only twelve more, only 240 kilos. I am about to open yet another container, but my hands are trembling, my fingers are stiff. And then I stop—I'm tired, I am just so tired, too old for this kind of lifting, my flesh and bones protest, far too old.

I sit down on the containers. Oh, Magnus, I am incapable of hurling the last of the blocks of ice overboard, our ice, it has been left in peace until now, until you came. But it hasn't been silent, because ice is never silent, it has its own sound, it creaks. Ice creaking is one of the world's oldest sounds and it frightens me, has always frightened me. It's the sound of something going to pieces. And the sound of a stone that fails to penetrate the ice, but gives off an echo all the same, a brief reverberation, of the water below—is a reminder of everything imprisoned underneath, of how solidly in place everything is.

But it has been a long time since I threw a stone at an ice-covered surface. The ice no longer forms on the lakes. Pollen season is already

underway in January. The ice is washed away by the rain—the world is being covered by flowing water. I wish I had a river so long.

I used to go skating, I remember, on the fjord, I skated faster than everybody. Magnus stood onshore and watched me, we were 10 or 11, we still didn't know each other, but I remember that I liked that he watched me, that he knew I was the fastest. I had skates that I screwed onto my boots, with sharp blades. Nobody uses those any longer; they buy new skates every autumn, new skates every year for the children—black hockey skates or white for figure skating. They think that one has to have skates, but nobody uses them, because the lakes don't freeze over any longer. I wish I had a river I could skate away on. But everything I have done has been to no avail. I have really tried, I have been fighting for my entire life, but I have been mostly alone. There are so few of us, it was futile. Everything we talked about, everything we said would happen, has happened, the heat has already arrived, nobody listened.

Magnus, your grandchildren will not be able to skate across the lakes. Yet you have approved this, our glacier, the ice. You have dissociated yourself to such a large extent from everything that once was ours—or perhaps you have always been like this, you have just let it happen. I can hear you, how you are thinking now, how people like you think. We're just following the development: what I have allowed to happen is happening everywhere, evil's banality—you have become like Eichmann. But nobody holds you accountable. Your Jerusalem never arrives.

I have these twelve containers, twelve containers containing ice one thousand years old. I am not going to throw them overboard, because you have to see them, Magnus. You can't just sit down there and let it happen; it's not supposed to be as easy as that. You are going to see the ice, feel it, you will personally stand next to it while it melts. You will have the chance to walk on it, step on it—it will melt beneath your feet, the way it once melted under our feet.

Again I start lugging containers. One by one I take the twelve containers of ice with me out of the cargo ship, over onto *Blue*.

CHAPTER SIX

DAVID

Once again my hands were immersed in soapy water. It foamed between my fingers and soaked through our clothing. My shirt swelled like a taut balloon on the surface of the water until the water prevailed. As the filth released its grip on our clothes, the color of the soap and water changed from transparent to a nondescript grayish-brown.

The air in the sanitary barracks was stagnant, with a strong odor of cleaning products. Familiar. Anna's head bent over the washing machine at home. August's tiny garments, clean and damp. The smell that spread through the room, covering up the aroma of food and the faint stench emanating from the trash can in the heat.

Anna and the laundry. The teeny-tiny garments.

I swallowed and tried to concentrate on what I was doing.

A few spots refused to come out, remaining in the fabric like shadows. Dried blood from a scrape on the knee that had long since turned a rusty, brown color. Purple spots from unripe cherries picked one night in someone's garden. They appeased our hunger pangs for

a little while, but the craving in our stomachs was replaced by a sour sensation.

It was our fourth day in the camp. Already every day was the same. Jeanette's office in the morning. Nothing new. Every day I asked if there was anything more I could do, anything else. But she shook her head. Then eat. Sweat. Listen to Lou talk, unable to pay attention. Pull myself together. Ask somebody about the time. Nothing new, no. Try to listen to Lou. Try to play. Try not to think—about Anna, about August, about the fire. Eat again. Wait for the evening, for the heat to abate. Sleep. Wait for the next morning and another visit to the Red Cross.

But today we were allowed to wash our clothes. Laundry tubs were set up on a simple workbench. Seven liters of water we had been given for this. A little treasure trove of water.

Lou was also washing her clothes. She was wearing only her underpants and scrubbing her shorts in a tub in front of her.

The door behind us opened. I turned around. It was a woman holding dirty laundry in one hand, and a small water jug in the other.

I nodded and said hi.

She mumbled a reply, took one of the tubs down from the shelf, poured some laundry detergent out of a can, sprinkled it across the bottom, and filled the tub with water, doing everything quickly and expertly.

She sat down on the other side of Lou. I tried to smile, but she didn't seem to notice, was busy with her laundry.

She put a dress in the water, a floral print, it looked expensive. After that a blouse, made of a thin, silk-like fabric.

"Nice," I said.

"What?"

"The blouse."

"Thank you."

She studied me for a couple of seconds before returning to her laundry. She was in her late 30s, maybe even 40. Her skeleton

seemed to be pressing through her skin. Her collarbone stuck out, but not because she didn't eat enough, more because she was like that, naturally thin.

Or maybe she was one of those who always watched her weight, exercised. There had been a lot of people like that before. I remembered it, that dieting was something women talked about. She was pretty, I saw that now—not beautiful, but pretty. Classic. The way you look if you come from a family where rich men marry elegant women. The families just become more and more attractive with each generation, until finally everyone forgets how ordinary people look.

One seldom saw her kind in Argelès. The tourists who came to the town were of a different sort. They liked the amusement park on the beach and the pedestrian street where you could buy knockoffs of famous labels. I had only seen her kind on the few occasions I had traveled farther north up the coast, in Cannes and Provence.

But now she was here, among all the rest of us. The former kinds of distinctions no longer existed.

Her movements were quick. Unfriendly? Maybe she didn't like my watching her.

"Been here long?" I asked, sort of to explain my staring.

"A while."

"Do you like it?"

"Excuse me?"

I laughed. "Sorry. Wrong question. I get it."

She didn't smile. Just kept rubbing her dress.

"Fine, fine." I held up my hands to show that I was giving up, that I wouldn't bother her anymore.

She continued washing with quick movements, putting more clothing into the tub. Only women's clothing, I could see.

"Are you here alone?" I asked.

"I thought you were done talking," she said.

"We're alone too," I said, pointing to Lou.

She stirred the contents of the tub a little. The suds foamed between her fingers. She stared at the clothes, then drew a breath and said, "You're not alone," she said. "There are two of you."

She hid her face from me, but she couldn't hide her voice. It wasn't accusing. It wasn't angry and dismissive like before. She just said it, plain and simple.

Abruptly I felt ashamed. She was right: I shouldn't say that I was alone, because I had Lou. I still had Lou. Who at this moment was playing with the laundry water while talking softly to herself. Something about the ocean. The ocean at home?

The woman rinsed the soap out of her clothes with the last of the water from the jug she had brought along, wringing them out with rhythmic movements. Her hands were slender, delicate. The water gushed out of them.

Suddenly I wanted her to wring out our clothes too, in the same way. For my own part I hadn't even made it to the rinse cycle yet.

"Would you like to eat with us?" I asked when she stood up to leave.

"You don't give up, do you?" the woman said.

How should I reply? That I felt bad for her? That that was why I asked. Or that I liked her hands? You don't say such things. Besides, I already regretted it, that I had asked. I shouldn't invite other women to dinner. I had Anna.

"We have to dry our clothes first," she said, without waiting for my answer.

Was that a yes?

"Can't we eat while they're drying?" I said. Because was there really anything wrong with our having a meal together? It wasn't exactly as if I had asked her out on a date.

"You're new here," she said. "We have to guard them while they're drying."

"Huh?"

"They disappear."

“Oh.”

I blushed. I should have understood that.

We sat there, the three of us, by the clotheslines beside the sanitary barracks, looking at our wet clothing hanging in the sun. There was no wind, so the garments hung limply from the line, but the heat did the job. And we just sat there.

She didn't suggest taking turns, so we could watch each other's clothing in shifts. Maybe she didn't trust me. I hadn't really given her any reason to. Or maybe she liked sitting like this. It was a way of killing time, maybe how people lived here.

I didn't suggest it either, actually. Because it was quite nice. We had found a place in the shrinking shadow of the barracks.

Lou played again, more wildly than usual. She ran back and forth between the drying garments.

The woman was silent. I was silent as well. It occurred to me that I'd forgotten to ask her name, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. It felt private, like everything else about her.

Afterward I learned it anyway. We were in the mess hall and had finished our meal. A casserole in dented aluminum bowls. Lukewarm.

Lou wolfed down everything she was given, as if she were afraid the food would disappear if she wasn't quick enough. It was late in the day and she had only eaten a few dry crackers for breakfast. I had forgotten while we were waiting for the clothes to dry that the child needed food. Scatterbrain. But now her tummy was full and she was calm. She said, as simply as only she could say it: “My name is Lou. What's your name?”

“Lou is a nice name,” the woman said, abruptly getting to her feet.

“But what is your name?” Lou asked.

The woman took a step away from the table. “Marguerite.”

Marguerite. Like a daisy.

“Daddy's name is David.”

The woman took one more step.

"That's nice. Thanks for the company."

"Where are you going?" I asked. "We could eat together later, too?"

"Yes," Lou said. "We could."

"Maybe," Marguerite said. But it didn't look like she meant it.

"Fine," I said.

Makes no difference to me, I wanted to say. But I didn't say anything. And she had already turned and was heading away.

I thought she needed us. But she didn't, I could see that now. A woman like her didn't need people like us.

I was just a child, dragging another child with me. We came straight from the sandbox, both Lou and I. We were dirty, even though we were clean. Completely unlike her. But I didn't want her to walk away, with that bony back of hers, so slender and erect.

"I was just trying to be nice," I said to her back.

"Me too," she said, without turning around. And then she disappeared.

For some reason or other my eyes were stinging. But crying didn't help, I knew that. Besides, it was so hot, so hellishly hot. The mess hall tent was hot. The sun beat down on the roof. The walls were folded up to let the air in, but it didn't help, because not even the faintest breeze could be felt. Only dry, sweltering heat.

Around us people sat on the benches, sweating. Red in the face, their skin shiny. Everyone looked the same. I didn't know any of them.

I emptied the water out of my cup. It was as warm as piss and tasted like rubber.

Waiting and waiting.

I stood up suddenly. "Come on," I said to Lou.

"I haven't finished eating."

"Finish up, then."

She pushed in the last spoonful.

"Come on," I said. "Hurry."

"Where are we going?" Lou said.

"Out," I said.

"Why?"

"They said we could go wherever we wanted. During the daytime we can go wherever we want."

I took her by the hand and pulled her out of the tent. We hurried through the camp. The sweaty faces were everywhere. Strangers, only strangers.

I had been surrounded by so many people. A wife. Two children. Parents, in-laws. A sister.

My big sister and I, my God, how we had argued when we were little. About everything. Alice never let me win. For a time I thought that she should have. She had the option. As the oldest, she had the power. The oldest always has the power. And the responsibility.

But letting me win would perhaps have meant breaking the rules of the game between us. Because we were supposed to argue, in a strange way I think we almost wanted to—siblings want to argue. It's so easy, much easier than being good to each other.

She was much older than me. But after I had children, the age difference was sort of obliterated. It was strange that she still lived the life of a young person, while I changed diapers and heated nursing bottles. But now, after the past few months, I started thinking of her as my big sister again. Not older, but big.

Alice, my big sister . . . I didn't know where she was either. That clever sister of mine, clever with words, clever with numbers, clever with her hands. She built things, all the time. No, not built—constructed—but she never had the chance to become an engineer as she had planned. The crisis took the march on her. She created so many things, a windmill in the garden, a solar-cell-powered doll-house. She won an inventor's contest at school. Where was she now?

My family. Alice, Mom, my aunts. Grandmother and grandfather. Eduard, the only one of my friends with whom I had cried. Where was he? Where were they?

And Dad . . . my elderly father. That feeble body of his, the unsteady gait—where was he? He was tougher than I'd thought—people like him usually didn't survive the summers. Hundreds of thousands of elderly people had passed away in recent years because of the heat. The nights in particular took their toll, the extreme heat, the aging bodies never found rest. But Dad lived. The heat didn't get to him, as it did with the rest of us; it didn't have any effect on him.

I had been angry with him for so many years. Angry with him for having had children far too late in life. So late that he couldn't bring himself to be a father. Couldn't bring himself to do the things a daddy does, what the other daddies did. Toss me into the air over his head, wrestle with me, raise his voice when I did something I wasn't supposed to do.

Alice had been enough for him, a careful girl, well-behaved, seldom dirty. I was simply far too much. Together with Dad I felt like I was all elbows, clumsy. Hard and sinewy. Far too loud. My movements uncontrolled. He never said it, but I was still young when I started noticing how he would leave the room when I came in. His sighs. How he lifted his book, always some book or other, protectively up against his face, using the book as a shield.

He didn't even manage to follow up on my schooling, didn't understand my impatience, my confusion over the letters of the alphabet. He had never been like that himself. I used to think that he'd always been old. And I was madder than hell with him for just that.

But still. Now I couldn't imagine the world without that failing old body of his, without his sighs and his thousand-yard stare. My little old father. I had given up on him too soon. I could have tried to approach him. I should have. While there was still time.

I should have understood that he survived for a reason, that I was fortunate.

But they just left, he and Mom. One day in October of last year, they closed up the house, covered the furniture with sheets, and locked the door. They wanted to take the train to Paris—she had a

cousin there. Alice went with them too. From there they hoped they would be able to continue farther north. In May we received our last message from them. They hadn't been granted residency anywhere but were going to try to get to Denmark on their own. After that . . . nothing.

I walked quickly. We passed the halls, the sanitary barracks. I pulled air into my lungs. Dad . . . Stop thinking about him, you have to stop thinking about him. About Dad. About Mom. About Alice.

Because there were too many people. Too many of them. I didn't have enough hope for so many people, only for Anna and August. Their faces, the smell of August, his gurgling, the hollow of Anna's neck, snuggling against it, in it. Just the two of them. That would have to do. If I could have them, it would do.

"Where are we going, Daddy?"

Lou trotted alongside of me, struggling to keep up. "Daddy?"

"I don't know. Out."

I took a breath. Tried to smile at her. "We'll just go for a little walk."

She didn't want to go, I could see it on her face. But she didn't protest. She just took my hand and held it tightly. Wherever I went, she followed.

I stepped briskly, adult strides. I had to get some air. Had to stop thinking. Stop yearning. Just wait. Anna. August. Wait.

"You're walking so fast," Lou said.

"Sorry." I pulled her toward the exit.