The Paper Dolls

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Part 1

Alva

I don't need to tell this story, but I'm telling it anyway and I'm telling it now so I can be done with it. Maybe I'll regret it later, but then it will be too late. The story I'm going to tell happened a long time ago; when I actually stop to count, I realize it's been almost forty years. And yet I still think about these things almost every single day, more and more the older I get. Maybe I've convinced myself that if I tell the story, it will dissolve and disappear—even though I know full well that's never going to happen. But I continue to hope anyway, waiting for it to stop playing itself in front of me like a projected film, like the cartoons we watched forward and then backward at birthday parties when I was a kid, and the backward was especially funny because then things happened that couldn't possibly happen—and that's how it is with my story, too. Maybe that's why I'm telling it now, to figure out how it could have happened. Because that's what it comes down to. How this could happen.

It was the 80s, and to get back there, I have to change my language because I don't talk the way I did back then anymore. And I have to become who I was, feel how it felt. My body was light but my mind heavy, and while I'm physically heavier now and emotionally numb, back then I was all over the place, like a cat who wanted to get out and fight and a mouse who wanted to hide at the same time.

Picture the two of us: me and Alva. We'll be turning seventeen that spring. Alva is fair, pale, and delicate, her hair shines like silver, her elbows are sharp like two right angles, she moves her arms a lot when she speaks and turns from side to side like she's always checking whether someone is looking over her shoulder. People say we look alike, maybe because we're both fair with gummy, shoulder-length hair that sticks out in all directions from the hair mousse or shaving foam we use. But I'm a bit taller than her, a bit slower, my body a bit softer. We're perfectly harmless, just two teenage girls in ripped jeans and nearly identical puffer jackets, our eyes heavily lined, our earlobes dotted with holes we pierced ourselves with needles and ice cubes. If you get really close, you can smell spearmint gum, Date perfume, and Prince Mild cigarettes. We're out hitchhiking on the highway, heading for the mall in our village, when a semi stops—one of those eighteen-wheelers.

Back when this happened, we were still singing in the church choir. There wasn't much else to do in the village. Until then, we'd done things by the book: done well in school, behaved. But at some point, something shifted. We didn't want to be good anymore, we wanted to be rebels, and because we were good at following rules, we were good at breaking them, too.

Pictures us in choir robes: white and floor length. We looked like angels when we put them on. Alva was a soprano, her voice was cold and breathy, always chosen for solos. She did it with a kind of irony, almost apologetically, somehow holding something back from the song as she sang, not giving it her all—but still, her voice flowed like silver, it was lifted up and out into the church by the rest of the choir. We sang Psalm 23, the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside still waters. The choir song surged around us like a waterfall of sounds, filling us up. We went out into the graveyard afterward. Alva had gotten hold of some hash, and we lay in the grass and smoked it and looked up at the sky. The world was ours, our whole life lay before us like green pastures, like still waters.

We were as naive as two cups of warm milk. We thought our bodies didn't matter, that they didn't mean anything for anyone but ourselves. At least, that's what I believed. I don't know what Alva thought; maybe she knew something else. She was a bit more experienced unless she was lying too, like how I lied when I said I'd been with someone but I hadn't really because the boy changed his mind and I didn't want to do it either.

The truck driver who stopped that day had a pine-shaped air freshener swinging from the mirror and a full bottle of Johnny Walker in the glove compartment. I sat in the middle, Alva by the door. We asked if we could smoke—people did that in cars in those days—and the smell of smoke and air freshener still makes me nauseous today. But back then, we felt like we were king of the road, the tiny passenger cars getting pushed aside as we barreled ahead. It was only a few minutes' drive to the village, but before we got there, we asked the driver where he was headed. He said Copenhagen, and then Alva said: "Can we come with you?"

I remember the feeling as we rolled past the spot where we normally got dropped off when we hitchhiked, and he just drove right past. But it wasn't anything to be worried about because we were the ones who asked to keep going. It was our first real adventure, and this was how life was going to be from now on. I didn't really have anything I needed to run from. My parents were nice enough and Alva's weren't that bad either, but we took off anyway just because we could. We had no money, no plans, no bags. As we drove through

the village, a small part of me hoped Alva would say, “Just kidding, you can let us out here.” Maybe she was hoping I’d be the one to say it, but neither of us said anything, so we just kept driving on narrow, winding roads that eventually straightened out and widened as the landscape flattened.

The driver’s name was Ove. If I try to force myself to remember what he looked like, I’d say he was tall, with big thighs in dirty jeans and a bit of a gut, a bald spot on top of his head, and big, hairy hands. He might’ve been thirty or forty. We were, of course, not interested in him—not in the slightest, not even in our worst dreams or nightmares. He wasn’t particularly funny, but we still laughed at everything he said, especially me, sitting in the middle, laughing at Ove and at Alva sitting next to me making fun of him in ways he didn’t catch, and then we found the big bottle of whiskey in the glove compartment because Ove was Swedish and said he never went to Norway without a little booze, and we were sitting so high up, higher than everyone else, and I’d told my parents I was at Alva’s and she’d told hers she was at mine, not that anyone was really keeping tabs on us, that’s how the 80s were. We flew down the highway which got wider and wider and we sat higher and higher, and the more whiskey Alva and I drank the harder we laughed, and we crossed the border and flew south through Sweden, and it got dark, and we were maybe halfway to Copenhagen when Ove said he wanted to stop for the night, he wanted to drink while there was still something left he said and then sleep a few hours before driving the next day, and he pulled off the highway into a rest stop with a bathroom we all used, and then Ove shared his food with us, a Tupperware with some stew his mom had made for him, he told us she always made him food when he was driving a long-haul. We only had one spoon that we shared, all three of us, and then we drank more Johnny Walker, Ove too now, taking big swigs, and it was dark, the cars flew past on the highway, their lights illuminating the cab like we were on a camping trip, and then it was late, and we were so tired, and I don’t know how it was decided that Alva would sleep in the front seat and I’d sleep in the bunk with Ove, I don’t think I was forced or anything, I just don’t know how it happened or who suggested it, but I must have gone to bed because I woke up with Ove on top of me, and my clothes were still on, or at least some of them, and I told Ove I wasn’t interested in what he was doing and after a while I told him to stop, and then he did and fell asleep, but I lay there with my eyes open in the bunk, listening to how the cars on the highway roared through me, the lights sort of descending through the cab, and it felt like a concentrated dose of fear was being pressed into my skull. I didn’t sleep after that. All night, the car lights kept falling, thundering through my head. We were on a highway somewhere in Sweden, I didn’t know where I was or how I’d get out of the car, I lay there wide awake while Ove snored next to me, and I was so thirsty,

my throat felt like sandpaper, the lights sank through the car and I just lay there, waiting for the night to be over.

Ove woke up when it got light out. I managed to squeeze past him, out of the bunk and into the front seat where Alva was awake, too. She said she hadn't slept and I said I hadn't either, and I wanted to tell her why but I couldn't, the words got stuck in my throat and I felt like if I'd said it out loud it would have come out in big hard chunks, so I said nothing. But now Ove wasn't nice anymore. He said he wasn't going to Copenhagen after all, actually he'd be stopping right here, in the middle of nowhere in Sweden, and we'd have to get the rest of the way on our own. Alva said, "But we don't have any money, you have to give us bus fare to get back home." "You can hitchhike," he said, and then he went out to pee. He left his jacket hanging in the cab, and I can still remember it: dark blue with shiny fabric and zippers, his wallet weighing down one pocket. Alva took it. She stuck her hand in the pocket and just grabbed it and stuffed it inside her puffer. It was dawn and the cars were roaring past on the highway, we climbed out of the cab, my heart was trembling, and when we got down Ove was standing there, tall and broad, and he must have seen what Alva did through the window because he strode straight over to her and demanded she give him his wallet back, and he tried to grab her but she was small and spry and got away at first, but then he caught her with his long arms, shoved her against the big front tire, held his massive hand around her throat screaming he wanted his wallet back, and I stood behind them looking for something to hit him with, and I saw the empty Johnny Walker-bottle on the floor of the cab around my eye level and reached up to grab it, but then I saw an enormous wrench lying next to it, probably over a foot long and heavy in my hand, and Ove had gotten Alva on the ground now and was rifling around in her pockets trying to find his wallet, he was bent over her and I raised the wrench in the air and brought it down on the bald spot on his head, as hard as I could, and Ove toppled over like a tree in the forest, he hit the wheel, slid to the ground, and there was blood on the metal because I'd hit the shiny spot on top of his head, which had an enormous wound now. Alva got to her feet but Ove stayed down and I was panting, the cars thundered past on the highway but we were hidden behind the big trailer, and I dropped the wrench on the ground and Alva grabbed my hand and we ran.

The highway was lined with a sparse forest, and beyond that, fields. We ran through the trees for over an hour, washed the blood off in a stream and threw the wallet in that same stream after taking the cash, a bundle of worn Swedish bills, then we kept walking until we reached a little village where there was a bus stop. The bus was getting there as we crossed the road and we ran over and paid with Swedish money and took the bus with some other teenagers, and when they got off we got off too, it was a small town with a train station, and

Alva bought us tickets and some food at the cafe, we each ate a sandwich with cheese and tomatoes and drank coffee and used the bathroom, and I stayed in there a lot longer than Alva, just sitting on the closed lid, my head feeling like a swarm of bees that wouldn't stop buzzing. I was sitting like that when Alva came and said the train was here now, and as we were running to make it she said she'd overheard someone talking about how a truck driver had been found dead by the roadside. "Who said that?" I asked, the lights from last night thundering through me again, and Alva said she'd heard it in the station, two women had been talking about it, and she said we shouldn't talk on the train, no one could hear we were speaking Norwegian, and we got on and found free seats and sat there without speaking.

Picture us again: me and Alva on the train. We look like ourselves, just a little beaten up. My hair's a tangled mess, my hands are trembling, Alva is so pale she's almost transparent. She hands our tickets to the conductor. We don't speak, we don't meet anyone's eyes, we make ourselves invisible. Outside we see naked, sallow fields and dark, dense forests, and we travel home, disappearing with the train and out of this story.

The puddles dotting the farmyard had frozen over. Johannes knew it before he saw it. He could tell by the sounds; the air had been gurgling like an aquarium for the past few days when he woke up, but today, it was dry and cold. He'd had to close the window and get an extra blanket during the night. The window had frozen open, and he had to yank it to get it to close. He slid his feet into his slippers and shuffled across the floor, hearing meowing out on the porch as he turned the light on. He opened the door and the cat dashed past him and headed straight for the food bowl, purring with anticipation. That was when he noticed the light was on in the studio out in the barn. Alva was never usually there so early, and she was always careful about turning the lights off at night; she said that years of struggling to make ends meet had ingrained certain habits within her. He shut the door, went inside, and filled the cat's bowl from the open can of food in the fridge. Then, it was a trip to the toilet before he came back to the kitchen and started the coffee maker. The cat had already eaten its breakfast and disappeared into the living room while Johannes turned on the radio; its familiar sound and the smell of coffee brewing were enough to make him want to stay up instead of simply going straight back to bed.

While he drank his coffee and listened to the morning news, he thought about how cold it must be in the studio and decided to bring Alva some firewood. Regardless of whether she'd gotten up early or worked all night, it was probably freezing. He imagined himself

walking into the studio and seeing her standing there, working with her back to him. She would jump when he said hello because she was so absorbed in her work: an enormous mixed-media painting. She'd been working on it for half a year, and it had been in constant flux; now, extensive parts of the original painting were completely gone. She would turn around as he entered, her silvery hair sticking up in all directions, a huge scarf wrapped around her neck, the old men's coat she always wore when she painted dwarfing her delicate frame. He would go over to the wood stove and set down the basket of firewood he'd carried in. It was heavy, and the logs would rattle around inside it as he placed it down in front of the stove and said, "You can't carry on like this, Alva, you'll get sick if you keep working in the cold, have you been at it all night?" And she would still have a little coffee left in her thermos, and after he'd lit a fire in her oven, she would pour the last drops into two of her porcelain cups and they would sit there, side by side, looking at the painting.

It wasn't yet seven o'clock, and the yard was still cloaked in darkness when he stepped outside. The cat darted out again when he opened the door, and the outdoor light shone on the frozen puddles. He stepped in one of them as he walked to the woodshed, the crisp sound reminding him of when he was a boy and could never pass by such a puddle without stepping on it just to hear the crunch. The sky was dark but getting lighter, the moon a pale streak over the roof of the barn, and the morning stars trembled. He carried the empty firewood basket across the yard and looked up at the studio window once again. The light was on up there while the windows downstairs, where Alva lived, were dark. He filled the basket with logs and kindling, then opened the door leading to the stairs up to the studio, hearing how heavily he was breathing just from climbing up to the second floor. When he reached the top of the stairs, he dropped the basket, and the logs tumbled out.

She was lying on the floor in the middle of the big room. Blood had flowed from her body and spread across the wooden planks in wide pools. She lay face down, clad not in her regular painting coat but the long knitted cardigan she often used—now stained deep red with blood. He heard himself shouting something as he ran into the room, first her name, then *no, no*, and when he heard his own voice, it felt surreal somehow, like it wasn't actually happening, more like watching a movie, and he grabbed her by the shoulders and turned her over, she wasn't alive but he still leaned over to check if she was breathing, his hands were covered in blood, then he saw the knife—the utility knife he'd seen her use to cut stencils—lying on the floor next to her head, and she wasn't breathing, she was like a heavy rag doll. He looked around. Everything looked like it usually did: the large painting was up against the wall, standing there shouting, screaming at him, her painting supplies were spread across the

table, tubes and palettes, all the usual mess strewn about. The firewood box by the stove was still full. He didn't understand—he must have already brought some up for her. Maybe he did it yesterday? He couldn't remember.

Vigdis Malmstrøm had just gotten in her car to head to work when Naima called. It was freezing cold inside, and the frost on the driveway glittered in the beam of the headlights. She started the car while Naima asked if she could drive straight to Nore Farm. It was in Nordbygda, not far from where Vigdis lived.

"A report of a potential murder came in early this morning," Naima said. Vigdis could tell she was walking and talking from how she was breathing.

"At Nore Farm?" Vigdis said, her eyes fixed on the diamonds in the driveway.

"Yes. The deceased is apparently a woman who was renting some rooms here. Patrol is already on-site. I just arrived," Naima replied.

Vigdis pulled onto the highway and turned in the opposite direction of her usual route—not left toward Sørbygda and the town center, but right, further up the valley. While her house was on a short side road surrounded by a handful of other houses, the number of dwellings thinned with each passing mile. By the time the GPS showed Nore Farm, no other buildings were in sight. It had gotten lighter by the time she turned between two fields onto a farm road lined with bare trees. Two patrol cars were parked in the yard, one with its lights on, and an ambulance. The small yard was framed by two farm buildings in addition to the main house, where a light was on in one window. Vigdis shivered as she stepped out, zipping her down coat all the way up to her neck. Naima was waiting for her outside with a colleague from patrol. Her face was pale and grave.

"The deceased is in the barn," she said, nodding toward the building behind her.

"Anyone else at home?" Vigdis asked.

"The owner of the farm is in the kitchen. Johannas Nore. He was the one who called it in. We asked him what happened, but he hasn't been able to give us a proper explanation."

Vigdis followed Naima toward the house. They climbed a stone staircase and entered through the vestibule into a narrow hallway that led to a large, old kitchen. Another colleague was speaking with an older man who sat hunched over the kitchen table. The room smelled of coffee, and the man had an empty cup in front of him, staring at his hands resting on the wooden table. He looked up as they came in. Naima walked over and placed a hand on his shoulder. He was wearing a thick, blue fleece jacket.

“Johannes? This is Vigdis Malmstrøm. She’ll be leading the tactical investigation,” she said softly. He was looking down at his hands again. They were red with blood.

Vigdis glanced around the room: old kitchen fixtures, a cat bowl in the corner on top of a newspaper, the stainless-steel counter. A half loaf of bread was lying there, a long bread knife beside it.

“Do you live here alone, Johannes?” she asked.

Johannes slowly turned his head but stopped mid-movement as if listening for something. His voice was barely audible when he replied.

“Yes, I live here alone. Alva lives out in the barn.”

“Alva Olsen. The deceased,” Naima added.

Vigdis nodded.

“We’re going to have to bring you to the station for a bit, Johannes,” she said.

“Why?”

“We just have to ask you a few more questions. And it’s best if we do that there.”

Johannes looked down at his bloodstained hands again.

“Can I wash my hands first?”

“Yes, but you’ll have to wait a bit. A technician will need to take a quick look at them first,” Vigdis said.

She opened the front door from the hallway, and a cat slipped inside, darting straight into the kitchen and over to its food bowl. The walls of the house were made of rough-timber and painted off-white in the hallway, light blue in the kitchen. She stepped outside. The yard was now full of vehicles, and she saw that forensic technician Bård Jensen had parked his car behind hers. Patrol had set up tape now: one barrier around the entire yard and another around one of the outbuildings, a long red barn with several doors. Bård was standing outside one of them, putting on a white forensic suit while speaking with a colleague. Both turned as Vigdis approached.

“Hi, Vigdis.”

“Hi, Bård. Hi,” she said to his colleague before turning back to Bård. “Can you take some samples from Johannes Nore’s hands? The owner of the farm. He’s inside,” she said, nodding toward the main house.

Bård grabbed his forensic kit and headed across the yard while Vigdis stepped through the open barn door. Inside was a steep, narrow staircase. She climbed the creaking steps into a large attic. Cold winter light streamed through a skylight, falling on the woman lying on the floor. She was on her back, her arms outstretched, wearing a nearly floor-length knitted cardigan. A woven woolen shawl wrapped around her neck was completely soaked in

blood. Vigdis noticed she was wearing fingerless gloves, and her hair was light and greying. Her head rested in a pool of blood that had spread across the floor, seeping into the rough, unpainted floorboards and down through the cracks. A utility knife was lying a few feet away from the body.

Vigdis surveyed the room. It was spacious, with high sloped ceilings. In addition to the skylight, there was a window in the gable wall. A large table in the middle of the room was covered in painting supplies: tubes, jars, brushes, palette knives, old newspapers and magazines. Several canvases were stacked along one wall. But the most striking thing in the room was an enormous painting leaning against the wall that separated the studio from the rest of the attic. The painting was maybe six by nine feet and depicted two women. She was stepping forward to get a closer look when she heard Bård creaking up the stairs and turned around.

"Alright, I've taken the samples from his hands," he said, setting down his bag. "Naima's taking him down to the station now."

She was nice—the girl sitting next to him. Naima Saleem. That was what Johannes tried to focus on as he sat in the police car on the way down to Sørbygda. He rarely went there, not if he could help it. He did his shopping in Nordbygda a couple of times a week, had his prescriptions sent there, and asked Alva to bring him anything else he needed. He took the bus down to Sørbygda every once in a while if he had a doctor's appointment or something, but avoided it if he could. And now he was sitting in the back of a police car, watching the fields go by, plowed into neat, straight furrows like a face combed into tidy lines, and he did the same thing—arranged his own face, reshaped it. Out of the blue, he asked Naima how long she'd been with the police, and she said she'd been here in the district for almost eight and a half years, ever since she finished at the police academy. Johannes asked her why she'd wanted to become a police officer, and she fell silent. After a moment, she said it was the only plan she'd ever had. She had been bored with the life she was given, the person she was—but as a police officer, she was never bored. The fields flew by as Johannes said he'd spent a long time wondering what he wanted to be. He'd dreamt of becoming a painter for a long time but then ended up training as an electrician instead, and then he inherited this farm. At one point, he'd thought about running it but had never gotten around to doing it himself. He turned to the girl—he thought he saw a hint of a smile on her serious face—and she answered something or other, but now it was as though her voice was coming from far away

because suddenly he remembered Alva all over again. He closed his eyes and saw the blood, blood pooling on the floor, her scarf looking like it had been dipped in it, and all that blood—it had all come from her neck. He groaned loudly and opened and closed his hands. They were clean now; he'd been allowed to wash them with dish soap in the kitchen after the police had scraped them and taken various samples. And then his face slipped out of the folds he'd arranged it in and became a ravaged landscape once again. He lifted his clean hands and covered it, and that's how he was sitting when they pulled up to the police station a little while later.

They were met by another young person in the interrogation room—a man with thick, curly hair. He stood when they entered and introduced himself as William Lund before he sat down next to the woman named Naima. They told Johannes he was a witness and wanted him to tell them whatever he could. Johannes told it as it was: he'd seen the light on when he woke up that morning and thought Alva was up early, or maybe that she hadn't even gone to bed at all, and he had gone up there with some firewood, but he didn't say there was already wood there when he arrived, that the firewood basket was still full, and she was lying on the floor, dead, blood everywhere.

"Did you touch her?" Naima asked, and at first, Johannes said he didn't know, but then, yes, he remembered. How heavy she was, and the knife, the one she used to cut stencils, it was lying on the floor. He must have gone down to his place and called the police; he remembered talking to them.

"Was anyone else at the farm, yesterday or during the night?"

No, not that he knew of. He hadn't had any visitors, and neither had Alva, he was quite sure of that. But could someone have come without him noticing? Sure, of course. He usually heard if a car came, but someone could have come on foot, and his bedroom was on the other side of the house. He usually slept lightly but sometimes he slept soundly. They asked if he had a car. No, he didn't drive anymore. Neither did Alva, but the bus stopped right out on the main road. Then they asked if Alva often had visitors, if she had any close friends, a boyfriend, family. He told them she had two sons—one was studying in Scotland, the other was out traveling, he couldn't remember where. And then they asked what kind of relationship she and Johannes had. He said she was a tenant on the farm and that she rented some rooms in the barn. There was a very simple apartment at one end of the building, one room and a kitchen, and it only had cold water and no bathroom, but there was an outhouse behind the barn. There was a large attic space above the apartment that she used as a studio. He pronounced that last word slowly, emphasizing each syllable. They asked how much she paid, and he told them the amount. "Per week?" Naima asked, looking at him with a steady

gaze. “No, per month.” “OK, so she lived and worked there, and how long had she been there?”

She’d arrived on a spring day. It was early spring—snowbanks still along the road, birds twittering in the trees, sunlight bathing the side of the house. He’d lived long enough to start counting how many more springs he might see. Eight, maybe ten if he was lucky, but most likely fewer. That made him notice more, listen more. He listened to the snow because you can hear snow; he’d known this since he was a boy. He’d listened back then, too, but then came all the years when he forgot or had other things on his mind. That’s how he was sitting when Alva came: against the sun-bathed wall, listening to the compacting of the snow, hearing the trickle from the gutters, feeling the sunlight tickle his eyelids. Her voice broke in. She said hello and strode toward him with her hand outstretched, stopping right in front of him. He’d stood up by the time she reached him, extending his hand as well. Her handshake was firm and confident. Then she turned, looked around, and said: “I get why you’d want to sit here and take in this view. What a fantastic place.” But he hadn’t been admiring the view; he’d been listening to the snow and feeling the sun on his eyelids, but he didn’t say that. She was slim and slight with a scarf wrapped several times around her neck, and her gray hair was disheveled. As she looked around, she inhaled deeply, filling her lungs and letting the air out again as if it were the best air she had ever breathed. She said her name was Alva Olsen. She’d come here because she’d heard he might have something to rent. “No, no, I don’t,” he said automatically because he didn’t want to rent out the apartment. It wasn’t really livable without a bathroom and such, and he didn’t want other people living so close, no. But she just kept talking. She said she was from the village but had lived elsewhere for years, and now she’d come back and wanted to find something affordable to rent, preferably someplace she could both live and work. She was a visual artist.

He could have kept saying no. But a little while later, they were standing up in the attic. They’d climbed the steep stairs and entered the large room with the rough paneling. There was a view of the snow-covered field from the gable window, and sunlight streamed through the skylight. She actually fell silent for a few seconds as she took it all in, then mumbled: “This is exactly what I’ve been dreaming of, Johannes.” She used his first name. He normally disliked when people did that—telemarketers, municipal workers, staff at the health clinic. It felt too intimate, too forced. But when she said “Johannes” it was different, it shrank the space between them—because there was indeed already a space. She wanted to see the apartment and they went down the stairs and through the other door. There were two doors side by side with a shared flagstone outside, a massive stone that had always been there, ever since Johannes came to the farm as a boy and his mother said: “This is where your

father lives, Johannes." He remembered the large stone; he'd sat on it and waited while his mother was inside talking to someone, maybe the father he'd never met. He sat on that stone outside the apartment, the apartment he later moved into with his mother while his father stayed in the main house. He knew that Alva would like the apartment too, he knew it before he had even opened the door to the large kitchen with its utility sink with cold water, a stove and counter, shelves along the paneled walls, a view of the surrounding fields. The floorboards creaked as Alva padded across them with light steps. Johannes stood to the side while she moved into the room beyond the kitchen, taking it all in just as he'd seen her do. There were so many memories in these rooms, but it was as if he was seeing them with new eyes now that she was there. When she was done looking around, she stood in the kitchen doorway in front of him, her eyes shining. "How much do you want for it, then?" she asked. And he replied: "Well, not much, I guess."

Afterward, Johannes felt like he'd said something wrong. He could feel it as the police were driving him home; it was like a shard of glass was lodged in his lungs like the splinter from the troll mirror—every breath hurt. What fairytale was that from, the Snow Queen? The police car turned up the road toward Nore, the birch trees bristling like snow crystals. Police tape was still hanging around the barn, and two cars were parked in the yard. He turned to the young police officer who was driving—the one named William—and asked what they were doing. He told them they were forensic technicians working inside the barn. What were they doing exactly? Securing the scene, looking for evidence of who had killed Alva. It was perhaps only then that Johannes understood, really understood, that someone had gone into the studio and killed Alva. Stabbed her with a utility knife. It didn't even sound like he was the one crying out; his voice was foreign. It felt like the whole thing was some kind of construction, something outside of him, even though it had happened right here, in his home, where he had lived most of his life. The young officer looked at him, a crease forming in his otherwise smooth forehead. He asked if he was okay, and Johannes made a sound close to a groan. "Who does something like that!" he cried. William said they were working hard to find that out, that they would do everything in their power. He asked if there was anyone Johannes wanted him to call, and Johannes said no. He just wanted to go inside, feed the cat, light the fire, sit down, and watch the flames. William asked if he should come inside with him, but no, Johannes said. "Am I free to go now?" Before getting out of the car, he turned and asked: "Should I be concerned this might happen again? Could he come back?" "No,

that's unlikely. But you should probably lock your door at night," William said, handing Johannes a card. "That's my number. You can call me anytime."

After the police car had driven off, Johannes remained standing outside. There was the barn, the house. The stairs. Everything looked the same. "Let us know if you go anywhere," the policewoman had said. Naima. "Why do you need to know that?" he asked. "You're a witness. You might be called in again." But he never went anywhere. Where was he supposed to go? He'd wanted to ask if they thought he had done something wrong, but he didn't dare—because that might put the idea in their heads. He placed his foot on the bottom step and felt that sharp shard in his lungs again. It was something he had said—or was it something he *hadn't* said? He walked up the stairs and opened the front door. The cat ran over to its food bowl, meowing expectantly. He walked to the fridge without taking off his shoes, took out the open can of cat food, and filled the bowl more than usual.

It was dark outside the meeting room windows when the investigation team assembled. Bård had come straight from the crime scene, taken a shower, and changed into his usual "uniform"—a checkered shirt and jeans. Prosecutor Elin Hammer was there, too; she would be briefing the press after the meeting. Vigdis looked at the reflection of their figures in the window: Bård's back as he spoke, her own pale face looking toward him, Elin's serious expression, Naima and William sort of at the edges of the scene.

"We'll have to wait for the forensic report, but at this point, we have reason to believe that 56-year-old Alva Olsen died as a result of someone stabbing her in the neck with a utility knife, likely severing her carotid artery," Bård said.

Vigdis felt a shiver run down her spine and noticed Elin moving ever so slightly when Bård pressed a key and an image appeared on the conference room screen. First, they were shown pictures of Alva lying on her back, then close-ups of the stab wound.

"We'll see if she suffered any other injuries, but all signs point to the knife wound as cause of death. She lost a significant amount of blood, which spread across the floor of the attic," Bård said, switching to a photo of the utility knife on the floor. It had a gray metal handle and a blade a couple of inches long—the kind you unscrew and replace when it gets dull.

"We believe this knife could be the murder weapon. It was still at the scene, only a few feet away from the deceased, with blood on both the blade and the handle. The knife has

traces of bloody hands but no fingerprints. One possible explanation is that the perpetrator was wearing gloves."

"Can we rule out suicide?" Vigdis asked.

Bård met her gaze.

"I'd say that's highly unlikely. It's theoretically possible, but the crime scene would have looked completely different in that case. There is no indication she used the knife on herself. It's covered in blood, and she has no blood on her hands," he replied.

"Any signs of a struggle?"

"Not that we've found. Not on the victim, and so far, not in the room either. But we're still waiting for the forensic report. There are no signs of forced entry, but there also wasn't a lock on the door. We're not finished with the crime scene examination, either," Bård added.

"There wasn't a lock on the door?" Vigdis repeated.

"No, not the door leading upstairs to the studio. There was no key. The apartment could be locked, but only with a simple key, the kind there's hundreds of," Bård replied.

"According to Johannes Nore, who rented the space out to her, Alva used a knife like that for her work," Naima interjected. "He believes it might be her own knife."

"Johannes Nore. Is he a potential suspect?" Elin Hammer asked.

Naima looked over at the prosecutor.

"No, we can't rule him out yet," she said. "When patrol arrived at the farm this morning, there weren't any visible car tracks. It was warm yesterday, but it froze overnight, and a car would most likely have left tracks. That suggests three possibilities: someone arrived on foot, someone came and left before the frost set in, or the murder was committed by someone already on the farm. As far as we know, the only people there were Johannes Nore and the victim. But there are still a lot of unknowns. We'll need to question him again, of course."

"We can do that tomorrow. Have you spoken to the family?" Vigdis asked.

William nodded. He had spoken with both sons. One was studying in Edinburgh, the other was traveling—currently backpacking in the mountains of Nepal.

"How did they react?"

"Shock, disbelief, grief. They said this is beyond comprehension," William replied.

"We also contacted her ex-husband, but they've been divorced for over ten years. They didn't have much contact anymore. He lives in Denmark with a new partner. He was shocked as well," Naima said.

Vigdis looked at her colleagues.

"We'll wait on the forensic pathology report. I've been told we might even get it as early as tomorrow if we're lucky. Until then, we need to keep working with the leads we have. There aren't many neighbors around, but we need to talk to the people on the nearby farms and see if anyone noticed anything unusual. We also need to check all digital traces—toll stations, surveillance cameras that might have picked something up. The gas station has a camera. The speed trap out there is usually inactive, but we might be lucky. Cell phone traffic in the area, base stations, and phone logs. William, can you take charge of all that?"

William was noting everything down and looked up.

"The family's first thoughts were either mental illness or robbery. Both sons asked about that. But they also said she didn't have any money."

Vigdis nodded.

"We can't rule out the possibility that Alva Olsen was the victim of something of that sort," she said. "The investigation will show whether she was a random target or not. Naima, can you look into her finances? Find out whether she had any debt or other financial issues. And there's one more important question: was she in a relationship?"

"Not that we know of. The sons didn't think so. They said she was completely absorbed in her painting and nothing else," William said.

"Johannes Nore said the same," Naima added.

"But we still can't rule it out, and it's something we need to clear up," Vigdis said. After thinking for a moment, she added: "The perpetrator stabbed the victim in the neck. That is an exceptionally brutal act."

She glanced over at Elin Hammer.

"Should we request permission to be armed when searching for this person?" she asked. "In case we're sent out on an assignment where the situation could turn dangerous?"

Elin paused for a few seconds before answering:

"Yes. Based on our current grounds, I can request authorization from the police chief for general arming[1]."

The barn door was sealed with police tape or whatever it was called. A white and yellow plastic ribbon with POLICE written in bold black letters. Johannes stood out in the yard, staring at it. There were police everywhere, swarming all around just like those black letters.

[1] In Norway, police officers aren't usually armed except for in extraordinary circumstances.

They were still working inside the barn, and several cars were parked in the yard, both patrol cars and unmarked vehicles. All the beautiful frozen puddles had been shattered into mosaics beneath their tires. A policewoman was making her way toward him between the cars, and he didn't recognize her until she was standing right in front of him.

"How are you doing, Johannes?"

It seemed everyone was using first names these days. He did it, too; he couldn't even remember her last name, just that her name was Naima. Alva was dead. He kept remembering it, over and over again, like when you're drifting off to sleep and suddenly jerk awake.

"I'm fine," he replied.

"We'd like to speak with you a bit more," she said.

"With me?"

"Yes, I told you yesterday that I'd be coming by to pick you up. Don't you remember?"

He didn't. She asked if he'd had breakfast. He said yes, even though he wasn't actually sure. Then she asked if it was okay if they headed to the station, and he said he just needed to use the restroom first.

He thought about running once he'd shut the bathroom door behind him. He stood in front of the open toilet lid, considering his options. The window in here was too small, but if he managed to get to the bedroom, he could climb out the back of the house. Then, he could cross fields and get to the road. And after that? He flushed and washed his hands.

A little while later, he saw the sunrise set the eastern sky ablaze from the back of the police car.

Naima brought him to the same interrogation room as yesterday. He was asked if he wanted coffee and he said yes, and then she told him to tell her about Alva. He thought he already had. She moved in during the spring, and then another spring came, a summer, and a fall. She'd been living in the barn for over a year and a half. Most of her belongings were still in the city, where she owned an apartment. She'd been divorced for many years. When she was young, she had studied at prestigious art schools—first in Oslo and then somewhere else, Aalborg, or was it Aarhus, either way, that was where she met her husband, who was Danish. He moved back to Denmark after the divorce. She hadn't painted much when the boys were little. She couldn't explain why, she just stopped. There was so much going on in her life otherwise and she didn't feel the need to paint. She worked in an art supply store and became the manager after a few years. But when the boys got older, she took up painting again, and now she was obsessed with it, she said. She didn't want to do anything else. She quit her job and started looking for another place to live—somewhere she could work undisturbed.

She must have known he had some rooms in the barn. They'd been rented out in the past, years ago, and he supposed she knew someone who had lived there once and just decided to stop by and ask. She rented out her own apartment in the city and lived off that income, simply and cheaply—she ate oatmeal, homemade bread, very little meat, soup from the wilted vegetables she got from the store at a discount. She'd quit smoking and drinking. When she needed to do her shopping, she took a big backpack, walked down to the main road, caught the bus to the store in Nordbygda, and returned with her backpack full. He'd seen her walking up the hill so many times, her back straight beneath the heavy pack. He kept her wood box full in the winter months. She said she didn't need it to be warm in the studio, that it made her lazy. She worked in her coat if need be, but her living room was always warm and cozy.

They didn't talk much at first. Johannes didn't want to bother her, and he saw the studio light on in the evenings; she often worked late. Sometimes, she came out to have coffee with him in the sunny spot by the house in the mornings. She made coffee in a French press, and they'd chat a little or sit quietly beside one another. She wasn't the kind of woman who needed to hear the sound of her own voice all the time.

She'd been working on the large painting for the past six months, an enormous canvas—nearly nine feet wide and six feet tall. All her stretcher frames were built by hand, though most were smaller. She'd be having an exhibition in half a year, and this was a piece she'd been planning for a long time. She worked more than ever before. The studio light stayed on when he went to bed, even in the summer evenings, the skylight open to the night sky. Since he occasionally had a reason to stop by, he could see how the painting was progressing. It changed a lot over those months, almost like a kind of story.

The painting depicted two women, both wearing the same type of long cloak. For a while, he wondered if they were angels, but they didn't have any wings. They stood side by side, stiff and solemn. As the painting developed, he thought he could recognize Alva's facial features in one of the women—something about the cheekbones, the mouth, and the eyes. The two women looked a bit similar; the second one was also fair-haired and a little taller, but her face was more blurred somehow, as if it were covered in mist, as if her head were in a cloud. The painting kept changing, and perhaps that changeability was what gave it character. Nothing about it felt fixed. Johannes started finding excuses to go to the studio to look at it. He brought wood, maybe a bit more often than necessary, he checked that it wasn't too cold or asked if she could pick something up at the store—even though she never went without asking him if he needed anything. He knew he was disturbing her, but she didn't seem to mind. She had an old armchair against the wall, right by the stairs, and would often ask if he

wanted to sit. He sat there silently, watching her work. That's how he saw the painting evolve from a sketch in the spring to something more solid in the summer, then it started to shift again. Fall came, and she still wasn't finished.

She also had other paintings, smaller pieces she worked on in parallel. She painted people and animals, almost always set in bare, dreamlike landscapes or interiors. There was a vagueness to the figures, the spaces and the scenery, something empty and almost abandoned—and at the same time, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. It was as if they lacked a solid form, like they were always on the verge of dissolving. She'd sometimes take a break with him when he stopped by, offering him some coffee from her thermos. She was often wrapped up in a big men's coat, the sleeves so long her fingers barely peeked out when she held the cup. That was her painting coat.

Once, she talked about how she hadn't painted for many years—then, all of a sudden, she picked it up again. "It feels like I'm in a rush," she told him. "There's so much I should have done."

She clutched her coffee cup and said:

"I'm afraid of dying before I finish."

"Why would you die, Alva?"

"No reason. Get sick. Step in front of a car. Every morning, I wake up and think, I hope I don't die before this painting is done," she said, then took a sip of coffee.

Then, one day, the painting was finished.

It was morning. When Johannes got up, Alva was already outside. It was an autumn day. The wind had howled through the night and he'd lain there awake, listening to the branches of the big tree hitting his bedroom wall. When he woke up the next day, the wind was the first thing that came to mind. He had some fence posts leaning against the barn wall that had surely blown over. Alva was out in the yard; he could see her through the window. It almost looked like she was waiting for him. She stood there with that light hair sticking out in all directions, bundled up in her stained men's coat, her arms wrapped around herself as if to keep her grounded so she wouldn't drift away, like she was filled with helium. He went outside and she reached a hand out toward him. Alva was fifty-six years old, and if a human life were a single year, she was in the transition between August and September. He was well into November himself. He watched how she set the heels of her boots on the steps as she led him up the steep stairs to the studio. The painting seemed to glow. It filled the room with a nauseating intensity. Johannes felt a sense of unease when he looked at it. It somehow seemed like the two women were trembling, as if they were made of jelly. They were

standing on a country road that wound behind them and gradually, almost imperceptibly, turned into a snake. He looked at how it slithered through the sallow landscape, disappearing over a hilltop and down into a valley, then reappearing on the next ridge at the back of the painting, where it lifted its head and opened its mouth, ready to strike. The two trembling women stood on the road, and, at the same time, on a snake.

Johannes stared at the painting, unsure what to say. Saying it was "nice" wouldn't quite cut it.

"Do you like it?" Alva asked.

"Yes," was all he said. Then, because he couldn't help himself, he asked what it was depicting. Alva regarded the painting with wide eyes.

"Don't you have a story that's beneath all the others? One that's sort of at the bottom of everything?"

Johannes thought about coming to the farm for the first time with his mother. "This is where your father lives, Johannes." The stone outside the barn, the illuminated window. He nodded without saying anything.

"This is my story," Alva said.

When Johannes had finished telling all this to the young detective named Naima, she looked at him with that steady gaze and repeated:

"'This is my story.' What do you think that story was?"

"She didn't say," Johannes replied, suddenly feeling impossibly tired. It was exhausting to recall all of this, and he was scared he was remembering wrong. Maybe he was. Once he said something, it became a truth, branded into his cerebral cortex like a memory, difficult to get rid of.

"What do you think the painting was about?" Naima asked.

And suddenly, he remembered one summer day. He had stopped by the studio when it struck him: the painting reminded him of an altarpiece. He liked churches, preferably without a congregation or a priest, or maybe the priest could be there, just not talk too much, and the congregation too, as long as they only sang and there wasn't any chattering—but he liked churches, he did, and he blurted out that her painting reminded him of an altarpiece. Alva turned to him, eyes shining. "Is it because of the choir robes?" she asked. He looked at the two women in the painting. He'd always thought they were just angels without wings and said that: "They look like angels." She nodded eagerly and said: "They're only angels because someone put robes on them." When Johannes didn't reply, she asked: "Didn't you play with paper dolls when you were a kid?" The truth was, he had. He didn't have many

toys, and his mother had drawn paper dolls for him. He played with them, but only in secret—because boys weren't supposed to do things like that. She also taught him how to embroider, and he made neat stitches, tying off the thread at the back because the back was just as important as the front. He tied the thread, and when his mother died, he was left with a feeling that the thread had come undone, that the knot had slipped. But boys didn't do embroidery and they didn't play with paper dolls, so he never said that to anyone and he didn't say it to Alva now. He just stood there in front of the painting and didn't respond when Alva said: "They're paper dolls. They become whatever you put on them."