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Opening Extract from...

RED SNOW

Written by **Will Dean**

Published By **Point Blank, an imprint of Oneworld Publications**

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Praise for *Dark Pines*

'*Dark Pines* crackles along at a roaring pace . . . This is the first in a series, and Moodyson, whose deafness is handled sensitively by Dean, is a character whose progress is worth following.'
Observer, thriller of the month

'The tension is unrelenting,
and I can't wait for Tuva's next outing.'
Val McDermid

'The best thriller I've read in ages.'
Marian Keyes, author of *Anybody Out There*

'A remarkably assured debut, *Dark Pines* is in turn tense, gripping and breathtaking, and marks out Will Dean as a true talent. Definitely one to watch.'
Abir Mukherjee, author of *A Rising Man*

'Dean never lets the tension drop as
his story grows ever more sinister.'
Daily Mail

'Bravo! I was so completely immersed in *Dark Pines* and Tuva is a brilliant protagonist. This HAS to be a TV series!'
Nina Pottell, books editor for *Prima Magazine*

Praise for *Red Snow*

'For all those who loved *Dark Pines* by Will Dean I can tell you that the forthcoming sequel, *Red Snow* is even better. Scandi noir meets *Gormenghast*. Just wonderful. Can't get enough of Tuva Moodyson.' Mark Billingham

'A complex plot suffused with the nightmarish quality of *Twin Peaks* and a tough-minded, resourceful protagonist add up to a stand-out read.' *Guardian*

'Claustrophobic, chilling and as dark as liquorice. Brilliant.' Fiona Cummins, author of *Rattle*

'Will Dean, you just pulled my heart out of my rib cage. Bravo! What a rollercoaster . . . I absolutely loved it. Super characterization and enough intrigue to keep me up at night.' Liz Nugent, author of *Lying in Wait*

'Even better than the original . . . This is just what crime fiction readers want: the old magic formula made to seem fresh.' *The Telegraph*

'Thoroughly enjoyed *Red Snow* . . . Great Scandi noir with an excellent heroine. Though beware – liquorice will never taste the same again.' Ruth Ware, author of *In A Dark, Dark Wood*

'Tuva Moodyson is uncompromising, dogged and vividly drawn.' Francesca Haig, author of *The Fire Sermon*

RED SNOW

WILL DEAN



A Point Blank Book

First published in Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland and Australia, by Point Blank,
an imprint of Oneworld Publications, 2019
This mass market paperback edition published 2019

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A CIP record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-78607-617-5
ISBN 978-1-78607-480-5 (ebook)

Typeset in Janson MT 11.5/15pt by
Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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10 Bloomsbury Street
London WC1B 3SR
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For Alfred. Always.

1

There's a Volvo down in the ditch and I'd say it's been there a while.

I touch the brakes and my truck comes to a stop nice and easy; studded tyres biting into ice and bringing me to a silent standstill. It's all silent up here. White and utterly, utterly silent.

The display on my dash reads minus nineteen Celsius. I pull on my hat and move the earflaps so they don't mess with my hearing aids and then I turn up the heat and leave the engine idling and open my door and step down.

The Volvo looks like an ice cube, all straight lines and sparkling crystals, no signs of life, not a colour or a feature to look at. It's leaning down hard to the right so I'm roughly level with the driver's side window. I knock. My gloved knuckle sounds dull on the frosted glass so I rub my hand over the window but it's blasted solid with ice.

I step back, cold air burning my dried-out cheeks. Need more creams, better creams, prescription winter-creams. My mobile has no reception here so I look around and then head back to my pick-up and grab my scraper, one from a collection of three, you can never be too careful, from my Hilux door well.

As I scrape the Volvo window the noise hits my aids like the sound of scaffolding poles being chewed by a log chipper. I start to get through, jagged ice shards spraying this way and that. And then I see his face.

I scrape harder. Faster.

'Can you hear me?' I yell. 'Are you okay?'

But he is not okay.

I can see the frost on his moustache and the solid ice flows running down from each nostril. He is dead still.

I keep scraping and pull the door handle but it's either locked or frozen solid or both. My breath looks nervous in front of my face; clouds of vapour between me and him, between my cheap mascara and his crystallised eyelashes. I've seen enough death these past six months, more than enough. I knock on the glass again and strain at the door handle. And then his eyes snap open.

I pull back, my thick rubber soles losing purchase on the shiny white beneath.

He doesn't move. He just looks.

'Are you okay?' I ask.

He stares at me. His body is perfectly still, his head unmoving, but his grey-blue eyes are on me, searching, asking questions. And then he sniffs and shakes his head and nods a kind of passive-aggressive 'thanks but I got this' dismissal which is frankly ridiculous.

'My name's Tuva Moodyson. Let me drive you into Gavrik. Let me call someone for you.'

The frozen snot in his moustache creaks and splinters and he mouths, 'I'm fine' and I can read his lips pretty well, over twenty years of practice.

I pull on his door handle, my neck getting hot, and then it starts to give so I pull harder and the ice cracks and the door swings up a little. It's heavy at this angle.

'You trying to snap my cables?' he says.

'Sorry?'

'It's about minus twenty out here I'd say and you just yanked my door open like it's a treasure chest. Best way to break a door handle cable.'

'You want to warm up in my truck?' I say. 'I can call breakdown?'

He looks out toward my truck like he's deciding if it's a suitable

vehicle to save his life and I look at him and at the layers of clothes he's entombed himself in: a jacket that must contain five or six other jackets judging by its bulk, and blankets over his knees and thick ski gloves and I can see three hats, all different colours.

He coughs and spits and then says, 'I'll come over just to warm up, just for a minute.'

Well, thanks for doing me that favour mister Värmland charm champion.

I help him out and he's smaller than me, half a head smaller, and he's about fifty-five. There's a pair of nail scissors on the passenger seat next to a carrier bag full of canisters, and there's a bag of dry dog food in the footwell. He locks his Volvo like there are gangs of Swedes out here just waiting to steal his broken down piece of shit car, and then he trudges over to my pick-up truck.

'Japanese?' he says, opening the passenger side.

I nod and climb in.

'Ten minutes and I'll be out your hair,' he says.

'What's your name?'

He coughs. 'Andersson.'

'Well, Mr Andersson, I'm Tuva Moodyson. Nice to meet you.'

We look out of the windscreen for a while, side by side, no talking, just staring at the white of Gavrik Kommun. Looks like one of those lucky blanks you get in a game of scrabble.

'You that one that writes stories in the newspaper?' he says.

'I am.'

'Best be heading back to my car now.'

'If you go out there again you're gonna end up dead. Let me drive you into town, your car will be fine.'

He looks at me like I'm nine years old.

'I've driven more tough winters than you've had hot lunches.'

What the hell does that even mean?

'And I can tell you,' he says, rubbing his nose on his coat sleeve. 'This ain't nothing. Minus twenty, maybe twenty-two, it ain't nothing.

Anyhows, I texted my middle boy three hours ago, told him my location, and when he's done up at the pulp mill he'll come pick me up. You think I ain't spent time in ditches in winter?'

'Fine. Go,' I say, pausing for him to think. 'But I'll call the police and then Constable Thord'll have to come by and pick you up. How about we save him the bother.'

Mr Andersson sighs and chews his lower lip. The ice on his face is thawing, and now he just looks flushed and gaunt and a little tired.

'You gonna be the one driving?' he says.

I sigh-laugh.

He sniffs and wipes the thawed snot from his moustache whiskers. 'Guess I don't got much choice.'

I start the engine and turn on both heated seats. As we pass his frozen Volvo he looks mournfully out the window like he's leaving the love of his life on some movie railway platform.

'Why don't you buy Swedish?' he asks.

'You don't like my Hilux?'

'Ain't Swedish.'

'But it goes.'

We drive on and then he starts squirming in his seat like he's dropped something.

'My seat hot?' he says.

'You want me to switch it down a notch?'

'Want you to switch the damn thing off cos I feel like I peed my pants over here.' He looks disgusted. 'Goddam Japanese think of everything.'

Okay, so I've got a racist bore for a passenger but it's only twenty minutes into Gavrik town. It's never the cute funny smart people who need picking up now, is it?

'Where do you want dropping off, Mr Andersson? Where do you live?'

'Just drop me by the factory.'

'You work there?'

'Could say that. Senior Janitor. Thirty-three years next June.'

I pull a lever and spray my windscreen and the smell of chemical antifreeze wafts back through the heating vents.

'How many janitors they got up there?' I ask.

'Just got me.'

'You get free liquorice?'

'I ain't got none so don't go asking. I'm the janitor and that's it.'

I drive up to an intersection where the road cuts a cross-country ski trail marked with plastic yellow sticks and they look like toothpicks driven into a perfect wedding cake. The air is still and the sky's a hanging world of snow and it is heavy, just waiting to dump.

'You did the Medusa story, eh?'

I nod.

He shakes his head.

'You just about ruined this place, you know that? Good few people be quite pleased to see you run out of town, I'm just saying what I heard.'

I get this bullshit from time to time. As the sole full-time reporter here in Gavrik, I get blamed for bad news even though I'm just the one writing it.

'I'd say it was a job well done,' I say.

'Well, you would, you done it.'

'You'd rather elk hunters were still getting shot out in the woods?' He goes quiet for a while and I switch the heat from leg/face to windscreen.

'All I know is we lost some hard-won reputation,' he says. 'And thank God we still got the factory and the mill to keep some stability. That's all I'm saying and now I done said it.'

As I get closer to town, the streets get a little clearer, more snow-ploughing here, more yard shovelling, and the municipal lighting's coming on; 3pm and the streetlights are coming on. Welcome to February.

'Suppose you were just doing your job like anyone but we're a small town and we're cut off from everywhere else so we've learned to stick together. I got eight grandkiddies to worry about. You'd know if you were from these parts.'

I drive on.

The twin chimneys of the factory, the largest employer in town, loom ahead of me. It's the biggest building around here save for the ICA Maxi supermarket. Two brick verticals backdropped by a white sheet.

'Say, you hear me pretty good for a deaf person, don't mind me saying.'

'I can hear you just fine.'

'You using them hearing aid contraptions?'

I feel his eyes on my head, his gaze boring into me.

'I am.'

'I'll be needing them myself pretty soon, sixty-one this coming spring.'

I drive past the ice hockey rink and on between the supermarket and McDonald's, the two gateposts of Gavrik, and up along Storgatan, the main street in town. I head past the haberdashery and the gun shop and my office with its lame-ass Christmas decorations still in the window, and on toward the cop shop, and then I pull up next to the Grimberg Liquorice factory 'Established 1839' – or so it says on the gates.

'This okay?' I ask.

He gets out without saying a word and I look around and there are five or six people scattered about all looking up to the sky. This doesn't happen, especially in February. A hunched figure in a brown coat slips on the ice as he walks away. I try to look up through the windscreen but it's frosted at the top, so I open my door and climb out onto the gritted salted pavement. I can hear mutterings and I can sense others joining us from Eriksgatan.

They're looking up at the right chimney, the one I've never seen

smoke coming out of. There's a man, or I think it's a man, a figure in a suit climbing the ladder that's bolted to the side of the chimney, climbing higher and higher past the masts and phone antennas attached to the bricks. He's in a hurry. No hat or gloves. I look up and the sky is blinding white, dazzling, and the pale clouds are moving fast overhead, the wind picking up. As I stare up it's like an optical illusion, like the chimneys are toppling over onto me. And then the man jumps.

2

He hits the cobbled area in front of the factory, in front of the arch, and his head breaks like a watermelon.

One person screams.

One.

A singular howl from a woman standing behind me.

'Get Thord,' I say to Janitor Andersson. 'Get the police.'

But he just stands there looking down at the man on the cobbles and then up to the chimney and then back down to the man. More people are coming out now, fastening coats and adjusting hats and gasping as they work out what just happened.

I see someone head off to the police station all of one minute away so I run into the factory lot and the snow is turning red.

'Stay with me,' I say, louder and more forcefully than I'd expected, but it's no use, he is the most dead person I have ever seen. His limbs are twisted and his arms are pulled in tight to his cracked head like a child in deep sleep. I feel useless. I can't help this broken man, I can't do anything for him.

Thord arrives at my side and takes the man's pulse and moves his cold ungloved hands toward the man's head but then stops because what good would it do?

He leads me away from the body and turns around and after a while an ambulance pulls up.

'Out of our way,' says one of two paramedics.

They get to work and I stagger a few steps back toward the iron

gates and half of Gavrik has turned out now; took some of them a while to get their outdoor gear on I guess, their boots and their mittens and their jackets and their bobble hats. But they're here now.

I feel faint so I let my back rest against the railings. I slouch down and notice a speck of pink snow on my boots and I think I'll pass out but I don't. And then I hear scream number two.

A well-dressed woman runs out through the factory arch and throws herself down next to the dead man. The paramedics retreat for a moment like they know who she is and they can't do much anyway.

'Step back, everyone,' says Thord, his arms outstretched, walking toward the street, toward the crowd of ski jacket people. 'Best thing you can all do is step back and return to your offices and your homes. Step back, please.'

And they do. Because they're Swedes and because they can't see much now that the ambulance is blocking their view, and also because it's minus nineteen, maybe less.

An old couple walk off up the street consoling each other.

Constable Thord looks at me.

'You alright, Tuvs?'

I nod.

The woman who threw herself down at the dead man, I'm pretty sure he was the boss of the factory and she's his wife, Anna-Britta I think her name is, she's wailing now, quietly sobbing from behind the ambulance. Chief Björn turns up and says something to Thord and then heads over to the body and pulls off his hat. It's getting dark now, whites turning into greys.

A Volvo taxi drives past slowly and another cop arrives. The new one. She started last week and that story made my front page. I can only see her back right now, black hair under her police hat, a tortoiseshell grip holding it all together. She turns and I see her face in this dull light and her eyes flash to me.

'We're gonna close up the gates,' Thord says, frost in his eyebrows, a red-haired woman passing behind him. 'Need to take photos and whatnot, and also talk to witnesses so maybe you can help me get a list together, seeing as you were here?'

I nod to him. 'Sure. Now?'

'Head over to the station in, I don't know, about an hour, an hour-and-a-half.'

'Okay.'

'Best if you get back to your office now. Sorry you had to see that.'

I photograph the chimney and the ambulance on my phone. After I turn my back on the scene, on the frozen weight of what has just happened, I can still feel the power of it behind me. It's uncomfortable to turn my back, to shun it, the brick factory and those two chimneys and the dead man broken in the snow. The shadow, the shadow of all of it, is stretching down Storgatan, and I follow it for a few minutes, a black Mercedes 4x4 skidding away as if to escape the chimney's darkness, and then I turn left and open the door to *Gavrik Posten.*

The bell tinkles and I step into warmth.

Lars isn't in, he's part-time and he'll be in tomorrow. Nils is back in his office slash kitchen on the right selling ad space to the same people he's been selling ad space to for the last twelve years. Lena's in her office on the left fixing for the print.

I kick off my boots, my stomach queasy, my legs unsteady, and then pull off my coat and gloves and hat. I hang up the coat on its reinforced hook and place the other woolly stuff in my basket.

Lena opens her door. Jeans and a ski undershirt. She has more grey in her afro than when I arrived here in Toytown and I think it suits her.

'Something happened?' she asks.

'Yeah.'

I pull off my fleece and lay it down on my desk.

'Grimberg jumped,' I say.

'What?'

'Climbed up the factory chimney and jumped off. He's dead.'

She covers her mouth with her hand. I'm always surprised and impressed by how affected she gets by bad news, the amount she's seen in her life, in Nigeria, in New York, in Gavrik. There is no blasé in Lena Adeola.

She shakes her head. 'You see him do it?'

I nod and she steps closer and puts her arm around me. Maybe it's because of what I've been through these past six months or maybe because of Mum or maybe because I'm leaving in ten days or maybe it's all of it. She's not normally a hugger.

I shudder at the thought of Grimberg hitting the cobblestones. That noise.

'Get you a coffee?' she says. 'You need a break?'

'I need to give a statement. Tell Thord what I saw and who was around.'

She heads into Nils's office slash kitchen and I catch sight of his tube-socked feet up on his desk and then she pours coffee from the machine into two chainsaw store freebie mugs and hands one over to me.

She sips and looks back to her office.

'We'll have to move things around now,' she says.

'I'll work tonight,' I tell her. 'We'll have enough for the front page.'

'If that's alright,' she says.

I nod and take my winter cream and spread it onto my chapped hands and work it into the valleys where my fingers meet, and my knuckles, and then onto my cheeks and eyelids. My lids are the worst, weeks of dry and cold. The February air can't hold humidity. I look at the clock, ten past four, and I think about that noise. That crack. Why did he jump? What could be so awful that you'd climb up a chimney in February and then end it all? I pull out my aids and switch on my microwave-sized PC and open my stories.

Six leading headlines that will now be trumped by the factory suicide. Valentine's dinner at Hotel Gavrik next week with a secret special guest. That will be dogshit deluxe, make no mistake. I think of the man's head on those cobbles, the snow, the dash of colour, the sound, the life leaving him right then, the exact pinpoint moment of death. I cringe and rub my eyes and open the next story. The local council have called for a Kommun-wide roof clearance effort this coming weekend. They're worried about collapses. They're also warning trespassers not to approach the abandoned black warehouse behind the Toyota dealership because with all the recent weather they say it could fall down any minute. The pulp mill an hour or so north of here is sponsoring the annual Gavrik vs Munkfors ice hockey match on March 13th. It sponsors the match every year and in most towns this wouldn't be a news story but this isn't most towns. Björnmossen's, Gavrik's largest gun store, is starting its sale on March 3rd. All ammunition half price. Next story: there was a scare last week when a little girl skated into an ice-fishing hole on the reservoir so the owners have cordoned off an area exclusively for skating. Fishing trumps skating, or at least it does here in Gavrik. And finally, perhaps the biggest story until the grisly events of today: the sole full-time reporter at *Gavrik Posten*, yours truly, is leaving after next week's issue to start work at a bi-weekly publication down near Malmö. I got my golden ticket.

I try to dodge the indoor puddles of water that mark every entrance area this time of year and pull on all my Gore-Tex fleece-lined gear. This is the deal in February in central Sweden. You spend half your time pulling on gear or taking it off, and the other half's spent either digging out your truck or else scraping it.

My hearing aids are still on my desk so I reach over and pull them on, each one uncomfortable on account of my dry crocodile skin, and then head back out onto the street.

It's cold and there's nobody around. The ambulance is gone, the cops are gone, the body's gone. But the factory's still there. Oh yeah,

it's still up there on its granite hill, looking down over the whole of Toytown and casting its shadows all the way out to McDonald's.

The cop shop's empty and the new girl's nowhere to be seen. I ring the bell on the counter and Thord wanders through.

'You wanna do this back there where it's warm?' he asks.

'You bet.'

He opens the heavy code-locked door and I step through. I've been back here one time before, when I was interviewing sources about the Medusa murders last October. Place hasn't changed much. Filing cabinets and six desks, three occupied. A kitchenette and a rack for police coats, and photos on the wall of Chief Petterson, Thord's late father.

'Coffee?' he asks.

'I'm good, thanks.'

This is February and that means peak coffee and peak booze and peak TV and peak online poker and that's about all there is until the snows melt away in late April.

'Horrible thing,' Thord says, sitting down at his desk and pointing to the chair on the other side.

I sit down. 'Horrible.'

'What happened before we arrived? Can you tell me in your own words?'

His cheeks are red and sore and his lips are peeling like old bark from a log.

'I arrived about three-thirty and there were maybe six or seven people looking up at the old chimney, the one on the right that never smokes. I got out my truck and looked up. Mr Grimberg was climbing that rusty metal ladder that runs up one side of each chimney, he was close to the top, just past the faint G of the Grimberg Liquorice lettering that runs down to the factory roof.'

'He was the only one on the ladder?'

'I think so. Didn't see anyone else, but it all happened very fast. He got to the top and then, real quick, he jumped off. It was silent

and then I heard a crack and he hit the cobbles by that arch tunnel that runs through the middle of the building. Then you came.'

'Anyone talking to him from below? Any arguments? Raised voices? He look scared?'

'Don't think so, it all happened so quickly.'

'We heard he was being spoken to. That he looked terrified climbing that ladder, almost like he was being chased. Nobody else around?'

I shake my head.

'Spoken to?' I say. 'Chased?'

Thord hasn't made a note of anything I've said, even though he has a chewed biro and a pad of paper in front of him.

'Horrible thing to happen in your last week,' he says.

'It is.'

'You recognise any of the other witnesses? I saw most of them myself, but two old-timers were walking off as I arrived.'

'There was Linda from the newsagent and a woman with bright scarlet red hair. And there was Bertil with the bad knee, used to work out at the sewage works.'

'Bertil Hendersson? The bee man?'

I nod.

'Okay, that's helpful,' he says, standing up. 'Thanks for coming by.'

'Quote for the paper, Thord?'

'Say what now?'

'I'll be needing a quote from the police, please.'

He swallows hard and looks over toward Chief Björn's desk. There's a speedboat brochure laying open by the telephone.

'Well, this ain't like other things, you know that.'

'I still need a quote.'

'I don't mean the . . .' he hushes his voice and sits back down, '. . . suicide, I mean the family, the Grimbergs. They're discreet people and they wouldn't want me saying too much if you know what I mean.'

'I'll be respectful. But I need a quote.'

'Let me talk to the Chief and I'll call you first thing in the morning.'

'Need it for the print, Lena's over there right now waiting for it. Just give me a soundbite.'

'Police say . . .'

I wait but he keeps on looking over at the direction of the factory and then at Chief Björn's desk. There's a stack of cruise holiday brochures next to the speedboat one.

'Police say . . .' I say.

'This was a tragic incident. Our thoughts are with the Grimberg family at this time.'

'That it?'

He frown-nods.

'Okay then, that'll have to do.'

'Don't go meddling with the Grimbergs, Tuvs. They're private people and the whole town relies on them.'

'We have to tell the news, Thord.'

'They're private people and they're not like me and you. They've been in that factory as long as my family's been in Gavrik, since 1840 or some such, and they pretty much built the whole town. If it wasn't for Grimberg Liquorice there'd be no Gavrik so we owe them the courtesy. They've had more than enough tragic deaths over the years. Blighted, they are. Leave them be.'

3

I step out of the cop shop and ice-cold wind blasts my face.

Why did Gustav do it? Why end it all? And why kill yourself in front of the whole town?

Shuffling, I cross Storgatan, empty of cars and people, and head back to the office. Snow is falling in sporadic flakes, floating down slowly and gently. I look to my left toward the factory and see a flash of warm colour up at one of the top windows. Then it disappears. I cup my hands over my ears to protect my aids, each one worth a month's salary here, or three weeks' worth at my new job, and then I run like anyone runs on an icy road. Ronnie's Bar, now refurbished, opened last week for the first time in years. A new place in a town with nowhere else to go. The office bell tinkles and Nils steps in from his office slash kitchen holding a bunch of white helium balloons.

'Kid's birthday. Happy Meal and all these and a tricycle. Nice day for it.'

I'm not sure if he's being sarcastic about the chimney death, or sincere.

'Have fun.'

He sets the balloons down. They have a lead weight to keep them from escaping Gavrik town, from leaving all this behind, and then he pulls on his huge jacket and hat and mittens.

'See you in the a-m.'

Lena's door's ajar so I stick my head around.

'Thai?'

She signals her approval.

I sit down at my desk, a pine catalogue thing from the early nineties, and pick up my phone and dial.

'Print night?' asks Tammy.

'Good memory,' I say. 'You should count cards in Vegas. Two pad thais, please, fierce as you are, pick up in fifteen minutes.'

'Got it.'

I google Gavrik and there are chimney-jump headlines in the regionals and even some of the nationals are running with it. *Wermlands Tidningen* talks about the family and how important they are to the community but they spell the widow's name wrong – it's Anna-Britta – and that really pisses me off. *Göteborg Posten* focus on Grimberg Liquorice, Sweden's third largest producer of salt liquorice and seventh largest producer of sweet liquorice. Lots of talk about heritage and secret recipes and other impersonal filler. Nothing much about the man who actually died or the grieving people he left behind.

My right hearing aid beeps so I pull it off and pop out the battery and take a new one from my key fob and then I pull off its sticker and wait a few minutes: a neat trick that gives me extra battery life. I drop in the new one and close it up. The aid plays a jingle as I switch it on.

I look at Gavrik on Google Maps because I want to see the factory's location relative to everything else. The building has an extra pull tonight. It's always had its own special feel, an ancient superiority, but now it's more intense. I zoom into Sweden and into Värmland and into Gavrik and there it is. An industrial lot of three acres or so at the top of Storgatan, north of the cop shop and Hotel Gavrik, its nearest neighbours, and south of St Olov's church ruin.

My Hilux's door is frozen shut so I tug on it gently remembering what Janitor Andersson said about cables snapping. If I lose this vehicle I am one hundred per cent fucked, especially in February.

The thing about being a small town reporter in the north pole is that you need a good reliable truck to get you to stories – and even more importantly, to get you away from them.

I pull the door and snow from the roof falls in and settles on my seat. Thord asked if someone was chasing Grimberg up the chimney. Was that even possible? I turn the key in the ignition and switch on the blower, full speed, full heat, all of it focussed on the windscreen, and then set the heated seat to max, and then grab my scraper. It's a routine, like a fighter pilot's pre-flight checks. I scrape the windscreen and mirrors and front windows and spray blue antifreeze on the rear ones. Then I get in and turn the wipers on and release the handbrake and set off. There is no noise and the dash says minus twenty-two.

Three-minute drive to Tammy's van on the edge of ICA Maxi's supermarket lot and I don't see a single person on the way. Not one. Her van's steaming and lit up and it's probably my favourite place in town and the only place I'll really miss.

Everything's white. It looks like God poured a bottle of correction fluid over the whole town, and who the hell could blame him.

Tammy's there leaning out of her hatch with her lumberjack hat tied under her chin, a bag of delicious food in each hand. I stand on tiptoe and kiss her cheek and stick two hundred kronor on the counter and grab the bags and run back to my truck.

I pass seven snow-topped For Rent signs on empty shops on the way back to the office. Seven.

Lena and I eat in silence at her desk. My noodles are glistening and ferocious with chili flakes and they are good. Really good. We both have a can of red Coke from the newsagent across the road and I wish mine had some rum in it. Fifty-fifty would do me just fine. We eat from the plastic containers. I have crackers, Lena doesn't.

'Hell of a day,' she says.

I have a mouthful of shrimp and peanuts so I just nod.

'You ever been inside there?' she asks.

'The factory?'

Lena nods, chopsticking noodles into her mouth.

'Just into the modern bit at the back when they launched some new flavour years ago. Seemed normal enough back there, just with that old building stuck on the front.'

Lena pulls a thread of spring onion from her teeth and picks up her Coke.

'They've got vermin trouble,' she says. 'Monster rats out in the liquorice root barns. God help them if they ever get inside.'

I wipe my mouth.

'Did you meet Gustav Grimberg, the man who died today?' she asks.

'I've never actually talked to him. Seen him in the bank I think, but no.'

'His dad died the same way,' she says.

'Off the chimney?'

'No,' she shakes her head. 'They say Ludvig Grimberg poisoned himself but that was maybe twenty years ago and you know how these stories get out of hand.'

I take a swig of Coke.

'Couldn't stand the girl his son chose to marry. That's the hearsay. Old man Ludvig blamed her for the business getting into trouble. That place has seen more than its fair share of death over the years.' She sucks a noodle into her mouth. 'You all packed?'

'Flat's ready pretty much. I kiss goodbye to the Hilux next week. Then I got to visit . . .' I pause and swallow hard, '. . . Mum's grave, I haven't been since the day itself, and then I'll be gone to the south where the girls are pretty and the boys are even prettier.'

'Nice life.'

I throw my food carton into the bag it came in and tie a knot in the end.

'Gonna send this to the printers in thirty minutes,' she says. 'You gonna have the front-page suicide ready?'

'Will do.'

I head to my desk and my ears are quite painful now, all dry crusty skin at the top where there's not enough fat. I write for twenty minutes. Turns out it's not easy to distil what I saw, what I heard, into headlines and copy. The watermelon crack, the two screams, one from a passer-by, all the sharper for it being so alone, so completely from just one person, and one from Gustav Grimberg's wife. It's not what I'm used to. I wrote about murder a lot last year. Medusa. The deaths in Utgard forest just outside town. This is totally different. A man jumped. There will be unanswered questions and guilt and thoughtless whispers of 'there's always another option' and 'took the easy way out' and there'll most likely be some distasteful chat in the haberdashery store over the road.

I write with an eye on the victims. His family. According to the official online records, God love Sweden for making all this stuff public, Gustav had a daughter, Karin, aged twenty, and a wife, Anna-Britta, the woman I saw, the second scream, aged fifty-three, and a mother, Cecilia, aged eighty-two. I have to be mindful of them. When Dad died the papers made mistakes and that pained Mum for the rest of her life. They said he died on June 26th when in fact he died on June 25th. These mindless errors made things worse for Mum. And, consequently, for me. When Medusa was stopped back in October there was all sorts of nonsense printed. Online and traditional papers. Good ones, even. Mistakes and lies and sloppy journalism and bullshit alluded to, but never quite clearly enough for anyone to sue.

I finish up and fact-check and read it through out loud and then I send it to Lena. She says thanks and I say goodnight.

There's a white taxi outside when I get to my building, a Volvo with its engine idling. Is it Viggo Svensson, the dangerous creep from Utgard forest? I speed up and lock myself into my flat and place a kitchen knife next to the door and then I double-check the locks. Most of my belongings are packed into three big suitcases for

me to take on the night train down to Malmö. The train will take eleven hours whereas a flight would take one, but airports and planes are hell on earth if you're deaf. The announcements, the rotten acoustics, everyone in a rush, me trying to hear scary security and police people. I vote trains.

I put my aids in desiccant to dry out overnight and then I get ready for bed. My sheets need changing. I say goodnight to Mum and Dad; the photo beside my bed, the one I can look at straight in the face now that they're both gone. I can look even though she stopped taking care of me after he died. Even though I had to feed us and shop for us and cook for us. Even though she never really asked how I was for all those years. I can look at her photo now. It's a start.

I think back to a guy I studied with in London, a redhead – don't think about the watermelon crack, not now, nothing you can do to help, think about the student – nice guy, never really knew him, safe to think about him, nice neck, nice hands, nice voice. And then I hear the sound of skull bone cracking on cobblestones.