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**CAMILLA
LACKBERG**
**THE GIRL
IN THE
WOODS**

Keep your children close, there's a killer on the loose...

Camilla Lackberg

The Girl in the Woods

Аннотация

No. 1 international bestseller and Swedish crime sensation Camilla Lackberg's new psychological thriller featuring Detective Patrik Hedström and Erica Falck – irresistible for fans of Stieg Larsson and Jo Nesbo. A missing child When a four-year-old girl disappears in the woods outside Fjällbacka, people are horror-struck. Thirty years ago, a child went missing from the same spot, and was later discovered, murdered. A murder Back then, two teenage girls were found guilty of the killing. Could one of them be the culprit this time? Detective Patrik Hedström starts investigating, with his wife, bestselling crime writer Erica Falck, by his side. A community torn apart But as Patrik and Erica dig deeper, it seems that everyone in the tight-knit community is hiding something. And soon, the residents must confront the fact that there could be a murderer in their midst...

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**CAMILLA
LACKBERG**

**THE GIRL
IN THE
WOODS**

Translated from the Swedish by
Tiina Nunnally

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Dedication

For Polly

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Chapter One



It was impossible to know what sort of life the girl would have had. Who she would have become. What kind of work she might have done, who she would have loved, mourned, lost and won. Or whether she would have had children and if so who they might have become. It was not even possible to imagine how she might have looked as a grown woman. At the age of four nothing about her was finished. Her eyes had changed from blue to green, her dark hair she'd had at birth was now light, though with a touch of red in the blond, and no doubt the colour would have changed again. That was especially difficult to determine at the moment. She was lying face down at the bottom of the lake. The back of her head was covered with thick, congealed blood. Only the strands floating outward from her skull revealed the subtle hues in her fair hair.

There was nothing particularly gruesome about this scene with the girl. It was no more gruesome than if she had not been lying there in the water. The sounds from the woods were the same as always. The light filtered through the tree branches the same way it always did at this time of day. The water rippled gently around

her, the surface disturbed only when a dragonfly occasionally landed, spreading tiny rings in its wake. The transformation had begun, and gradually she would become one with the woods and the water. If no one found her, nature would run its usual course until she became part of it.

So far no one knew she was gone.

Chapter Two



‘Do you think your mother will wear white?’ Erica asked as she turned to look at Patrik lying next to her in bed.

‘Ha, ha. Very funny,’ he said.

Erica laughed and poked him in the side.

‘Why is it so hard for you to accept that your mother’s getting married? Your father remarried a long time ago, and there was nothing strange about that, right?’

‘I know I’m being silly,’ said Patrik, shaking his head as he swung his legs off the bed and started putting on his socks. ‘I like Gunnar, and I think it’s great my mother won’t have to live alone any more, but ...’

He stood up and pulled on his jeans.

‘It feels a little odd, to be honest. Mamma has lived alone for as long as I can remember. I suppose you could say there’s some sort of mother-and-son thing going on, for some reason it feels ... strange, Mamma getting married again.’

‘You mean it feels strange that she and Gunnar are having sex?’

Patrik raised his hands to cover his ears.

‘Stop!’

Laughing, Erica tossed a pillow at him. He instantly threw it back, and all-out war ensued. Patrik flung himself on top of her, but the wrestling quickly turned to caresses and heavy breathing. She moved her hands to his fly and undid the top button.

‘What are you guys doing?’

Maja’s bright voice made them both stop and turn towards the open doorway. Maja was not the only one standing there. She was flanked by her little twin brothers, who were happily staring at their parents on the bed.

‘We’re just tickling each other,’ said Patrik, out of breath, as he sat up.

‘You need to fix the lock on the door!’ Erica hissed, pulling up the covers to hide her bare breasts.

She sat up and managed to smile at her children.

‘Why don’t you go downstairs and start breakfast. We’ll be there in a minute.’

By now Patrik had put on the rest of his clothes, and he shoed the kids ahead of him.

‘If you can’t fix the lock yourself, you could ask Gunnar. He always seems ready with his tools. Assuming he’s not busy with something else with your mother, that is.’

‘Cut it out,’ laughed Patrik, leaving the room.

With a smile on her face, Erica sank back on the bed. She could allow herself a few more minutes before getting up. Not having a set schedule was one of the benefits of being her own boss, though it might also be regarded as a disadvantage. Making

her living as an author required stamina and self-discipline, and sometimes it could be a little lonely. Yet she loved her job. She loved writing and bringing to life the stories and fates she chose to depict. She loved all the poking around and research as she tried to work out what had actually happened and why. She'd been longing to sink her teeth into the case she was working on right now. The case of little Stella, who had been kidnapped and killed by Helen Persson and Marie Wall, had affected her deeply. It was still affecting everybody in Fjällbacka.

And now Marie Wall was back. The celebrated Hollywood actress was in Fjällbacka to star in a film about Ingrid Bergman. The whole town was buzzing with rumours.

Everyone had known at least one of the girls or their families, and everyone had been equally upset on that July afternoon in 1985 when Stella's body was found in the small lake.

Erica turned on to her side and wondered if the sun had been as hot back then as it was today. She'd have to look that up when it was time for her to walk the few metres across the hall to her home office. But not quite yet. She closed her eyes and dozed off as she listened to Patrik and the kids talking in the kitchen downstairs.

Helen leaned forward as she looked around. She propped her sweaty hands on her knees. A personal record today, even though she had gone out running later than usual.

The sea shimmered clear and blue in front of her, but inside her a storm was raging. Helen straightened up and stretched,

wrapping her arms around her torso. She couldn't stop shaking. 'Someone just walked across my grave.' That's what her mother always used to say. And maybe there was something to it. Not that anyone was walking across *her* grave. But maybe across somebody's grave.

Time had lowered a veil; the memories were now so hazy. What she did remember were the voices of all those people who wanted to know exactly what had happened. They'd said the same thing over and over until she no longer knew what was their truth and what was hers.

Back then it had seemed impossible to come back and build a life here. But all the whispering and shouts had diminished over the years, transformed into low murmurs until at last they ceased altogether. She'd felt as if she was once again a natural part of life.

And now the gossip was going to start again. Everything was going to be dredged up. As so often happens in life, several events had coincided. She'd been sleeping badly for weeks, ever since receiving the letter from Erica Falck, telling her she was writing a book and would like to meet with Helen. She'd been forced to renew the prescription for the pills she'd managed to do without for so many years. She needed the pills to deal with the next piece of news: Marie was back.

Thirty years had passed. She and James had been living quietly, without drawing attention, and she knew that was what James preferred. Eventually all the talk will stop, he'd said. And

he was right. Their dark moments didn't last long, provided she made sure everything went as smoothly as possible. And she'd been able to ward off the memories. Until now. Images began flashing through her mind. She could see Marie's face so clearly. And Stella's happy smile.

Helen turned her eyes towards the sea again, trying to focus on the waves slowly rolling in. But the images refused to loosen their grip. Marie was back, and with her came disaster.

'Excuse me, where can I find the loo?'

Sture offered a look of encouragement to Karim and the others who had gathered for Swedish lessons in the refugee centre in Tanumshede.

Everyone repeated the phrase, doing the best they could. 'Excuse me, where can I find the loo?'

'How much does this cost?' Sture went on.

Again they repeated in unison. 'How much does this cost?'

Karim struggled to connect the sounds Sture was uttering as he stood at the blackboard with the text in his book. Everything was so different. The letters they were supposed to read, the sounds they were supposed to make.

He glanced around the room at the valiant group of six students. Everyone else was either outside in the sun playing ball or inside lying in bed. Some people tried to sleep away the days and the memories, while others sent emails to friends and relatives who were still alive and possible to reach, or they surfed the Internet for news reports. Not that there was much

information to be gleaned. The government broadcast nothing but propaganda, and the news organizations around the world had a hard time getting their correspondents into the country. Karim had been a journalist in his former life, and he understood the difficulties of reporting accurate and updated news from a country at war like Syria, which had been ravaged both from within and without.

‘Thank you for inviting us over.’

Karim snorted. Now there was a phrase he’d never use. If there was one thing he’d quickly learned, it was that Swedes were a reserved people. They’d had no contact whatsoever with any Swedes, except for Sture and the others who worked for the refugee centre.

It was as if they’d ended up in a separate little land inside the country, isolated from the rest of the world. Their only companions were each other, along with their memories of Syria. Some of the memories were good, but most of them were bad. Those were the ones many people relived over and over again. For his part, Karim tried to suppress all of it. The war that had become their daily existence. The long journey to the promised land in the north.

He’d made it here, along with his beloved wife Amina and their two precious children Hassan and Samia. That was the only thing that mattered. He’d managed to bring them to safety and give them an opportunity for a future. The bodies floating in the water sometimes forced their way into his dreams, but when he

opened his eyes they were gone. He and his family were here in Sweden. Nothing else was important.

‘How do you say when you have sex with someone?’

Adnan laughed at his own words. He and Khalil were the youngest of the men here. They sat next to each other and egged each other on.

‘Show some respect,’ Karim said in Arabic, glaring at them.

He shrugged an apology as he looked at Sture, who gave a slight nod.

Khalil and Adnan had come here on their own, without family, without friends. They’d managed to escape Aleppo before it got too dangerous to flee. They’d had to decide between leaving and staying. Both could be deadly.

Karim couldn’t muster any anger toward them, despite their blatant lack of respect. They were children, frightened and alone in a strange country. Their cockiness was all they had. Everything here was unfamiliar to them. Karim had spent some time talking to them after the lessons. Their families had collected all the money they could find to make it possible for the two young men to leave Syria. A lot was riding on the boys’ shoulders. Not only had they been thrown into a foreign world, they were also obligated to create a life for themselves here so they could rescue their families from the war. Karim understood them, but it still was not acceptable for them to show such lack of respect for their new homeland. No matter how scared the Swedes were of the refugees, they had welcomed them and provided them with

shelter and food. Sture came here in his spare time, struggling to teach them how to ask for the price of things and how to find a loo. Karim might not understand the Swedes, but he was eternally grateful for what they'd done for his family. Not everyone shared his attitude, and those who displayed no respect for their new country ruined things for them all, making the Swedes regard them with suspicion.

'How nice the weather is today,' said Sture, carefully enunciating the words as he stood at the blackboard.

'How nice the weather is today,' Karim repeated, smiling to himself.

After two months in Sweden, he understood why the Swedes were so grateful every time the sun came out. 'What bloody awful weather,' was one of the first phrases he'd learned to say in Swedish. Though he still hadn't fully mastered the pronunciation.

'How often do you think people have sex at their age?' Erica asked, taking a sip of her sparkling wine.

Anna's laugh made the other customers in Café Bryggan turn to stare at them.

'Are you serious, Sis? Is that what you go around thinking about? How many times Patrik's mother is getting laid?'

'Yes, but I'm thinking about it in a broader context,' said Erica, eating another spoonful of her cioppino. 'How many years are left for a good sex life? Do people lose interest somewhere along the way? Do they replace their sexual desires with an irresistible urge to do crossword puzzles or Sudoku and eat sweets, or does

it remain constant?’

‘Hmm ... I don’t know.’

Anna shook her head and leaned back in an attempt to find a more comfortable position. Erica felt a lump form in her throat. It wasn’t long ago that they’d both been involved in the horrible car accident that had caused Anna to lose the baby she was expecting. She would always have the scars on her face, but soon she would give birth to the child she and Dan had created from their love. Sometimes life could be truly surprising.

‘For instance, do you think—’

‘If you’re about to say “Mamma and Pappa”, I’m going to get up and leave right now,’ said Anna, holding up her hand. ‘That’s not something I even want to think about.’

Erica grinned.

‘Okay, I won’t use our parents as an example, but how often do you think Kristina and Bob the Builder have sex?’

‘Erica!’ Anna covered her face with her hands and again shook her head. ‘You need to stop calling poor Gunnar “Bob the Builder” just because he happens to be such a nice handy guy.’

‘Okay, let’s talk about the wedding instead. Have you been summoned to give your opinion about the dress? I can’t be the only one who has to pretend to be enthusiastic and approving when she shows me one hideous matronly gown after another.’

‘Yup, she asked me too,’ said Anna, struggling to lean forward to eat her open-face shrimp sandwich.

‘Why don’t you balance the plate on your belly?’ Erica

suggested with a smile that was rewarded with a glare from Anna.

No matter how much Dan and Anna had longed for this baby, it wasn't much fun being pregnant in the intense summer heat, and Anna's belly was huge.

'Couldn't you try steering her in the right direction?' Erica went on. 'Kristina has such a great figure. She has a smaller waist and nicer boobs than me, but she doesn't dare show them off. Think how beautiful she'd look in a lacy, low-cut sheath dress!'

'Keep me out of it if you're going to try to give Kristina some sort of makeover,' said Anna. 'I'm planning to tell her she looks fantastic no matter what she shows me.'

'You're such a chicken!'

'You can take care of your own mother-in-law, and I'll take care of mine.'

Anna took a bite of her shrimp sandwich, savouring the taste.

'Right – like Esther's difficult to get on with,' said Erica, picturing Dan's sweet mother, who would never express the slightest criticism or offer any conflicting opinions.

This was something Erica knew from personal experience, because a long time ago she and Dan had been an item.

'No, you're right. I'm lucky to have her,' said Anna, then swore when she dropped her sandwich on her dress.

'Hey, don't worry about it. Nobody'll even notice – they'll be too busy looking at your enormous bazookas,' said Erica, pointing at Anna's breasts, which currently required a bra with size G cups.

‘Shut up.’

Anna did her best to wipe the mayonnaise off her dress. Erica leaned forward, took her little sister’s face in her hands, and kissed her on the cheek.

‘What’s that for?’ asked Anna in surprise.

‘Love you, that’s all,’ said Erica lightly, raising her glass. ‘To us, Anna. To you and me and our crazy family. To everything we’ve been through, to everything we’ve survived, and to not having any more secrets between us.’

Anna blinked a few times before raising her glass of cola to drink a toast with Erica.

‘To us.’

For a moment Erica thought she glimpsed a dark glint in Anna’s eyes, but the next second it was gone. She must have imagined it.

Sanna leaned over the Philadelphus coronarius and breathed in the scent. This time it didn’t soothe her as it usually did. Customers were walking around, picking up pots and placing potting soil in their trolleys, but she hardly noticed. The only thing she could see was Marie Wall’s phoney smile.

Sanna couldn’t for the life of her fathom what Marie thought she was doing, coming back after all these years. As if it weren’t bad enough having to run into Helen in town and being forced to nod a greeting.

She had accepted that Helen lived close by, that any moment she might catch sight of her. She could see the guilt in Helen’s

eyes and how it was eating her up more and more as the years passed. But Marie had never shown any remorse, and her smiling face could be seen in every celebrity magazine.

And now she was back. Phoney, beautiful, laughing Marie. They'd been in the same class at school, and Sanna had always looked with envy at Marie's thick lashes and her long blond hair curling down her back, but she'd also seen the darkness inside her.

Thank goodness Sanna's parents wouldn't have to see Marie's smile here in town. Sanna was thirteen when her mother died from liver cancer, and she was fifteen when her father passed away. The doctors hadn't been able to give a precise cause of death, but Sanna knew what it was. He had died from grief.

Sanna shook her head, feeling a headache coming on.

They had forced her to move in with her mother's sister, Aunt Linn, but she'd never felt at home there. Linn and Paul's own children were several years younger than Sanna, and they didn't have a clue what to do with an orphaned teenager. They hadn't been mean or treated her badly, they'd done the best they could, but they'd remained strangers to her.

Sanna had chosen to attend a community college specializing in horticulture far away, and she found a job soon after graduating. She'd supported herself ever since. She ran this small garden centre on the outskirts of Fjällbacka. She didn't earn a lot, but it was enough to make a living for herself and her daughter. And that was all she needed.

Her parents had been transformed into the living dead when Stella was found murdered, and she understood why. Certain people were born with a brighter light than others, and Stella had been one of them. Always happy, always cheerful, always offering kisses and hugs to everyone. If Sanna could have died instead of Stella on that hot summer morning, she would have gladly taken her place.

But Stella was the one who was found in the lake. After that, nothing was left.

‘Excuse me, but are there any roses that are easier to take care of than others?’

Sanna gave a start and looked up at the woman who had come over without her noticing.

The woman smiled, and the furrows on Sanna’s face relaxed.

‘I love roses, but I’m afraid I don’t have green fingers.’

‘Is there a specific colour you’d like?’ asked Sanna.

She was an expert at helping people find the plants best suited to them. Certain people did better with flowers that needed a lot of care and attention. They were able to make orchids thrive and blossom, and they’d have many happy years together. Other people could barely even take care of themselves, so they needed plants that were tolerant and strong. Not necessarily cacti – those she saved for the worst cases – but she might suggest, for instance, a Peace Lily or a philodendron. And she took pride in always pairing the right plant with the right person.

‘Pink,’ said the woman dreamily. ‘I love pink.’

‘In that case, I have the perfect rose for you. It’s called a burnet rose. The most important thing to remember is to give it some extra attention when you plant it. Dig a deep hole and soak the soil with water. Add a little fertilizer – I’ll give you the right kind – before you put in the rosebush. Fill in the hole and water it again. Watering is very important in the beginning when the roots are taking hold. Once it’s established, it’s more a matter of regular maintenance so the rosebush doesn’t dry out. And cut it back every year in early spring, when buds are starting to appear on the birch trees.’

The woman cast an adoring glance at the rosebush Sanna placed in her trolley. She understood completely. There was something special about roses. She often compared people to flowers. If Stella had been a flower, she would definitely have been a rose. *Rosa Gallica*. Lovely, magnificent, with layer upon layer of petals.

The woman cleared her throat.

‘Is everything all right?’ she asked.

Sanna shook her head, realizing that once again she’d got lost in memories.

‘Yes, I’m fine, just a little tired. This heat ...’

The woman nodded at her vague reply.

Actually everything was not all right. Evil had returned. Sanna could sense it as clearly as she smelled the fragrance from the roses.

Being on holiday with children couldn’t really be classified as

relaxing, thought Patrik. It was an odd combination of all that was wonderful and yet completely exhausting. Especially when he had sole responsibility for all three kids while Erica went to lunch with Anna. Against his better judgement, he'd taken them to the beach to keep them from climbing the walls at home. It was usually easier to prevent them from fighting if they were fully occupied, but he'd forgotten how the beach could make things more difficult. For a start, there was always the risk of drowning. Their house was in Sälvik, right across from the bathing area, and many times he'd woken in a cold sweat after dreaming that one of the kids had slipped out and wandered down to the sea. Then there was the sand. Noel and Anton insisted not only on throwing sand at other children, which earned Patrik angry looks from other parents, but they also, for some inexplicable reason, enjoyed stuffing sand in their mouths. The sand was one thing, but Patrik shuddered to think of all the other nasty things going into their little mouths along with it. He'd already taken a cigarette butt out of Anton's sandy fist, and it was only a matter of time before a piece of glass followed. Or a pinch of discarded snuff.

Thank God for Maja. Sometimes Patrik felt guilty his little girl took on so much responsibility for her younger brothers, but Erica always claimed Maja enjoyed doing it. Just as Erica had enjoyed taking care of her own little sister.

Right now Maja was watching the twins so they didn't go too far out in the water. If they did, she hauled them back towards

shore with a firm hand, checking to see what they'd put in their mouths, and brushing off the other children when her little brothers threw sand at them. Sometimes Patrik wished she wasn't always so dutiful; he worried she'd have plenty of ulcers ahead of her if she continued to be such a conscientious child.

Ever since the heart trouble he'd experienced a few years back, he knew how important it was to take care of himself, allowing time to rest and unwind. But it was questionable whether being on holiday with the kids fit the bill. Much as he loved his children, on days like these he longed for the peace and quiet of the Tanumshede police station.

Marie Wall leaned back in her deckchair and reached for her drink. A Bellini. Champagne and peach juice. Well, not like at Harry's in Venice, unfortunately. No fresh peaches here. She had to make do with the cheap champagne the skinflints at the film company had put in her fridge, mixed with ProViva peach juice. She had demanded that the ingredients for Bellinis should be here when she arrived and it seemed this was the best they could come up with.

It was such a strange feeling to be back. Not back in the house, of course. It had been demolished long ago. She couldn't help wondering whether the people who owned the new house built on that plot were haunted by evil spirits after everything that had gone on there. Probably not. No doubt the evil had gone to the grave with her parents.

Marie took another sip of her Bellini. She looked around and

wondered where the owners of this house had gone. A week in August with fantastic summer weather should have been the time when they got the most enjoyment out of a house that must have cost them millions, both to buy and to renovate, even if they didn't spend much time in Sweden. Presumably they were at their chateau-like property in Provence, which Marie had found when she googled their name. Rich people seldom settled for anything less than the best. Including summer houses.

Yet she was grateful to them for renting out their house. This was where she retreated each day the moment filming was finished. She knew it couldn't last. Some day she was bound to run into Helen, and she'd no doubt be struck by how much they had once meant to each other, and how much had changed since. But she wasn't yet ready for that.

'Mamma!'

Marie closed her eyes. Ever since Jessie was born, she'd tried in vain to get her to use her first name instead of that dreadful label. But the child had insisted on calling her 'Mamma', as if by doing so she might change Marie into one of those dowdy earth-mother types.

'Mamma?'

The voice was right behind her, and Marie realized she couldn't hide.

'Yes?' she said, reaching for her glass.

The bubbles prickled her throat. Her body grew softer and more pliant with every sip.

‘Sam and I were thinking of going out in his boat for a while. Is that okay?’

‘Sure,’ said Marie, taking another sip.

She peered at her daughter from under the brim of her sun hat. ‘What do you want?’

‘Mamma, I’m fifteen,’ said Jessie with a sigh.

Good God, Jessie was so pudgy it was hard to believe she was her daughter. Thank goodness she’d at least managed to meet a boy since they’d arrived in Fjällbacka.

Marie sank back and closed her eyes, but only for a second.

‘Why are you still here?’ she asked. ‘You’re blocking the sun, and I’m trying to get a tan. I need to go back to filming after lunch, and they want me to have a natural tan. Ingrid Bergman looked as brown as a gingerbread biscuit when she spent her summers on the island of Dannholmen.’

‘I just ...’ Jessie began, but then she turned on her heel and left.

Marie heard the front door slam. She smiled to herself. Alone at last.

Bill Andersson opened the lid of the basket and took out one of the sandwiches Gun had made. He glanced up before swiftly shutting the lid. The seagulls were quick, and if he didn’t watch out they would steal his lunch. Here on the pier, he was particularly vulnerable.

Gun poked him in the side.

‘I think it’s a good idea, after all,’ she said. ‘Crazy, but good.’

Bill closed his eyes for a moment as he took a bite of his

sandwich.

‘Do you mean that, or are you only saying it to make your husband happy?’

‘Since when do I say things to make you happy?’ Gun replied, and Bill had to admit she was right.

During the forty years they’d been together, he could recall only a few times when she had not been brutally honest.

‘Well, I’ve been thinking about this ever since we saw that documentary, *Nice People*, about the Somali bandy team that lives and trains here in Sweden. In my opinion, something similar ought to work here too. I talked with Rolf at the refugee centre, and they’re not having much fun up there. People are such cowards, they don’t dare approach the refugees.’

‘I get treated like an outsider in Fjällbacka because I’m from Strömstad,’ said Gun, reaching for another fresh roll, bought at Zetterlinds, and slathering it with butter. ‘If locals treat people from the next county as foreigners, it’s no surprise they’re not exactly welcoming the Syrians with open arms.’

‘It’s about time everybody changed their attitude,’ said Bill, throwing out his hand. ‘These people have come with their children, fleeing from war and misery, and they’ve had a terrible journey getting here. So the locals need to start talking to them. If Swedes can teach people from Somalia to ice-skate and play bandy, surely we should be able to teach Syrians to sail. Isn’t Syria on the coast? Maybe they already know how to sail.’

Gun shook her head. ‘I have no idea, sweetheart. You’ll have

to google it.’

Bill reached for his iPad, which he’d put down after completing their morning Sudoku puzzle.

‘I’m right, Syria does have a coastline, but it’s hard to know how many of these people lived near the sea. I’ve always said, *anybody* can learn to sail. This will be a good chance to prove I’m right.’

‘But wouldn’t it be enough for them to sail for fun? Why do they need to compete?’

‘According to the documentary, those Somalis were motivated by accepting a real challenge. It became a kind of statement for them.’

Bill smiled. It felt good to express himself in a way that sounded both knowledgeable and reasonable.

‘Okay, but why does it have to be a – what was it you said? A “statement”?’

‘Because it won’t have any impact otherwise. The more people who get inspired, like I was, the more it will have a ripple effect, until it becomes easier for refugees to be accepted by society.’

In his mind, Bill pictured himself instigating a national movement. This was the way all big changes started. Something that began with the Somalis entering the world bandy championships and continued with the Syrians competing in sailing contests could lead to anything at all!

Gun placed her hand on his and smiled at him.

‘I’ll go and talk to Rolf today and set up a meeting at the

centre,' said Bill, reaching for another roll.

After a moment's hesitation he picked up a second roll and tossed it to the seagulls. After all, they too were entitled to food.

Eva Berg pulled up the stalks and placed them in the basket next to her. As usual, her heart skipped a beat when she looked out across the fields. All this was theirs. The history of the place had never troubled them. Neither she nor Peter was especially superstitious. Yet when they bought this farm ten years ago there had been a lot of talk about all the misfortunes that had struck the Strand family, the former owners. But from what Eva understood, a single tragic event had caused all the other troubles. The death of little Stella had brought about the sad chain of events that had befallen the Strand family, and that had nothing to do with this farm.

Eva leaned forward to look for more weeds, ignoring the ache in her knees. For her and for Peter, their new home was paradise. They were from the city, if Uddevalla could be called a city, but they'd always dreamed of living in the country. The farm outside Fjällbacka had seemed perfect in every respect. The fact that the asking price was so low because of what had happened here simply meant it was within their budget. Eva hoped they had been able to fill the place with enough love and positive energy.

Best of all was the way Nea was thriving here. They'd named her Linnea, but ever since she was tiny, she'd called herself Nea, so it was only natural for Eva and Peter to call her that too. She was now four years old and so stubborn and headstrong that Eva

was already dreading her teenage years. But it seemed she and Peter were not going to have more children, so they'd at least be able to focus all their attention on Nea when the time came. At the moment, those days seemed very far away. Nea ran around the farm like a little ball of energy, with her fluff of blond hair, which she'd inherited from Eva, framing her bright face. Eva was always worried that the child would get sunburned, but she merely seemed to get more freckles.

Eva sat up and used her wrist to wipe the sweat from her forehead, not wanting to smudge her face with the dirty gardening gloves she wore. She loved weeding the vegetable garden. It was such a refreshing contrast to the work of her office job. She took a childish pleasure in seeing the seeds she'd sown become plants that grew and flourished until they could be harvested. Their garden was intended only for their own use, since the farm couldn't provide them with an income, but they were able to meet much of their household needs with a vegetable garden, a herb garden, and a field of potatoes. Yet occasionally she felt guilty about how well they were doing. Her life had turned out better than she'd ever imagined. She needed nothing more than Peter, Nea, and their home on this farm.

Eva began pulling up carrots. Off in the distance she saw Peter approaching on the tractor. His regular job was working for the Tetra Pak company, but he spent as much of his free time as possible on the tractor. This morning he'd gone out early, long before Eva was awake, taking along a sack lunch and a Thermos

of coffee. A small wooded area belonged to the farm, and he'd decided to clear out the underbrush, so she knew he'd bring back firewood for the winter. He'd no doubt be sweaty and filthy, with aching muscles and a big smile.

She put the carrots in her basket and pushed it aside. The carrots were for the supper she'd cook this evening. Then she took off her gardening gloves and dropped them next to the basket before she headed towards Peter. She squinted her eyes, trying to catch sight of Nea on the tractor. She'd probably fallen asleep, as she always did. It had been an early start for the child, but she loved going to the woods with Peter. She loved her mother, but she adored her father.

Peter drove the tractor into the farmyard.

'Hi, honey,' said Eva after he switched off the engine.

Her heart beat faster when she saw his smile. Even after all these years he could still make her weak at the knees.

'Hi, sweetheart! Have the two of you had a good day?'

'Er, um ...'

What did he mean by 'the two of you'?

'What about the two of you?' she said.

'What?' said Peter, giving her a sweaty kiss on the cheek.

He looked around.

'Where's Nea? Is she taking an afternoon nap?'

There was a great rushing in Eva's ears, and as if from far away she heard herself say:

'I thought she was with you.'

They stared at each other as their world split apart.

THE STELLA CASE

Linda glanced at Sanna as she sat beside her, bouncing in the passenger seat of the car.

‘What do you think Stella will say when she sees all the clothes you’ve bought?’

‘I think she’ll be happy,’ said Sanna with a smile, and for a moment she looked like her cheerful little sister. Then she frowned in that typical way of hers. ‘But maybe she’ll be jealous too.’

Linda smiled as she drove into the farmyard. Sanna had always been such a considerate big sister.

‘We’ll have to explain to her that she’ll get lots of nice clothes when she starts school too.’

She’d hardly stopped the car before Sanna jumped out and opened the back door to take out all the shopping bags.

The front door of the house opened, and Anders came out on to the porch.

‘Sorry we’re a little late,’ said Linda. ‘We had to stop for a bite to eat.’

Anders gave her an odd look.

‘I know it’s dinnertime soon, but Sanna had her heart set on going to a café,’ Linda went on, smiling at her daughter, who gave her father a quick hug before running inside the house.

Anders shook his head.

'It's not that. I just ... Stella hasn't come home.'

'She hasn't?'

The look on Anders's face made her stomach knot.

'No, and I rang both Marie and Helen. They weren't home either.'

Linda let out a sigh and shut the car door.

'Oh, I'm sure they must've forgotten about the time. You'll see. You know how Stella is. She probably wanted to walk through the woods and show them everything.'

She kissed Anders on the lips.

'I expect you're right,' he said, but he didn't look convinced.

The phone was ringing, so Anders hurried into the kitchen to take the call.

Linda frowned as she leaned down to take off her shoes. It wasn't like Anders to get so upset. But he'd had a full hour to wonder what might have happened to the girls.

When she straightened up, she found Anders standing in front of her. The expression on his face brought back the knot in her stomach full force.

'That was KG on the phone. Helen is back home now, and they're about to eat dinner. KG rang Marie's house, and according to him, both girls claim they dropped Stella off around five.'

'So what are you saying?'

Anders pulled on his trainers.

'I've searched everywhere on the farm, but maybe she went

back to the woods and got lost.’

Linda nodded.

‘We need to go out and look for her.’

She went over to the bottom of the stairs and called to their elder daughter.

‘Sanna? Pappa and I are going out to look for Stella. She’s probably over in the woods. You know how much she loves being there. We’ll be back soon!’

Then she looked at her husband. She didn’t want him to let on to Sanna how uneasy they both felt.

Half an hour later they could no longer hide their concern from each other. Anders was gripping the steering wheel so tightly, his knuckles were white. After searching the woods next to their property, they’d driven back and forth along the road, slowly passing all the places where they knew Stella usually went. But they hadn’t seen any trace of her.

Linda put her hand on Anders’s knee.

‘We should head home now.’

Anders nodded and looked at her. The worry in his eyes was a frightening reflection of her own.

They needed to ring the police.

Chapter Three



Gösta Flygare riffled through the stack of papers in front of him. It was a Monday in August, so the stack wasn't very big. He had no complaints about working in the summertime. Aside from playing a few rounds of golf, he had nothing better to do. Occasionally Ebba came to visit him, but with a new baby to care for, she couldn't get away very often. He understood that. What mattered to him was knowing he had a standing invitation to visit Ebba in Gothenburg, and the invitation was genuinely meant. Even a small dose of what had now become his family was better than nothing. And it was best if Patrik, who had young children, was able to take time off in the middle of the summer. He and Mellberg could sit here like a pair of old horses and handle whatever business came in. Martin dropped by once in a while to check on the 'old guys', as he jokingly said, but Gösta thought the real reason was that he needed company. Martin hadn't met anyone new since Pia died, which was a shame. He was a fine young man. And his daughter needed a maternal influence. Annika, the police station's secretary, sometimes took the child home with her, giving the excuse that Tuva could play

with her own daughter, Leia. But it wasn't enough. The child needed a mother. But Martin wasn't ready for a new relationship, and that was that. Love could not be forced, and for Gösta there had only ever been one woman. Yet he thought Martin was a little too young to feel the same way.

He realized it wasn't easy to find a new love. It was impossible to control such feelings, and the choices were limited since they lived in such a small town. Besides, Martin had been somewhat of a Don Juan before he met Pia, so there was always the risk it would be a second-time around with certain women. And in Gösta's opinion, trying a second time rarely worked out if the first time hadn't been successful. But what did he know? The love of his life had been his wife Maj-Britt, with whom he'd shared all his adult years. There had never been anyone else, either before or after.

The shrill ringing of the phone roused Gösta from his brooding.

'Tanumshede police station.'

He listened intently to the voice on the line.

'We're on our way. What's the address?'

Gösta wrote it down, hung up the phone, and then rushed into the next room without bothering to knock.

Mellberg gave a start, waking from a sound sleep.

'What the hell?' he said, staring at Gösta, frantically pushing his comb-over back into place.

'A missing child,' said Gösta. 'Four years old. She's been gone

since this morning.’

‘This morning? And the parents are only calling us now?’ said Mellberg, jumping up from his chair.

Gösta glanced at his watch. It was a little after three p.m.

They didn’t get a lot of cases involving missing children. In the summer, the police mostly dealt with drunks, burglaries and break-ins, assault and battery incidents, and sometimes rape.

‘Each one thought she was with the other parent. I told them we’d leave immediately.’

Mellberg stuck his feet in his shoes, which he’d discarded on the floor next to his desk. His dog Ernst, who was also awake now, wearily lowered his head having concluded that the commotion had nothing to do with the possibility of going out for a walk or getting something to eat.

‘Where is it we’re going?’ asked Mellberg, hurrying after Gösta, who was headed for the garage.

‘The Berg farm,’ said Gösta. ‘Where the Strand family used to live.’

‘Bloody hell,’ said Mellberg.

He’d only heard about the old case, which had happened long before he came to Fjällbacka. But Gösta had been here back then, and for him the situation seemed all too familiar.

‘Hello?’

Patrik had brushed off his hand before he took the call, but the phone still got sand on it. With his free hand he motioned for the kids to come over and then he got out a packet of Marie biscuits

and a container of apple slices. Noel and Anton lunged for the biscuits, each trying to grab the packet away from his brother, until it fell on the sand sending biscuits spilling out. Other parents were staring at them, and Patrik could literally feel them snorting. He could understand their reaction. He thought that he and Erica were both relatively competent parents, yet sometimes the twins behaved as if they'd been brought up by wolves.

'Just a second, Erica,' he said. With a sigh he picked up a couple of biscuits and blew off the sand.

Noel and Anton had already eaten so much sand, a little more wasn't going to hurt them.

Maja picked up the container of apple slices and set it on her lap as she sat down to survey the bathing area. Patrik looked at her slender back and her hair curling damply at the nape of her neck. She looked so lovely as she sat there, even though he, as usual, had failed to pull her hair into a proper ponytail.

'All right, I can talk now. We're down at the beach, and we just had a little biscuit incident I had to take care of.'

'Okay,' said Erica. 'Is everything good apart from that?'

'Everything's great,' he lied as he again tried to wipe the sand off by rubbing his hands on his swim trunks.

Noel and Anton picked up the biscuits from the sand and continued eating them, causing an audible crunching sound to issue from their mouths. A seagull circled overhead, waiting for the toddlers to take their eyes off the biscuits for a second. But the gull wasn't about to get any of the treats. The twins could

finish off an entire packet of Marie biscuits in world-record time.

‘I’m finished with lunch now,’ said Erica. ‘Shall I come over and join you?’

‘Sure, do that,’ said Patrik. ‘Could you bring some coffee in a Thermos? I’m such a novice at these kinds of outings, I forgot to bring any coffee.’

‘No problem. Your wish is my command.’

‘Thanks, sweetheart. You have no idea how much I’ve been longing for a cup of coffee.’

He smiled as he ended the call. After five years of marriage and three children, he could still feel butterflies in his stomach whenever he heard his wife’s voice on the phone. Erica was the best thing that had ever happened to him. Well, aside from the children. Then again, without Erica he wouldn’t have any children.

‘Was that Mamma?’ asked Maja, shading her eyes with her hand as she turned to look at him.

Dear God, she looked so much like her mother from certain angles. And that made Patrik very happy. Erica was the most beautiful woman he knew.

‘Yup, that was Mamma. She’s on her way here.’

‘Yay!’ shouted Maja.

‘Hold on, someone’s ringing me from the station. I have to take this call,’ said Patrik, using a sandy finger to push the green button on his mobile.

Gösta’s name had appeared on the display, and Patrik knew

his colleague wouldn't call to disturb his holiday unless it was something important.

'Hi, Gösta,' he said. 'One minute. Maja, could you give the boys some pieces of apple? And take away that old lollypop stick Noel is about to stuff in his mouth. Thanks, sweetie.'

He raised the mobile to his ear again.

'Sorry, Gösta. I'm listening now. I'm at the beach in Sälvik with the kids, and chaos doesn't come close to describing things.'

'I'm sorry to bother you when you're on holiday,' said Gösta, 'but I was thinking you might want to know we've received a report of a missing child. A little girl has been missing since this morning.'

'Since this morning?'

'Yes, we don't have any further information yet, but Mellberg and I are on our way to see her parents right now.'

'Where do they live?'

'That's the thing. She disappeared from the Berg farm.'

'Oh, shit,' said Patrik, his blood turning cold. 'Wasn't that where Stella Strand used to live?'

'Yes, that's the place.'

Patrik looked at his own children who were now playing relatively peacefully in the sand. The mere thought of one of them going missing made him break out in a sweat. It didn't take him long to make up his mind. Even though Gösta hadn't specifically asked for his help, Patrik knew he would like someone to assist him other than Mellberg.

‘I’ll come,’ he said. ‘Erica should be here in fifteen minutes or so, and then I can leave.’

‘Do you know where the farm is?’

‘I do,’ replied Patrik.

He knew all right. Lately, at home, he’d been hearing a lot about that particular farm.

Patrik pressed the red button to end the call and leaned forward to pull all three children close. They protested, and he got completely covered with sand. But he didn’t care.

‘You look a little funny,’ said Jessie.

The wind kept blowing her hair into her face, and she reached up to brush it back.

‘What do you mean by “funny”?’ said Sam, squinting up at the sun.

‘Well, you’re not exactly a ... boating type.’

‘So what does a boating type look like?’

Sam turned the wheel to avoid another sailboat.

‘Oh, you know what I mean. They wear deck shoes with tassels, navy-blue shorts, a polo shirt, and a crew-neck sweater draped over their shoulders.’

‘And a captain’s hat, right?’ Sam added with a little smile. ‘How do you happen to know what a boating type looks like, anyway? You’ve hardly ever been out on a boat.’

‘Sure, but I’ve seen films. And pictures in magazines.’

Sam pretended not to know what she was talking about.

Of course he didn’t look like a typical boating type. With his

ragged clothes, his raven-black hair, and kohl-rimmed eyes. With dirt under his fingernails that were bitten to the quick. But she hadn't meant it as a criticism. Sam was the cutest guy she'd ever seen.

Jessie shouldn't have said that stuff about boating types. Every time she opened her mouth she said something stupid. That's what everyone had told her at the series of boarding schools she'd attended. They all said she was stupid. And ugly.

And they were right. She knew that.

She was fat and clumsy. Her face was spotty, and her hair always looked greasy, no matter how often she washed it. Jessie felt tears well up in her eyes, but she quickly blinked them away so Sam wouldn't notice. She didn't want to disgrace herself in front of him. He was the first friend she'd ever had. And the only one, ever since the day when he'd come over to her as she stood in a queue outside the Central Kiosk in town. He'd told her he knew who she was, and then she'd realized who he was.

And who his mother was.

'Shit, how come there are so many people out here,' said Sam, looking for an inlet that didn't have two or three boats moored or anchored off shore.

Most of the best places were already taken by morning.

'Fucking swimmers,' he mumbled.

He managed to find a sheltered cleft on the back side of Långskär Island.

'Okay, we're going to pull in here. Could you jump ashore

with the mooring line?’

Sam pointed to the rope lying on the deck in the bow of the boat.

‘Jump?’ said Jessie.

Jumping was not something she ever did. And definitely not from a boat on to slippery rocks.

‘It’s not hard,’ said Sam calmly. ‘I’ll stop the boat right before we get there. Crouch down in the bow so you can jump ashore. It’ll be fine. Trust me.’

Trust me. Was she even capable of such a thing? Trust someone? Trust Sam?

Jessie took a deep breath, crawled forward to the bow, took a tight grip on the rope, and crouched down. As the island got closer, Sam slowed their approach, and they slid gently and quietly towards the rocks where they would moor. Much to her own surprise, Jessie leapt from the boat on to the rocks, landing lightly, and still holding the rope in her hand.

She’d done it.

It was their fourth trip to the Hedemyr department store in two days, but there wasn’t much else to do in Tanumshede. Khalil and Adnan sauntered around the top floor among all the clothing and accessories on display. In the beginning Adnan had a hard time dealing with all the looks levelled at them, and the suspicion. By now he’d accepted that they attracted attention. They didn’t look like Swedes or talk like Swedes or move like Swedes. He probably would have stared too if he’d seen a Swede in Syria.

‘What the hell are you looking at?’ snapped Adnan in Arabic, turning towards a woman in her seventies who was staring at them.

No doubt she was keeping an eye on them to make sure they didn’t shoplift. Khalil could have told her that they would never take anything that didn’t belong to them. They wouldn’t dream of it. They weren’t brought up like that. But when she snorted and headed for the stairs to the ground floor, he realized it would be pointless.

‘What kind of people do they think we are? It’s always the same thing.’

Adnan continued cursing in Arabic and waving his arms around so he almost knocked over a lamp on a nearby shelf.

‘Let them think whatever they like. They’ve probably never seen an Arab before,’ said Khalil.

Finally he got Adnan to smile. Adnan was two years younger, only sixteen, and sometimes he still seemed like a boy. He couldn’t control his emotions; they controlled him.

Khalil hadn’t felt like a boy for a long time now. Not since the day when the bomb killed his mother and little brothers. The mere thought of Bilal and Tariq brought tears to his eyes, and Khalil quickly blinked them away so Adnan wouldn’t notice. Bilal was always getting into mischief, but he was such a happy kid, it was hard to be mad at him. Tariq was always reading and filled with curiosity; he was the boy everyone said would be something great one day. In a split second they were gone. Their bodies were

found in the kitchen, with their mother lying on top of the boys. She hadn't been able to protect them.

Clenching his fists, Khalil looked around, thinking about how his life was now. He spent his days in a small room in the refugee centre, or he roamed through the streets in this strange little town where they'd landed. Such a quiet and desolate place, lacking all smells and sounds and colours.

The Swedes went about in their own world, barely even greeting one another, and they seemed almost frightened if anyone addressed them directly. They all spoke so quietly, without gesturing.

Adnan and Khalil went downstairs and out into the summer heat. They paused on the pavement outside the department store. It was the same thing every day. So difficult to find anything to occupy their time. The walls of the refugee centre seemed to close in, as if trying to suffocate them. Khalil didn't want to seem ungrateful. Here in Sweden he had a roof over his head and food in his belly. And he was safe. There were no bombs falling here. People lived without the threat of either soldiers or terrorists. Yet even in safety it was hard to live a life in limbo. Without a home, without anything to do, without purpose.

This was not living. It was merely existing.

Adnan sighed as he stood next to Khalil. In silence they headed back to the refugee centre.

Eva stood as if frozen to the spot, hugging her arms around her torso. Peter kept rushing around. He'd searched everywhere

at least four or five times, lifting up bedclothes, moving the same boxes, calling Nea's name over and over. But Eva knew it was pointless. Nea wasn't here. She could feel her absence in her body.

She squinted her eyes, noticing a dot way off in the distance. A dot that got bigger and bigger, becoming a white splotch as it approached. Eva realized it must be the police. Soon she could clearly see the blue and yellow markings on the car, and a chasm opened inside her. Her daughter was missing. The police were here because Nea was missing. She'd been missing since this morning. Her brain struggled to take in the fact she'd been missing since the morning. How could they have been such bad parents not to notice their four-year-old had been gone all day?

'Are you the one who called?'

An older man with silver hair had got out the police car and now came over to her. She nodded mutely, and he reached out to shake her hand.

'Gösta Flygare. And this is Bertil Mellberg.'

An officer about the same age but significantly heavier shook her hand as well. He was sweating copiously and raised his arm to wipe his brow on his shirtsleeve.

'Is your husband here?' asked the thinner officer with greyer hair as he scanned the yard.

'Peter!' called Eva, alarmed at how weak her voice sounded. She tried again, and Peter came rushing out of the woods.

'Have you found her?' he shouted.

Then he caught sight of the policemen and his heart sank.

It all seemed so unreal to Eva. This couldn't be happening. She expected to wake up at any second, relieved to find she'd simply been dreaming.

'Why don't we sit down and talk over a cup of coffee?' said Gösta calmly as he touched Eva's arm.

'Of course. Come in. We'll sit in the kitchen,' she said as she led the way.

Peter stayed where he was, standing in the middle of the farmyard, his long arms hanging limply at his sides. She knew he wanted to keep searching, but she couldn't handle this conversation on her own.

'Peter, come on.'

With heavy steps he followed his wife and the police inside. Turning her back on the others, Eva began fiddling with the coffee machine, but she was very aware of the officers' presence. Their uniforms seemed to fill the whole room.

'Milk? Sugar?' she asked them, and both nodded.

She got out the milk and sugar as her husband stood in the doorway.

'Sit down,' she told him, a bit sharply, and he obeyed.

As if on autopilot, she set the table with coffee mugs, spoons, and a packet of Ballerina biscuits she found in the cupboard. Nea loved Ballerina biscuits. The thought made Eva flinch, and she dropped a spoon on the floor. Gösta bent down to pick it up, but she beat him to it. She put the spoon in the sink and took a new

one out of the silverware drawer.

‘Shouldn’t you be asking us questions?’ said Peter, keeping his gaze fixed on his hands. ‘She’s been missing since this morning, and every second counts.’

‘We’ll wait for your wife to sit down, and then we’ll start,’ said Gösta with a nod towards Eva.

She poured coffee for all of them and sat down.

‘When did you last see the little girl?’ asked the fat officer as he reached for a biscuit.

Eva felt a rush of anger. She’d put the biscuits on the table because it was expected when guests came over, but it infuriated her to see him munching on a chocolate biscuit as they answered questions about Nea.

Eva took a deep breath, knowing she was being irrational.

‘Last night. She went to bed at the usual time. She has her own bedroom, and I read her a good-night story and then turned off the light and closed the door.’

‘And you didn’t see her after that? She didn’t wake up during the night? Neither of you went to check on her? You didn’t hear anything?’

Gösta’s voice was so gentle, she could almost ignore the fact that his colleague had helped himself to another biscuit.

Peter cleared his throat.

‘No. She always sleeps through the night. I was the first one up this morning. I was going to drive the tractor over to the woods, so I just had a quick cup of coffee and a piece of toast. Then

I left.’

There was a pleading tone to his voice. As if there might be some answer to be found in what he’d said. Eva reached out to put her hand on his. It felt as cold as her own.

‘And you didn’t see Linnea at that time? In the morning?’

Peter shook his head.

‘No, the door to her room was closed. I tiptoed past as quietly as I could so I wouldn’t wake her. I wanted Eva to be able to sleep a little longer.’

She squeezed his hand. That was Peter in a nutshell. Always so considerate. Always thinking of her and Nea.

‘What about you, Eva? Tell us about your morning.’

Gösta’s gentle voice made her feel like crying.

‘I woke up late, it was already half past nine. I can’t remember the last time I slept so late. The whole house was quiet, and the first thing I did was go to check on Nea. The door to her room was open, and her bed was unmade. She wasn’t there, so I just assumed ...’

Eva couldn’t hold back a sob. Peter placed his other hand on top of hers and gave it a squeeze.

‘I assumed she must have gone with Peter out to the woods. She loves doing that, and she often goes with him. So it wasn’t strange and I didn’t think for a second ...’

Eva could no longer hold back the tears. She reached up to wipe them away.

‘I would have assumed the same thing,’ said Peter, and again

squeezed his wife's hand.

She knew he was right. And yet. If only she had ...

'Could she have gone to visit a friend?' asked Gösta.

Peter shook his head.

'No, she always stays here on the farm. She has never even tried to go beyond our property.'

'There's always a first time,' said the fat officer. He'd been sitting so quietly as he ate one biscuit after another that Eva practically jumped when he spoke. 'Maybe she ran into the woods.'

Gösta gave Bertil Mellberg a look that Eva couldn't decipher.

'We'll organize a search party,' he said.

'Do you think that's what happened? She got lost in the woods?'

The woods went on forever. The very thought of Nea lost in there made Eva feel sick with apprehension. They had never worried such a thing might happen. And Nea had never gone off on her own. But maybe they'd been naive. Naive and irresponsible. Allowing a four-year-old girl to run free on the farm when it was right next to a big woods. Nea was lost, and it was all their fault.

As if Gösta could read Eva's mind, he said:

'If she's in the woods, we'll find her. I'm going to make a few phone calls right now, and we'll start the search in no time. We'll have a search party organized within the hour, so we can make maximum use of the daylight.'

‘Will she make it through a night out there on her own?’ asked Peter in a toneless voice.

His face was deathly pale.

‘The nights are still warm,’ Gösta assured him. ‘She’s not going to freeze, but we’ll do everything we can to find her before it gets dark.’

‘What was she wearing?’ asked Mellberg, reaching for the last biscuit on the plate.

Gösta looked surprised.

‘That’s a good question. Do you know what clothes she had on when she disappeared? Even though you didn’t see her this morning, maybe you could check to see if any of her clothes are missing.’

Eva nodded and stood up to go to Nea’s room. At last, here was something concrete she could contribute.

But at the door to the bedroom she hesitated. She took several deep breaths before she could push it open. Everything looked exactly the same as always, which made it even more heartbreaking. The wallpaper with pink stars, with little pieces missing where Nea had picked at the paper. The teddy bears piled up at the end of the bed. The bedclothes decorated with pictures of Elsa from the film *Frozen*. The Olaf doll that always lay on the pillow. The hanger with ... Eva stopped short. She knew exactly what Nea had on. To make sure she peeked inside the wardrobe and then looked around the room. No, she didn’t see it anywhere. She hurried back downstairs.

‘She’s wearing her Elsa dress.’

‘What does an Elsa dress look like?’ asked Gösta.

‘It’s a blue princess dress. With a picture of the princess on the front. Elsa, from *Frozen*. She loves *Frozen*. And she probably has on her *Frozen* knickers too.’

Eva realized that things she took for granted, as the parent of a young child, might be completely foreign to someone else. She’d watched that film at least a hundred times. It was on twice a day, every day, year round. Nea loved it more than anything, and she could perform the whole ‘Let It Go’ scene. Eva forced back a sob. She could picture Nea so clearly as she whirled around wearing her blue dress and the long white gloves, dancing as she sang all the lyrics. Where was she? And why were they just sitting here?

‘I’ll go and make those phone calls. Then we’ll start the search,’ said Gösta, as if he’d heard her silent scream.

All she could muster was a nod. She looked at Peter. Both of them were thinking the same dark thoughts.

BOHUSLÄN 1671

It was an overcast November morning, and Elin Jonsdotter shivered as she sat next to her daughter in the clattering wagon. The vicarage, which they were gradually approaching, was beginning to look more like a castle compared with the little house where she and Per had lived in Oxnäs.

Britta had been fortunate. That had always been true. As their father's favourite, Elin's little sister had received all manner of advantages during their childhood, and there had never been any doubt that she would find a good husband. And their father had been right. Britta had married the vicar and moved into the vicarage, while Elin had been forced to settle for Per the fisherman. But Elin had no complaints. Per might have been poor, but a kinder person could not be found on this earth.

A heavy feeling settled in her chest at the thought of Per. But she gave herself a shake and plucked up her courage. There was no use shedding any more tears over something she could not change. God had wanted to test her, and now she and Märta would have to try to survive without Per.

She had to admit, it had been most generous of Britta to offer her a position as a maid at the vicarage, as well as a roof over their heads. Even so, Elin felt a great sense of unease as Lars Larsson drove into the yard, their few possessions piled in the wagon. Britta had not been a particularly nice child, and Elin

doubted that age would have made her any kinder. But she could ill afford to turn down the offer. As tenants in the coastal area they had merely leased the fields. When Per died, the farmer had said they could stay until the end of the month, but then they would have to leave. As a poor widow without a home or any means of support, she would have to rely on the goodwill of others. And she had heard that Britta's husband Preben, who was the vicar in Tanumshede, was a pleasant and amiable man. She had seen him only at church services. She had not been invited to Britta's wedding, and of course she and her family had never been invited to visit the vicarage. But she recalled that he had kind eyes.

When the wagon came to a halt and Lars muttered that they should climb down, she pulled Märta close for a moment. Everything would be fine, she told herself. But a voice inside her was saying something else entirely.

Chapter Four



Martin gave the swing another push. He couldn't help smiling at Tuva's happy shriek.

He was feeling better with every day that passed, and he realized this was largely due to his daughter Tuva. Right now she was on summer holiday from pre-school, and he had a couple of weeks off, so they were spending every second together. And it had done both of them a world of good. Ever since Pia died, Tuva had slept in his bed, and every night she fell asleep leaning against his chest, often in the middle of a story. He would slip out of bed when he was sure she was sleeping and go sit in front of the TV for another hour or two, drinking a cup of the calming tea he'd bought at a health-food shop. Annika was the one who had suggested in the wintertime he should try to find some soothing natural herb or supplement for those times when sleep evaded him. He didn't know whether it was a placebo effect or the tea was actually working, but he'd been able to get some sleep. And maybe that's what had made all the difference, enabling him to cope with the loss. It never went away entirely, but the edges had gradually worn smooth, and he could even allow himself to

think of Pia without falling apart. He tried to tell Tuva about her mother. They would talk about her and look at photographs. Tuva was so young when Pia died that she had very few memories of her mother. He wanted to tell her as much about Pia as he could.

‘Pappa, push me higher!’

Tuva shrieked with joy when he gave the swing an even harder push, and she soared higher.

Her dark hair flew around her face and, as had happened so many times before, Martin was struck by how much the little girl looked like Pia. He got out his mobile to film her, backing up to get everything in the frame. When his heels bumped into something, he heard a loud cry. Startled, he glanced behind him and caught sight of a toddler who was screaming to high heaven as he held a sandy toy spade in his hand.

‘Oh, sorry,’ said Martin, kneeling down to comfort the boy.

He glanced around, but none of the other adults showed any sign of coming over, so he ruled them out as the kid’s parents.

‘Shhh, don’t worry, we’ll find your mamma and pappa,’ he consoled the toddler, who merely screamed even louder.

A short distance away, over by some shrubbery, he saw a woman about his own age who was talking on her mobile. He tried to catch her eye, but she seemed upset. She was speaking angrily and motioning with her free hand. He waved to her, but she still didn’t notice. Finally he turned to Tuva, whose swing was losing momentum now that he wasn’t pushing it.

‘Wait here. I have to take this baby over to his mamma.’

‘Pappa kicked the baby,’ said Tuva loudly, but he shook his head at her words.

‘No, Pappa didn’t kick the baby. Pappa— Oh, never mind, we’ll talk about it later.’

Martin picked up the screaming boy, hoping he could make it over to the woman before she noticed that a strange man was carrying her son. But he needn’t have worried. She remained completely immersed in her phone conversation. He felt a trace of annoyance as he watched her talking and gesticulating when she should be keeping an eye on her child. The boy was now screaming loud enough to pierce his eardrums.

‘Excuse me,’ he said when he reached the woman, and she stopped in mid-sentence.

She had tears in her eyes, and mascara was running down her cheeks.

‘I have to go now. YOUR son is unhappy!’ she said, and ended the call.

She wiped her eyes and held out her arms towards the boy.

‘I’m sorry, I stepped back and didn’t see him behind me,’ said Martin. ‘I don’t think he’s hurt, but I probably scared him a bit.’

The woman hugged the boy.

‘Don’t worry. He’s at that age when he’s scared of strangers,’ she said, blinking away the last of her tears.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked. She blushed at the question.

‘Oh my God, how embarrassing to stand here crying in broad daylight. And I wasn’t watching Jon either. I’m sorry. I must seem

like the world's worst mother.'

'No, no, don't say that. He was doing fine. Are you sure you're okay?'

Martin didn't mean to pry, but she looked so miserable.

'Well, it's not like somebody died, or anything. It's just that my ex is such an idiot. His new girlfriend apparently isn't interested in the "baggage" of his marriage, so he's cancelled the three days he was supposed to have Jon. And his excuse was that she "was looking forward to the two of them spending some alone-time together".'

'How pathetic,' said Martin, irate on her behalf. 'What an asshole!'

She smiled and he felt his gaze drawn to her dimples.

'So what about you?'

'Oh, I'm okay,' he replied, and she laughed.

'No, I meant which one is yours?'

She nodded towards the playground, and he slapped his hand to his forehead.

'Oh, right. That's what you meant. Well, my daughter's over there – the little girl on the swing who's looking a bit grumpy about not swinging any more.'

'Oops. You'd better go over and give her swing a push. Or is her mother here too?'

Martin blushed. Was she flirting with him? He caught himself hoping she was. He didn't know what to say in reply, but he realized he might as well tell her the truth.

‘No, I’m a widower,’ he said.

‘Oh, forgive me,’ she said, putting her hand to her mouth. ‘Trust me to go and make some crass remark like “it’s not like somebody died”.’

She touched his arm, and he gave her as reassuring a smile as he could muster. Something inside him didn’t want her to be sad or upset. He wanted to hear her laugh. He wanted to see those dimples again.

‘It’s okay,’ he said and felt her relax.

Behind him, Tuva was calling: ‘Pappaaaa!’ Her voice was getting shriller and more demanding.

‘Looks like you’d better go over and give your little girl’s swing a push,’ the woman said, wiping the snot and sand off Jon’s face.

‘Maybe I’ll see you here again,’ said Martin.

He could hear the hope in his voice. She smiled, and her dimples were even more visible than before.

‘Sure, we come here often. In fact, we’ll probably be back tomorrow,’ she said. Martin nodded happily as he started backing away to rejoin Tuva.

‘We’ll most likely see you then,’ he said, trying not to grin too much.

He took another step and felt his heels bump into something. This was immediately followed by a piercing shriek. Over by the swings he heard Tuva sigh.

‘Pappa, watch out ...’

In the midst of the chaos Martin’s mobile rang. He pulled it

out of his pocket and checked the display: *Gösta*.

‘Where on earth did you find this person?’

Marie pushed away the woman who’d spent the past hour making up her face and turned to look at the film director, Jörgen Holmlund.

‘Yvonne is really good at her job,’ said Jörgen with that irritating quaver in his voice. ‘She’s worked on most of my films.’

Behind her, Yvonne was quietly sobbing. The headache that had plagued Marie since she arrived at her trailer was getting worse.

‘I’m supposed to be Ingrid Bergman down to her fingertips in every single scene. She was always flawless. I can’t look like one of the Kardashians. Contouring? Have you ever heard of anything so dreadful! My features are perfect. I don’t need fucking contouring!’

She pointed at her face, which had distinct patches of white and dark brown.

‘They’ll be blended together. It’s not going to look like that when I’m finished,’ said Yvonne, so faintly Marie barely heard her.

‘I don’t give a shit. My features don’t need fixing!’

‘I’m sure Yvonne can do it over,’ said Jörgen. ‘Just tell her what you want.’

Beads of sweat had formed on his forehead even though it was cool inside the trailer.

The big film team and the production office were being

housed at TanumStrand, a tourist and conference centre situated between Fjällbacka and Grebbestad. But on location in Fjällbacka, various trailers served as the make-up and wardrobe quarters.

‘Okay, take it off and start over. Then we’ll see,’ she said, and she couldn’t help smiling when she saw how relieved Yvonne looked.

During her early days in Hollywood, Marie had always complied with other people’s wishes, doing whatever was asked of her. But she was a different person nowadays, and she knew how her role should be shaped, how she should look.

‘We need to be ready in an hour, at the latest,’ said Jörgen. ‘We’re going to film some of the easier scenes this week.’

Marie turned to look at him. Yvonne had used a damp cloth to remove an hour’s worth of work in ten seconds, and her face was clean of all make-up.

‘You mean we’re doing the cheaper scenes this week? I thought we had a green light from everybody.’

She couldn’t keep the concern from creeping into her voice. This was not one of those obvious film projects with investors queuing up in their eagerness to be part of it. The film climate had changed in Sweden, with priorities shifting to indie films, while the bigger pictures went begging. This project had already come close to folding several times.

‘They’re still having discussions about ... priorities ...’ Again the irritating quaver in his voice. ‘But that’s nothing for you to

worry about. Concentrate on doing an amazing job on the scenes we film. That's the only thing you need to think about.'

Marie turned back towards the mirror.

'There are lots of reporters who want to interview you,' said Jörgen. 'About your connection to Fjällbacka, and the fact this is the first time you've been back in thirty years. I can understand if it feels ... uncomfortable to talk about that time, but if you'd like to—'

'Go ahead and schedule them,' said Marie without taking her eyes off the mirror. 'I have nothing to hide.'

If there was one thing she'd learned, it was that any publicity was good publicity. She smiled at herself in the mirror. Maybe the damned headache was finally starting to fade.

After relieving Patrik, Erica had packed up the children and then they slowly walked up the hill towards home. Patrik had taken off as soon as she arrived, and she'd noticed a trace of worry in his eyes. Erica shared his concern. Just considering the possibility of something happening to a child was like falling into an abyss.

She had given her own kids a few extra kisses when they reached home. She put the twins down for their afternoon nap and turned on the DVD player so Maja could watch *Frozen*. Now she was sitting in her home office. When Patrik had told her the name of the farm where the missing girl lived and the uncanny similarity in age, Erica had immediately felt a pressing need to go over her research material. She was a long way from being

ready to start writing the book, but her desk was covered with maps, photocopies of newspaper articles, and handwritten notes about Stella's death. She sat for a moment, staring at the piles of papers. At this stage, she was still gathering facts, making no effort to shape, arrange, or sort through all the material. That would be the next step in the long and winding path that would lead to a completed book. She reached for the copy of an article and studied the two girls in the black-and-white photographs. Helen and Marie. Their expressions sullen and truculent. It was difficult to tell whether she was seeing anger or fear in their eyes. Or evil, as many people had claimed. But Erica had a hard time believing children could be evil.

The same kind of speculation occurred in all the famous cases where children committed horrible acts: Mary Bell, who was only eleven when she killed two children. The murderers of three-year-old James Bulger. Pauline Parker and Juliet Hulme, the two girls in New Zealand who killed Pauline's mother. Erica loved the Peter Jackson film *Heavenly Creatures*, which was based on the case. After the event, people would say things like: 'She was always such a horrible child.' Or: 'I saw the evil in his eyes even when he was young.' Neighbours, friends, and even family members had been more than willing to give their views on such cases, pointing to factors they believed indicated some innate evil. But surely a child couldn't be evil. Erica was more apt to believe what she'd read somewhere: 'evil is the absence of goodness'. A person was undoubtedly born with a

tendency towards one or the other, but whether that tendency was enhanced or diminished would depend on where and how the individual was raised.

For that reason she needed to find out as much as she could about the two girls in the photographs. What sort of children were Marie and Helen? How had they been brought up? She wasn't planning to settle for what other people knew about them and their families. She was equally interested in what had gone on behind closed doors. What sort of values had been instilled in the girls? Were they treated well? What had they learned about the world prior to that terrible day in 1985?

Eventually both girls had retracted their confessions and stubbornly insisted on their innocence. Even though most people had remained convinced Helen and Marie were guilty, there had been plenty of speculation. What if someone else was responsible for Stella's death? An opportunist killer. And what if an opportunity had once again presented itself? It couldn't be a coincidence that a girl of the same age should disappear from the very same farm. What were the odds of that happening? There had to be a connection between the two events. What if the police had missed a clue the killer had left behind, and what if the perpetrator, for some reason, had decided to strike again? Maybe inspired by Marie's return? But if so, why? And were other girls in danger?

If only she'd made more progress in her research. Erica got up from her desk. The heat was stifling in her office, so she

leaned across to open the window. Outside, life was going on as usual. The sounds of summer reached her. Children shrieking and laughing down at the beach. Seagulls screeching as they hovered over the water. The wind rustling the crowns of the trees. Outside, everything seemed idyllic. But Erica hardly noticed.

She sat back down and began sorting through the materials she'd collected. But she hadn't even started on the interviews. She had a long list of people she planned to talk to, and naturally Marie and Helen were at the top of the list. She'd already tried to approach Helen, sending her several letters without receiving a response, and she'd been in contact with Marie's PR agent. On the desk were copies of various interviews Marie had given about the Stella case, so Erica didn't think the actress would be averse to talking to her. In fact, it was commonly thought that Marie's career would not have taken off as it had if the news about her past hadn't been leaked to the press after she'd appeared in small roles in a few minor productions.

If there was one thing Erica had learned from the previous books she'd written about true crime cases, it was that people had a deep-seated longing to speak out, to tell their story. Almost without exception.

She switched on the ringer on her mobile in case Patrik happened to call, though he'd probably be too busy to keep her updated. She had offered to help search, but he'd said they would have more than enough volunteers, and it would be better if she stayed with the children. Erica had voiced no objections. From

downstairs in the living room she could hear that the film had reached the point where Elsa had built an entire castle out of ice. Erica slowly put down the papers she was holding. It had been far too long since she'd kept Maja company in front of the TV to watch a film. I'll just have to put up with that ego-tripping princess, she thought as she stood up. Besides, Olaf is so charming. The reindeer too, for that matter.

'What have you arranged so far?' asked Patrik, getting right to the point when he arrived at the farm.

Gösta stood outside the farmhouse, next to a group of wooden patio furniture painted white.

'I rang Uddevalla and they're sending a helicopter.'

'What about the Coast Guard?'

Gösta nodded. 'Everybody has been notified, and help is on the way. I phoned Martin and asked him to get together some volunteers for the search party. He got right on it, calling people in Fjällbacka, so we should have lots of people here very soon. And our colleagues from Uddevalla are bringing the search dogs.'

'So what do you think?' said Patrik, keeping his voice low because the girl's parents were standing a short distance away, holding on to each other.

'They want to go out and search on their own,' said Gösta, who had noticed Patrik looking at the couple. 'But I told them they needed to wait until we get organized, otherwise we might end up squandering resources if we have to go looking for them too.'

He cleared his throat.

‘I don’t know what to think, Patrik. Neither of them has seen the little girl since she went to bed last night, which was around eight o’clock. And she’s so young: four years old. If she’d been anywhere close by, she would have showed up sometime during the day. If nothing else, she would have come home when she got hungry. So she must have got lost. Or ...’

He left the word dangling in the air.

‘It’s such a strange coincidence,’ said Patrik. Thoughts he didn’t want to acknowledge kept creeping into his mind.

‘I know. The same farm,’ said Gösta, nodding. ‘And the girl is the same age. It’s impossible not to think about that.’

‘I assume we’re not working solely on the premise that she got lost. Right?’

Patrik was careful not to look at the parents as he spoke.

‘Right,’ said Gösta. ‘As soon as possible we’ll start talking to all the neighbours around here, at least those who live along the road leading to the farm. We need to find out whether they saw anything last night or today. But first we need to focus on the search. It gets dark a lot sooner now that it’s August, and I can’t stand the thought of her sitting somewhere in the woods, all alone and scared. Mellberg wants us to contact the media, but I think it would be better to wait.’

‘Good God, yes. But of course that’s what he’d want,’ said Patrik with a sigh.

Their boss was looking quite full of himself as he welcomed the volunteers who were starting to arrive.

‘Okay, we need to get organized. I brought along a map of the area surrounding the farm,’ said Patrik, and Gösta’s face lit up.

‘Let’s divide the search area into sections,’ he said, taking the map from Patrik.

He placed it on the patio table, took a pen from his shirt pocket, and began drawing.

‘What do you think? Is this about the right size section for a group? If we assign three or four people to each group?’

‘Sure, that’s good,’ said Patrik, nodding.

Over the past few years he and Gösta had worked well together, and even though Patrik’s usual partner was Martin Molin, he enjoyed teaming up with the older police officer. That had not been the case back in the days when Gösta’s partner was Ernst, their now deceased colleague. But it turned out it actually was possible to teach an old dog new tricks. Gösta’s mind still had a tendency to drift to the golf course instead of focusing on police work, but when it really mattered, like now, his mind was razor-sharp and completely focused.

‘Want to give everyone a briefing?’ asked Patrik. ‘Or do you want me to do it?’

He didn’t want to tread on his colleague’s toes by taking over.

‘You do it,’ said Gösta. ‘The main thing is to prevent Bertil from saying anything.’

Patrik nodded. It was seldom a good idea to allow Mellberg to speak to the public. Invariably he’d upset or offend someone, and they’d have to waste time on crisis-management instead of

getting on with the task at hand.

He glanced over at Nea's parents, who were now standing in the middle of the farmyard, still holding on to each other.

'I'll go say hello to the parents first,' he said. 'Then I'll brief everybody who's here so far, and we'll have to repeat the briefing as more people arrive. Volunteers are going to be turning up the whole time, so it'll be impossible to get everyone together at once. And we need to see about getting the search under way as soon as possible.'

He cautiously approached the girl's parents. It was always difficult to deal with family members at times like this.

'I'm Patrik Hedström. From the police,' he said, shaking hands with them. 'As you can see, we've started bringing in volunteers for the search party, and I'm planning to give them a quick run-down on what's happening so we can begin the search.'

He realized he sounded very official, but that was the only way he could keep his own emotions in check and focus on what needed to be done.

'We've called our friends, and Peter's parents, who are in Spain, said they'd be here,' Eva explained quietly. 'We told them it wasn't necessary, but they're terribly worried.'

'We have search dogs on the way from Uddevalla,' said Patrik. 'They'll need an item that belongs to your daughter ...'

'Nea,' said Eva, swallowing hard. 'Her name is actually Linnea, but we call her Nea.'

'Nea. Nice name. Do you have something belonging to Nea

that the dogs can sniff so they'll be able to track her scent?"

"The clothes she wore yesterday are in the hamper. Would that do?"

Patrik nodded.

"Perfect. Could you go and get them? And would you mind making some coffee for the volunteers?"

He could hear how stupid it sounded to suggest serving coffee, but he had two reasons for making the request. He wanted to be undisturbed while he was giving the volunteers instructions, and he wanted to keep the parents occupied. That usually made things easier.

"Shouldn't I go with them?" said Peter. "On the search, I mean?"

"We need you to stay here. When we find her, we have to know where you are, so it's best if you stay here at the farm. We'll have more than enough volunteers out there."

Peter seemed to hesitate, so Patrik placed his hand on the man's shoulder.

"I know how hard it must be to stay here and wait. But believe me, that's the most useful thing you can do."

"Okay," said Peter quietly. Then he and Eva headed for the house.

Patrik gave a loud whistle to draw the attention of the three dozen or so people who had already gathered in the farmyard. A man in his twenties who was filming the scene stuffed his mobile in his pocket.

"In a few minutes we'll be sending you off to start searching.

Every minute counts when such a young child is missing. We're looking for Linnea, known as Nea, who is four years old. We don't know exactly how long she's been missing, but her parents haven't seen her since they put her to bed last night around eight o'clock. Each thought she was with the other parent all day today, an unfortunate misunderstanding, so it wasn't until about an hour ago that they discovered she was missing. One of the theories we're working on, and it's the most likely one, is that the little girl has got lost in the woods.'

He pointed towards Gösta, who was still standing next to the patio table with the map spread out in front of him.

'We're going to divide you up into groups of three or four, and then my colleague Gösta will assign you to a specific area. We don't have any extra maps to give you, so you'll have to do the best you can. Perhaps use your mobile phone to take a picture of your section on the map so you can keep tabs on your search area.'

'We can also pull up a GPS map of the area,' said a bald man, holding up his phone. 'If anyone needs a good app, come and see me before we leave, and I'll show you which is the best one. I always use a GPS map on my mobile when I go hiking in the woods.'

'Thanks,' said Patrik. 'After you've been assigned a search area, I'd like you to walk about an arm's length apart. And move slowly. I know it can be tempting to try to search the area as fast as possible, but there are so many places in the woods where a

little four-year-old might be hidden, or ... uh ... might hide, so it's better to take your time.'

He raised his fist to his mouth and coughed. 'If you should ... find something,' he said and paused.

He didn't know how to go on, and he was hoping the people gathered here would understand without him being more specific. He started over.

'If you should find something, please do not touch or move anything. It might be a clue, or, well, something else.'

A few people nodded, but most kept their eyes fixed on the ground.

'So stay where you are and phone me immediately. Here's my number,' he said, taping a big piece of paper with his number to the wall of the barn. 'Go ahead and type it into your mobile. Everybody understand? Stay where you are and phone me. Don't do anything else. Okay?'

An older man at the back raised his hand. Patrik recognized the man. His name was Harald, and he'd owned the bakery in Fjällbacka for years.

'Is there any ...' He stopped and tried again. 'Is there any chance this is not a coincidence? With the farm, I mean? And the little girl? And what happened ...?'

He didn't need to say anything more. Everybody understood exactly what he was getting at. Patrik wasn't sure how to reply.

'We're not ruling out anything,' he said at last. 'But for the moment, the most important thing is to search the woods nearby.'

Out of the corner of his eye, Patrik saw Nea's mother come out the front door carrying a bundle of clothes in her arms.

‘All right. Let's get going.’

The first group of four went over to Gösta to get their assigned area. A helicopter could be heard approaching above the treetops. It wouldn't have any trouble landing because there was plenty of space on the farm. People began heading for the woods, and Patrik watched them go. Behind him he heard the helicopter make its landing, and at the same time the police vehicle bringing the dogs from Uddevalla turned into the farmyard. If the girl was out there in the woods, they would find her. He was convinced of that. But there was another possibility: she hadn't got lost. And that's what scared him.

THE STELLA CASE

They'd been searching for the girl all night. More and more had joined the search, and Harald could hear people all around him in the woods. The police had done a good job, and there was no lack of volunteers. The family was well liked, and everyone knew the little girl with the reddish blond hair. She was the kind of child who refused to give up until she won a smile from anyone she happened to meet in the shops.

He felt bad for the parents. His own kids were grown now; two of his sons were helping to search. He'd closed the bakery. It wasn't a busy time anyway, since the summer holidays were mostly over and there were long intervals during the day when the bell over the door didn't ring. Although he would have closed even if there was a flood of customers. He felt a pain in his chest at the mere thought of the horror Stella's parents must be going through right now.

Harald randomly poked at the bushes with the stick he carried. Their task was not an easy one. The woods covered a big area, yet how far could the little girl have gone on her own? If she was even in the woods at all. This was only one of the possibilities the police were considering. Her face had appeared on all the news broadcasts, because it was just as likely she could have been coaxed into a car. If so, she'd be miles away by this time. But Harald refused to think about that. Right now his task was to help

search the woods, along with all the others whose footsteps and voices he could hear through the branches.

For a moment he paused to breathe in the forest scent. He rarely ventured into the outdoors these days. The last few decades he'd been busy with the bakery and his family, but when he was a young man he'd spent a lot of time outdoors. He promised himself to get back in the habit. Life was short. The past day had been a constant reminder there was no way of knowing what lay around the corner.

Only a few days ago Stella's parents had no doubt thought they knew what to expect from life. They had lived each day without pausing every other moment to rejoice at what they had. Same as most people. It wasn't until something happened that people stopped to treasure every second they had with those they loved.

He set off again, walking very slowly, one metre after another. Up ahead he caught a glimpse of water in between the trees. They had received detailed instructions about what to do if they came upon a pond or lake. They were supposed to notify the police, so they could drag the water or send divers in if it was deep. The water he was looking at right now was calm and smooth, except for a few dragonflies landing on the surface, spreading tiny little rings around them. That's all he saw. The only other thing visible to the naked eye out on the small lake was a tree trunk that had fallen into the water, felled by wind or lightning several years earlier. He went closer and saw that the roots of the trunk were still clinging to the shore. Cautiously he climbed up on the broken

tree. He saw nothing but the calm surface of the water. Then he slowly lowered his gaze to look down at his feet. That's when he noticed the hair. The reddish blond hair floating like seaweed in the murky water.

Chapter Five



Sanna was standing in the middle of an aisle in the Konsum supermarket. During the summer she usually kept the garden centre open as long as possible, but today she hadn't been able to keep her mind on her customers. For once all the questions about how often geraniums needed to be watered seemed too stupid for words.

She gave herself a shake and looked around. Vendela was supposed to come back from staying with her father today, and Sanna wanted to make sure she had plenty of her favourite foods and snacks on hand. One week her daughter was vegan, the next she would eat only hamburgers, and after that she might be on a diet and merely gnaw on a carrot while Sanna babbled on about how young girls needed to eat or risk succumbing to anorexia. Nothing was permanent, nothing was the way it used to be.

She wondered whether Niklas had the same problems with their daughter. Taking turns having Vendela stay with them every other week had worked out well for many years. But now Vendela seemed to have discovered the leverage she wielded. If she didn't like the food, she would say it was better at her father's place,

and that he let her hang out with Nils in the evenings. Sometimes Sanna felt utterly exhausted, and she wondered why she'd ever thought the early years of Vendela's life had been demanding; the teenage years seemed to be ten times worse.

It was as if her daughter had turned into a stranger. Vendela always used to be on at her mother the minute she spotted her sneaking a smoke behind the house, and she'd frequently lectured her about the risk of cancer. But lately Sanna had noticed that Vendela's clothes reeked of cigarette smoke.

Sanna glanced around at the shelves and finally made up her mind. She'd go for something safe. Tacos. And she bought both ground beef and tofu, just in case this turned out to be a vegan week.

These teenage phases had passed Sanna by; she'd grown up too fast for that. Stella's death, and all the awful things that followed, had catapulted her straight into adulthood. There had been no opportunity for teen angst, no parents to make her roll her eyes.

She'd met Niklas at the community college. They moved in together when she got her first job. Eventually they had Vendela – and Sanna had to admit the pregnancy had been an accident. The fact their relationship had failed was her fault, not his. Niklas was a good man, but she'd never been able to let him fully into her heart. Loving someone, no matter whether it was a spouse or a daughter, hurt too much. That was something she'd learned early on.

Sanna put tomatoes, cucumbers, and onions in her trolley and

headed for the checkout.

‘I suppose you’ve heard the news,’ said Bodil as she began scanning the prices of each item Sanna placed on the conveyor belt.

‘No, what’s going on?’ asked Sanna as she picked up a soda bottle and placed it flat on the belt.

‘You didn’t hear about the little girl?’

‘What little girl?’

Sanna was listening with only half an ear. She was already regretting her decision to buy Coke for Vendela.

‘The one who’s disappeared. From your old farm.’

Bodil couldn’t keep the excitement out of her voice. Sanna froze, holding the bag of Tex-Mex shredded cheese in her hand.

‘Our farm?’ she said, hearing a rushing sound in her ears.

‘Yes,’ said Bodil, continuing to scan the items without noticing that Sanna had stopped unloading her trolley. ‘A four-year-old girl disappeared from your old farm. My husband went out to join the search party in the woods. I heard lots of people have turned up to help.’

Sanna slowly set the bag of cheese on the belt. Then she headed for the door, leaving her groceries behind. Her purse too. Behind her, she heard Bodil calling her name.

Anna leaned back in her chair and looked at Dan, who was sawing a board in half. Right now, in the worst of the summer heat, he’d decided it was the perfect time to get started on the ‘new deck’ project. They’d been talking about it for three years,

but apparently it couldn't be put off any longer. She guessed his male nesting instincts had come into play. Her own nesting instincts had taken a different form. She'd been going through the clothing in all the wardrobes in the house. The kids had started hiding their favourite clothes, fearing they'd end up among the garments she was planning to give away.

Anna smiled at Dan as he worked in the heat. She realized that for the first time in ages she was actually enjoying life. Her small decorating business wasn't exactly ready to be launched on the stock market, but she'd won the trust of many of the discriminating summer visitors, and she was now having to turn away customers because she was too busy. And the baby was growing inside her. They'd decided not to find out the gender, so for now they simply called the child 'baby'. The other children were eagerly involved in trying to come up with a name, but with suggestions like 'Buzz Lightyear', 'RackarAlex', and 'Darth Vader', they hadn't been much help. And one night a grumpy Dan had quoted Fredde from the TV show *Solsidan*: 'We each made a list of suggested names, and then we took the one at the top of Mickan's.' All because she'd dissed his suggestion that, if the baby was a boy, they should call him Bruce after Bruce Springsteen. Dan claimed her choice, Philip, made it sound as if the kid was going to be born wearing a navy pea jacket. So that's how things stood. The birth was only a month away, and they still hadn't decided on a single name for a boy or a girl.

But it'll all work out, thought Anna as Dan came over to her.

He leaned down and kissed her on the lips. He was sweaty and tasted of salt.

‘So here you sit, relaxing,’ he said, patting her belly.

‘Yup. The kids have all gone out to visit friends,’ she said, taking a sip of her iced coffee.

She’d heard it said pregnant women shouldn’t drink too much coffee, but she needed some sort of treat for herself now that alcohol and unpasteurized cheese were both forbidden.

‘I practically died at lunch today when my sister sat there sipping a big, cold glass of bubbly,’ she moaned. Dan squeezed her shoulder.

He sat down next to her and leaned back with his eyes closed, enjoying the late afternoon sun.

‘Soon, sweetheart,’ he said, stroking her hand.

‘I’m going to bathe in wine after the birth,’ she sighed, as she too closed her eyes.

Then she remembered that pregnancy hormones put her at risk for brown spots. With a muttered curse she opened her eyes and put on her broad-brimmed hat.

‘Shit. I can’t even sunbathe,’ she cursed.

‘What?’ said Dan drowsily, and she realized he was about to fall asleep in the sun.

‘Nothing, sweetheart,’ she said, although she suddenly had an irresistible urge to kick him in the shin, purely for being a man and not having to endure the pains of pregnancy or give up anything.

It was so fucking unfair. As for those women who sighed dreamily about how *wonderful* it was to be pregnant and what a *gift* it was to be the one who brought children into the world – well, she'd like to punch them. Hard.

'People are idiots,' she muttered.

'What?' Dan said again, this time sounding even drowsier.

'Nothing,' she said, pulling the brim of her hat down over her eyes.

What was she thinking about before Dan came over and interrupted her? Oh, right. How wonderful life was. And it was. In spite of the pregnancy pains and everything else. She was loved. She was surrounded by family.

She took off the hat and lifted her face to the sun. To hell with brown spots. Life was too short not to enjoy the sun.

Sam wished he could stay here forever. Ever since he was a kid, he'd loved it here. The heat from the rocks. The gurgling of the water. The screech of the seagulls. Out here he could escape from everything. He could close his eyes and let it all slip away.

Jessie was lying next to him. He could feel the warmth of her body. A miracle, that's what she was. The fact she'd come into his life at this particular moment. Marie Wall's daughter. What an irony of fate.

'Do you love your parents?'

Sam opened one eye and squinted at her. She was lying on her front with her chin propped on one hand, staring at him.

'Why are you asking?'

It was an intimate question. Especially since they'd known each other only a short time.

'I've never met my father,' she said, looking away.

'How come?'

Jessie shrugged.

'I don't know. I guess my mother didn't want me to. I'm not sure she even knows who my father is.'

Sam reached out his hand to touch her arm. She didn't flinch, so he left it there. Her eyes brightened.

'What about you? Do you have a good relationship with your parents?'

He'd been feeling so safe and calm, but now that disappeared. Yet he understood why she would ask, and he somehow felt he owed her an answer.

'My father, he's ... well, he's been in the war. Sometimes he's gone for months at a time. And sometimes he brings the war home with him.'

Jessie leaned closer, resting her head on his shoulder.

'Has he ever ...'

'I don't want to talk about it. Not yet.'

'What about your mother?'

Sam closed his eyes, letting the sunlight warm him.

'She's okay,' he said at last.

For a few seconds he thought about what he was refusing to think about, and he squeezed his eyes shut even tighter. Then he opened his eyes and fumbled in his pocket for the cigarettes he'd

brought along. He took out two, lit both of them, and handed one to Jessie.

Calm spread through his body, the buzzing faded from inside his head, and the memories were carried away by the smoke. He leaned forward and kissed Jessie. At first she froze. From fear. From surprise. Then he felt her lips soften and let him in.

‘Oh, how adorable!’

Sam gave a start.

‘Look at the little lovebirds!’

Nils came sauntering down from the rocks with Basse and Vendela in tow. As always. They didn’t seem to be capable of surviving without each other.

‘So who’s this?’ Nils sat down right next to Sam and Jessie, staring at her intently as she pulled up her bikini top. ‘Looks like you’ve found yourself a girlfriend, Sam.’

‘I’m Jessie,’ she told him, holding out her hand, which Nils ignored.

‘Jessie?’ said Vendela behind him. ‘You must be Marie Wall’s daughter.’

‘Aha. The daughter of your mother’s pal. The Hollywood star.’

Nils was now looking at Jessie with interest as she kept on tugging at her bikini top. Sam wanted to protect her from their prying eyes. He wanted to put his arms around her and tell her to pay them no mind. Instead he reached for her T-shirt.

‘I guess it’s no surprise that the two of you would find each other,’ said Basse, giving Nils a poke in the side.

His voice was a shrill, feminine falsetto, but no one ever teased him about it for fear of drawing the wrath of Nils. His real name was Bosse, but in middle school he'd got everyone to call him Basse instead, because it sounded cooler.

'Yeah, I guess it's not really that strange,' said Nils, looking from Jessie to Sam.

'Okay, I'm fucking hungry,' he said. 'Let's get out of here.'

Vendela smiled at Jessie. 'See you later.'

Sam looked at them in surprise. Was that it?

Jessie leaned towards him.

'Who were those guys?' she said. 'They're weird. Nice, but weird.'

Sam shook his head.

'They're not nice. Not at all.'

He pulled his mobile out of his pocket, opened the photo file, and skimmed through the videos. He knew why he'd saved this particular video. It was a reminder of what people could do to each other. And to him. But he'd never planned to show it to Jessie. Enough people had already seen it.

'They posted this on Snapchat last summer,' he said, handing his mobile to Jessie. 'I managed to film it before it was removed.'

Sam looked away as Jessie clicked on the start button. He didn't need to watch it. When he heard the voices the whole scene clearly unfolded in his mind.

'You're so out of shape!' Nils had shouted. 'Wimpy like a girl. Swimming is good exercise.'

Nils had headed for Sam's boat, which was moored not far from where it was today.

'You can swim back to Fjällbacka. It'll build muscles.'

Vendela laughed as she filmed everything with her camera. Basse came running alongside Nils.

Nils tossed the mooring line into the boat, then set his foot on the bow and gave it a push. The small wooden boat began slowly backing away from the island, but it got caught in a current a few metres out, and the distance increased rapidly.

Nils turned towards the camera, grinning broadly.

'Have a nice swim.'

At that point the video ended.

'Holy shit,' said Jessie. 'Holy shit.'

She looked at Sam with tears in her eyes.

He shrugged.

'I've been through worse.'

Jessie blinked away her tears. He suspected that she too had survived worse experiences. He put his hand on her shoulder and felt how she was shaking. But he could also feel the bond between them. And what united them.

One day he would show her his notebook and share all his thoughts with her. Including his big plan. One day everyone would see.

Jessie wrapped her arms around his neck. She smelled so wonderful, of sun and sweat and marijuana.

It was getting late, but still light, like a memory of the sun that

had shone all day from a clear blue sky. Eva looked towards the farmyard where the shadows were beginning to lengthen. Cold fingers seemed to clutch at her heart as she thought about Nea, who always hurried inside before dark fell.

People were coming and going out there. Voices mixed with barking from the dogs as they took turns to search. The ice-cold fingers again clutched at her heart.

The older officer, Gösta, came in the front door.

‘I was thinking of having a cup of coffee, and then I’ll go back out.’

Eva got up to pour him some coffee. She’d made countless pots of coffee over the past few hours.

‘Nothing yet?’ she asked, even though she knew the answer.

If he had any news, he would have told her at once instead of asking for coffee. But there was something comforting and soothing about asking the question.

‘No, but we’ve got a big team out there searching. It feels like all of Fjällbacka has turned out.’

Eva nodded, trying to compose herself before speaking.

‘Yes, everyone has been amazing,’ she said, sinking down on her chair. ‘Peter went out to join the search too. I couldn’t keep him away.’

‘I know.’ Gösta sat down across from her. ‘I saw him in one of the search groups.’

‘What ...’ The words stuck in her throat. ‘What do you think happened?’

She didn't dare look at Gösta. Various scenarios, each one worse than the last, kept running through her mind. Whenever she tried to seize hold of one of them, wanting to understand, the pain was so great she could hardly breathe.

'There's no use in speculating,' said Gösta gently, reaching out to place his hand on hers. His calm concern slowly warmed her.

'But she's been missing such a long time now.'

Gösta squeezed her hand.

'It's summer and it's warm outside. She's not going to freeze. The woods cover a large area, there's a lot of territory to search, and we simply need a few more hours. I'm sure we'll find her, and she'll be scared and upset, but no harm done. Okay?'

'Except ... that's not what happened to the other little girl.'

Gösta pulled away his hand and took a sip of coffee.

'That was thirty years ago, Eva. Another lifetime, another era. It's pure coincidence that you're living on this farm, and it's pure coincidence that your daughter is the same age. Four-year-olds get lost. They're filled with curiosity and, from what I understand, your daughter is a lively little girl with an adventurous streak. Which means it's probably not so strange that she couldn't resist venturing into the woods. Obviously it didn't turn out the way she'd expected, but we're going to find her. There are so many of us searching.'

He stood up.

'Thanks for the coffee. I'll head back out now. We'll keep searching all night, but it would be a good idea for you to get

some sleep.'

Eva shook her head. How could she sleep while Nea was out there in the woods?

'I didn't think you'd want to,' said Gösta, 'but at least I tried.'

She stared at the door after he closed it behind him. She was alone again. Alone with her thoughts and the cold fingers gripping her heart.

BOHUSLÄN 1671

Elin leaned forward to make Britta's bed. Then she straightened up and pressed her hand to her lower back. She was not yet accustomed to sleeping on the hard bed in the maid's quarters.

As she looked down at the comfortable bed where Britta slept, she allowed herself to feel something like envy, but only for a moment. With a shake of her head, she reached for the empty pitcher on the night table.

It had come as a surprise to discover that her sister did not share either a bedroom or a bed with her husband. But it was not her place to judge. For her part, she had always thought the best time of day was when she could climb into bed next to Per. Resting safely in his arms had made her feel that she and Märta would never come to harm in the world.

How wrong she had been.

'Elin?'

She started when she heard the gentle voice of the master of the house. She had been so lost in her own thoughts that she nearly dropped the pitcher.

'Yes?' she said, pausing to collect herself before turning around.

His kind blue eyes were fixed on her, and she felt the blood rush to her face. Quickly she lowered her eyes.

She did not know how to behave around her sister's husband. Preben was always so kind to her and Märta. He was both a vicar and master of the house. And she was merely a servant in her sister's employ. A widow living on the mercy of a household that was not her own.

'Lill-Jan says you can cure milk fever. My best milk cow is afflicted.'

'Is it Stjärna?' asked Elin, keeping her eyes fixed on the floor. 'The boy mentioned something about it this morning.'

'Yes, Stjärna. Are you busy or might you come with me to have a look at her?'

'Yes, of course I will come.'

She set the pitcher on the night table and silently followed Preben out to the cowshed. Stjärna lay on the stable floor at the very back, bellowing. She was clearly in pain and unable to stand. Elin nodded to the boy named Lill-Jan who stood nearby, looking dismayed.

'Go to the kitchen and get me some salt.'

She squatted down and cautiously caressed the cow's soft muzzle. Stjärna's eyes were wide with fear.

'Will you be able to help her?' asked Preben quietly as he too patted the brown-and-white spotted cow.

For a second their hands touched. Elin swiftly pulled hers away, as if she had been bitten by a snake. Again she felt the blood rush to her face, and she noticed a slight flush on the master's face before he straightened up as Lill-Jan returned, out of breath.

‘Here you are,’ said the boy with that lisp of his, and he handed the container of salt to Elin.

She poured a mound of salt into the palm of her left hand. With the index finger of her right hand she stirred the salt in a clockwise direction as she loudly spoke the words her maternal grandmother had taught her:

‘Our Lord Jesus, he journeys far and wide, curing pox and blight, water bane and all manner of banes between heaven and earth. In God’s name, amen.’

‘Amen,’ said Preben, and Lill-Jan hurried to chime in. Stjärna bellowed.

‘What happens now?’ asked Preben.

‘All we can do now is wait. Praying over salt most often will do the trick, but it can take time, and it also depends on how bad the fever is. But have a look at her early in the morning. I think this will have helped.’

‘Hear that, Lill-Jan?’ said Preben. ‘Look in on Stjärna as soon as you get up in the morning.’

‘That I will, master,’ said Lill-Jan, backing his way out of the cowshed.

Preben turned to Elin.

‘Where did you learn such things?’

‘From my grandmother,’ said Elin tersely.

She could still feel the touch of his hand.

‘What else can you cure?’ asked Preben, leaning against one of the stalls.

She scraped her toe on the ground, pausing before she answered.

‘Most things as long as the pain is not too far gone.’

‘Both people and animals?’ asked Preben curiously.

‘Yes,’ replied Elin.

It surprised her that Britta had never mentioned this to her husband. Yet the boy Lill-Jan had heard rumours about Elin’s skills. Perhaps that was not so strange, after all. When they lived together under their father’s roof, her sister had always spoken scornfully about Elin’s grandmother and her wisdom.

‘Tell me more,’ said Preben as he headed for the door.

Elin followed reluctantly. It was not proper for her to be chatting with the master of the house in this manner, and it was all too easy for gossip to begin spreading on the farm. But Preben was the one in charge, so she had no choice but to follow him. Britta was standing outside, her arms hanging at her sides, a dark look on her face. Elin’s heart sank. This was what she had feared. He risked nothing, but she could easily land in disfavour. And Märta along with her.

Her trepidation about how it might be to live at the mercy of her younger sister had been fully realized. Britta was a stern and unkind mistress, and both she and Märta had felt the sting of her sharp tongue.

‘Elin has been helping me with Stjärna,’ said Preben, calmly meeting his wife’s eye. ‘Now she is on her way to set the dinner table for us. She suggested that we might spend some time

together, you and I, since I have been away so much lately, tending to church business.’

‘Did she now?’ said Britta, still suspicious, though not quite as stern as usual. ‘Well, that was a good suggestion.’

She briskly took hold of Preben’s arm.

‘I have been missing my lord and master terribly, and I think he has been neglecting his wife of late.’

‘My dear wife is perfectly right about that,’ he replied, heading for the house along with Britta. ‘But we will now make amends. Elin said we might sit down at the table in half an hour’s time, which suits me well, as I will have time to wash and dress properly so I will not appear like a shabby ruffian next to my beautiful wife.’

‘Oh, come now, you can never look shabby,’ said Britta, slapping him on the shoulder.

Elin walked behind them, forgotten for the moment, and sighed with relief. The darkness she had glimpsed in Britta’s eyes was all too familiar. She knew her sister would not hesitate to do harm to anyone she thought had wronged her. But this time Preben had saved her and Märta, and she would remain eternally grateful to him for that, even though he should not have placed her in this situation to begin with.

She picked up her pace and hurried to the kitchen. She had only half an hour to set out the food and ask the cook to prepare something special. She smoothed her apron, feeling again the warmth of Preben’s hand.

Chapter Six



‘What are you doing, Pops?’

Bill had been so immersed in the text he was writing that he gave a start when his son spoke. He almost knocked over his cup, and some of the coffee sloshed over the side on to his desk.

He turned to look at Nils, who was standing in the doorway.

‘I’m working on a new project,’ he said, turning the computer screen so Nils could see.

“‘Nicer People’,’ read Nils aloud.

Underneath the text was a picture of a sailboat ploughing its way through the water.

‘I don’t get it.’

‘Don’t you remember that documentary we saw? The Filip and Fredrik film, *Nice People*?’

Nils nodded.

‘Oh, yeah. Those black guys who wanted to play bandy.’

Bill grimaced.

‘The Somalis who wanted to play bandy. Don’t call them “black guys”.’

Nils shrugged.

Bill peered at his son standing there in the dim light of the room with his hands in his pockets and his blond fringe hanging in his eyes. Nils had come along late in their lives. Unplanned and, to be honest, not particularly welcome. Gun had been forty-five when Nils was born, while he was almost fifty, and Nils's two older brothers were in their late teens. Gun had insisted they keep the child, saying there had to be some meaning behind her pregnancy. But Bill had never developed the same connection with Nils as he had with the older boys. He hadn't really tried. He hadn't wanted to change nappies or sit in the sandbox or read the first-grade maths book for the third time.

Bill turned back to the computer screen.

'This is a media presentation. My thought is to do something that will be a positive way of helping the refugees in the area become part of Swedish society.'

'Are you going to teach them how to play bandy?' asked Nils, his hands still in his pockets.

'Don't you see the sailboat?' Bill pointed at the screen. 'They're going to learn to sail! And then we'll compete in the Dannholmen regatta.'

'The Dannholmen regatta isn't exactly the same thing as the bandy world championship those blacks competed in,' said Nils. 'Not the same league at all.'

'Don't call them blacks!' said Bill.

Nils was undoubtedly trying to provoke him.

'I know the Dannholmen regatta is a significantly smaller

event, but it has great symbolic importance around here, and it will attract a lot of media attention. Especially now they're making that film here.'

Nils snorted. 'I don't know if they're really refugees at all. Only people who have money can make their way up here. I read that on the Internet. And those so-called refugee kids have beards and moustaches.'

'Nils!'

Bill looked at his son, whose face was now flushed with indignation. It was like looking at a stranger. If he didn't know better, he'd think his son was ... a racist. But that wasn't possible. Teenagers knew so little about the ways of the world. All the more reason to promote this type of project. Most people were basically good at heart. They just needed to be educated, given a little push in the right direction. Nils would soon realize how wrong he was.

Bill heard his son leave the room and close the door behind him. Tomorrow was the start-up meeting, and he needed to have everything ready for the press. This was going to be big. Really big.

'Hello?' called Paula as she and Johanna came in the door with three suitcases and two prams. She was carrying the baby, balanced on her hip.

Paula smiled at Johanna as she set down the heaviest suitcase. A holiday on Cyprus with a three-year-old and an infant probably hadn't been the smartest plan, but they'd survived.

‘I’m in the kitchen!’

Paula relaxed as soon as she heard her mother’s voice. If Rita and Bertil were home, she could leave the kids with them so she and Johanna could unpack in peace and quiet. Or else they could forget about unpacking until tomorrow and instead stretch out on the bed to watch a film until they fell asleep.

Rita gave them a smile as they came into the kitchen. There was nothing strange about her cooking in their kitchen as if it were her own. Rita and Bertil lived in the flat upstairs, but ever since the kids were born, the boundaries between the two flats had disappeared to such an extent that they might as well have installed a direct staircase from one to the other.

‘I made enchiladas. I thought you’d be hungry after the trip. How did things go?’

She reached out her arms to take Lisa.

‘Fine. Or rather, not so great,’ said Paula, gratefully handing over the baby. ‘Shoot me if I ever start talking again about how wonderful it would be to go away for a week with the kids.’

‘It was your idea,’ muttered Johanna as she tried to wake Leo, who had fallen asleep.

‘It was nuts,’ said Paula, taking a pinch of melted golden cheese from the top of one of the enchiladas. ‘Kids everywhere, grown people dressed up like cuddly toys walking around in the heat and singing some sort of battle song.’

‘I don’t think you could really call it a battle song,’ said Johanna, laughing.

‘Okay, but it was indoctrination from some kind of sect. If I’d been forced to listen to it one more time I was going to go over and strangle that big hairy bear.’

‘Tell her about the chocolate fountain,’ said Johanna.

Paula groaned.

‘Oh my God. Every night they had a buffet, specially designed for kids, so there were tons of pancakes, meatballs, pizza, and spaghetti. And a chocolate fountain. One boy made quite an impression. Everyone knew this kid’s name was Linus, because his mother ran around the whole time yelling: “No, no, Liiinus! Don’t do that, Liiinus! Stop kicking that girl, Liiinus!” Meanwhile the boy’s father was busy chugging down the beer, starting right after breakfast. And on the last day ...’

Johanna couldn’t help giggling as Paula picked up a plate, helped herself to an enchilada, and sat down at the kitchen table.

‘On the last day,’ she went on, ‘Linus ran right into that huge chocolate fountain and knocked it over. There was chocolate everywhere! And he threw himself down in it and began smearing chocolate all around, while his mother jumped up and down, completely hysterical.’

She took a big bite of her food and sighed. This was the first taste of anything spicy all week.

‘Uncle Bertil?’ said Leo, starting to wake up as Johanna held him.

‘Yes, where is Bertil?’ asked Paula. ‘Has he already fallen asleep in front of the TV?’

‘No,’ said Rita. ‘He’s working.’

‘This late?’

Bertil rarely worked nights.

‘Yes, he had to go. But you’re still on maternity leave,’ said Rita, casting a hesitant look at Johanna.

She knew it hadn’t been easy to get her daughter to take time off, and Johanna was still worried that Paula might go back to work too soon. The plan was for the family to spend the whole summer together.

‘So what’s going on?’ asked Paula, putting down her knife and fork.

‘They went out to search for someone who’s gone missing.’

‘Who’s missing?’

‘A child,’ said Rita, avoiding her eye. ‘A four-year-old girl.’

She knew her daughter all too well.

‘How long has the little girl been missing?’

‘Since last night, but the parents didn’t discover she was gone until this afternoon, so the search has only been going on for a couple of hours.’

Paula cast a pleading look at Johanna, who glanced at Leo and nodded.

‘Go. They’ll need all the help they can get.’

Paula got up and gave her partner a kiss on the cheek. ‘Love you. I’ll be back soon.’ She went into the hall and pulled on a lightweight jacket. ‘Where are they?’ she asked her mother.

‘On a farm. Bertil called it the Berg farm.’

‘The Berg farm?’

Paula abruptly stopped what she was doing. She knew that farm well. And its history. And she was too much of a cynic to believe in coincidences.

Karim knocked hard on the door. He knew Adnan was inside, and he had no intention of leaving until he opened the door. The years they’d spent in a world where a knock on the door could spell death, for themselves or a family member, meant that many refugees were reluctant to open the door. Karim pounded on the door again. Finally it opened.

When he saw Adnan staring at him wide-eyed, he was almost sorry he’d knocked so hard.

‘I just talked to Rolf, and he said all of Fjällbacka is out looking for a missing girl. We need to help.’

‘A girl? A child?’

‘Yes. Rolf said she’s four years old. They think she might be lost in the woods.’

‘Of course we’ll help.’ Adnan turned to look back inside the room as he reached for his jacket. ‘Khalil, come here!’

Karim backed up a few steps.

‘We need you to help round everyone up. Tell them we’ll meet up at the kiosk. Rolf has promised to drive us there.’

‘Sure. And we’d better hurry. A little girl shouldn’t be all alone in the woods at night.’

Karim continued knocking on doors, and he heard Khalil and Adnan doing the same. After a while they’d gathered fifteen

others to help out. Rolf would have to make two or three trips to get them all there, but that wasn't a problem. He was a nice person. He wanted to help.

For a moment Karim felt uncertain. Rolf was nice, and he knew them. But how would the other Swedes react when they turned up? A bunch of roaches from the refugee centre. He knew that's what people called them. Roaches. Or wogs. But a child was missing, and it was everyone's responsibility to find her. It didn't matter whether she was Swedish or Syrian. Somewhere a mother was crying in despair.

When Rolf pulled up in his car, Karim, Adnan, and Khalil were waiting along with Rashid and Farid. Karim glanced at Rashid. His children were back in Syria. Rashid met Karim's eye. He didn't know whether his own children were still alive, but tonight he was going to help search for a Swedish little girl.

It was blissfully quiet now the kids were in bed. Sometimes Erica felt guilty about how much she enjoyed the peace in the evenings. When Maja was little she'd joined the web forum Family Life in an attempt to find like-minded people and to get things off her chest. She thought she couldn't be the only one who was experiencing a conflict between being a mother and needing time to herself once in a while. But she'd received such a hate-filled response when she'd honestly written about her feelings that she'd never gone back to the forum. She'd been caught off guard by the curses and insults other mothers had hurled at her, just because she didn't love every minute she spent breastfeeding,

getting up in the middle of the night, changing nappies, and listening to her baby crying. She'd been told she should not have had a child, that she was an egotistical and self-absorbed bitch because she felt the need for time on her own. Erica could still feel the anger surging inside her at the thought of those women judging her because she didn't act and feel the same as them. Why can't everyone do whatever is best for them? she wondered as she sat on the sofa with a glass of red wine, trying to relax in front of the TV.

Her thoughts soon turned to another mother. Nea's mother, Eva. She could only imagine what anguish she must be feeling right now. Erica had sent Patrik a text to ask again whether she could help. She could get Kristina to come over to look after the kids. But he had told her they already had all the volunteers they needed, and she would be more useful staying at home with the children.

Erica didn't know the Bergs, and she'd never been to their farm. Wanting to describe the setting as precisely as possible, she'd thought about going out there to have a look around and take a few pictures, but so far she hadn't done it. There were old photographs available, so she knew exactly how the farm had looked when the Strand family lived there. Yet it was always a different experience to visit a location in person, to take in the atmosphere and get a feeling for how life on the farm must have been.

She'd enquired about the Berg family and learned they'd

moved here from Uddevalla, looking for peace and quiet in the country and a good place for their daughter to grow up. Erica sincerely hoped their dream would be realized, that she'd soon get a text from Patrik saying they'd found the child in the woods, scared and lost, but alive. Yet she had a bad feeling that was not how this would end.

She swirled the red wine in her glass. She'd treated herself to a good Amarone in spite of the oppressive evening heat. Most people drank chilled rosé wines in the summer, or white wine served with ice cubes. But she didn't care for either white or rosé wines. She preferred sparkling wines or intense red wines, no matter what the season. That said, she couldn't tell the difference between an expensive champagne and a cheap Spanish cava, so as Patrik liked to joke, she was a cheap date.

She felt guilty, sitting in comfort and drinking wine when a four-year-old girl, in the best-case scenario, was lost in the woods. But that was how her mind worked. It was too awful to dwell on all the bad things that might happen to a child, so she subconsciously turned her thoughts to something banal and meaningless. That was a luxury Nea's mother couldn't afford at the moment. She and her husband had found themselves caught in a living nightmare.

Erica straightened up and set her wine glass on the coffee table. She reached for her notebook. Over the years she'd got in the habit of always having paper and pen nearby. She liked to jot down whatever thoughts and ideas popped into her head,

and she made lists of things she needed to do in order to move forward with her book. That was what she wanted to do now. All her instincts told her that Nea's disappearance was somehow connected to Stella's death. She'd spent the past few weeks loafing. Summertime laziness and sunshine had taken over, and she hadn't made the sort of progress she'd hoped with her book. Now she was going to set her mind to it. That way, if the worst happened, she might be able to offer help, based on what she'd learned about the previous case. Maybe she could find the link that she was sure existed.

Erica glanced at her mobile. Still no word from Patrik. Then she began feverishly jotting down notes.

THE STELLA CASE

She knew even before they reached her. The heavy footsteps. Their eyes fixed on the ground. They didn't have to say a word.

'Anders!' she screamed, and her voice was so shrill.

He came rushing out of the house, but stopped abruptly when he saw the police officers.

He fell to his knees on the gravel. Linda rushed over to him, put her arms around him. Anders had always been so big and strong, but right now she was the one who had to keep them both going.

'Pappa? Mamma?'

Sanna stood in the doorway. The light from the kitchen lit up her blond hair like a halo.

'Did they find Stella, Mamma?'

Linda couldn't meet her daughter's eye. She turned towards one of the officers. He nodded.

'We've found your daughter. I'm afraid she's ... she's dead. We're so sorry.'

He stared down at his shoes and swallowed hard to hold back the tears. He was as pale as a ghost, and Linda wondered whether he'd seen Stella. Seen the body.

'But how can she be dead? That can't be true. Mamma? Pappa?'

She heard Sanna's voice behind her, rattling off questions. But

Linda had no answers to give her. Nor any solace to offer. She knew she ought to let go of Anders and take her daughter in her arms. But only Anders understood the pain she now felt in every fibre of her body.

‘We want to see her,’ she said, finally making herself raise her head from Anders’s shoulder. ‘We have to see our daughter.’

The taller of the two officers cleared his throat.

‘And you will. But first we have to do our job. We have to find out who did this.’

‘What do you mean? It was an accident, surely?’

Anders pulled away from Linda and stood up.

The tall policeman quietly replied.

‘I’m afraid this was no accident. Your daughter was murdered.’

The ground suddenly rose up towards Linda. She didn’t even have time to be surprised before everything went black.

Chapter Seven



Only twenty more to go.

James Jensen was hardly out of breath as he did the next push-up. The same routine every morning, in summer as well as winter. On Christmas Eve and on Midsummer Eve. These sorts of things had meaning. Routines had meaning. Consistency. Order.

Ten left.

Helen's father had understood the meaning of routines. James still missed KG, although the feeling was a form of weakness he normally didn't allow himself. KG had suffered a heart attack almost ten years ago, and no one had ever been able to take his place.

The last one. James got up after his hundred push-ups. A long life spent in the military had taught him the value of being in top physical condition.

James glanced at his watch: 08.01. He was behind schedule. When he was home he always had breakfast at eight o'clock sharp.

'Breakfast is ready!' called Helen, as if she'd read his mind.

James frowned. The fact she was calling him meant she'd noticed he was late.

He used a towel to dry off the sweat, then left the deck and went into the living room. The kitchen was right next door, and he could smell bacon cooking. He always ate the same breakfast. Scrambled eggs and bacon.

'Where's Sam?' he asked as he sat down and started in on the eggs.

'He's still sleeping,' said Helen as she served him the bacon, which was perfectly crisp.

'It's eight o'clock and he's still asleep?'

Annoyance crept over him, as it always did when he thought about Sam. Sleeping past eight in the morning? He'd always been up by six in the summertime, and then he'd worked until late in the evening.

'Go wake him,' he said, taking a swig of coffee, but the next instant he spat it out. 'What the hell? No milk?'

'Oh, sorry,' said Helen, taking the cup from his hand.

She poured the coffee into the sink, refilled it, and added a dash of whole milk.

Now it tasted the way it should.

Helen hurried out of the kitchen. He could hear her rushing up the stairs, followed by a murmur of voices.

His annoyance returned. The same annoyance he felt when he was deployed with a unit and one or more of the soldiers tried to downplay or avoid situations out of fear. He couldn't understand

that kind of behaviour. If a man chose to join the military, especially in a country like Sweden where it was completely voluntary to deploy to a war zone in another country, then he should do the job he'd been assigned. Fear was something you left at home.

'Where's the fire?' grumbled Sam as he came sauntering into the kitchen, his black hair standing on end. 'Why do I have to get up at this hour of the morning?'

James clenched his fists under the table.

'In this house we don't sleep away the day,' he said.

'But I couldn't find a summer job, so what the hell am I supposed to do?'

'No swearing!'

Both Helen and Sam flinched. For a moment anger made everything go black before his eyes, and James forced himself to take several deep breaths. He had to maintain control, both over himself and over his family.

'At nine hundred hours we'll meet out back for target practice.'

'Okay,' said Sam, looking down at the table.

Behind him Helen was still cringing.

They'd been walking all night. Harald was so tired he could hardly see straight, but he had no intention of going home. That would mean giving up. Whenever the fatigue got the better of him, he'd returned to the farm for a short break to warm up and drink some coffee. Each time he'd found Eva Berg sitting mutely in the kitchen, her face grey with worry. That was enough for

him to go back out to rejoin the search party.

He wondered whether the others knew who he was. And what role he'd played thirty years ago. He was the one who had found the other little girl. People who had lived in Fjällbacka back then knew about it, of course, but he didn't think Eva and Peter did. At least, he hoped not.

When they were assigned search areas, he had deliberately chosen the area with the lake where he'd found Stella. And that was the first place he'd gone to search. The small lake had dried up long ago, leaving behind only a patch of wooded land. But the old tree trunk was still there. The huge tree had clearly withstood a good deal of wind and weather, and it looked more brittle and drier than thirty years earlier. But he found no little girl lying there. He caught himself heaving a sigh of relief.

The search party had regrouped several times during the night. Some people had gone home to get a few hours' sleep, then come back and joined different groups. New volunteers had also arrived as the summer night gave way to morning. Those who had not gone home to rest included the men and boys from the refugee centre. Harald had chatted with them as they searched. They spoke in halting Swedish while he tried out his halting English. But somehow they'd managed to communicate.

He was now part of a small group that included the man who had introduced himself as Karim, and Johannes Klingsby, a local builder whom Harald had hired whenever he needed renovations done at the bakery. They were moving slowly and

resolutely through the woods as the sun broke through and the day brightened. The police officers in charge of the search had reminded them several times during the night not to hurry. It was best to make their way forward carefully and methodically.

‘We’ve been searching this area all night,’ said Johannes. ‘She can’t have gone this far.’

He threw out his hands.

‘Last time we spent twenty-four hours searching,’ said Harald. Once again he pictured Stella’s body in his mind.

‘What?’ asked Karim in English, shaking his head. It was hard for him to understand Harald’s broad Bohuslän accent.

‘Harald was the one who found the dead girl in the woods, thirty years ago,’ Johannes explained in English.

‘Dead girl?’ said Karim, stopping. ‘Here?’

‘Yes. Four years old, same as this girl.’

Johannes held up four fingers.

Karim looked at Harald, who nodded quietly.

‘Yes. It was right over here. But there was water back then.’

He was ashamed of his poor English, but Karim nodded.

‘There,’ said Harald, pointing at the tree trunk. ‘It was not a big lake, it was a ... the Swedish word is “tjärn”.’

‘A small lake, more like a pond,’ Johannes chimed in.

‘Yes, yes. A pond,’ said Harald. ‘A pond over there by that tree, and the girl was dead.’

Karim slowly walked towards the tree. He squatted down and placed his hand on the trunk. When he turned to look at the other

men, his face was so pale that Harald took a step back.

‘Something is under the tree. I can see a hand. A small hand.’

Harald staggered back another step. Johannes leaned over a bush, and they soon heard him sobbing. Harald met Karim’s eye and saw a reflection of his own despair. They needed to call the police.

Marie held the script on her lap as she tried to learn her lines for the upcoming scene, but she couldn’t concentrate. The scene was going to be filmed indoors, in the big industrial warehouse in Tanumshede. Inside, they’d constructed a number of sets, almost like mini-worlds, ready for the actors to enter. For the most part, the rest of the filming would be done on location, on the island of Dannholmen. Ingrid Bergman had spent a great deal of time on the island when she was married to the theatre director Lars Schmidt. She’d carried on visiting Dannholmen long after she and Lars were divorced.

Marie stretched out her arms and shook her head. She wanted to be rid of all the thoughts that had started haunting her when people began talking about the missing girl. All those memories of a laughing Stella running ahead of her and Helen.

Marie sighed. She was here now, about to play her dream role. This was what she’d been working towards for so many years; it was the thing that had kept her going after the roles in Hollywood dried up. She’d earned this part, and she was a good actress. It didn’t take much effort for her to immerse herself in a role, pretending to be someone else; after all, she’d had plenty

of practice, ever since she was a child. Lying or acting – there was so little difference between the two. She'd learned to master both early on.

If only she could stop thinking about Stella.

'How does my hair look?' she asked Yvonne.

The make-up artist approached nervously and came to such an abrupt halt she almost stumbled. She surveyed Marie from head to toe, then removed a comb stuck in the bun at the nape of her neck and smoothed a few stray strands of hair. She handed Marie a mirror and waited for her to inspect the results.

'It looks fine,' said Marie, and the tense, anxious look on Yvonne's face vanished.

Marie turned towards the designated wardrobe area where Jörgen was arguing with Sixten, who was in charge of lighting.

'Are you ready for me yet?' she asked.

'Give us another fifteen minutes!' called Jörgen.

His frustration was obvious in his voice. Marie knew why. Delays cost money.

Once again she wondered how things were going with the finance for the film. This wasn't the first time she'd worked on a film that started shooting before the money was in place, and on those previous occasions the plug had been pulled on the entire production. Nothing was certain until they passed the point when the film had already cost so much that it wouldn't be feasible to stop. But they weren't there yet.

'Excuse me, but could I ask you a few questions while you're

waiting?'

Marie looked up from her script. A man in his thirties was looking at her with a big smile on his face. Obviously a reporter. Normally, she would never agree to an interview that hadn't been scheduled in advance, but his skin-tight T-shirt showed off well-toned muscles that made her reluctant to dismiss him out of hand.

'Sure, ask away. I'm only sitting here waiting.'

Thankfully, Ingrid had always been stylish, so the shirt she was wearing for today's scene was particularly flattering.

The guy with the six-pack introduced himself as Axel, a reporter from *Bohuslänningen*. He began with several banal questions about the film and her career before he got to what was clearly the purpose of the interview. Marie leaned back and crossed her long legs. The past had served her career well.

'So how does it feel to be back here? Oh, I almost said "back at the scene of the crime", but let's call that a Freudian slip. Because you and Helen have always maintained your innocence.'

'We *were* innocent,' said Marie, noting with satisfaction that the young reporter couldn't stop staring at her décolletage.

'Even after you were found guilty of the crime?' said Axel, making an effort to tear his gaze away from her chest.

'We were children and completely incapable of committing such a crime, even though we were charged and convicted. Witch hunts still go on, even in this day and age.'

'So what was it like for you, in the years that followed?'

Marie tossed her head. She would never be able to describe

those years to him. He'd probably grown up with two perfect parents who helped him with everything, and he now lived with a significant other and their kids. She glanced at his left hand. A wife, not a significant other, she corrected herself.

'It was ... educational,' she said. 'I plan to write about it in detail in my memoirs some day. It's not something I can describe in a few sentences.'

'Since you mention your memoirs, I've heard that the local author, Erica Falck, is planning to write a book about the murder and about you and Helen. Are you cooperating with her? And have you and Helen approved the book?'

Marie hesitated before answering. Erica had contacted her, but she was in negotiations with one of the big book publishers in Stockholm regarding her own version of the story.

'I haven't yet decided whether to cooperate,' she said, signalling that she had no intention of answering any more questions on that topic.

Axel took the hint and changed the subject.

'I assume you've heard about the little girl who's been missing since yesterday? From the same farm where Stella was living when she disappeared.'

'A strange coincidence, but no more than that. The girl probably just got lost somewhere.'

'Let's hope so,' said Axel.

He glanced down at his notebook, but at that moment Jörgen motioned for Marie. PR was great, but right now she wanted to

go into the Dannholmen living room set and put on a brilliant performance. She had to convince the backers that this film was going to be a hit.

She shook hands with Axel, holding his hand a little longer than necessary as she thanked him for the interview. She began walking towards Jörgen and the rest of the team, but then stopped and turned around. Axel's tape recorder was still rolling, and Marie leaned forward and in a hoarse voice spoke a few numbers into the microphone. She glanced at Axel.

'That's my phone number.'

Then she turned away and stepped into the 1970s, entering the set of the windswept island that had been Ingrid Bergman's paradise on earth.

As soon as Patrik took the call from an unknown number, he knew this would be the news they'd been dreading. He listened to the voice on the other end of the line, then motioned to Gösta and Mellberg who were standing a short distance away talking to the dog handlers.

'Yes, I know where it is,' he said. 'Don't touch a thing. Not a thing. Wait there until we arrive.'

By the time he ended the call, Mellberg and Gösta had joined him. There was no need to say a word. One look at his expression told them all they needed to know.

'Where is she?' Gösta asked.

His eyes were fixed on the farmhouse where Nea's mother was standing in the kitchen making more coffee.

‘The same place where the other girl was found.’

‘Bloody hell!’ said Mellberg.

‘But we already searched that area. Several groups have searched it,’ said Gösta with a frown. ‘How could they have missed her?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Patrik. ‘That was Harald on the phone – the man who owns Zetterlind bakery. It was his group that found her.’

‘The same guy who found Stella,’ said Gösta quietly.

Mellberg stared at him.

‘That’s quite a coincidence. What are the odds that the same person, after a thirty-year gap, would find a second murdered little girl?’

Gösta waved his hand dismissively.

‘We checked him out the first time, but he had an airtight alibi. He had nothing to do with the murder.’ He looked at Patrik. ‘Because this is murder, right? Not an accident? Considering that she was found at the same spot, it seems more than likely we’re talking about murder.’

Patrik nodded.

‘We’ll need to wait and see what the techs say, but Harald said she was naked.’

‘Bloody hell,’ said Mellberg again, his face turning pale.

Patrik took a deep breath. The morning sun had begun its climb upward, and the temperature had already risen so much that his shirt was sticking to his body with sweat.

‘I suggest we split up. I’ll go and meet Harald at the site where the girl was found. His group is waiting there. I’ll take some crime scene tape with me and cordon off the area. Bertil, ring Torbjörn in Uddevalla and ask him to come out here as fast as possible with a forensic team. When the search parties get back here, tell them the search has been called off. We don’t want any volunteers going out searching again. And tell the dog handlers and the helicopter pilots they can stop looking. Gösta, could you ...’

Patrik fell silent, giving his colleague a troubled look.

Gösta nodded.

‘I’ll do it,’ he said.

Patrik didn’t envy him the task. But it was only logical for him to ask Gösta to do it. He’d had the most contact with Nea’s parents, and Patrik knew he would be able to deal with the situation.

‘And ring the pastor too,’ said Patrik. Then he turned to Mellberg. ‘Bertil, go get Nea’s father as soon as he comes back with his group, so he doesn’t hear the news before Gösta has a chance to speak to him.’

‘That won’t be easy,’ said Mellberg, grimacing.

Beads of sweat had formed on his upper lip.

‘I know. The news is going to spread like wildfire, but do your best.’

Mellberg nodded. Patrik left his colleagues and headed for the woods. He still couldn’t understand it. The place where Stella

had been found thirty years ago had been the first location they'd searched. Yet somehow they had missed her.

After walking for ten minutes he caught sight of the three men who were waiting for him. In addition to Harald, there were two younger men, one of whom looked like a foreigner. Patrik shook hands and greeted them. Not one of them wanted to meet his eye.

'Where is she?' he asked.

'Under the big tree trunk over there,' said Harald, pointing. 'That's why we didn't see her at first. There's a hollow space underneath, and someone stuffed her body into it. You can only see her if you go close and move the tree trunk.'

Patrik nodded. That explained it. But he cursed himself for not giving the order to search the area more thoroughly.

'You know she's back, right? For the first time since she was sent away.'

Patrik didn't have to ask who Harald meant. Everybody in town was aware of Marie Wall's return, especially since she'd come back under such dramatic circumstances.

'Yes, we know,' he said without speculating any further about what her return might mean.

But the thought had already occurred to him. It was certainly a strange coincidence, to say the least: no sooner had Marie returned than another little girl from the same farm turned up murdered, in the exact same spot where Stella was found.

'I'm going to cordon off the area, and in a while our forensics team will inspect the crime scene.'

He set down the bag he was carrying and took out two big rolls of blue-and-white police tape.

‘Should we go back?’ asked the younger man, who’d introduced himself as Johannes.

‘No, I’d like all of you to stay. Try not to move around too much. The techs will want to examine your clothing and shoes, since you’ve been walking around the crime scene.’

The man who seemed to be a foreigner looked puzzled. Harald turned to him and said in halting English:

‘We stay here. Okay, Karim?’

‘Okay,’ said the man with a nod. Patrik realized he was one of the men Rolf had brought from the refugee centre.

No one spoke for a few minutes. They were all struck by the surreal contrast between the reason for their presence and the idyllic surroundings. The birds carried on chirping merrily, as if nothing had happened, as if the dead body of a four-year-old girl wasn’t lying just metres away. The birdsong was accompanied by the rustle of the gentle breeze in the treetops. At this time of day, with the sun’s rays penetrating the trees to light the glade where they stood, it was heartbreakingly beautiful. Patrik’s gaze settled on a patch of chanterelles. Under normal circumstances, his heart would have leapt with excitement at the prospect of harvesting a few to take home. But right now picking mushrooms was the furthest thing from his mind.

Patrik began unwinding the tape. The only thing he could do for the little girl was to carry out his job to the best of his ability.

So he worked in silence, and tried to avoid looking at the tree trunk.

Eva was standing at the sink, rinsing out the coffee pot. She'd lost count of how many pots she'd made during the night. The sound of someone quietly clearing his throat made her turn around. When she saw the look in Gösta's eyes and his tense posture, the coffee pot slipped out of her grasp. The sound of breaking glass was instantly followed by a scream that sounded so close, yet so far away. A scream of grief and loss beyond all comprehension.

The scream came from her own lips.

She fell into Gösta's arms. His hold on her was the only thing keeping her from collapsing. She gasped for breath as Gösta stroked her hair. She wished Nea was here, laughing as she ran around the room. She wished Nea had never been born, wished she'd never produced a child who would then be taken from her.

Now all was lost. Everything had died with Nea.

'I've notified the pastor,' said Gösta, leading her over to a kitchen chair.

He must see how broken I am inside, thought Eva, since he's treating me so carefully.

'Why did you do that?' she asked, genuinely confused.

What could a pastor do for her now? She'd never had a strong religious faith. And a child should be with her parents, not with some god up in heaven. What could a pastor say that she and Peter would find the least bit consoling?

‘Peter?’ she said, her voice sounding parched and brittle.

Even her voice had died with Nea.

‘They’re looking for him. He’ll be here soon.’

‘No,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘Don’t do it. Don’t tell him.’

Let him stay out there in the woods, she thought. Let him still have hope. Peter was the only one left now. She had died with Nea.

‘He has to be told, Eva,’ said Gösta, putting his arm around her again. ‘There’s no way to avoid it.’

Eva nodded as she leaned against Gösta. Of course Peter couldn’t keep wandering through the woods like some kind of forest creature. They had to tell him, even though that would mean he too would die.

She pulled away from Gösta and leaned forward to lay her head on the table. She’d been awake for twenty-four hours. Hope and fear had kept her going. Now all she wanted was to sleep and escape everything. Pretend it was all a bad dream. Her body relaxed, the wooden tabletop felt as soft as a pillow under her cheek. She slipped further and further away. A warm hand was cautiously patting her back. Warmth spread through her body.

Then someone came in the front door. She didn’t want to open her eyes. She didn’t want to see Peter standing there. But Gösta gave her shoulder a squeeze, and she had to do it. She looked up and met Peter’s gaze, which was just as shattered as her own.

BOHUSLÄN 1671

The cow named Stjärna had recovered by the time Lill-Jan went to see to her the next morning. Preben said nothing to Elin about it, but he looked at her with new interest. She felt him watching her as she prepared breakfast. Britta had been in an unusually good mood when Elin helped her sister to dress. But she was always happiest on Sundays. She loved sitting at the very front of the church during the services, wearing her best clothes and with her hair beautifully coiffed. She loved seeing the pews fill with the members of Preben's congregation.

It was not a long walk from the vicarage to the church, and the servants went as a group. Preben and Britta had gone ahead in the horse-drawn wagon so Britta's fine clothes would not be soiled by muck and mire.

Elin held Märta's hand in a tight grip. The girl scampered more than she walked, and her blond plaits bounced against the back of the old cloak she wore. It was freezing cold, and Elin had carefully stuffed paper inside Märta's shoes to keep her feet warm and dry, but also because the shoes were hand-me-downs from one of the maids whose feet were much bigger. But Märta did not complain. Shoes were shoes, and she had already learned to be happy with what she had.

Elin's heart lifted when she saw the church looming before them as they reached Vinbäck. The newly built tower was a

stately sight, and the metal roof gleamed in the winter sun. A cemetery wall made of red-painted planks surrounded the church, and there were three big brick entrances with roof tiles, and iron gates to prevent livestock from wandering into the cemetery.

Merely stepping inside the churchyard made Elin's heart sing, and when they entered the church itself she took a deep breath and allowed the silent atmosphere to seep inside her.

She and Märta took seats at the very back. There were forty-eight pews in all, but lately they were never filled. The crowds of people who had once flocked to the coastal area during the great herring era a hundred years earlier were now only a memory. Elin's maternal grandmother had told her about the old days, recounting stories she had heard from her own parents and grandparents. Back then, everything had been different. The herring was so abundant they hardly knew what to do with all the fish, and people had come from all over Sweden to settle in the area. But the herring had disappeared and war and famine had depleted the land. Now only the stories remained. And many pews stood empty, while the rest were occupied by the listless, pale, and gaunt residents of Bohuslän. Looking at their faces, Elin saw a defeated people, devoid of hope.

The church had windows only on the south wall, but the light streaming in was so lovely that she felt tears well up in her eyes. The pulpit was also on the south side. The murmuring among the congregation faded as Preben climbed the stairs to the pulpit.

The service began with a hymn, and Elin put extra effort into the song, as she usually did, since she knew she had a beautiful singing voice. It was a small vanity she allowed herself because Märta loved to hear her sing.

She tried hard to understand what Preben was saying. Swedish was the only language permitted in the church, both for the sermon and the prayers. This was a great burden for most members of the congregation, since they were more accustomed to speaking Danish and Norwegian.

But he had a lovely voice. Elin closed her eyes and immediately felt the warmth of Preben's hand. She opened her eyes and forced herself to stare at the back of Britta's head, at the very front of the church. Britta wore her hair in a beautiful plait that Elin had fixed for her that morning. The white collar of her dress was freshly starched. She was nodding as Preben preached.

Elin forced her thoughts away from the sound of Preben's voice and the memory of his hand touching hers. He was Britta's husband, yet she was sitting here in God's house thinking these forbidden thoughts. It would come as no surprise if lightning struck the church and killed her on the spot, as punishment for her ungodliness. She squeezed Märta's hand and made herself listen, trying to understand the words issuing from the pulpit. Preben was talking about the great turmoil spreading across their kingdom and their parish, and about their countrymen who were carrying on a brave fight against the devil by seeking out his envoys and bringing them to trial. The congregation listened as

if mesmerized. The devil was as much a part of their daily lives as God was. Satan was omnipresent – danger lurked in the eyes of cats, in the ocean deep, in the raven perched in the tree. Satan was as real as a father or a brother, or the neighbour living next door. The fact that the evil one could not be seen by the naked eye made him even more dangerous, and constant vigilance was required.

‘So far we have been spared,’ said Preben, his voice resounding so beautifully between the stone walls. ‘But it is only a matter of time before Satan sinks his claws into children and women in our little corner of the world as well. So I beseech you to be watchful. The signs will be evident. Keep God’s watchful eye on your wife, your daughter, your maids, your neighbour, your mother-in-law, and your sister. The sooner we find these brides of the devil who dwell among us, the sooner we can strike back and prevent Satan from claiming a foothold here.’

Everyone nodded, an agitated rosy flush appearing on their cheeks. Any of the children who sniggered received a sharp poke in the side, a tug on their hair, or a box on the ear.

The rest of the church service was over much too soon. It was a break from the daily routine, a time for everyone to rest and turn their attention to the needs of their soul.

Elin stood up and took a firm grip on Märta’s hand so she would not get lost in the crowd of people all trying to leave at once. When they stepped outside, she shivered in the cold.

‘Pox upon you!’ a voice cried behind her.

Elin turned in surprise, but when she saw who had cursed her she lowered her eyes. It was Ebba of Mörhult, the widow of Claes who had perished along with Per and the others on the fishing boat. Ebba was one of the reasons she had not been able to stay in Fjällbacka but had been forced instead to accept Britta's offer. Ebba's hatred towards her knew no bounds, since she blamed Elin for what happened. And Elin knew why the woman felt that way, even though the words she had called to Per on that fateful morning had not caused the boat to sink. Elin's words had not drowned Per and his men; it was the fault of the storm that had suddenly overtaken them.

Yet things had not gone well for Ebba after Claes died, and she blamed her misfortune on Elin.

'Ebba, not on the church grounds, not on sacred soil,' Helga Klippare admonished her younger sister, drawing her away.

Elin gave Helga a grateful look and quickly moved off with Märta before the confrontation turned into an even bigger spectacle. People had turned to stare at her, and she knew that many thought Ebba's accusations were justified. But Helga had always been a kind and fair woman. She was the one, after all, who had helped bring Märta into the world on that spring morning eight years ago. The birth of every child in the area had been overseen by Helga, who was skilled at midwifery. It was also rumoured that she secretly helped poor girls who had landed in trouble, but that was not something Elin fully believed.

With heavy steps she headed back towards the vicarage. The

bliss she had felt after the church service was gone, and the memories of that unhappy day made her drag her feet on the short walk home. Usually she tried not to dwell on the past. Even God could not undo what was done. And to some extent Per had only himself to blame. His pride had caused him to fall. It was something she had warned him against ever since she agreed to marry him, but he had refused to listen. And now he and the others lay at the bottom of the sea as prey for the fish, while she and her daughter trudged along as lowly servants, heading for her sister's home. She would spend the rest of her life knowing that she had sent off her husband with harsh words the last time she saw him. Words that Ebba, and God knew how many others from Fjällbacka, now held against her.

It all began with a cask of salt. Word had come that henceforth all trade with foreign lands must be conducted via Gothenburg, and Bohuslän had been forbidden to carry on trade with Norway or any of the other countries with which they had successfully conducted business in the past. This had further increased the poverty of the region, and a great animosity arose against the powers that had so blithely arrived at this decision. Not everyone abided by the rules, and coastal patrols were kept busy confiscating goods that had not been properly cleared by customs. Elin had many times urged Per to obey the regulations; not doing so would only bring misfortune upon their heads. And Per had nodded, assuring her that he agreed.

So when the customs official Henrik Meyer knocked on the

door one afternoon in early September, she was not concerned as she let him enter their home. But one look at Per sitting at the kitchen table made her realize she had made a grave mistake. It took Meyer only a few minutes to find the illegal cask of salt in the back of the tool cupboard. Elin understood at once what this meant, causing her to clench her fists in the pockets of her tunic. She had warned Per so many times not to do anything foolish. Yet he could not resist.

She knew him so well. He had that unabashed look of pride in his eyes that shone through the poverty and lent him a tenacious strength. The mere fact that he had courted her testified to the courage he possessed, which most others certainly lacked. He had not known that her father cared little about her fate. In Per's eyes, she was the daughter of a wealthy man and should have been beyond his reach. But that same audacity, that same pride and strength, had now brought them to ruin.

When the customs official entered their small home, he announced that in three days he would return to confiscate the boat Per had spent so many years toiling to make his own, even though the fishing was meagre and starvation was a constant threat. The boat was his, yet he had risked everything for the sake of a cask of salt, which he had illegally purchased in Norway.

Elin was furious. Angrier than she had ever been before. She wanted to hit him, scratch out his green eyes and tear out his blond hair. His cursed pride was about to rob them of everything. How would they support themselves now? She

always took whatever work she could find, but she was unable to bring in many *riksdaler*, and it would not be easy for Per to get hired as crew on someone else's boat now they were forbidden from trading with foreign goods. And the fishing was no longer profitable.

Per had reached out to put his hand on her shoulder, but she had shrugged it off and turned her back to him. Then she had wept bitter tears. From anger and from fear. Outside their small home the wind was blowing harder, and when Per got out of bed at dawn, she sat up and asked where he was going.

'We are going out in the boat,' he replied, pulling on his trousers and shirt.

Elin had merely glared at him as Märta slept soundly on the bench in the kitchen.

'In this weather? Are you out of your mind?'

'If they are going to take away my boat in three days' time, we need to do all we can before then,' he said, putting on his coat.

Elin hurriedly dressed and followed him out of the house. He did not stop long enough to eat anything. He seemed in such a hurry to go out into the stormy weather, it was as if the devil were on his heels.

'You must not go out today!' she shouted, trying to be heard over the roar of the wind. As she pursued him down the street, curious neighbours emerged to watch. Ebba of Mörhult's husband Claes came out too, with an equally furious wife running after him.

‘You will bring death upon yourselves if you go out in this weather!’ screamed Ebba shrilly as she tugged at Claes’s jacket.

He pulled free and snarled at her: ‘We have no choice if you want the children to have food to eat.’

Per nodded to Claes, and the two of them headed for the spot where the boat was moored. Elin watched his broad back retreating, and fear sunk its claws into her so fiercely that she could hardly breathe. At the top of her lungs she yelled:

‘Have it your way then, Per Bryngelsson. Let the sea take you and your cursed boat, because I do not want you any more.’

She noticed Ebba’s frightened expression as she turned away. With her skirts flapping around her legs, Elin rushed back inside. As she threw herself on to the bed to weep, she had no idea how those words would continue to haunt her, even into death.

Chapter Eight



Jessie turned over in bed. Her mother had left for the film shoot before six a.m., and Jessie was enjoying having the house to herself. She stretched out her arms, then sucked in her stomach. It felt wonderfully smooth. Not at all fat and doughy the way it normally did. It was flat and smooth, like Vendela's.

But eventually she had to exhale, making her stomach bulge out. She removed her hand in disgust. She hated her stomach. She hated her whole body and everything else in her life. The only thing she didn't hate was Sam. She could still taste his kiss on her lips.

Jessie sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She could hear the water lapping below the house. She pushed aside the curtains. Brilliant sunshine again. She hoped Sam would want to go out in the boat today too, in spite of the video he'd shown her.

She'd known kids like Nils, Basse and Vendela all her life, at various schools, in different countries in different parts of the world. She knew what they wanted. And what they were capable of doing.

Yet for some reason they didn't seem interested in doing anything to her.

Jessie had always known the moment when news about her mother began to spread through a new school. First the smiles, the pride at having the daughter of a film star at their school. But that changed as soon as somebody googled her mother's name and found out who she was: the murderer who became an actress. Then came the stares. And the whispering. She would never be one of the popular girls – because of the way she looked and because of who she was.

Her mother didn't understand. For her, attention was always a good thing. No matter how bad the situation was for Jessie at school, she had to hang on in there until her mother started making a new film somewhere else.

It was the same for Sam. What had happened to their mothers thirty years ago hovered like a dark cloud over both of them.

Jessie went to the kitchen and opened the fridge. As usual, there was no food, just bottles of champagne. Eating was never a priority for her mother. She was too concerned about keeping her slim figure to take any interest in food. Jessie survived on the generous monthly allowance her mother gave her, spending most of the money on fast food and sweets.

She ran her hand over the bottles, feeling the cold glass under her fingertips. She took one out of the fridge – it was surprising how heavy it was – and set it on the marble countertop. She had never tasted champagne, but her mother – *Marie* – drank it all

the time.

She tore off the metal wrapper and for several seconds stared at the wire surrounding the cork before she cautiously took it off. She pulled at the cork but didn't hear the familiar 'pop'. It seemed to be firmly wedged in the top of the bottle. Jessie glanced around before recalling the way Marie always wrapped a dishtowel around the cork in order to pull it out. Jessie reached for one of the white kitchen towels, then twisted the cork at the same time as she pulled on it. Finally it began to come loose. Another tug and Jessie heard the 'pop' as the cork flew out of the bottle.

Foam gushed out, and Jessie hurriedly stepped back to avoid being drenched with champagne. Quickly she poured some of the bubbly into a water glass she found on the counter. Hesitantly she took a sip and then grimaced. It tasted awful. But Marie usually added juice, which probably made it taste better, and she always used proper champagne glasses. Jessie took a tall, slender glass from the cupboard and then found the only container of juice in the fridge. She had no idea how much juice to use, but she filled the glass two-thirds full with champagne before adding peach juice. The concoction threatened to overflow, so Jessie slurped it up. Now it tasted much better. It was actually good.

Jessie put the open bottle back in the fridge along with the juice and then took her glass out to the dock in front of the house. Her mother was going to be away filming all day, so she could do whatever she liked.

She reached for her mobile. Maybe Sam would come over and have some champagne.

‘Knock, knock?’ Erica called through the open door, which was framed by an enormous trellis of pink climbing roses. They smelled marvellous, and she’d spent a few minutes admiring them.

‘Come in!’ said a cheerful voice from somewhere inside, so Erica took off her shoes in the hall and went in.

‘Oh my, is that really you?’ said a woman in her sixties when she saw Erica. She was holding a dishtowel in one hand and a plate in the other.

Erica always felt strange when people recognized her even though they’d never met. The success of her books had made her somewhat of a celebrity, and occasionally she was even stopped on the street by someone wanting to take her picture or ask for an autograph.

‘Hi. Yes, I’m Erica Falck,’ she said, shaking hands with the woman.

‘Viola,’ said the woman, giving her a big smile.

She had a delicate network of laughter lines at her eyes, revealing that she smiled often.

‘Do you have a few minutes?’ asked Erica. ‘I’m working on a book about one of your father’s old cases, and since he’s no longer with us—’

‘You thought you’d find out what I know,’ Viola interjected, smiling again. ‘Come in. I was just making a fresh pot of coffee.’

And I think I know which case you're talking about.'

Viola led the way to the kitchen, which was off the hallway. A bright and airy room with watercolour paintings on the walls offering spots of colour. Erica paused to admire one of the paintings. She didn't know much about art, nor was she particularly interested, but it was clear the artist was talented and she felt drawn to the image.

'What lovely paintings,' she said, looking at them one after the other.

'Thank you,' said Viola, blushing. 'It has long been a hobby of mine, but recently I've started exhibiting a few of them. And it turns out people actually want to buy my work. I have a show on Friday at Stora Hotel, if you'd like to come.'

'I may just do that. I can see why people like them. They're wonderful,' said Erica as she sat down at the big white kitchen table which was positioned in front of a huge mullioned window.

She loved old windows. There was something about the irregularity of the glass that made them seem much more alive than modern factory-made windows.

'Milk?' asked Viola, and Erica nodded.

'Please.'

Viola brought over a sponge cake from the counter and cut two thick slices. Erica could feel her mouth watering.

'I assume you want to talk about my father's investigation into little Stella's murder,' said Viola as she sat down across from Erica.

‘Yes. I’m writing about the case, and your father Leif is an important piece of the puzzle.’

‘It’s been nearly fifteen years since Pappa died. I suppose you know that he committed suicide. It was a terrible shock, even though we should have known it might happen. He’d been terribly depressed ever since our mother passed away from lung cancer. He said he no longer had any reason to live. But I remember that up until his death he talked a lot about that particular case.’

‘Do you recall what he said?’

Erica resisted the impulse to close her eyes out of sheer pleasure as she took a big bite of sponge cake. The butter and sugar melted in her mouth.

‘It was so long ago, I can’t remember the details. Maybe they’ll come back to me if I give it some thought. But I do remember that the case bothered him. He was starting to have doubts.’

‘Doubts about what?’

‘About whether those girls really did it.’

Viola looked pensive as she took a sip of coffee from the white ceramic mug.

‘You mean he thought they were innocent?’

This was news to Erica. Her pulse quickened. After living with a police officer for many years, she knew that gut instincts often turned out to be right. If Leif had doubted the girls’ guilt, he must have had good reason.

‘Did he say why he was having doubts?’

Viola held her coffee mug in both hands, caressing the grooves

on the sides with her thumbs.

‘No,’ she said, frowning. ‘He never mentioned anything specific. But I suppose it didn’t help that both girls retracted their confessions and continued to proclaim their innocence all these years.’

‘But no one believed them,’ said Erica, recalling the many articles she’d read about the case, and the response from local residents whenever the case happened to come up in conversation.

Everybody seemed to be in agreement: the girls had killed Stella.

‘Right before he died, he started talking about re-opening the case, but he killed himself before he could do anything. Besides, he was retired, so he would have had to persuade the new chief of police, who I don’t think would have been especially keen on the idea. The case was solved. The question of guilt had been established, even though there was never a proper trial because the girls were so young.’

‘I don’t know whether you’ve heard, but ...’ Erica began, glancing at her mobile. Still no word from Patrik. ‘A little girl went missing yesterday afternoon, or possibly even since the night before, from the same farm where Stella lived.’

Viola stared at her.

‘What? No, I haven’t heard a thing. I’ve been in my studio, working on the paintings for my show. What happened?’

‘They don’t know yet. They’ve been out searching since

yesterday afternoon. My husband is a police officer, so he's involved in the search.'

'Oh no. Good gracious.'

Viola was struggling to find the right words. No doubt she was experiencing the same flood of emotions that Erica had on hearing the news.

'It's a strange coincidence,' said Erica. 'Too strange. And the girl is the same age as Stella. Four years old.'

'Oh, dear God,' said Viola. 'Maybe she just got lost. That farm is in a rather remote spot, isn't it?'

'Yes, it is. I hope that's what happened.'

But Erica could see Viola wasn't convinced either.

'Did your father write down any notes on the case? Do you think he might have saved some of the investigative materials at home?'

'Not that I'm aware of,' replied Viola. 'My two brothers and I took care of Pappa's estate after he died, but I can't recall seeing anything. I can check with my brothers, but I don't think there were any notebooks or case files. If there were, I'm afraid we must have thrown them out. None of us are sentimental about saving things. We believe we keep our memories in here.'

She placed her hand on her heart.

Erica knew what she meant and wished she was the same way. She had a hard time getting rid of things with sentimental value, and Patrik was always joking that he was married to a hoarder.

'Please do ask them. And here's my phone number, in case

you happen to find anything. Or if you remember something your father said about the case. Anything at all. Don't hesitate to phone, no matter how insignificant it might seem. You never know.'

Erica took a business card from her purse and handed it to Viola, who studied it for a moment before setting it on the table.

'Such awful news about that little girl. I hope they find her,' she said, shaking her head.

'I hope so too,' replied Erica, again glancing at her mobile.

Still no message from Patrik.

'Well, thank you,' she said, getting up to leave. 'I'll try to stop by the gallery on Friday if I can. I love your paintings.'

'I hope to see you then,' said Viola, blushing at Erica's praise.

As Erica headed for her car, the scent from the roses lingered in her nostrils. And Viola's words rang in her ears.

Leif had harboured doubts that Marie and Helen were guilty.

It felt as if they'd been waiting for an eternity, but an hour after Mellberg made the call, Torbjörn Ruud and his team of technicians from Uddevalla came walking through the woods. Patrik ushered them towards the tree trunk a couple of metres inside the area he had cordoned off.

'Oh hell,' said Torbjörn. Patrik nodded.

He knew crime scene techs had seen just about everything, and over time they couldn't help but become inured to the horror. But dead children never ceased to affect them. The contrast between the vitality of a young child and the utter finality of

death felt like a punch in the solar plexus.

‘Is that where she is?’ asked Torbjörn.

‘Under the tree trunk,’ Patrik confirmed. ‘I haven’t gone over to check. I wanted to wait for you to get here so as to avoid having anyone else walking through the site. According to the men who found her, there’s a hollow space, and her body was shoved inside. That’s why we didn’t find her earlier, even though we searched this area several times.’

‘Are those the men who found her?’

Torbjörn pointed at Harald, Johannes and Karim, who were standing a short distance away.

‘Yes. I asked them to stay here, so you could make sure nothing at the crime scene came from them. I assume you’ll want to photograph their shoes to identify which footprints are theirs.’

‘That’s right,’ said Torbjörn. He rattled off some instructions to one of the techs he’d brought along. Then he put on a protective suit and pulled plastic coverings over his shoes. Patrik did the same.

‘Come on,’ said Torbjörn when they were both ready.

Patrik took a deep breath and followed him over to the tree. He steeled himself for what they were about to see, but the sight still upset him so much that for a moment he froze. The first thing he saw was a child’s hand. As he’d been told, the little girl’s naked body had been stuffed into a hollow in the ground underneath the tree. She was curled up as if in a foetal position. Her face was turned towards them, though partially hidden by her hand,

which was black with dirt. Her blond hair was covered with dirt and leaves, and Patrik had to stop himself from bending down to brush off the debris. Who could have done such a thing? What kind of person would do that? Fury rushed through his veins, giving him the strength to do what he had to do. It helped him to remain cold and professional, putting his own feelings aside until later. He owed it to the little girl and her parents. And after many years of working together, he knew Torbjörn would be doing the same.

They squatted down next to each other and took in all the details. The child's body was mostly hidden from view, making it impossible to tell the cause of death. That would come later. What mattered at the moment was securing any evidence the perpetrator might have left behind.

'I'll step away for a while and let your team get to work,' said Patrik. 'Let me know when we can lift her out. I want to help.'

Torbjörn nodded, and signalled for the techs to move in and begin the meticulous task of collecting evidence from the area surrounding the tree. It was a task that could not be hurried. The smallest strand of hair, a cigarette butt, a piece of plastic, everything found in the area would have to be photographed, placed in plastic bags, and labelled. Any footprints in the loose soil would have to be lifted by pouring a viscous substance into the indentation; once the substance hardened, the techs could remove the entire footprint and take it back to the lab for comparison. It was time-consuming work, and having

participated in a number of homicide investigations, Patrik had learned to curb his impatience and allow Torbjörn and his team to do their job in peace. The evidence they collected would be vital when the murderer was brought to trial. If anything was lost due to carelessness, it might harm their case.

Patrik stepped beyond the cordoned-off area and took up position a short distance away. Right now he didn't have the energy to talk to anyone. He needed to gather his thoughts and prepare for what had to be done. The first twenty-four hours of an investigation were crucial; they needed to trace witnesses before they had time to forget what they'd seen, and to ensure that evidence was gathered before it could be erased or damaged by the elements, or by the perpetrator returning to remove all traces. A lot could happen in twenty-four hours, so it was important to prioritize. In theory, Mellberg, as the station chief, should have been in charge of this, but in practice the responsibility fell on Patrik's shoulders.

He got out his mobile to text Erica and let her know he'd be late. She'd be wondering what was going on, and he trusted her to be discreet and keep the news to herself until he gave her the all clear. But there was no reception, so he put his phone back in his pocket. He'd ring her later.

It was hot. He closed his eyes and turned his face towards the sun. The sounds from the woods blended with the murmured conversations of the techs. Patrik thought about Gösta. He wondered how he was doing, and he was grateful he wasn't the

one who had to tell Nea's parents.

A mosquito landed on his bare arm. He opened his eyes, but resisted the impulse to kill it, swatting it away instead. There had been enough death for one day.

It was all so surreal. Here he stood in the middle of a Swedish wood with people he'd never met before.

This was not the first time Karim had seen a dead body. When he was imprisoned in Damascus, a dead man had been dragged from the cell right in front of his eyes. And during the journey across the Mediterranean Sea, he'd seen dead children floating next to the boat.

But this was different. He'd come to Sweden because it was a country with no dead children. Yet a dead girl was lying only a few metres away.

Karim felt someone touch his arm. It was the older man named Harald, the one with the kind brown eyes who spoke English with such a strong Swedish accent that Karim found it difficult to understand. But he liked the man. They had passed the time by chatting. When neither of them could find the right words, they had resorted to gesturing and miming. And the younger guy, Johannes, had helped Harald find the English words that eluded him.

For the first time since arriving in Sweden, Karim had found himself talking about his family and homeland. He was aware of the longing in his own voice as he spoke of the city he'd left behind, maybe never to return. But he knew the picture he

presented was not entirely accurate. The place and people he longed for had nothing to do with terrorism.

How could any Swede comprehend what it was like to spend your days constantly looking over your shoulder, fearful that at any moment someone might betray you? It might be a friend, a neighbour, even a family member – the government had eyes everywhere. Everyone was trying to protect their own interests, everyone did whatever was necessary to save their own skin. Everyone had lost somebody. Everyone had seen loved ones die, and that meant they would do anything to protect whoever they had left. As a journalist, he'd been especially targeted.

'You okay?' asked Harald, his hand still resting on Karim's arm.

Karim could see his own thoughts mirrored in the other man's face. He had let down his guard, revealing the longing and frustration, and it unnerved him. He slammed the lid shut on his memories.

'I'm okay. I'm thinking about the girl's parents,' he said, seeing for a second the faces of his own children.

Amina was probably worried by now, and her uneasiness always affected the children. But there was no reception out here, so he hadn't been able to phone her. She would be cross when he returned. Amina was always angry whenever she felt anxious. But it didn't matter. She was even more beautiful when she was angry.

'Those poor people,' said Harald, and Karim saw that his eyes

were shiny with tears.

A short distance away the men in white plastic overalls were kneeling on the ground near the little girl, carrying out their work. One of the techs had photographed Karim's shoes. He'd also taken pictures of the shoes Johannes and Harald were wearing. And he'd pressed tape against their clothing, then carefully placed the pieces of tape in plastic bags, which he sealed and labelled. Karim understood why he did this, even though he'd never seen it happen before. The technicians wanted to rule out any traces that he and the two other men might have left behind when they entered the area where the little girl lay.

Johannes said something in Swedish to the older man, and they both nodded. Johannes then translated:

'We thought maybe we could ask the policeman if we can go home now. They seem to be done with us.'

Karim nodded. He wanted to get away from this place where the dead girl lay. Away from the sight of her blond hair and her little hand covering her face. Away from where she had been stuffed into a hollow in the ground, lying in a foetal position.

Harald went to talk to the officer standing on the other side of the police tape. They spoke for a moment in low voices, and then Karim saw the policeman nod.

'We can go,' said Harald when he rejoined the others.

Karim noticed he had started to shake, now that the tension had eased. He wanted to go home. Back to his children. And to Amina's flashing eyes.

Sanna closed her eyes at the sound of Vendela pounding up the stairs. She had a splitting headache today, and she couldn't help flinching when the door slammed. She could picture the wood panelling cracking.

All Sanna had done was suggest that Vendela should go with her to the garden centre. Vendela had never been exactly thrilled about being there, but nowadays she seemed to regard it as a form of punishment. Sanna knew she ought to take a sterner hand with Vendela, but she just didn't have the energy. It felt as if all her strength had vanished when she heard about Nea's disappearance.

The sound of throbbing bass came from upstairs now, so loud it made the walls vibrate. Sanna wondered how her daughter planned to spend the day. She mostly seemed to hang out with those two boys, and they were probably not the best companions for her. A fifteen-year-old girl and two boys the same age could only mean trouble.

Sanna pushed aside her breakfast plate. Vendela had eaten only an egg. The bread she'd always had for breakfast, ever since she was little, contained too much sugar for Vendela these days. Sanna toasted a slice of the bread and spread on a thick layer of orange marmalade. She was already so late that five more minutes would make no difference.

She didn't mind that Vendela was in one of her defiant moods today. At least it was a distraction from thoughts of Nea. And she hadn't had time to think about Stella. But now, as she sat alone in

the kitchen, all the memories came flooding in. She remembered that day down to the smallest detail. How happy she'd been to go with her mother to Uddevalla to buy new clothes for school. How she'd felt torn between joy at having a shopping expedition with her mother and envy of Stella, who had those two cool older girls babysitting her. But her jealousy was forgotten as soon as they had waved goodbye and she and her mother drove off in the Volvo, headed for the big city.

On their way home, she kept glancing in the back seat at the shopping bags with her new clothes. Such amazing clothes. She'd been so happy it was all she could do to sit still. Her mother had scolded her, but she'd been laughing as she did so.

That was the last time she ever saw her mother laugh.

Sanna set the rest of her toast on the table. The bread seemed to swell inside her mouth. She remembered getting out of the car and seeing her father's expression when he greeted them. Nausea suddenly overwhelmed Sanna, and she had to rush for the toilet, making it there just in time. Pieces of orange marmalade floated in the toilet bowl, and she began to retch again.

Afterwards she sank on to the cold tile floor, shaking all over. Upstairs, the music was still thudding.

The bullet slammed into one of the targets nailed to a tree in the forest glade behind their yard.

'Good,' said James curtly.

Sam had to force himself not to smile. This was the only thing for which he ever received praise. It seemed his only talent as a

son was being a good shot.

‘You’re getting better and better,’ James told him, giving a satisfied nod as he peered over the rims of his sunglasses.

He wore aviator shades. Sam thought his father looked like a parody of an American sheriff.

‘See if you can hit the target from a little further away,’ said James, motioning for Sam to back up.

Sam moved away from the tree.

‘Steady your hand. Exhale at the precise moment you squeeze the trigger. Focus.’

James had trained elite Swedish military units for years, and Sam knew his father was a highly respected professional. That he was also a cold bastard probably added to his reputation, but it made Sam long for the next time James would be deployed abroad.

The months when James was away, often to unknown destinations, seemed like a breath of fresh air to Sam. Both he and his mother were more relaxed. She laughed more, and Sam loved seeing her happy. As soon as James stepped in the door, the laughter vanished, and she went out running more often. She lost weight, but instead of looking healthier, she just looked stressed. Sam hated that version of his mother as much as he loved the happier one. He knew he was being unfair, but she was the one who had chosen to have a child with that man. Sam refused to call him Father. Or Pappa.

He quickly fired off a few shots. He knew his aim was right on.

James nodded with satisfaction.

'Hell, if only you had a backbone, I could make a fine soldier out of you,' said James, chuckling.

Helen came into the backyard.

'I'm going out for a run,' she called to James and Sam, but neither of them answered.

Sam thought she'd already left. She usually went running right after breakfast in order to avoid the worst heat of the day, but it was nearly ten o'clock.

'Back up another couple of metres,' said James.

Sam knew he'd be able to hit the target, even at that distance. He'd been practising at greater distances during the periods when James was away. But for some reason he didn't want to show his father exactly how good a shot he was. He didn't want to give him the satisfaction of thinking his son had inherited something from him. He didn't deserve any credit. Everything in Sam's life was in spite of James, not thanks to him.

'Nice!' his father shouted when he made the next series of shots.

That was something Sam hated. The way James would switch to English, speaking with a distinct American accent. He had no American ancestors; his grandfather had been a fan of James Dean when he was young. But James had spent so much time with Americans that he'd picked up their accent. Thick and mushy. Sam found it embarrassing every time James failed to speak Swedish.

‘One more time,’ said James in English, as if he could read Sam’s thoughts and wanted to provoke him.

Sam aimed the gun at the target and pulled the trigger. Bullseye.

BOHUSLÄN 1671

‘The girl was inside the big house yesterday. And you know what I have said about that, Elin!’

Britta’s words were spoken harshly, and Elin bowed her head.

‘I will speak to her,’ she said quietly.

Britta swung her legs over the side of the bed.

‘We are receiving a special visitor today,’ she went on.

‘Everything must be perfect. Have you washed and starched my blue dress? The silk brocade?’

She stuck her feet into the slippers next to the bed. Their warmth was welcome. Even though the vicarage was a more splendid house than any Elin had ever seen, it was still cold and draughty, and the floor was ice-cold in the wintertime.

‘Everything is ready and waiting,’ replied Elin. ‘We have scrubbed every nook and cranny of the house, and Boel from Holta arrived yesterday and has already begun to prepare the food. She will start by serving stuffed codheads, followed by capon with gooseberries as the main course, and bread custard for dessert.’

‘Excellent,’ said Britta. ‘Harald Stake’s envoy should be served a meal befitting a lord. After all, Harald Stake is the governor of the county of Bohuslän, and he has been ordered by the king himself to speak to the vicars about this plague of witchcraft. Only a few days ago, Preben told me of a witch who has been

imprisoned in Marstrand.’

Britta’s cheeks had flushed crimson with indignation.

Elin nodded. People could talk of nothing else these days. The recently formed witchcraft council had busied itself imprisoning witches all over Bohuslän and soon the trials would begin. All over Sweden, strong measures were being taken against this wickedness. Elin shuddered. Witches and sorcerers. Travels to Blåkulla, witch mountain, and alliances with the devil himself. It appalled her that such evil existed so close to home.

‘I heard from Ida-Stina that it is because of you that Svea of Hult is now with child,’ said Britta as Elin helped her dress. ‘Whatever it is you did for her, I want you to do the same for me.’

‘I can do only what my maternal grandmother taught me,’ said Elin, tightly lacing Britta’s bodice in the back.

She was not surprised by the request. Britta was nearing twenty, and she and Preben had been married for two years, yet her belly had not yet swollen with child.

‘Do whatever you did for Svea. It is time for me to give Preben a child. He has started asking when this might happen.’

‘I made Svea a herbal mixture from one of Grandmother’s recipes,’ said Elin, as she began brushing Britta’s long hair.

The two sisters were very different in appearance. Elin had inherited her mother’s blond hair and pale blue eyes. Britta had dark hair, and her dark blue eyes were like those of the woman who had taken Elin’s mother’s place even before she died. Gossiping tongues in the village still whispered that Elin’s mother

Kerstin had died of a broken heart. Even if this were true, Elin wasted no time thinking about it. Their father had died a year ago, and Britta was the only one who could save her and Märta from death by starvation.

‘She also taught me certain words to speak,’ said Elin cautiously. ‘If you are not opposed, I could prepare the mixture for you and say the appropriate prayers. I have everything I need to brew the concoction. I dried plenty of herbs during the summer so that I would have enough to last the winter.’

Britta waved her slender white hand dismissively.

‘Do as you please. I need to give birth to a child for my husband or risk bringing misfortune upon us.’

Elin was about to say in that case perhaps it would be a good idea for her to share the marriage bed with him. But she was wise enough to keep quiet. She had seen the consequences of arousing Britta’s ire. For a moment she wondered how a man as kind as Preben could have married someone like Britta. No doubt their father had had a hand in it, eager as he was to see his daughter make a good match.

‘You may go now,’ said Britta, standing up. ‘I am sure there must be countless things you need to attend to before Stake’s envoy arrives. And speak to that girl of yours, or I shall have to let the rod do the talking.’

Elin nodded, though her sister’s threat of beating Märta made her blood boil. So far Britta had not lifted a hand against the girl, but when she did, Elin knew she would not be able to answer for

her actions. She would have to impress upon her daughter the importance of heeding her warning not to enter the big house.

Elin went out to the yard and looked around uneasily.

‘Märta?’ she called.

Britta took a dim view of any servant who spoke too loudly. Yet another thing to remember if Elin did not want to fall into disfavour.

‘Märta?’ she called a little louder as she went into the stable.

This was the most likely place to find Märta, but she wasn’t there either. Unfortunately, Elin’s daughter had inherited not only her father’s green eyes, but also his stubbornness. The girl never seemed to listen to her mother’s admonitions.

‘We are here,’ she heard a familiar voice say.

Preben. She stopped abruptly.

‘Come over here, Elin,’ he said kindly from the darkness of the last stall.

‘Yes, come here, Mother,’ said Märta eagerly.

Elin hesitated but then picked up her skirts to avoid soiling the hem with muck from the ground and quickly moved in the direction of their voices.

‘Look, Mother,’ said Märta, awe in her voice.

She was sitting at the very back of an empty stall, holding three kittens on her lap. They looked to be no more than a day old. They were turning their heads back and forth, blind to the world. Next to Märta sat Preben. He too had a lapful of kittens.

‘Truly one of God’s miracles,’ he said, petting a tiny grey

kitten.

The creature meowed pitifully, rubbing its head on his sleeve.

‘Here, take one, Mother,’ said Märta, handing Elin a black-and-white spotted kitten that flailed its paws in the air.

Elin hesitated. She looked over her shoulder. Britta would not be pleased to find her and Märta here. And with Preben.

‘Sit down, Elin.’ Preben gave her a small smile. ‘My dear wife is fully occupied with preparations for our grand visitor this evening.’

Still Elin hesitated. But unable to resist the helpless appeal of the black-and-white kitten, she reached out and took it from Märta, then sat down on the straw and set the kitten on her lap.

‘The vicar says I can choose one to be mine, all mine.’

Märta gave Preben a delighted look. Elin glanced at him as well. He was smiling – a smile that reached all the way to his blue eyes.

‘You must baptize the kitten too,’ he said. ‘But as we have agreed, this must be a secret, just between the two of us.’

He held a finger to his lips and gave the girl a solemn look. Märta nodded, her expression equally solemn.

‘I will tell no one. It will be my most precious secret,’ she said, looking at the kittens. ‘That is the one I want.’

She stroked the head of a tiny grey kitten. It was the smallest of the litter. Elin looked over at Preben, trying to shake her head without drawing Märta’s attention. The poor little thing looked so scrawny, she doubted it would survive. But Preben calmly

returned her look.

‘Märta has a fine eye for cats,’ he said, scratching the grey kitten behind the ear. ‘I would have made the very same choice.’

Märta gave the vicar a look that Elin had not seen since misfortune had befallen them, and it made her heart ache. Per was the only one who had ever received such looks from Märta. Yet there was something about Preben that reminded her of Per. A kindness in his eyes that was soothing and invited trust.

‘Her name will be Viola,’ said Märta, ‘since violets are my favourite flowers.’

‘A splendid name,’ said Preben.

He looked at Elin. They had to hope the kitten did not turn out to be a male.

‘Märta wants to learn to read,’ said Preben, patting the girl’s blond head. ‘My parish clerk gives the children lessons twice a week.’

‘I do not see what use she would have for that,’ said Elin.

If there was one thing life had taught her, it was that womenfolk did best not to draw attention. Or to entertain great hopes. Disappointment was all they could expect in life.

‘She must be able to read her catechism,’ said Preben, and Elin felt ashamed.

How could she argue with the vicar? If he thought it beneficial or even advisable for her daughter to learn to read, who was she to object?

‘In that case, Märta may attend the lessons,’ said Elin, bowing

her head.

She herself had never learned to read. She had managed to handle the repeated catechism questions because she had learned everything by rote.

‘That is decided then,’ said Preben happily, giving Märta one last pat on the head.

He stood up and brushed the straw from his trousers. Elin tried not to look at him. There was something about him that attracted her, and she was ashamed the thought had even entered her mind. Preben was her sister’s husband and the vicar of the church. To feel anything but gratitude and reverence for such a man was a sin, and she deserved God’s punishment.

‘I suppose I had better go in and help Britta with the preparations now, before she runs all the servants ragged,’ he said cheerfully. Then he turned to Märta. ‘Take care of Viola now. You have a good eye for who needs a helping hand.’

‘Thank you,’ said Märta, giving Preben such an adoring look that Elin’s heart melted.

And ached. The longing she felt for Per struck her with such force she had to turn away. Listening to Preben’s retreating footsteps, she banished the memories from her mind. Per was gone. There was nothing to be done about it. She and Märta had only each other now. And Viola.

Chapter Nine



‘This is a very sad day,’ said Patrik, looking around at his colleagues in the conference room.

No one spoke, no one looked at him. He supposed that, like him, they were thinking about their own children. Or grandchildren.

‘Bertil and I are cancelling all leave. As of now, everyone is back on the job,’ he said. ‘I hope you will understand.’

‘I think I speak for everybody here when I say you couldn’t keep us away,’ said Paula.

‘That’s what I thought,’ replied Patrik, moved by his colleagues’ response. Even Mellberg was eager to get to work.

‘So let’s tend to the practical matters first. I know that several of you have children who aren’t in school at the moment.’

He looked at Martin as he said this.

‘Pia’s parents will take care of Tuva while I’m at work.’

‘Good,’ said Patrik.

Since no one else spoke, he assumed that Paula and Annika had also made arrangements at home. The death of a child took priority over everything else. It was all hands on deck, and he

knew they had many hours of work ahead of them.

‘Gösta, how are the parents doing?’ asked Patrik, sitting down in a chair next to the whiteboard at the front of the room.

‘As well as could be expected,’ said Gösta, blinking several times. ‘The pastor came over, and I called in the doctor as well. When I left, both parents had been given a sedative to help them sleep.’

‘Do they have any relatives who can come over?’ asked Annika, who had a big family and was used to having lots of people around, lending their support in a crisis.

‘Eva’s parents are dead. Peter’s parents live in Spain, but they’re on a plane as we speak. They should be here in a few hours.’

‘What has Torbjörn told you so far? How is their work coming along?’ asked Martin, reaching for the large Thermos jug that Annika had filled with coffee before the meeting began.

‘The girl’s body is being taken to Gothenburg for the post-mortem,’ said Patrik quietly.

The memory of lifting Nea’s small body out from underneath the tree trunk would stay with him forever. Wild animals had not been able to reach her as she lay there in the hollow, but insects had poured out when they lifted her. Images flashed through his mind in rapid progression; he knew the same sequence would be replayed in his mind every night for the foreseeable future. He had observed many post-mortems in the course of his career, so he was familiar with what went on. All too familiar. He didn’t

want to picture the little girl lying naked and exposed on the steel table. He didn't want to know where Pedersen would make the incisions, how her organs would be removed, how everything that had once given her life would be weighed and measured. He didn't want to know how the stitches would then form a 'Y' on her chest.

'How did it go at the crime scene?' Gösta asked. 'Did they find anything useful?'

Patrik gave a start as he tried to shake off the visions of Nea on the autopsy table.

'They collected a lot of material, but we don't know yet how significant it will be.'

'What sort of things did they find?' Martin wanted to know.

'Footprints, though they might be from the three men who found her or the previous search parties. Everyone who took part in the search has been asked to provide footprints. Did any of you search that particular area? If so, we need footprints from you too.'

'No, none of us was in the area where the girl was found,' said Gösta, helping himself to a cup of coffee.

'Okay, footprints. What else?' asked Paula.

'I'm not sure. The techs were putting a lot of things in plastic bags, but I won't know the details until Torbjörn's report comes in. He doesn't like to give out any information until he's had a chance to take a close look at all the collected material.'

Mellberg stood up and went over to the window.

‘Damn, it’s hot in here.’

He tugged at his shirt collar as if he couldn’t breathe. There were big patches of sweat under his arms, and his comb-over had slid down over one ear. He opened the window. The traffic noise was a little intrusive, but no one objected to having fresh air sweep through the stuffy room. Ernst, the station’s dog, had been lying at Mellberg’s feet, panting. Now he got up and padded over to the window to sniff at the air.

‘So Torbjörn didn’t tell you anything?’ asked Paula.

Patrik shook his head. ‘No, we’ll have to wait for his preliminary report. And I need to find out from Pedersen when we can expect the results of the post-mortem. I’m afraid there are other cases ahead of this one, but I’ll talk to him and see what he can do.’

‘You were there at the scene. Did you notice anything?’ Paula persisted. ‘Anything on her body or—’

Martin grimaced.

‘No. And it’s not worth speculating until Pedersen has time to examine her.’

‘Are there any obvious suspects?’ asked Martin, tapping his pen on the table. ‘What do we know about the parents? It wouldn’t be the first time parents killed their own child and then tried to make it look like someone else had done it.’

‘I have a hard time believing that, in this case,’ said Gösta, setting down his cup so hard the coffee sloshed over the side.

Patrik held up his hand.

‘At this point there’s no reason to believe Nea’s parents are in any way involved. But Martin’s right – we can’t rule out the possibility. We need to talk to them as soon as we can, partly to find out whether they have an alibi, and partly to find out whether they have any information that might help us move forward with the investigation. But I’m inclined to agree with Gösta. At this stage, nothing points towards them.’

‘Since the girl was naked, maybe we ought to look into whether any paedophiles have been seen in the area of the farm,’ Paula suggested.

Silence settled over the room. Nobody wanted to think about what this suggestion implied.

‘I’m afraid you’re right,’ Mellberg said after a moment. ‘But how do we go about that?’

He was still sweating buckets and panting as heavily as Ernst. ‘There are thousands of tourists here right now,’ he went on. ‘How can we tell whether there are any sex offenders or paedophiles among all those people?’

‘We can’t. But we can dig out the reports of suspected sex offenders who may have turned up here this summer. Wasn’t there a woman who came in this week to report a guy who was secretly taking pictures of kids at the beach?’

‘Yeah,’ said Patrik with a nod. ‘I took the report. Glad you thought of that, Annika. Could you go through all the reports we’ve taken since May? Pull out anything of interest. Better to cast a broad net, and later we can narrow it down.’

'I'm on it,' she said, writing a note to herself.

'So we need to talk about the elephant in the room,' said Paula, refilling her cup from the Thermos.

A hissing sound issued from the Thermos pump, indicating it was almost empty. Annika got up to refill it. Coffee was the fuel they all needed at the moment.

'I know what you're talking about,' said Patrik, looking a little uncomfortable. 'The Stella case. Helen and Marie.'

'Yes,' said Gösta. 'I was working here at the station thirty years ago. Unfortunately, I don't remember all the details. It was a long time ago, and Leif turned over all the routine stuff to me while he handled the investigation and interviews. But I do recall what a shock it was to the whole town when Helen and Marie, having admitted to killing Stella, later retracted their confessions. To my mind, it's no coincidence that Nea disappeared from the same farm and was found in the same place. Or the fact that this should happen right when Marie comes back here after a thirty-year absence.'

'I agree,' said Mellberg. 'We need to talk to both of them. Even though I wasn't here for that investigation, I heard a lot of talk about the case. And I've always thought it was especially horrifying that such young girls would kill a child.'

'Both of them have maintained their innocence all these years,' Paula pointed out.

Mellberg snorted. 'In that case, why did they confess in the first place? Personally, I've never doubted those two girls killed

Stella. And it doesn't take an Einstein to put two and two together when the same thing happens again, now they're back together for the first time in thirty years.'

'We need to be careful not to rush to judgement,' said Patrik. 'But I agree we need to talk to both of them.'

'I think it's crystal clear,' Mellberg went on. 'Marie comes back, she and Helen are united, another murder occurs.'

Annika came back into the room, bringing the Thermos filled with coffee.

'Did I miss anything?'

'We were only saying that we need to consider possible similarities with the 1985 case. And we'll have to interview Helen and Marie.' Patrik looked at the whiteboard. 'Annika, could you try to find the interview files and the rest of the case notes and evidence? I know it won't be easy, considering what a mess it is in the archives, but give it a try.'

Annika nodded and made another note on her pad.

For a moment Patrik sat in silence, pondering whether what he was about to say had been properly thought through. But if he said nothing, it would undoubtedly come up in some other context, and then he'd be criticized for not mentioning it to his colleagues.

'Regarding the Stella case ...' he said, pausing before going on. Then he tried again. 'Well, the thing is, Erica has started work on her next book. And ... she has decided to write about that particular case.'

Mellberg sat up straight. 'She's going to have to put that on hold for a while,' he said. 'We have enough to worry about without your wife running around and getting in the way. This is police business, not a matter for civilians who have neither the training nor the experience of the police force.'

Patrik had to stop himself from pointing out that Erica had been of far more help than Mellberg in solving their last few big cases. He knew it would do no good to insult Mellberg. His boss had the greatest faith in his own talents, albeit he was alone in that regard. Patrik had learned to work around him instead of with him. He also knew from experience that it would serve no purpose to tell Erica not to research the Stella case. Once she started poking around, she wouldn't rest until all her questions were answered. But that wasn't something he needed to tell his colleagues. He surmised that everyone other than Mellberg was well aware of this.

'Fine,' he said. 'I'll tell Erica. But she has already done a lot of research, so I was thinking we might use her as a resource. What would you think if I invited her over this afternoon so she could tell us what she knows about the case?'

'I think that's a brilliant idea,' said Gösta. Everyone except Mellberg nodded agreement.

But Bertil knew when he was outnumbered and muttered: 'I suppose that's all right.'

'Good. I'll talk to her as soon as we finish the meeting,' said Patrik. 'Maybe you could add whatever details you do remember

from the investigation, Gösta.’

Gösta nodded. His wry smile indicated there wasn’t much he’d be able to recall.

‘So, what else is on the list of things we need to do?’ asked Patrik.

‘The press conference,’ said Mellberg, looking more cheerful.

Patrik frowned but he knew he had to choose his battles. Mellberg would be allowed to handle the press conference. They would just have to cross their fingers that he didn’t manage to do any damage in the process.

‘Annika, could you call a press conference for this afternoon?’

‘Okay,’ she said, making a note of the request. ‘Before or after Erica has been here?’

‘Let’s do it before,’ said Patrik. ‘Preferably two o’clock. I’ll ask Erica to be here around three thirty.’

‘I’ll tell the reporters two o’clock. The phone has been ringing nonstop, so it’ll be nice to be able to tell them something.’

‘We all need to be aware that this is going to turn into a real media circus,’ said Patrik.

He shifted in his seat. Unlike Mellberg, who relished being in the spotlight, he viewed media interest as nothing more than a hindrance. Though on rare occasions media reports did lead to important tips from the public, more often than not the negative effects far outweighed the positive.

‘Don’t worry. Leave it to me,’ said Mellberg happily, leaning back in his chair. Ernst was once again draped over his feet under

the table. Even though it must have been like wearing a pair of warm wool socks, Mellberg let him stay. Erica was fond of saying that Mellberg's love for the big, shaggy dog was one of his few redeeming qualities.

'Be sure to weigh every word you say,' Patrik reminded him, fully aware that Mellberg usually allowed the words to spill out, free and uncensored, and without any thought for the consequences.

'I have a lot of experience dealing with the press corps. During my days in Gothenburg—'

'Great,' Patrik cut in. 'We'll leave it to you then. Maybe you and I could do a brief run-through beforehand, discuss what we want to emphasize and what we should keep to ourselves. Okay?'

Mellberg huffed. 'As I said, during my days in Gothenburg—'

'How should we divide up the work?' asked Martin, heading off Mellberg's diatribe.

Patrik gave him a grateful look. 'I'll talk to Torbjörn and Pedersen and find out when we might expect to get more information from them.'

'I'll talk to Nea's parents,' said Gösta. 'But I'll give the doctor a call first to check how they're doing.'

'Do you want to take someone with you?' asked Patrik. He could only imagine what Eva and Peter must be going through.

'No, I can handle it alone. Better to use our resources on other things,' said Gösta.

'I can talk to the girls who were convicted of killing Stella,'

said Paula. ‘Or “women”, I suppose I should say. They’re not girls any more.’

‘I’ll go with you,’ said Martin, raising his hand like a schoolboy.

‘Good.’ Patrik nodded. ‘But wait until Erica has been here and given us more meat on the bone, so to speak. Use the time until then to knock on doors in the area around the farm. When people live in a remote spot like that, they tend to keep an eye out for anything unusual and any strangers who happen by. So it’s worth talking to the neighbours.’

‘Okay,’ said Paula. ‘We’ll drive out there and have a chat with the closest neighbours.’

‘I’ll hold the fort here,’ said Patrik. ‘The phone keeps ringing, and I want to review our plans for the investigation before the press conference.’

‘And I need to get ready,’ said Mellberg, reaching up to pat his hair in place.

‘All right. We’ve got a lot of work to do,’ said Patrik, signalling the meeting was over.

The small conference room was now unbearably stuffy and hot. He was desperate to get out of there, and he suspected his colleagues felt the same way.

The first thing he did was ring Erica. He wasn’t sure it was wise to let her get involved in the investigation, but as he saw it, he had no choice. On the other hand, it would be a real bonus if she had information that could help them find Nea’s killer.

The first kilometre was always tough, in spite of all the years she'd been running. But after that it got easier. Helen felt her body respond and her breathing became more regular.

She had started running as soon as the court hearing was over. The first day she ran five kilometres to rid her body of all the frustration. The pounding of her footsteps on the gravel, the wind blowing through her hair, the sounds all around her – those were the only things that could silence the rest of the world.

She ran a little further each time, and she got better and better. Over the years she'd run in more than thirty marathons. But only in Sweden. She dreamed of being in a marathon in New York, Sydney, or Rio, but she was grateful that James at least let her take part in the Swedish races.

The fact that she was allowed to cultivate this interest of hers, allowed to spend a couple of hours every day on her running, was solely because he appreciated the discipline of the sport. It was the only thing he respected about her – that every morning she ran tens of kilometres, that her psyche was able to conquer the limitations of her body. But she could never explain to anyone how, when she ran, everything that had happened was erased, becoming hazy and distant, nothing more than a dream she had once had.

In her peripheral vision she saw the house built on the site where Marie's childhood home had once stood. By the time Helen returned to Fjällbacka, the new house was already there. Her parents chose to move away immediately after everything

fell apart. Her mother, Harriet, couldn't handle all the gossip, the surreptitious stares, and the whispering.

James and her father, KG, had seen each other often until KG died. Sometimes she and Sam would go along when James drove to Marstrand, but only so Sam could visit his grandparents. Helen had no wish to see either of her parents. They had failed her when she needed them most, and that was something she could never forgive.

Her legs were starting to tighten, and she reminded herself to correct her stride. Like so much else, she'd had to struggle to develop a good stride. Nothing had ever come naturally to her.

No, now she was lying to herself. Until that day, life had been easy, they had still been a family. She couldn't recall any problems or setbacks. Nothing but bright summer days and the scent of her mother's perfume when she tucked her in at night. And love. She remembered the love.

She picked up speed in order to drown out her thoughts. All those thoughts that running usually erased. Why were they appearing in her mind now? Was she going to have to give up even this temporary reprieve? Had Marie's return ruined everything?

With each breath, Helen noticed how different everything felt. Her lungs were straining, and in the end she had to stop. Her legs felt so tight, and her body was weak from lactic acid. For the first time her body had defeated her will.

Helen didn't notice she was falling until she landed on the

ground.

Bill looked around the restaurant in the TanumStrand hotel and conference centre. Only five people had turned up. He saw five weary faces. He knew they had been out searching for little Nea all night. He and Gun had talked about it on their way over, wondering whether they should postpone the meeting. But Bill was convinced this was exactly what was needed at the moment.

Yet it had never occurred to him that only five people would come.

Rolf had arranged for Thermoses of coffee and rolls with cheese and paprika to be set on a side table, and Bill had already helped himself. He took a sip of coffee. Gun sat on a chair next to him, sipping her coffee as well.

Bill looked from the exhausted faces to Rolf, who was standing at the entrance to the restaurant.

‘Maybe you’d like to introduce everyone?’ he asked.

Rolf nodded.

‘This is Karim. He came here with his wife and two children. He worked as a journalist in Damascus. Then we have Adnan and Khalil, sixteen and eighteen, respectively. They came to Sweden alone and have become friends at the refugee centre. And this is Ibrahim, the oldest of the group.’ Rolf switched to English. ‘How old are you, Ibrahim?’

The man next to Rolf had a big beard. Smiling, he held up five fingers.

‘Fifty.’

‘That’s right. Ibrahim is fifty, and he arrived here with his wife. Finally, we have Farid. He came to Sweden with his mother.’

Bill nodded to the man with the shaved head and the huge body. He looked to be in his thirties and, judging by his girth, he spent a large part of his time eating. Bill thought it might be tricky to get the weight distribution right in a sailboat with someone who weighed at least three times as much as the others, but they’d find a way. He needed to stay positive. If he hadn’t stayed positive he never would have survived that time when his boat capsized off the coast of South Africa and the great white sharks began circling.

‘And my name is Bill,’ he said, speaking slowly and clearly. ‘I’m going to speak Swedish with you as much as possible.’

He and Rolf had agreed that would be best. The whole point was for the refugees to learn the language so they could more rapidly become part of society.

Everyone except Farid had a puzzled expression. He replied in broken but understandable Swedish:

‘I am the only one who understands Swedish okay. I have been here the longest and I have studied hard, very hard. I can maybe help to translate in the beginning. So the boys will understand?’

Bill nodded. That seemed sensible. All the new words and specialized sailing terms would be challenging even for a native Swede. Farid switched to Arabic and quickly explained what Bill had said. The others nodded.

‘We try ... understand ... Swedish ... and learn,’ said the man named Karim.

‘Great! Excellent!’ said Bill, giving them a thumbs up. ‘Do all of you know how to swim?’

He made swimming motions with his arms, and Farid repeated his question in Arabic. The five men spoke among themselves, then Karim replied for all of them, again in laborious Swedish.

‘We can ... that is why we take this course. Otherwise not.’

‘Where did you learn to swim?’ asked Bill, both relieved and surprised. ‘Have you spent a lot of time on the coast?’

Farid quickly translated. His words were greeted with laughter.

‘At the leisure centre,’ he said with a smile.

‘Oh, of course.’

Bill felt stupid. He didn’t dare glance at Gun sitting next to him, but he could hear her trying not to snort. He probably needed to do some reading about Syria, so he wouldn’t seem like such an ignorant fool. He’d visited many parts of the world, but for him their country was only a blank patch on the map.

He reached for another roll. It had a thick layer of butter, just the way he liked it.

Karim raised his hand, and Bill gave him a nod.

‘When ... when we begin?’

Karim said something in Arabic, and Farid added: ‘When do we begin sailing?’

Bill threw out his hands.

‘There’s no time to lose. The Dannholmen regatta takes place in only a few weeks, so we start tomorrow! Rolf will give you a lift to Fjällbacka, and we’ll begin at nine o’clock. Bring warm clothes with you. It’s colder out on the water than on shore when the wind is blowing.’

When Farid had translated, the others looked a bit uneasy. But Bill gave them an encouraging look and what he hoped was a winning smile. This was going to be great, just great. No problems at all. It was all good.

‘Thanks for letting the kids hang out here for a while,’ said Erica as she sat down across from Anna on the partially finished deck.

She had gratefully accepted the offer of iced tea. The heat was oppressive, and the AC wasn’t working properly in her car. She felt as if she’d been wandering in the desert for forty days. She reached for the glass Anna had filled from the carafe and downed the iced tea in one long swig. Anna laughed and refilled her glass. Now that Erica had quenched the worst of her thirst, she could drink the rest of her tea more slowly.

‘It was fine,’ said Anna. ‘The kids were so sweet I hardly even noticed them.’

Erica grinned. ‘Are you sure you’re talking about my kids? Maja can be quite docile, but I wouldn’t call those two little rascals “sweet”.’

Erica wasn’t kidding. When the twins were younger, they’d

been very different from each other. Anton had been calmer and more introverted, while Noel was the one who always made a fuss and got into mischief. Now both of them had entered a period when they were filled with such an excess of energy that it was frequently too much for her. Maja had never gone through anything like that. She hadn't even been particularly obstinate when she was a toddler, so Erica and Patrik had not been prepared for this. And it was double trouble, since they were twins. Erica would have loved to leave the children with Anna for the rest of the day, but her sister looked so tired that she couldn't ask any more of her today.

'So how did it go?' Anna said, leaning back in her Baden Baden deckchair with the gaudy, sun-patterned cushion.

Anna hated the sight of those cushions every time they sat outside on the deck, but Dan's mother had made them, and she was such a nice person that Anna couldn't bring herself to replace them. In that respect Erica was lucky. Patrik's mother, Kristina, would never dream of sewing or doing any other type of handiwork.

'It was pretty hopeless,' said Erica gloomily. 'Her father died so long ago, and she didn't remember much. And she didn't think he'd saved any of the investigative materials. But she did say something interesting. She told me Leif had started to doubt whether they actually did it.'

'You mean he thought the girls weren't guilty after all?' said Anna, swatting away a horsefly.

Erica kept her eye on the fly. She hated all wasps and flies.

‘Uh-huh. She said he wasn’t convinced they did it, especially towards the end of his life.’

‘I thought they confessed,’ said Anna, again swatting at the fly. But it was merely dazed and continued attacking her the second it recovered. ‘My God, get away from me!’

Anna got up and reached for a magazine on the table. She rolled it up and swung at the fly, mashing it against the wax tablecloth.

Erica couldn’t help smiling at her hugely pregnant little sister going after that fly. Not an easy task for Anna at the moment.

‘Go ahead and smirk,’ said Anna peevishly as she wiped the sweat from her forehead before she sat down again. ‘Now where were we? Oh, right. Those girls confessed, didn’t they?’

‘Yes, they did, and it was their confession that got them convicted. Since they were so young, they didn’t receive a sentence, but the matter of their guilt was outlined in a statement at the court hearing.’

‘But what if they *weren’t* guilty?’ said Anna, staring at Erica. ‘What a tragedy that would be. Two thirteen-year-old girls whose lives were destroyed. Doesn’t one of them live around here? That’s awfully brave of her, if you ask me.’

‘I know. She moved back after a few years in Marstrand. You can imagine what the locals were saying about her at first, so it must have been hell. But after a while all the talk died down.’

‘Have you met her yet? For your book?’

‘No. I sent her several requests for an interview, but she never answered. So I was thinking of going to see her. To find out whether she’d agree to talk to me.’

‘How do you think your work on the book is going to be affected by what’s happened?’ asked Anna quietly. ‘To the little girl, I mean.’

Erica had phoned to tell Anna about Nea as soon as she heard that the girl’s body had been found. News of the child’s death would spread like wildfire through the whole community.

‘I’m not sure,’ said Erica hesitantly as she helped herself to more iced tea. ‘Maybe people will be more inclined to talk now, or maybe the opposite. We’ll soon find out.’

‘What about Marie? Our glamorous Hollywood star? Is she willing to be interviewed?’

‘I’ve been corresponding with her publicist for the past six months. My guess is, she has her own book deal in the works, and she’s not sure whether my book will help or hinder sales. But I’m going to pay her a visit, regardless.’

Anna looked askance. Erica knew the thought of contacting complete strangers and trying to persuade them to talk was her sister’s worst nightmare.

‘Let’s talk about something more pleasant, okay?’ said Erica. ‘We need to arrange a bachelorette party for Kristina.’

‘Of course we do,’ said Anna, laughing so hard her huge belly bounced. ‘But what do you do when the bride is a bit ... past the usual age? All the traditional games like getting her to sell kisses

at a booth don't seem appropriate, not to mention making her skydive or bungee-jump.'

'You're right. I can't imagine Kristina doing any of those things,' said Erica. 'Why don't we just invite a bunch of her friends and spend a nice evening together? How about dinner at Café Bryggan? Good food, good wine. It can be as simple as that.'

'Sounds like a great idea,' said Anna. 'Though we should still come up with some kind of fun kidnapping plan.'

Erica nodded.

'Sure, otherwise it's not a real bachelorette party! And by the way, when is Dan going to make a respectable woman of you?'

Anna blushed.

'You can see how I look at the moment. We've agreed to have the baby first. Then we'll start thinking about a wedding.'

'So when do you think—' Erica began, but she was interrupted by 'Mambo No. 5' playing on her mobile.

'Hi, sweetheart,' she said when she saw the name on the display.

She listened to what Patrik was saying, giving only a few brief remarks in reply.

'No problem. Don't worry about the kids. See you later.'

She ended the call and put her mobile back in her purse. Then she looked at Anna. She knew it was asking a lot to get her sister to babysit the kids again, but she had no choice. Kristina was in Uddevalla all afternoon, so she couldn't ask her.

'Okay,' said Anna. 'I can watch the kids for you. How long will

you be gone?’ She laughed when she saw Erica’s embarrassed expression.

‘Could I drop them off again around three? Patrik wants me to come over to the station to tell them about the Stella case. I have to be there at three thirty. So I should be back here by five or five thirty. Will that work?’

‘That’s fine,’ said Anna. ‘Your kids are better behaved with me than with you.’

‘Oh, come on,’ said Erica, blowing her sister a kiss.

But it couldn’t be denied that Anna had a point. The children had behaved like angels.

‘What do you think they’re scared of?’

Sam realized he had started to slur his words. The combination of sun and champagne had gone straight to his head. He was holding the glass in his left hand. His right hand ached after the morning’s target practice.

‘Scared of?’ said Jessie.

She too was slurring her words. She’d had several glasses before he arrived and they were now on the second bottle.

‘Won’t your mother notice some bottles are missing?’ he asked, motioning with the glass.

The golden bubbles sparkled when the sunlight hit the glass. He’d never thought about how beautiful champagne was. On the other hand, he’d never seen it close up.

‘Oh, don’t worry. She won’t care,’ replied Jessie, tossing her head. ‘As long as there’s still some left for her.’

She reached for the bottle.

‘But what did you mean about being scared? I don’t think they’re scared of us.’

‘Of course they’re fucking scared,’ said Sam, holding out his glass.

The foam reached the top and spilled over the rim, but he merely laughed and licked the champagne off his hand.

‘They know we’re not like them. They sense ... they can sense the darkness inside us.’

‘Darkness?’

She studied him in silence. He loved the contrast between her green eyes and blond hair. He wished she would realize how beautiful she was. He looked beyond her weight and the spots. He had recognized himself in her when he saw her at the Centrum kiosk. He knew they both shared that lost feeling. And he saw in her the same darkness.

‘They know we hate them. They see all the hatred they’ve already created in us, but they can’t help themselves, they keep pouring it on, keep creating something they won’t be able to control.’

Jessie giggled.

‘My God, you sound so pretentious. *Skål!* We’re sitting here in the sunshine, on the dock next to a luxury villa, we’re drinking champagne, and we’re having a fucking great time.’

‘You’re right.’ He smiled as their glasses clinked. ‘We’re having a fucking great time.’

‘Because we deserve it,’ Jessie said, stumbling over her words. ‘You and me. We fucking deserve it. We’re better than them. They’re nothing compared to us.’

She raised her glass so abruptly that half the champagne spilled out, landing on her bare stomach.

‘Oops,’ she said, giggling.

She reached for a towel, but Sam stopped her. He looked around. The dock was hidden by a fence, and the boats out in the water were a good distance away. They were alone in the world.

He knelt down in front of her, between her legs. She looked down at him with excitement. Slowly he licked the champagne off her skin. He sucked up the bubbly that had filled her navel and then ran his tongue over her sun-warmed skin. She tasted of champagne and sweat. He raised his eyes and looked at her. Keeping his eyes fixed on hers, he reached for the edge of her bikini bottoms and slowly pulled them down. When he began licking her, he heard her panting breaths mixing with the sound of the seagulls screeching overhead. They were alone. All alone in the world.

THE STELLA CASE

Leif Hermansson took a deep breath before he stepped inside the small interview room at the police station. Helen Persson and her parents, KG and Harriet, were waiting inside. He knew the parents – everyone in Fjällbacka did – though they were no more than chance acquaintances. It was different with Marie Wall's parents. The police in Tanumshede had had countless opportunities to meet them over the years.

Leif wasn't happy about being police chief. He didn't enjoy supervising others or having to make the decisions. But he was too good at his job, and it had got him promoted. Of course it was only the police station in Tanumshede; he had politely but firmly turned down all opportunities that would have meant moving somewhere else. He had been born in Tanumshede, and that was where he intended to stay until the very end.

Days like today made him hate being the boss. The responsibility of having to find the perpetrator, male or female, who had killed a little girl, rested heavily on his shoulders.

He opened the door to the dreary room with the grey-painted walls, allowing his eyes to rest for a moment on Helen's slumped figure as she sat at the table. Then he nodded to Harriet and KG, seated on either side of their daughter.

'Is it really necessary for us to have this talk here at the station?' asked KG.

He was chairman of the Rotary Club and a big shot within the local business community. His wife Harriet was always impeccably dressed, with her hair styled and her nails exquisitely manicured. But Leif had no idea what she did with her time other than taking care of her appearance and attending meetings of the Home and School Association. She always seemed to be at KG's side at various functions and parties, always laughing and with a martini in her hand.

'We thought it would be easier for you to come to us,' said Leif, signalling an end to that discussion.

How the police chose to do their job was their own concern, and he had a feeling that KG would try to take over if he didn't keep tight control of the conversation.

'It's the other girl you should be talking to,' said Harriet, tugging at her freshly ironed white blouse. 'Marie. She comes from that dreadful family.'

'We have to talk to both girls, since all indications are that they were the last ones to see Stella alive.'

'But Helen has nothing to do with this. Surely you understand that.'

KG was so indignant, his moustache quivered.

'We're not saying they had anything to do with the girl's death, but they were the last ones to see her, and we need to go over the chain of events if we're going to find the perpetrator.'

Leif glanced at Helen. She was sitting in silence, staring down at her hands. She had dark hair like her mother. She was pretty

in a quiet, ordinary sort of way. Her shoulders were tensed, and she was plucking at her dress.

‘Helen, can you tell me in your own words what happened?’ he said gently, surprised to feel a certain tenderness for the girl.

She looked so vulnerable and frightened, and her parents seemed much too focused on themselves to notice their daughter’s terror.

Helen glanced at her father, who nodded curtly.

‘We promised Linda and Anders to babysit Stella. We live nearby, and sometimes we go over there to play with Stella. They said they’d give us twenty kronor so we could go to the kiosk with Stella and buy ice cream.’

‘When did you pick her up?’ asked Leif.

The girl looked up at him.

‘I think it was around one. I went over there with Marie.’

‘Marie,’ snorted Harriet, but Leif raised his hand to silence her.

‘So it was around one o’clock.’

Leif jotted down the time in the notebook in front of him. The tape recorder was silently running in the background, but taking notes helped him to organize his thoughts.

‘Yes, but Marie would know better than me.’

Helen shifted position.

‘Who was at home when you picked her up?’

Leif stopped writing and smiled at Helen, but she still refused to meet his eye as she picked invisible lint off her white summer

dress.

‘Her mother. And Sanna. They were about to leave when we got there. She gave us the money so we could pay for the ice cream. Stella was really happy. She was jumping up and down.’

‘Did you leave at once? Or did you stay at the farm for a while?’

Helen shook her head and a lock of her dark hair fell into her face.

‘We played on the farm. Jumped rope with Stella. She likes it when we each take one end of the rope so she can jump. But she kept stumbling and getting tangled up, so we got tired of the game.’

‘What did you do then?’

‘We took her with us and walked to Fjällbacka.’

‘That must have taken quite a while.’

Leif made a quick calculation. It would take him personally about twenty minutes to go from the Strand farm to the centre of town. With a four-year-old in tow, it would take much longer. The child would want to smell the grass and pick flowers and then she’d get a pebble in her shoe, or she’d have to pee, and her legs would get so tired that she wouldn’t want to go any further. Walking from the farm to Fjällbacka with a four-year-old would take for ever.

‘We took a pushchair with us,’ said Helen. ‘The kind you can fold up so it gets really small.’

‘A collapsible pushchair,’ said Harriet.

Leif gave her a look that stopped her from saying anything

else.

Helen cast a quick glance at her mother.

Leif put down his pen.

‘So how long did it take you to get there? With Stella in the pushchair.’

Helen frowned.

‘It took ages. It’s a gravel road up to the main road, and it’s hard to steer a pushchair on gravel. The wheels kept getting stuck.’

‘But approximately how long did it take?’

‘Maybe forty-five minutes? But we didn’t check the time. We don’t have watches.’

‘You do have a watch,’ said Harriet. ‘You just refuse to wear it. But I’m not surprised that other girl doesn’t have one. If she did, it probably would have been a stolen watch.’

‘Mamma! Don’t say that!’

Helen’s eyes flashed.

Leif looked at Harriet.

‘If you don’t mind, let’s stick to the matter in hand.’

He nodded at Helen.

‘Then what? How long did you stay in Fjällbacka with Stella?’

Helen shrugged.

‘I don’t know. We bought ice cream and sat on the wharf for a while, but we didn’t let Stella go near the edge because she can’t swim, and we didn’t have any life jackets with us.’

‘Very smart,’ said Leif with a nod.

He made a note to speak to Kjell and Anita who owned the

kiosk to see if they recalled seeing the girls and Stella yesterday.

‘So you ate your ice cream and sat on the wharf. Did you do anything else?’

‘No. After a while we started walking back. Stella was tired. She fell asleep in the pushchair.’

‘So you spent about an hour in Fjällbacka? Does that sound right?’

Helen nodded.

‘Did you go the same way back?’

‘No, on the way back Stella wanted to go through the woods, so she got out of the pushchair and we walked the rest of the way through the woods.’

Leif jotted down a few notes.

‘And when you got back, what time do you think it was?’

‘I don’t know, but it took about the same amount of time to walk home.’

Leif looked down at the notes he’d written. If the girls arrived at the farm around one, played for twenty minutes or so, then walked to Fjällbacka in forty minutes, spent an hour there and then walked back in forty minutes, it would have been about 15.40 when they got home. Although considering Helen’s less than precise sense of time, he couldn’t rely on that, so he wrote ‘15.30–16.15’ in his notebook and drew a circle around it. Even that time frame might not be reliable.

‘What happened once you got home with Stella?’

‘We saw her father’s car in the yard, so we assumed he was

home. And when we saw Stella running towards the house, we left.’

‘But you didn’t see her father? You didn’t see her go inside the house?’

‘No.’

Helen shook her head.

‘Did the two of you go straight home?’

‘No ...’

Helen glanced at her parents.

‘What did you do?’

‘We went over to the lake behind Marie’s farm and went swimming.’

‘We’ve told you before you’re not allowed—’

A look from Leif stopped Harriet.

‘About how long were you there?’

‘I don’t know. But I was home for dinner at six.’

‘Yes, she was,’ said KG, nodding. ‘Though she didn’t tell us anything about going swimming. She said they’d been babysitting little Stella the whole time.’

He glared at his daughter, who was still looking down at her dress.

‘Obviously we noticed that her hair was wet, but she said they’d been running through the sprinkler with Stella.’

‘It was stupid to lie. I know that,’ said Helen. ‘But I’m not supposed to go there. They don’t like me to go anywhere with Marie, but that’s just because of her family, and she can’t help

who her parents are, can she?’

Again her eyes flashed.

‘That girl is made of the same stuff as her family,’ said KG.

‘She’s just ... a little tougher than others,’ said Helen in a low voice. ‘But maybe there’s a good reason for her to be that way. Have you ever thought about that? She didn’t choose to grow up in that family.’

‘Let’s all calm down,’ said Leif, holding up his hands.

Even though their argument told him something valuable about their family dynamics, this wasn’t the right time or place to be airing such matters.

He read aloud from his notes.

‘Does that match more or less what you remember about yesterday?’

Helen nodded.

‘Yes, it does.’

‘And Marie will tell me the same thing?’

For a moment he thought he saw a glimmer of uncertainty in her eyes. Then she replied calmly:

‘Yes, she will.’

Chapter Ten



‘How are you doing?’ asked Paula, giving Martin a searching look as they drove.

He wondered how long everyone was going to keep worrying about him.

‘Things are good,’ he said, surprised to hear that he actually meant it.

His grief at losing Pia would never disappear completely. He would always wonder what their life together might have been, and he’d see her like a shadowy presence at all the important occasions in Tuva’s life. Even at the less important occasions, for that matter. After Pia died, people told him a time would come when he’d be able to enjoy life again. That one day he would feel happy and find himself laughing. That his grief would never go away, but he’d learn to live with it, to walk side by side with his sorrow. At the time, when he was wandering in darkness, it had seemed impossible. In the beginning he frequently seemed to be taking one step forward and two steps back, but after a while it became two steps forward and one step back. Until gradually all movement was forward.

Martin's thoughts turned to the mother he'd met at the playground yesterday. To be honest, he'd been thinking about her a lot. He realized he should have asked for her phone number. Or at least found out her name. But it was easy to think of things after the event. He'd felt flustered when he realized he'd like to see her again. As luck would have it, they lived in a small community, and he'd been hoping to see her at the playground today. That was his plan, anyway, until Nea was found murdered, and he'd been forced to end his holiday and go back to work.

Guilt flooded over him. How could he be thinking about a woman at a time like this?

'You look happy, but also a little worried,' said Paula, as if she'd read his thoughts.

Before he could stop himself, he told her about the woman at the playground. He nearly missed the exit and had to turn the wheel hard to the left.

'Aha,' said Paula. 'She's so cute you can't even drive when you think about her!' She reached for the grab-handle above the car window.

'You probably think I'm a real idiot,' Martin said, blushing so much that his freckles were even more noticeable against his pale skin.

'I think it's great,' said Paula, patting his leg. 'And don't feel guilty. Life has to go on. And if you're feeling good, then you'll do a better job. So find out who she is and give her a call. We're not going to be able to work round the clock. If we get too tired

we'll only make mistakes.'

'You're probably right,' said Martin, wondering how he should go about finding her.

He knew the name of her son. That was always a start. Tanumshede wasn't a big place, so he should be able to find her. Provided she wasn't a tourist just passing through. What if she didn't even live in the area?

'Aren't we going to stop somewhere?' said Paula as he drove past the first house they'd seen since turning on to the gravel road.

'What? Oh, sorry,' he said, blushing again.

'I'll help you track her down later,' Paula told him with a grin.

Martin pulled into the driveway of an old, red-painted house with white trim and lots of gingerbread details. He found himself sighing from sheer envy. This was exactly the sort of house he'd dreamed of owning. He and Pia had been saving up for a house, and had almost scraped together enough for a down payment. Every evening they would search the property websites, and they'd even gone to their first viewing. But then came the cancer diagnosis. The money was still in his savings account. His dream of buying a house had died with Pia, along with all his other dreams.

Paula knocked on the door of the house.

'Hello?' she called after a moment.

She glanced at Martin, found the door was unlocked, and stepped into the entryway. In a big city it would have been unthinkable to do such a thing, but here few people ever locked

their doors, and friends would often simply go inside. The woman who now came towards them didn't seem the least bit startled to hear the voices of strangers in her front hall.

'Oh, hello. Looks like the police are paying me a visit, am I right?' she said, giving them a smile.

She was so short and tiny and wrinkled that Martin was afraid the draught coming in from the front door might blow her over.

'Come in. I'm watching the third round between Alexander Gustafsson and Daniel Cormier,' she said.

Martin gave Paula a puzzled look. He had no clue what the old lady was talking about. He had very little interest in sports. Occasionally he might watch a football match if Sweden was in the semi-finals for the European or world championships, but that was about it. And he knew Paula was even less interested in sports, if such a thing were possible.

'Whatever it is you want, it'll have to wait. Have a seat on the sofa,' the woman told them, pointing at a rose-patterned sofa upholstered in some sort of shiny fabric.

Slowly she lowered herself on to a big wingback chair with a footstool placed right in front of the huge TV. To his surprise, Martin saw that the 'match' she was watching consisted of two men in a cage going at each other like crazy.

'Gustafsson had him in an arm lock in the second round, and Cormier nearly caved, but the bell rang just as he was about to give up. And now in the third round Gustafsson is looking tired, while Cormier is recharged. But I haven't given up yet.

Gustafsson has a fierce fighting spirit, and if he can only get him down on the ground, I think he'll take it home. Cormier is strongest when he's on his feet, but not as sharp on the ground.'

Martin found himself speechless as he stared at the woman.

'Mixed Martial Arts, right?' asked Paula. 'MMA?'

The woman looked at her as if she were an idiot.

'Of course it's MMA. What did you think it was? Hockey?'

She chuckled. Martin noticed a glass of whisky on the table next to her chair. When I'm her age, he thought, I'm going to treat myself to whatever I want, and whenever I want it, and never mind what might be considered sensible.

'It's a title match,' said the woman, her eyes fixed on the TV. 'They're fighting for the world championship. It's been billed as the match of the year. So you'll have to excuse me if I can't give you my full attention right now. I don't want to miss this.'

She reached for her glass and took a swig of whisky. On the TV screen the big blond guy knocked down the dark-skinned man with the bizarrely wide shoulders and then pounced on top of him. To Martin it looked like an assault that would have earned him several years in jail in real life. And what about those ears? What had those guys done to their ears? They were big and thick and looked like badly shaped lumps of clay. He suddenly understood what people meant by 'cauliflower ears' when they talked about fighters.

'Three minutes to go,' said the woman, taking another swig of her drink.

Martin and Paula exchanged glances. He could see she was trying hard not to laugh. This was the last thing they'd expected. Suddenly the woman shouted and leapt up from her chair.

‘YES!’

‘Did he win?’ asked Martin. ‘Did Gustafsson win?’

The blond giant was racing around the cage like a lunatic. He jumped up on the edge and screamed. Apparently, he was the winner.

‘Cormier got beat. He had him in a rear neck choke, and he finally gave up.’

She downed the last of her whisky.

‘Is he the one they’ve been writing about in all the papers? The Mole – isn’t that what they call him?’ asked Paula, looking pleased she’d remembered that much.

‘The Mole? No, he’s called The Mauler!’ the woman snorted. ‘Gustafsson is one of the best in the world. Surely you know that – it’s common knowledge.’

She got up to go to the kitchen.

‘I’m going to make some coffee. Would you like some?’

‘Yes, please,’ said both Martin and Paula.

Having a cup of coffee was part of what they did when they were out talking to people. If they had a lot of interviews in one day, it was sometimes hard to get to sleep at night.

They got up and followed the woman into the kitchen. Martin realized they hadn’t even introduced themselves.

‘Sorry, we didn’t get a chance to tell you our names. I’m Martin

Molin, and this is Paula Morales. We're from the Tanumshede police station.'

'Dagmar Hagelin,' said the woman cheerfully as she set a kettle on the hob. 'Have a seat at the table. It's more pleasant. I only use the living room when I want to watch TV. I prefer to spend most of my time in here.'

She pointed to the worn wooden table, which was covered with crossword puzzles. Quickly she gathered them all up and set the pile on the window ledge.

'A workout for the brain. I'll be ninety-two in September, so I need to keep exercising the old noggin, else dementia will creep in faster than you can say ... Oh, er, I forget.'

She laughed merrily at her own joke.

'How did you get interested in MMA?' asked Paula.

'My great-grandson is involved at the elite level. He doesn't compete in the UFC yet, but it's only a matter of time. He's good, and he's ambitious.'

'I see. But it's still a little ... um, unusual,' Paula ventured.

Dagmar didn't reply at once. She took the kettle off the hob using a crocheted potholder and set it on the table on top of a cork trivet. Then she got out three sweet little cups made of delicate porcelain with a pink pattern and gold rims. She put them on the table and sat down to serve the coffee. Only then did she speak.

'We've always been very close, Oscar and I, so I started going to his matches. And it's easy to get caught up in the whole thing. You can't help it. I was quite a successful track-and-field athlete

in my younger days, so I can relate to the tension and excitement.'

She pointed to a black-and-white photograph on the wall of a young and sporty-looking woman on her way over the high-jump bar.

'That's you?' said Martin, impressed as he tried to match the image of the tall, slender, and muscular young woman with the tiny, stooped grey-haired granny sitting across from him.

Dagmar seemed to know what he was thinking and gave him a big smile.

'Even I have a hard time believing that's me. But the strange thing is, I feel the same way inside as I did back then. Sometimes I'm shocked when I look at myself in the mirror, and I find myself saying: "Who's this old lady?"'

'How long were you involved in sports?' asked Paula.

'Not long, compared to athletes today, but too long for those days. When I met my husband, I had to put sports aside, and then I had a child and a house to take care of. But I'm not blaming my daughter. That's the way things were. She's a fine person. She wants me to come and live with her when I can't take care of the house any more. She's getting on in years herself. She'll be sixty-three this winter, so I think we'd get along all right if we ended up under the same roof.'

Martin took a sip of coffee from the delicate cup.

'It's Kopi Luwak coffee,' said Dagmar when she saw the look of pleasure on his face. 'My eldest grandchild imports it to Sweden. It's made from coffee beans eaten by civet cats. The

civets poop out the beans, which are then gathered, washed, and roasted. It's not cheap. Usually costs about six hundred kronor per cup, but as I said, Julius imports the coffee, so he gets it for a better price, and sometimes he gives me some. He knows I love it. You'll never taste better coffee.'

Martin looked at the coffee aghast, but then shrugged and took another sip. He didn't care where it came from when it tasted so divine. He hesitated for a moment but decided it was time to move on from the small talk.

'I don't know whether you've heard the news,' he said, leaning forward. 'But a little girl was found murdered up here in the woods.'

'I heard. My daughter came by and told me,' said Dagmar, her expression darkening. 'That sweet little blonde girl who was always running around like a tornado. I still go out for a long walk every day, and I often go past the Berg farm. I'd often see her out in the yard.'

'When did you last see her?' asked Martin, taking another sip of coffee.

'Hmm ... when was it?' said Dagmar, looking pensive. 'Not yesterday, but the day before, I think. On Sunday.'

'What time of day?' asked Paula.

'I always take my walk in the morning before it gets too hot. She was out in the yard, playing. I waved to her as I walked past, like I always do, and she waved back.'

'So that was Sunday morning?' said Martin. 'But not since

then?’

Dagmar shook her head.

‘No. I didn’t see her yesterday.’

‘Did you happen to see anything that struck you as unusual?’

The smallest detail could be important. So even if something seems trivial to you, better to tell us and we’ll decide whether it’s significant or not.’

Martin drank the rest of his coffee. He felt so clumsy holding the fragile little cup in his hand. He set it carefully down on the saucer.

‘No, I can’t say I recall anything that would be of interest. I have a good view out the kitchen window when I’m sitting here, but I don’t remember seeing anything special.’

‘If you happen to think of something later on, don’t hesitate to phone us,’ said Paula, getting up after casting an enquiring glance at Martin, who nodded.

She put her business card on the table and pushed in her chair.

‘Thanks for the coffee,’ said Martin. ‘It was excellent and also ... an experience.’

‘Precisely the way things in life should be,’ replied Dagmar with a smile.

He glanced again at the photo of the beautiful young athlete and saw the same glint in her eye as in the eyes of ninety-one-year-old Dagmar. He recognized that glint. Pia had had it too: joie de vivre.

With great care he closed the lovely old front door behind him.

Mellberg stretched as he sat at the head of the conference table. An impressive group of reporters had gathered. Not only from the local papers, but from the national media as well.

‘Is it the same perpetrator?’ asked Kjell from *Bohuslänningen*.

Patrik was keeping a close eye on Mellberg. He would have preferred to take over, but Mellberg had put his foot down. A press conference was his moment in the spotlight, and he wasn’t about to give up the opportunity. This was in stark contrast to his readiness to step aside when it came to anything that resembled hard work.

‘We can’t rule out the possibility of a link to the Stella case, but we’re not going to get locked into any one theory,’ said Mellberg.

‘But surely it’s not a coincidence,’ Kjell insisted.

His dark beard now had a few streaks of grey.

‘As I said, we will of course investigate every angle, but when something seems too obvious, there’s a risk we might not look into other possibilities.’

Good answer, Mellberg, thought Patrik with surprise. Maybe he’d actually learned a few things along the way.

‘Though clearly it does seem a strange coincidence that the film star should come back here right before this happens,’ said Mellberg. All the reporters began feverishly taking notes.

Patrik had to clench his fists to stop himself from slapping his forehead. He could already guess what the evening headlines would be.

‘So, are you planning to question Marie and Helen?’ asked a

hack from one of the evening papers.

The younger reporters were always the most persistent. Hungry to establish themselves at the paper and prepared to do whatever it took to make their name.

‘Yes, we plan to talk to them,’ Mellberg confirmed. It was obvious he was enjoying all the attention.

He gladly turned his face towards the cameras aimed at him, reaching up to make sure his comb-over was in place.

‘So are they your prime suspects?’ asked a young female reporter from the other big evening paper.

‘Well, I mean ... No, I wouldn’t exactly say that ...’

Mellberg scratched his head and seemed to realize he might have turned the conversation in the wrong direction. He looked at Patrik, who cleared his throat and said:

‘We have no suspects at this stage of the investigation. As Bertil Mellberg said, we’re not ruling anything out yet. We’re waiting for the technical report, and we’re carrying out interviews on a broad front, talking to people who might provide information regarding the time period when Nea disappeared.’

‘So you think it’s merely coincidence that a girl from the same farm disappears and is found dead in the same place as Stella, during the same week when one of the individuals convicted in the Stella case comes back here for the first time in thirty years?’

‘The most obvious connections are not always the most significant,’ he replied to the follow-up question. ‘So it would not be wise for us to get locked into one theory right now. As

Mellberg has already pointed out.’

Kjell from *Bohuslänningen* raised his hand to indicate he had another question.

‘How did the girl die?’

Mellberg leaned forward.

‘As Patrik Hedström mentioned, we haven’t yet received the technical report, and the post-mortem hasn’t been done. So at this time we can’t address that question.’

‘Is there a risk other children might be murdered?’ Kjell went on. ‘Should parents in the area keep their children inside? As you might expect, rumours have been spreading, and people are scared.’

Mellberg paused before answering. Patrik discreetly shook his head, hoping his boss would get the message. There was no reason to frighten the local population.

‘At the present time there is no reason for concern,’ Mellberg said. ‘We’re putting all our resources into this investigation. We will find out who killed Linnea Berg.’

‘Was she killed in the same way as Stella?’

Kjell wasn’t giving up. The other journalists looked from him to Mellberg. Patrik crossed his fingers that Mellberg would stand firm.

‘As I said, we won’t know until we have the results of the pathology report.’

‘But you’re not denying it?’ the young hack chimed in.

In his mind Patrik again pictured the body of the little girl,

lying exposed and alone on the cold autopsy table. He couldn't help snapping, 'We've already told you that we won't know anything until we get the pathology report!'

The young reporter retreated, looking offended.

Kjell raised his hand again. This time he looked straight at Patrik.

'I've heard your wife is writing a book about the Stella case. Is that true?'

Patrik had known the question would come, but he still felt unprepared for it. He looked down at his clenched fists.

'For some reason, my wife refuses to discuss her projects, even with the excellent resources she has at home,' he said, drawing a ripple of laughter from the reporters. 'So I've only heard a few things about it in passing. I don't know how far along she is in her research. I'm usually kept out of the creative process, and I don't get involved until she asks me to read the completed manuscript.'

That wasn't entirely true, but almost. He knew roughly what stage Erica had reached in the project, but only because of a few casual remarks she'd let slip. She was always reluctant to talk about her books while she was working on them, and he usually got involved only if she needed to ask him about any police-related issues. But she rarely supplied any context when putting her questions, so they were little help in getting a sense of the book itself.

'Could that have been a contributing factor? For another murder?'

The young woman from the evening paper was looking at him expectantly, and he could see the gleam in her eye. What the hell did she mean? Was she saying his wife might have provoked the death of the little girl?

He was about to open his mouth to deliver a scathing reply when he heard Mellberg's calm admonition:

'I consider that question both tasteless and irrelevant. And no, there is nothing to suggest any connection whatsoever between Erica Falck's book and the murder of Linnea Berg. And if you can't refrain from such outrageous questions during the next' – Mellberg glanced at his watch – 'ten minutes that remain of this press conference, I won't hesitate to cut it short. Understood?'

Patrik exchanged astonished glances with Annika. And to his great surprise, the journalists behaved themselves for the rest of the press conference.

After Annika had ushered everyone out, overriding their mild protests and attempts to ask a few more questions, Patrik and Mellberg remained behind in the conference room.

'Thank you,' said Patrik simply.

'I'll be damned if I'll let them go after Erica,' muttered Mellberg, and turned away.

He called to Ernst, who had been lying under the table where Annika had set out coffee for the reporters, and then left the room.

Patrik laughed quietly to himself. Amazing. The old guy had a streak of loyalty in him after all!

BOHUSLÄN 1671

Elin had to admit that Britta looked enchanting. Her dark eyes were beautifully offset by the blue fabric of her gown, and her hair had been brushed to a glossy sheen. She wore her hair loose, held back from her face by a lovely silk ribbon. It was not often that they received such a grand visitor. Actually never, if truth be told. Such dignitaries had no reason to visit a simple vicarage in Tanumshede parish, but the king's edict issued to Harald Stake, governor of Bohuslän, had been quite clear. All the representatives of the church in the county were to be involved in the battle against sorcery and the forces of evil. The government and the church had joined together to fight the devil, and for that reason the vicarage in Tanumshede was to be honoured with a visit. The message was to be spread to all corners of the realm; that was what the king had decreed. And Britta was quick to understand and exploit the opportunity. They would offer the very best in food, lodging, and conversation during Lars Hierne's visit. He had politely suggested he might stay at the local inn, but Preben had told him that would be out of the question. At the vicarage they would be delighted to receive such an esteemed guest. Even though the inn had a separate section for noble and refined guests, the Tanumshede vicarage would see to it that the governor's envoy would be offered all the comforts he might desire.

Britta and Preben were waiting at the door when the carriage arrived. Elin and the other servants kept to the background, their heads bowed and their eyes fixed on their feet. Everyone had been ordered to appear neat and tidy, dressed in clean clothing. And the girls had all combed their hair so carefully that not a strand escaped from beneath their kerchiefs. The air was filled with the fresh scent of soap and the pine boughs the servant boy had used to decorate the rooms that morning.

When the vicar and his wife were seated at the table with their guest, Elin poured wine into the big tankards her father had always used to serve wine when she was growing up. They had been passed on to Britta as a wedding gift. When she married, Elin had received several of the tablecloths her mother had embroidered. Her father had not wanted the finer things from his home to end up in the poor hovel of a fisherman. And Elin had actually agreed with his decision. What would she and Per have done with such frills and finery? Those things were better suited to the vicarage than Elin's simple home. But she treasured her mother's tablecloths. She kept them in a small chest along with the herbs she gathered and dried every summer. She always wrapped the herbs in paper so as not to stain the white cloths.

Ever since she was little, Märta had been sternly warned never to open the chest. Elin did not want her child's sticky fingers touching her mother's tablecloths, but the admonition was also because some of the herbs could be poisonous if not handled properly. Her maternal grandmother had taught her the uses of

the various herbs, along with the words of supplication to be used. There could be no confusion, or disaster might ensue. Elin was ten years old when her grandmother began teaching her, and she had decided to wait until Märta was the same age before she passed on her knowledge.

‘Oh, how terrible it is with all these wives of the devil,’ said Britta, giving Lars Hierne a gentle smile.

Enchanted, he stared at her lovely features glowing in the light of the many tallow candles. Britta had chosen well when she decided to wear the blue brocade dress; the fabric gleamed and sparkled against the backdrop of the dark walls in the vicarage dining room, making Britta’s eyes look as blue as the sea on a sunny day in July.

Elin silently wondered how Preben was reacting to the way their visitor was immodestly staring at his wife, but he appeared completely unaffected. He seemed to pay no attention at all. Instead, Elin felt him looking at her, and she quickly lowered her gaze. She had already noticed that he too looked exceptionally stylish. When he was not wearing his clerical garb, he dressed most often in dirty work clothes. For a man of his position, he had an odd fondness for doing manual labour on the farm and taking care of the livestock. On her very first day at the vicarage, Elin had asked one of the other maids about this and was told it was indeed strange, but the master often worked side by side with his servants. They had simply grown accustomed to this unusual behaviour. Yet the maid had gone on to say that the mistress

did not favour her husband's conduct, which had led to many quarrels at the farm. When the maid suddenly realized who Elin was, her whole face turned red. This sort of response occurred frequently. Elin held a strange position on the farm, since she was both a maid and the sister of the vicar's wife. She belonged and yet did not belong. When she entered the servants' quarters the others would often stop talking and refuse to look in her direction. In that sense, she felt even lonelier, but it did not greatly concern her. She had never been friends with many women, most of whom she regarded as spending far too much time gossiping and squabbling.

'Yes, these are troubling times,' said Lars Hierne. 'Yet we are fortunate to have a king who refuses to turn a blind eye, a king who dares to enter the battle against the evil forces we are now fighting. This has been a difficult year for the realm, and the ravages of Satan have been greater than for many generations. The more of these women we can find and bring to trial, the faster we can quell the devil's power.'

He took a bite of bread and ate it with pleasure. Britta's gaze was fixed on his lips, and her face shone with both fascination and alarm.

Elin listened closely as she carefully refilled his tankard with wine. The first course had been served, and Boel of Holta need not feel shame for the meal she had prepared. They were all eating with great appetite, and Lars Hierne praised the food many times, which caused Britta to modestly throw out her hands.

‘But how can you be certain these women are part of the devil’s web?’ asked Preben as he leaned back in his chair, holding the tankard in his hand. ‘We have not yet found the need to bring anyone to trial here in our district, but I doubt we will be spared. Though so far we have merely heard rumours and loose talk about how others have set about the task.’

Lars Hierne tore his eyes away from Britta and turned to Preben.

‘It is actually a very simple and straightforward process to establish whether someone is a witch – or a sorcerer, for that matter. We must not forget that women are not the only ones who may succumb to Satan’s temptations. Although it is more common for womenfolk, since they are more susceptible to the devil’s enticements.’

He gave Britta a solemn look.

‘To determine whether the accused is indeed a witch, we first subject her to the water test. She is bound, hand and foot, and thrown into deep water.’

‘What happens next?’

Britta leaned forward. She seemed to find the subject fascinating.

‘If she floats, she is a witch. I am proud to say that so far we have not subjected a single innocent woman to an unjust accusation. They have all floated like birds. And with that, they have revealed their true nature. Afterwards they are offered the chance to confess and receive God’s forgiveness.’

‘And have they confessed? The witches you have seized?’

Britta leaned even closer, and the flames from the candles cast dancing shadows over her face.

Lars Hierne nodded.

‘Oh yes, they have all confessed. Some have required ... persuasion in order to elicit a confession. Where a woman has been long under Satan’s power or deeply in thrall to the evil one, his hold may be greater. But in the end they all confess. And upon confessing they have been executed according to the decree of both king and God.’

‘You are carrying out a most important task,’ said Preben, nodding pensively. ‘Yet I dread the day when we must carry out such a painful duty here in our parish.’

‘Yes, it is indeed a heavy cross to bear, but we must have the courage to take on whatever obligations Our Lord asks of us.’

‘In truth, in truth,’ said Preben, raising the tankard to his lips.

The next course was now brought to the table, and Elin hurried to pour more red wine. All three had already had a good deal to drink, and a slight haze had appeared in their eyes. Again Elin felt Preben looking at her, and she took great pains not to meet his eye. A shiver raced down her spine, and she nearly dropped the pitcher she was holding. Her grandmother used to call such a feeling a premonition of trouble brewing. But Elin convinced herself it was merely a gust of wind from a gap in the window frame.

Later, when she went to bed, however, the feeling returned.

She drew Märta closer on the narrow cot they shared, in an attempt to fend it off, but the feeling stayed with her.

Chapter Eleven



Gösta was glad he wasn't expected to attend the press conference. It was nothing but show and spectacle, in his opinion. He always had the feeling the journalists were there to find fault and stir up trouble rather than to communicate with the public and contribute to the investigation. But maybe he was a cynic. When you'd been in the job as long as he had, cynicism became a habit that was hard to break.

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