

AFTER SHE'S GONE

A case as cold as the season.

An investigator who is missing.

A killer ready to strike again.

A profiler who can't remember.

And a boy who holds her secrets in his hands . . .

Those who sow the wind, harvest the storm.

—BOSNIAN PROVERB

O R M B E R G

October 2009

Malin

I held on tightly to Kenny's hand as we walked through the darkness and the woods. Not because I believed in ghosts. Believing in ghosts was for idiots. For people like Kenny's mother, who spent her days in front of the TV watching pathetic shows about so-called mediums searching through old houses looking for spirits that didn't exist.

Still.

The fact remained that almost everybody I knew had heard the sound of a baby's cry near the cairn—a sort of prolonged, mournful whimpering. They called it the Ghost Child, and even if I didn't believe in spirits and other stupid things like that, why risk it, so I've never been out here alone after dark.

I looked up at the sharp tops of the spruces. The trees were so high they almost hid the sky and the bright, round, milky moon. Kenny pulled me forward by the hand. I could hear beer bottles in the plastic bag clinking, and smell his cigarette and the moist soil and the rotting leaves. Just a few meters behind us, Anders lumbered along through the underbrush, whistling a song I recognized from the radio.

"Come on, Malin."

Kenny jerked me by the hand.

"What?"

“You’re slower than my mom. Are you drunk already?”

The comparison was unfair—Kenny’s mother weighed at least four hundred pounds, and I’d never seen her walk anywhere besides from the couch to the bathroom. And even that left her out of breath.

“Shut up,” I said, hoping Kenny could tell I was joking. Hoping he’d know I meant it with love and respect.

We’d only been together for two weeks. In addition to the unavoidable and awkward make-out session in his bed, which stank of dogs, we’d devoted our time to establishing our roles. Him: dominant, funny (sometimes at my expense), and at times overcome by a precocious, self-centered melancholy. Me: admiring, pliable (usually at my own expense), and generously supportive when he was depressed.

The love I felt for Kenny was so intense, unreflective, and, of course, physical, that it sometimes left me completely exhausted. Still, I didn’t want to leave his side for a second, as if I were afraid he’d turn out to be a dream, a sweet figment of my imagination that my yearning teenage heart had somehow cobbled together.

The pine trees around us seemed ancient. Soft pillows of moss spread out around their roots and a gray beard of lichens grew from the thick branches closest to the ground.

Somewhere in the distance a twig snapped.

“What was that?” I asked, perhaps a little bit too shrilly.

“That’s the Ghost Child,” Anders said in a dramatic voice somewhere behind me. “It’s here to take you awaaaaay.”

He howled the last.

“Damn it, don’t scare her!” Kenny hissed, overcome by a sudden and an unexpected urge to protect me.

I giggled, stumbled over a root, and came close to losing my balance, but Kenny’s warm hand was there in the darkness. The bottles in the bag made a muffled clinking sound as he shifted his balance from one foot to the other to support me.

The gesture made me warm inside.

At that point, the trees thinned out, as if stepping to the side. Made room for a little clearing where the stones of the cairn stood. The stones resembled an enormous, stranded whale under the moonlight—overgrown by thick mosses and small ferns that swayed gently in the breeze.

Beyond the clearing the rest of Orm Mountain's dark silhouette rose toward the night sky.

"Ugh," I said. "Why could we not just go to somebody's house and drink beer there instead? Do we really have to sit in the woods? It's freezing out here."

"I'll keep you warm," Kenny said with a grin.

He drew me so close I could smell the beer and snuff on his breath. Part of me wanted to turn my face away, but I stood still and met his eyes because that's what was expected of me.

Anders just whistled, sat down on one of the large, round stones, and reached for a beer. Then lit a cigarette and said:

"I thought you wanted to hear the Ghost Child."

"There's no such thing as ghosts," I said, and sat down on a smaller rock. "Only idiots believe in ghosts."

"Half of Ormberg believes in the Ghost Child," Anders countered, then cracked a beer and took a swig.

"Exactly," I replied.

Anders laughed at my comment, but Kenny didn't seem to hear me. He rarely seemed to listen to what I said. Instead he sat beside me, running his hand over my butt. Stuck an ice-cold thumb inside the waistband of my pants. Then he brought his cigarette to my mouth. I obediently took a deep drag, leaned my head back, and looked up at the full moon as I exhaled. All the sounds of the forest seemed louder: the rustle of the breeze through the ferns; muffled cracking and snapping, as if thousands of unseen fingers were being dragged across the ground; and the ghostly hoot of a bird somewhere in the distance.

Kenny handed me a beer.

I took a drink of the cold, bitter liquid and stared into the

darkness between the pines. If someone was hiding in there, squeezed behind a tree trunk, we'd never see him. It would be a breeze to sneak up on us here in the clearing, like shooting deer in a cage or catching goldfish from an aquarium.

But why would anyone do that, in Ormberg?

Nothing ever happened here. That's why people made up ghost stories—to keep from dying of boredom.

Kenny belched quietly and opened another beer. Then he turned and kissed me. His tongue was cold and tasted like beer.

"Get a room!" Anders said, then belched. Loudly. As if the belch were a question he expected us to answer.

The comment seemed to trigger something in Kenny, because he pushed his hand inside my jacket, groping his way under my shirt and squeezing my breast hard.

I repositioned myself to accommodate him and ran my tongue along the sharp teeth in his upper jaw.

Anders stood up. I pushed Kenny away gently and asked:

"What is it?"

"I heard something. It sounded like . . . like someone crying, or sort of whimpering."

Anders let out a mournful cry, and then laughed so hard beer sprayed out of his mouth.

"You're mentally disturbed," I said. "I need to pee. You guys can stay here looking for ghosts."

I got up, walked around the cairn, following the stones to just a few meters away. Turned around to make sure neither Kenny nor Anders could see me, then unbuttoned my jeans and squatted close to the ground.

Something, maybe moss or some plant, tickled my thigh as I peed. The cold snuck around my legs and under my jacket.

I shivered.

What a wonderful idea to come out here to drink some beer. Truly inspired! But why didn't I say anything when Kenny suggested it?

Why didn't I ever say anything when Kenny suggested something?

The darkness was compact, and I pulled a lighter out of the pocket of my jacket. Flicked the little wheel with my thumb and let the flame shine onto the ground: autumn brown leaves, velvety moss, and those big gray stones. And there, in a crevice between two nearby stones, I caught a glimpse of something white and flat that looked like a hat on a big mushroom.

Kenny and Anders were still talking about the ghost, their voices animated and slurred. The words tumbled out quickly and on top of each other, sometimes interrupted by laughter.

Perhaps it was curiosity, or maybe I just wasn't that keen to go back to the boys yet, but I felt a sudden urge to examine the mushroom more closely.

What kind of mushroom would it be, at this time of the year, in the middle of the woods?

The only mushrooms I'd ever picked here were chanterelles.

I held the lighter closer to the crevice between the stones so that the dim illumination slowly revealed the object. Peeled off a few leaves and pulled a small fern out by its roots.

Yes, there was definitely something there. Something that . . .

Still in a squat with my jeans around my ankles, I pushed my free hand in and poked the white smoothness. It felt hard, like stone or porcelain. Maybe an old bowl? Definitely not a mushroom.

I stretched a little more and rolled away the stone that lay on top of the bowl. The stone was smaller than the others and not very heavy, but still landed with a thud in the moss beside me.

And there it lay, the bowl or whatever it was. It was the size of a grapefruit, cracked on one side, with some kind of fibrous brown moss growing from it.

I stretched out my hand and felt those thin, dark threads. Rubbed them between my thumb and forefinger for a moment before my brain finally put the pieces of this puzzle together, and

I realized what it was.

I dropped the lighter, stood up, took a few stumbling steps straight into the dark, and started screaming. A scream that came from deep inside and seemed to have no end. As if terror were pushing out every atom of oxygen in my body through my lungs.

When Kenny and Anders came to my rescue, I still had my pants down and my lungs had given new life to my scream.

The bowl was no bowl. The moss was no moss. It was a skull with long dark hair.

O R M B E R G

Eight years later—2017

Jake

My name is Jake. I'm named after Jake Gyllenhaal—one of the best actors in the world. It's supposed to be said in the English way, but most of my classmates say it wrong on purpose. They call me Yake or even worse, Yakuh, exaggerating the Swedish pronunciation. It makes me wish I had another name, but there's not much I can do about that. I am who I am. And my name is my name. Mom really, really wanted me to be named Jake, and Dad did what Mom wanted, probably because he loved her more than anything else in the world.

Even now that Mom is dead, it's as if she's still with us in some way. Sometimes Dad sets a place for her at the table, and when I ask him a question it takes him a really long time to reply, as if he's trying to figure out what Mom would say. Then comes the answer: "Sure, you can borrow a hundred kronor" or "Okay, you can go to the movies, but be home by seven."

Dad almost never says no to anything, though he's gotten a little stricter since Triåkungen, the old textile factory, was turned back into housing for asylum seekers.

I'd like to think it's because he's kind, but Melinda, my big sister, says it's because he's too tired to say no. When she says it it's usually with a meaningful glance at the empty beer cans on the

kitchen floor, then she smiles crookedly and blows a perfect smoke ring, which slowly rises toward the ceiling.

I think Melinda's being ungrateful. I mean, she's even allowed to smoke at home. Mom never would have allowed that, but instead of being thankful, she says stuff like that. It's ungrateful, unfair, and, above all, unkind.

When Grandma was still alive, she used to say her son-in-law probably wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer, but that at least we lived in the prettiest house in Ormberg, which is something. I don't think she realized I knew what a sharp knife was, but I did. In any case, it was clearly okay to be a dull knife as long as you had a nice house.

Ormberg's prettiest house lies five hundred meters from the highway and goes straight into the forest, next to a river that flows all the way to Vingåker. There are two reasons the house is so nice: first, Dad's a carpenter, and second, he rarely has any jobs. That's lucky, because it means he can work on the house almost all the time.

For example, Dad's built a huge deck around the whole house. It's so big you can play basketball on it or ride your bike. If you really got a good start, and there wasn't a fence, you could jump straight into the river from the short side. Not that anyone would want to do that—the water is ice cold, even in the middle of summer, and the bottom is full of sludge and seaweed and slimy, disgusting worms. Sometimes, in the summer, Melinda and I blow up an old air mattress and float down the stream to the old saw-mill. The trees lean over the river, making a ceiling of green lace, like the tablecloths Grandma used to knit. When you're on the river, the only thing you hear is birds, the rubbery creak of the air mattress, and the rushing sound of the little waterfall that flows into a pond near the old ironworks.

When my grandfather, whom I never met, was young, he worked at the ironworks, but it closed long before Dad was born. The dilapidated building was burnt down by skinheads from Ka-

trineholm when Dad was my age—fourteen—but the blackened ruins remain. From a distance, they look like fangs sticking up between the bushes.

Dad says that everyone had jobs in Ormberg back then: either on a farm, or in the ironworks, or at Brogrens Mechanical or at TrikåKungen. Now, only the farmers have jobs. All the factories closed, and the jobs moved to China. Brogrens Mechanical stands silent and abandoned, a skeleton of corrugated sheet metal on flat land, and the castle-like brick building of the TrikåKungen textile factory has been converted to refugee housing.

Melinda and I aren't supposed go there, even though Dad normally lets us do whatever we want. He doesn't even seem to think about what Mom would have said either, because the answer comes in a flash if we ask. He says it's for our safety. What exactly he's afraid of is unclear, but Melinda always rolls her eyes when he brings it up, which makes him angry, and they start talking about caliphates, burkas, and rapes.

I know what burkas and rapes are, but not caliphates, so I've made a note of it to google later—I usually do that with words I don't know. I like words, especially hard ones.

I like collecting them.

That's another secret I can't tell anyone. You get beaten up for less in Ormberg, like listening to the wrong music or reading books. And some people—like me, for example—get beaten up more often than others.

I walk out onto the deck, lean against the railing, and stare out over the river. The storm clouds have thinned out and exposed a sliver of blue sky and an intense orange sun just above the horizon. Frost, which makes the wooden deck look hairy, glitters in the last rays of sunshine, and the river flows by dark and sluggish.

The river never freezes—because it's always moving. You could swim it the whole winter, but of course nobody does.

The deck is littered with branches that blew down during the storm late last night.

I should probably gather them up and throw them onto the compost pile, but I'm hypnotized by the sun, hanging there like an orange just below the edge of the clouds.

"Jake, come inside for fuck's sake," Dad shouts from inside the living room. "You'll freeze your ass off out there."

I let go of the railing, stare at the perfectly shaped, wet imprints where my hands just lay, and go back into the house.

"Close the door," Dad says from the massage chair in front of the huge flat screen.

Dad lowers the volume with the remote and looks at me. A wrinkle appears between his thick eyebrows. He runs a freckled hand over his bald head. Then he absently moves his hand to the massage chair's control panel, which no longer works.

"What were you doing out there?"

"Looking at the river."

"Looking at the *river*?"

The wrinkle between Dad's eyebrows deepens as if I've said some hard words he doesn't know, but then it's as if he decides he doesn't care anymore.

"I'm going to Olle's for a while," he says, unbuttoning the top button on his jeans to make room for his belly. "Melinda made some grub. It's in the fridge. Don't wait up for me."

"Okay."

"She promised to be home by ten."

I nod and go out to the kitchen, grab a Coke, go up to my room, and feel butterflies in my stomach.

I'll get at least two hours to myself.

It's dark when Dad leaves. The door slams so hard that my windowpanes rattle, and after a moment the car starts and I hear him drive off. I wait a few minutes to make sure he's not coming back,

then I go to Mom and Dad's bedroom.

The double bed is unmade on Dad's side. On Mom's side the blanket is stretched neatly across the bed and the pillows stand perfectly fluffed against the wall. The book she was reading before she died still lies on the nightstand, the one about the girl who gets together with a rich guy named Grey. He's a sadist and can't fall in love, but the girl loves him anyway, because girls like when it hurts. At least that's what Vincent says. I find it hard to believe—I mean, who likes getting whipped? Not me, anyway. I think the girl probably likes Grey's money, because everybody loves money and most people would do anything to get rich.

Like take a whipping now and then or give a blow job to a disgusting sadist, for example.

I walk over to Mom's closet and pull the mirror door aside. It sticks a bit and I have to give it a shove before it glides open. Then I run my hands over her clothes: sleek silks, sequined dresses, soft velvet, tight jeans, and wrinkled, unironed cotton.

I close my eyes and swallow.

It's so beautiful, so perfect. If I were rich, as rich as that Grey, I would buy a walking closet or whatever it's called. I'd fill it with handbags for every occasion, every season, hang them on special hooks, and my shoes would be lined up on their own shelves with special lighting.

I realize, of course, that's impossible. Not just because it costs tons of money, but because I'm a guy. It would be totally preposterous to get a closet full of women's clothes. If I did, it would truly prove I'm a freak. That I'm worse than that weirdo Grey—because it's okay to hit women and tie them up, but not to dress like one.

At least not in Ormberg.

I take out the gold-sequined dress, the one with the small shoulder straps, and the slippery lining. Mom used to wear it on New Year's Eve, or when she took a cruise to Finland with her girlfriends.

I hold it up in front of me and take a few steps back so I can see myself in the mirror. I'm skinny and my brown hair is like a crown around my pale face. I gently lay the dress down on the bed and go to the dresser. Pull out the top drawer and select a lacy black bra. Then I take off my jeans and my hoodie and put on the bra.

It looks kind of bulky, of course. There's nothing where the breasts should be, just a flat, milky white chest with small, stupid nipples. The bra cups stand straight out from my chest. I put a rolled-up sock in each cup and then slip the dress over my head. As always when I try on the sequin dress, I'm struck by how heavy it is—heavy and cold against my skin.

I observe my image in the mirror and suddenly feel uncomfortable. I'd rather use someone else's clothes beside Mom's, but I don't have any women's clothes of my own, of course, and Melinda mostly has jeans and tops. She'd never wear something this pretty.

I ponder which shoes would go best with the dress. Maybe the black ones with pink jewels on them? Or the sandals with blue and red straps? I choose the black ones—I almost always choose them because I love the sparkling pink jewels. They remind me of expensive jewelry, like the girls' in those YouTube clips Melinda watches.

I back up and examine my mirror image. If my hair were just a little longer, I'd definitely look like a girl for real. Maybe I can let it to grow out a bit, at least long enough so that I can put it up?

The thought is titillating.

When I walk into Melinda's room, I leave imprints on the thick carpet. Dad put in wall-to-wall carpet in all the rooms except the kitchen, because it feels nice to walk on. I love the feeling of that softness under high heels; it's almost like I'm walking on grass, like I'm outside.

Melinda's makeup bag is huge and messy. I take a look at the clock and decide I have time. I paint thick black lines around my eyes like Adele and color my lips with wine red lipstick. The heat

spreads inside of me when I look in the mirror.

I'm beautiful, for real.

I'm Jake, but not, because I'm prettier and more perfect and more like myself than before.

In the hall I pull on one of Melinda's sweaters—it's freezing outside and even if I wanted to, I couldn't go out in just the dress. The black wool is scratchy and the buttons have fallen off, so it won't stay closed. The chill nips at my legs as I lock the front door, put the key under the empty, cracked flowerpot, and head for the road. The gravel crunches under my weight, and I have to concentrate on keeping my balance in these high heels.

The night is dark and colorless and smells like wet earth.

A light mixture of snow and rain has started to fall. The dress makes a sound as I walk, a sort of rustling. The trees are silent along the path, and I wonder if they see me and if so, what they think. But I don't think the spruces would have any objection to my attire. They're just trees.

I take off on a smaller path.

A country road lies about a hundred meters in front of me. I can walk there, but no farther, because someone might see me and that would be the worst thing that could ever happen. Even worse than death.

I love walking by myself in the woods. Especially in Mom's clothes. I usually pretend I'm out on the town in Katrineholm, on my way to a bar or restaurant.

When I'm a few meters from the road, I stop. Close my eyes and try to enjoy this as much as I possibly can, because I will have to head back soon. Back to Ormberg's prettiest house, back to the flat screen and massage chair and my bedroom with all the movie posters. Back to the fridge filled with fast food and an ice machine that works if you bang your fist against it a few times.

Back to Jake who doesn't have a dress or bra or high heels.

Cold raindrops fall on my head, flow down my neck and in between my shoulder blades.

I hunch over, but really the weather isn't that bad. Not compared to yesterday when the wind blew so hard I thought the roof would fly away.

I hear a thud coming from somewhere; maybe it's a deer—there's a lot of them around here. Once, Dad came home with a whole deer that Olle had shot, and he hung it upside down in the garage for several days before skinning and butchering it.

More sounds.

A twig snapping and then something else—a stifled groan, like an injured animal. I freeze and peer into the darkness.

Something moves between the trees, creeping through the brush toward me.

A wolf?

The thought scares me, but I know there are no wolves here. Only moose, deer, foxes, and hares. The most dangerous animals in Ormberg are human beings; that's what Dad always says.

I turn around to run back to the house, but one high heel sticks in the ground, and I fall backward. A sharp rock penetrates the palm of my hand and pain pierces my lower back.

A moment later a woman crawls out of the forest.

She's old. Her hair hangs in wet strands around her face, and her thin blouse and jeans are soaked through and torn. She has no jacket or shoes and her arms are streaked with blood and dirt.

"Help me," she says in a voice so weak I can barely understand the words.

I slide backward on the ground in complete terror to escape her. She looks exactly like a witch or an insane murderer from one of the horror movies I watch with Saga.

The rain has gotten heavier and a big puddle spreads out around me. I get up on to my haunches, take off my shoes and hold them in my hand.

"Help me," she mutters again, trying to get to her feet.

I realize that she's not a witch, but maybe she could be crazy. And dangerous. Last year, the police arrested a mentally ill guy in

Ormberg. He'd escaped from Karsudden Hospital in Katrineholm and hid for almost a month in somebody's empty summer cottage.

"Who are you?" I ask, still backing up, my feet sinking into the wet moss.

The woman stops. She looks surprised, as if she doesn't know how to answer that question. Then she looks at her arms, pushes away a branch, and I see she's holding something in her hand, a book or maybe a notebook.

"My name is Hanne," she says after a few seconds.

Her voice sounds steadier, and when she meets my eyes, she tries to press out a smile.

She goes on:

"You don't need to be afraid. I won't hurt you."

The rain whips against my cheek as I meet her eyes.

She looks different now, less like a witch and more like somebody's aunt. A harmless old woman who's ripped her clothes and fallen down in the woods. Maybe she got lost and can't find her way home.

"What happened?" I ask.

She looks down at her ripped-up clothes and then looks up and meets my gaze. I can see the despair and horror in her eyes.

"I don't remember," she murmurs.

At that very moment, I hear a car approaching in the distance. The old woman also seems to hear it, because she takes a few steps toward the big road and waves her arms. I follow her up onto the edge of the highway and stare into the darkness toward the oncoming vehicle. In its headlights, I can make out Hanne's bare feet, which are covered with blood, as if she'd scratched them on sharp twigs and stones.

And I see something else too: I see the sequins of my dress glitter and sparkle like stars in a clear night sky.

Who knows who might be sitting in that car—could be a neighbor or a friend's big brother or the crazy old man on the

other side of the church—but the likelihood that it's someone I know is pretty high.

The terror spreads inward, twisting my intestines, squeezing my heart tight.

There's only one thing worse than witches and mental patients and insane murderers—being discovered. If people in Ormberg found out you might as well just shoot me now.

I back up into the woods and squat down behind a few bushes. The driver must have seen me, but hopefully didn't recognize me. It's dark, the rain is pouring now, and I am in a costume of sorts.

The car stops, and the window glides down with a hum. Music flows out into the night. I hear the old woman talk to the driver, but I don't recognize the woman inside or the car. After a minute, the old woman opens the back door and jumps in. And the car disappears into the night.

I stand up and walk down the path, which runs like a dark, shining snake through the woods. The only sound is the rain.

The old woman whose name was Hanne is gone, but she left something on the ground—a brown book.

Malin

I huddle over against the wind in the parking lot, staring down at the shiny black asphalt, my mind still on the question Mom asked just before I got the call.

Why did you become a cop, Malin?

When I get that question I usually laugh and roll my eyes. I make some joke about how it's not for the money, or the car, or the hours. In other words: I deflect. I don't *want* to consider the question seriously, examine my motives or myself. If I were to try to explain it, I'd say it's in part because I like helping people, that deep down I really believe I can make a difference. Also, I've always had the urge to create order, put things in their proper place, like that feeling you get when you clean your house or weed your garden.

Besides, going away to study at the Police Academy in Sörentorp, just north of Stockholm, was an easy way to escape. A free ticket out of Örmberg, and an excellent excuse to avoid having to visit on the weekends.

And the skeleton that Kenny, Anders, and I found in the woods eight years ago—did that have anything to do with my career path?

I don't know.

At the time, it was exciting to be at the center of a high-profile criminal investigation. Even if the victim, a little girl, was never identified. And the perpetrator never found.

It definitely didn't occur to me that I might work that very case one day.

A bitterly cold gust of wind blows an empty plastic sack and some leaves in the direction of the one-story brick hospital. Someone exits the reception area, stands with his back to the wind, and lights a cigarette.

Manfred Olsson, my temporary colleague, called me less than an hour ago.

I remember the surprise on Mom's face when I took the call. Her eyes flicking between the clock and me, and then her realization that something serious had happened, and I was going to have to leave. Even if it was the first Sunday of Advent, and she had a roast in the oven.

Manfred sounded out of breath when I answered the phone, as if he'd run the three-kilometer track near the church. But he often sounds out of breath, probably because he's carrying around an extra fifty kilos. And I was completely unprepared for what he said: Hanne Lagerlind-Schön had been found in the forest yesterday—alone, suffering from hypothermia, and confused. Could I head to the hospital and meet her with him?

It apparently took the local police almost a day to connect her to us and contact Manfred. Not so strange, I suppose—there's no police station in Ormberg. The closest one is in Vingåker, and we don't have much contact with them. Plus Hanne couldn't remember what she was doing in the forest, or that she'd ever been in Ormberg.

Of everyone I've ever worked with, Hanne is the last person I'd expect something like this to happen to. She's a kind, quiet, and pathologically precise criminal profiler in her sixties, from Stockholm. She never comes late to a meeting and takes constant notes in a little brown book.

How is it even possible? How can you forget where you are and who your colleagues are?

And where the hell is Peter Lindgren? He never leaves her side.

Hanne and Peter are two of the five people investigating the murder of the girl in the cairn. Since the arrival of our new national police commissioner, there've been a number of new initiatives: We're going to get tougher on vandalism. Our clearance rate is supposed to increase. Special teams will focus on gang violence in vulnerable areas. And a new task force has been set up to revisit cold cases related to deadly violence. The statute of limitations for murder was abolished in 2010, and now there are stacks of murder cases lying unsolved all over the country.

The murder of the little girl in Ormberg is only one such cold case dug out of storage for a new review. We've been working on it for just over a week. Hanne and Peter are here from the National Operations Department. If I understand correctly, they're also a couple—an odd couple, since Hanne must be at least ten years older than Peter. Manfred came down from NOD as well. He's been working with Peter for a long time. Besides them, Andreas Borg is in our group—a police officer in his thirties who's stationed in Örebro usually.

And then there's me, Malin.

That I would end up working on the investigation into the murder of the girl at the cairn is unforeseen to say the least—not just because I was the one who found her that autumn night eight years ago, but also because I've been working at the Katrineholm police station since graduating from the academy. But there's a logic to it: I was sent to Ormberg because I grew up there. I'm expected to contribute my local knowledge. I think I might be the only police officer in all of Södermanland who grew up in Ormberg.

The fact that I discovered the body wasn't even a part of the calculations when my superiors made this decision. They wanted someone on site who knew their way around the seemingly end-

less forests in this area, and who could talk to the old people who live inside them.

They have a point.

Ormberg isn't exactly welcoming to strangers, and I know this village inside and out, know everyone who lives there. The few that are left, that is. Since the TrikåKungen factory and Brogrens Mechanical plant closed most people have moved away. All that's left are the people who own summer homes, the old folks, and the unemployed.

And the refugees, of course.

I wonder who came up with the brilliant idea of putting hundreds of asylum seekers into a depopulated small town in Södermanland. It's not the first time, either. When the Balkan refugees came in the early nineties the old TrikåKungen building also served as a refugee camp.

Manfred's big German SUV swings into the parking lot, and I head toward him.

He parks the car, and his solid, hunched figure begins to trudge in my direction. The wind grabs hold of his reddish blond hair and blows it up and back so it forms a halo around his head.

He's dressed elegantly, as usual, wearing an expensive coat and a red scarf of thin, slightly wrinkled wool. He's wrapped it around his neck with studied nonchalance. He's has a briefcase in cognac leather tucked under his left arm, and his steps are hurried.

"Hello," I say, and jog to keep up with him.

He nods reservedly toward me as we enter the hospital.

"Is Andreas coming, too?" I ask.

"No," says Manfred, running his hand through his hair, trying to force it back into place. "Apparently he's at his mother's place in Örebro. We'll have to brief him tomorrow."

"And Peter—have you heard anything?"

It takes a moment for Manfred to answer.

"No. His phone seems to be turned off. And Hanne doesn't remember anything. I've filed a missing person report. The police

and the military will start searching the forest tomorrow morning.”

I don't know how close Peter and Manfred are, but you can tell they've worked together for years. They seem to agree about most things and communicate with very few words. A look or a short nod seems to be all that's required.

Manfred must be worried.

No one's heard from Peter since yesterday, when he and Hanne left our temporary office in Ormberg at half past four.

As far as we know, I'm the last person who saw them.

When they left they seemed more animated than usual, as if they were headed for something fun. I asked where they were off to, and they said they were thinking about going to Katrineholm for dinner—they were tired of food that tasted like cardboard, something to that effect. After that, neither of us heard from Hanne or Peter—which wasn't so strange, since it was a weekend, and we'd decided to take a few days off.

We enter, go to the front desk, and get directions to her room. The bright hospital lights shine off the linoleum floors of the corridor. Manfred looks tired, his eyes bloodshot and his lips pale and chapped. But he often looks tired. I suppose the combination of his stressful job and the demands of being a fifty-year-old father to a young child must be quite draining.

Hanne is sitting on the edge of her bed when we enter. She has on a hospital gown and an orange blanket wrapped around her shoulders like a cape. Her hair hangs down over her shoulders in damp wisps, as if she's just showered. Her hands are covered with small scratches, and her feet are bandaged. There's an IV stand next to her, and a tube runs from the dropping-bottle to her hand. Her eyes are glassy, her face expressionless.

Manfred goes over to her and gives her a clumsy hug.

“Manfred,” she murmurs in a raspy voice.

Then she turns her eyes to me, tilts her head a little, and stares uncomprehendingly.

It takes a few seconds for me to realize she doesn't recognize me, even though we've been working together for more than a week.

The realization chills me.

"Hi, Hanne," I say, touching her arm gently, suddenly afraid my touch might rip her like a paper doll—she seems so desperately frail.

"It's me, Malin, we work together," I continue, trying to keep my voice steady. "Do you recognize me?"

Hanne blinks several times and meets my gaze. Her eyes are watery and bloodshot.

"Yes, of course," she says, but I'm sure she's lying because her expression is one of tormented concentration, as if trying to solve a difficult equation.

I grab a stool and sit across from her. Manfred sinks down on the bed and puts his arm around her narrow shoulders.

Hanne seems so tiny and thin next to him, almost childlike.

Manfred clears his throat.

"Do you remember what happened in the woods, Hanne?"

Hanne's face crumbles. She wrinkles her forehead and shakes her head slowly.

"I don't remember," she says, burying her face in her hands.

For a moment, she seems embarrassed, as if she'd like to push this whole situation away.

Manfred catches my eye.

"It doesn't matter," he says, squeezing her shoulders, and then continues in a steady voice:

"You were in the woods south of Orm Mountain last night."

Hanne nods, straightens her back, and puts her hands on her knees.

"Do you remember that?" I ask.

She shakes her head and scratches absently at the surgical tape

holding her IV needle in place. Her nails are cracked and black-rimmed.

"You were found by a young woman driving through the forest," Manfred says. "And apparently you were with another young woman. She was wearing a cardigan and some kind of glittery dress. Do you remember?"

"No, sorry. I'm so sorry, but . . ."

Hanne's voice breaks and tears start running down her cheeks.

"It doesn't matter," Manfred says. "It's okay, Hanne. We'll find out what happened. Do you remember if Peter was with you in the woods?"

Hanne buries her face in her hands again.

"No. *Forgive me!*"

Manfred looks distressed. Gives me a pleading look.

"What's the last thing you remember?" I try.

At first I don't think she's going to answer. Her shoulders are rising up and down violently, and every breath seems like it takes great effort.

"Ilulissat," she says, with her face still buried in her hands.

Manfred meets my eyes and mouths: "Greenland."

Hanne and Peter came here straight from Greenland to participate in the investigation. They'd been on a two-month-long trip of a lifetime, which they took after solving a very complicated murder case.

"Okay," I say. "And then you came to Ormberg to work on the investigation of the skeleton in the cairn. Do you remember that?"

Hanne trembles and sobs.

"Do you remember *anything* from Ormberg?" Manfred asks quietly.

"Nothing," Hanne says. "I remember *nothing*."

Manfred takes her thin hand and seems to ponder something. Then he stiffens, turns her palm upward, and stares intently at it.

At first I don't understand, but then I see something's been written on Hanne's hand. Sprawling numbers in ink, pierced by

small wounds, visible on her pale skin. I'm able to make out "363," but then the text becomes blurs and impossible to decipher, as if it were scrubbed away along with the forest dirt.

"What's this?" Manfred asks. "What do these numbers mean?"

Hanne stares at her hand uncomprehendingly, as if she'd never seen it before. As if it were a wild animal that's snuck into the hospital and settled there on her knee.

"I don't know," she says. "I haven't got a clue."

We're sitting in the lunchroom with a doctor named Maja, who seems to be my age. Her long blond hair falls in soft curls on her white coat. She reminds me of the kind of woman I wanted to be when I was younger: tiny, curvy, and sweet—everything I've never been. She's wearing jeans, and a pink T-shirt peeks out from under her lab coat. A blue pin with the word "Doctor" written on it sits on her chest, and a few pencils stick out her pocket.

The room isn't large. It contains a couple refrigerators, a dishwasher, and a round table with four birch-veneer chairs. There's a poinsettia sitting in a plastic pot in the middle of the table. A thank-you card filled out in wobbly handwriting is stuck between its leaves.

Two nurses enter, grab something from one of the refrigerators, and then head back out to the corridor again without saying a word.

"She was suffering from extreme hypothermia and dehydration when she arrived," Maja says, pouring a splash of milk into her coffee. "And, she was found wearing nothing but a thin blouse and pair of pants, even though it was freezing out."

"No coat?" Manfred asks. Maja shakes her head.

"No coat, no shoes."

"Was she able to tell you anything about what had happened?" I ask.

Maja gathers her long, light hair into a knot at the nape of her

neck. Her perfectly shaped lips form a small pout. She sighs, and shakes her head.

"She couldn't remember anything. We call it anterograde amnesia. That's when you're unable to form new memories after a certain point in time. At first we thought she might have suffered head trauma. But there's no evidence of that. She has no external damage and the head X-ray revealed no bleeding or swelling. But, of course, we might have missed something. You need to do an X-ray within six hours of a head trauma in order to be sure you catch any bleeding. And we don't know how long she was out there in the woods."

"Could she have suffered something so terrifying that she's repressed it?" I ask.

Maja shrugs slightly and takes a sip of her coffee. Then grimaces and slams the cup down onto the table.

"Sorry! The coffee around here tastes like shit. You mean could she have suffered psychological trauma so intense that it caused the memory loss? Perhaps; that's not my area of specialty. But we're beginning to think she might have some underlying form of dementia. Perhaps it's become more acute as a result of what she experienced. Her short-term memory is severely impaired, but she remembers everything that happened until a month ago quite clearly."

"Could we check her medical records?" I ask.

"You mean her medical records in Stockholm?" Maja asks. "Hanne has given us her permission, which we require legally. But we don't know where she's been receiving treatment, and she doesn't remember. Records are often kept by the health care providers themselves."

Manfred clears his throat, seems to be hesitating. Strokes his beard.

"Hanne *did* have some trouble with her memory," he says quietly.

"*What?*" I say. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

Manfred squirms and looks embarrassed.

"I didn't think it was very serious. Peter mentioned it, but I got the feeling she was more scatterbrained, not that it was . . . well, not that she was suffering from *dementia*, in the clinical sense."

He falls silent, starts fiddling with his expensive Swiss wristwatch. His confession astonishes me. Could he seriously mean that Hanne was allowed to work on a murder investigation even though she was ill? That a person suffering from dementia had been entrusted with matters of life and death?

"We still don't know why her short-term memory is so impaired," Maja inserts diplomatically. "It *could* be due to underlying dementia, but she also could have experienced some form of trauma, either physically or psychologically."

"What happens to her now?" Manfred asks.

"I don't really know. Apparently, social services is trying to find a temporary placement for her, because the rest homes are full. But she's not sick enough to stay at the hospital. Not if you ask me anyway. She's having problems with her short-term memory, but everything else is fine."

"Could her memory come back?" I ask. "Could it be temporary?"

Maja smiles sadly and tilts her head. She puts her coffee cup down, lays her small hands on the table, and folds them.

"Who knows. Stranger things have happened."