

LINDA STÅHL

THE SINNER
SHALL
AWAKEN

Original title: **Syndaren skall vakna**

Norstedts, April 2021, 440 pages

Excerpt translated from the Swedish by Alice Menzies

Pp. 9–41, pp. 85–111

NORSTEDTS AGENCY

catherine.mork@norstedts.se

sofia.odsberg@norstedts.se

linda.altrovberg@norstedts.se

[pp. 9-41]

Wednesday 9 September

Chapter 1

Hearing a knock on the glass, Harald Tengbom looked up and saw Hamid standing in the doorway. His broad shoulders seemed to fill the frame, and his tailormade suit looked like it had been moulded to his body. His black hair was slicked back, the tamed waves gleaming in the light. Harald had been on the verge of calling one of his clients, and was sitting with the phone in his hand, but he put it down and told his colleague to come in.

The desk chair Harald was sitting in was a complicated ergonomic model, but he hadn't bothered to read the instruction manual, so he felt a niggling pain in both his lumbar region and shoulders. An active lifestyle would probably do far more for his aches and pains than a chair so comfortable that it encouraged sedentary behaviour.

Hamid came into the room and sat down in one of the two visitors' chairs in front of Harald's desk.

"Congratulations," said Harald, smiling at his younger colleague as he held out a hand. "I hear you made a good impression on the von Materns. Seems like it's between us and Mäklare Syd now, but rumour is that they're going to pick us. Thanks to you. If you can sell their dilapidated old mansion in Ljunghusen, that'll be a big deal for the company. A really big deal."

The likelihood of Greger von Matern choosing Näset Estates had increased markedly when Hamid Bircan stepped in and charmed his wife, Sylvia. Or ex-wife, as she now was.

Hamid took Harald's outstretched hand and gripped it tightly. Harald was particular about handshakes, and didn't have a single employee with either clammy hands or a dead fish of a shake. He held Hamid's hand and

placed his other palm on top, patting the backs of their hands before letting go. Hamid smiled, managing the difficult art of looking neither embarrassed nor boastful. Harald felt a sense of warmth flood through his chest at the thought that his disciple had managed to make a name for himself so quickly. He had always hoped for a son who could take over the firm once it was time for him to step back, but then Amanda had come along instead, and his daughter hadn't followed his footsteps into the world of property.

He studied the younger man with pride. Hamid Bircan had only been with Näset Estates for a few years, but he was already among their top salesmen. Hungry and skilful, he reminded Harald of himself in his younger days. Harald still delivered, of course, but that was largely down to old merits—not that there was anything wrong with that. Truth be told, he longed to wind down, and with someone like Hamid on board, it would be much easier to offload some of the responsibility.

“I was thinking about going to Flommen for lunch,” said Hamid. “Would you like to join me?”

Harald got up and walked around the desk. He placed a hand on his colleague's navy blue sleeve and squeezed his shoulder.

“I would've gladly joined you for lunch at the golf club, but I was actually planning to go home early to see Yvonne. With things being so busy here recently, we haven't seen much of each other. I thought I'd spoil her with a champagne lunch.”

“Absolutely, Harald. Absolutely. Just let me know if anything comes up—you know I've got your back.”

Harald let go of Hamid's shoulder, patted him and smiled. Hamid got to his feet and ran a hand over his glossy black hair.

It was reassuring to know that he had someone he could rely on to help; someone without any ulterior motive whatsoever. It meant Harald

could ease off on his need to be in control, however strange it felt after a career in which he had left nothing to chance.

Harald decided to stop off at the shopping centre on his way home. He went to the liquor store first, marching straight over to the shelf of Moët, and then to the supermarket, where he picked up everything he needed at the deli counter. The man who served him wasn't one of his favourites. As he waited for his turn, Harald had been hoping for one of the other assistants, but the system clearly had other plans. The women who worked behind the counter were much more service-oriented and pleasant than the man, who came across as a little stand-offish. Harald dealt with that by being a little more difficult himself—not that he was any worse than the women in the queue around, all dressed in Armani jeans and Burberry scarves, asking to taste one thing after another. They crinkled their noses at what they claimed was too much fat on the Parma ham, and they complained that the bresaola was being sliced too thickly.

Harald asked to sample the items he was buying, too. The man on the other side of the counter gave him a lingering look but then sliced tasters of everything Harald pointed at. His basket quickly filled up with various paper-wrapped meats, a couple of mature cheeses, a pack of lightly salted biscuits and a tub of olives stuffed with anchovies. Yvonne's favourite. For dinner that evening, he bought two slices of Västerbotten pie and 100 grams of Kalix roe. He was pleased with his little haul.

A stiff breeze was blowing in the car park outside, and an empty plastic bag danced across the tarmac over by the recycling station. It sailed upwards and did an about turn before plunging back down to the ground. There was still some heat in the air, but that didn't stop the wind from grabbing hold

of Harald and giving him a good shake. Höllviken was beautiful in many ways, but it always seemed to be blowing a damn gale.

Despite that, he decided to put the top down on his AMG. It might be his last chance for the year. There was an old Queen tune was playing on the radio, and Harald hummed along. As he passed the roundabout and turned off onto the main road, he saw the waves breaking on the Öresund side, and he smelled salt and seaweed in the air. A horse and rider were walking along the promenade, going against the wind. Further along the road, he passed a group of teenagers struggling on their bicycles.

Just before the bridge over the Falsterbro Canal, Harald turned off onto Trulsibrunnvägen. It wasn't even one o'clock, but he was almost home.

“Yvonne!”

Harald held his shopping bags in one hand as he closed and locked the door behind him.

A compact silence filled the house. He couldn't even hear the radio. Yvonne always listened to P4 Radio Malmöhus, and the sound system delivered the audio to every room—even the bathroom—but the house was now so quiet that Harald could hear himself breathing.

He made his way down the hall into the kitchen. He switched on the ceiling lights and turned them up as bright as they would go, making the stainless steel worktops gleam. There was a faint hint of cleaning products hanging in the air. The place was as neat and tidy as ever; he loved his wife for that. For much of their marriage, Yvonne had worked part time as a pre-school teacher, even when their daughter was young. It had been important to her to have a job. But when she turned fifty, she had made the decision to take early retirement in order to devote herself to the house and her interests.

The loss of income from her part-time work didn't make much difference to their finances.

The melody from the radio in the car was still in Harald's head, and he hummed "Radio Ga Ga" as he took out two plates and started to arrange artfully rolled slices of prosciutto alongside hunks of cheese. The bottle of champagne went straight into the freezer to cool down.

"Yvonne?" he repeated, louder this time, but there was still no answer.

Harald saw his own reflection in the window as he wiped his hands on a rough kitchen towel. His movements were becoming slower and slower. Yvonne could easily have popped out, of course, but Harald had the sense that something wasn't quite right. He left the kitchen and went to fetch his phone to call his wife.

Chapter 2

Reub Thelander studied the two people sitting in the meeting room. Both Estrid Berg and Claes Trygg, detectives at the station in Vellinge, were staring straight ahead, wearing expressions that revealed they were taking in far more with their eyes than their ears. Reub resisted the familiar urge to claw at both forearms, a tic that often came hand in hand with nerves.

The head of CID, Detective Chief Inspector Michaela Green, had suffered a stroke earlier that summer, and had been on sick leave for the past few months. Today was Reub's first day as her acting replacement. Management had eventually realised that it would be a while before Michaela was back, and had decided to bring in a temporary cover. That type of extravagance was rare; one person out didn't mean another person in. Instead, they usually saw it as an opportunity to save money.

The door opened and a man entered the room, completing the group. Pedram Afshari.

“Sorry I'm late.”

From his name and appearance, Reub had expected a foreign accent, but the man spoke in a thick Skåne drawl. Pedram strode across the room to Reub, glancing back at the whiteboard on the wall and reading the name written in green pen. His thick, dark brows rose momentarily before lowering again, and he held out a hand.

“Pedram Afshari, I'm the group's IT expert and administrator.”

“Reub Thelander.”

They shook hands. Pedram's gaze was steady and confident.

“Welcome to Vellinge.”

“Thanks!”

Pedram sat down and Reub took a deep breath, ready to start the usual introductory speech.

“What’s the first thing that comes to mind when I say the word ‘universe’?”

Estrid Berg looked down at the table. More accurately, she looked down at her belly, which was so round that she had no choice but to sit back from the table. She looked ready to pop any day now, and according to the personnel files Reub had skimmed through on the train from Jönköping, she was only a month or so from her due date. Claes Trygg reached for a banana from the fruit bowl and put it down in front of him before folding his arms. His shirt was crisply ironed, and the logo on the breast pocket revealed that it was from one of the more expensive brands. His bald head gleamed in the glare of the strip lights, and when he noticed that Reub’s gaze had landed there, he ran a quick hand over his scalp.

Would he be the most difficult member of the group going forward? Reub was so used to analysing people, trying to predict their reactions, that it came automatically. Finding allies was important, but it was also crucial to quickly get a sense of who might pose a threat. It was a life-long habit.

“Infinity, I think,” Pedram spoke up after a moment’s silence. “The universe, that is. Something huge that goes on forever.”

Reub glanced at the others. Estrid gave a slow nod in agreement, but Claes remained perfectly still, staring blankly ahead.

“When I was younger,” said Reub, managing to keep calm, “I often used to talk to my dad about space. I bombarded him with questions he couldn’t always answer. He told me that we know very little about the universe. That we have no idea where it starts and ends. It probably keeps going for all infinity.”

Reub left out the key role God had played in that particular explanation of the universe. To the Thelander family, there was no Big Bang; the earth and everything on it had been created by God. It was all the Lord's work, may His will be done, etcetera.

Reub took a couple of sips from the glass on the table. The sparkling water was virtually flat, and tasted metallic and salty. It wasn't much of a thirst quencher.

"How long is infinity?" Reub continued. "When does infinity end? The incomprehensibility of it is hard for us to take in."

The new acting head of CID paused for effect before going on:

"But do we really need to know everything? Maybe not everything can be explained. We've mulled over the mysteries of the universe, and most of us can handle that."

Reub's shirt sleeves were rolled up, revealing a pair of tattooed forearms. The pattern had been carefully chosen for aesthetic reasons, but above all to hide the scars that would never fade.

"Non-binary. Does anyone here know what that means?"

Three pairs of eyes stared up at Reub. One by one, they scanned their new colleague, and after a moment's silence it was Claes who raised his hand.

"That's someone who doesn't know whether they're male or female," he replied, without waiting for the green light to speak.

Reub listened carefully for any subtext, noticed the disdain on Claes's face.

"I'd actually say they do know," said Reub, placing both palms on the table. "They know that they're neither male nor female. And it's not exactly rocket science to work out that I'm non-binary. A condition of us being able to work together is you accepting that I'm infinite. Just like the universe."

The hum of the air conditioning unit was the only sound in the room. The speech was over and done with, and Reub's pulse began to slow. *Be who you are and love who you want.* Reub glanced down at the tattooed text, words uttered by a grandmother upon learning that her grandchild was non-binary. She was the only member of the family who knew, and just a few days later she had died after a long illness. Their time together had been far too short, and Reub still regretted that they had never really got to know each other. She had been on her deathbed when they finally came together, after an entire life apart.

“Is ‘they’ OK, or which pronoun do you prefer?”

Estrid's question wasn't entirely unexpected, but nor was it the most common response. On hearing the universe metaphor and finding out that Reub was non-binary, people tended to focus on what kind of genitals were hiding beneath Reub's clothes. It was perfectly acceptable to be non-binary so long as people knew whether you were *really* male or female. Whenever the question of genitals came up, Reub had to give an equally long speech about how what a person had between their legs didn't by any stretch of the imagination necessarily correspond to their gender identity.

“They is fine,” Reub told her, unsure whether it was time to lower their guard or raise it a little higher.

Chapter 3

Alex Carsén opened the window and breathed in the mild late summer air in an attempt to sharpen her senses. The water down below was dazzling, glittering silver. She had asked for a room on the top floor, not just because of the views but because it gave her a greater sense of security than lower down. No one could see her up here. No one could peer in from outside, pressing their forehead to the glass, breath fogging the pane. Her reasoning had been much the same when she bought her apartment in Kungsholmen. Top floor, not overlooked. An extra—but crucial—security measure. She hadn't even bothered to view any places that didn't tick that particular box. The renovations on the bathroom had overrun, and while she waited for the finishing touches to be completed, she was staying here. She couldn't exactly complain.

The publicity campaign for her latest book was in full swing, the Gothenburg book fair less than a month away. Admittedly it wasn't Alex who popped up on chat show sofas or took part in authors' panels—something she had never done, for obvious reasons. But it took just as much effort to write scripts and practise with her spokeswoman so that everything she said matched what Alex wanted to convey. She was Alex Carsén to the people, but no one had ever seen her face. Instead she pushed her spokeswoman into the spotlight whenever she was invited to speak in public, and Görel Rudström did the job with panache. The two women had only known each other for a few years, but their partnership had grown so strong that it almost resembled a symbiosis. When Görel spoke to readers or journalists, the words that came out of her mouth were Alex's. Görel was her ventriloquist's

dummy. The fact she had been so unwavering in her help over the past few years, going above and beyond what could be expected of another person, didn't make her any less admirable.

Alex could see the Royal Palace on the other side of the water, colourless and glum, and if she leaned out of the window she could see Stockholm Town Hall towering over the rooftops in the distance, its three golden crowns rising up into the blue sky. A boat pulled away from the quay with a loud blast of the horn. It reminded her of a scene from Seacrow Island, when Uncle Melker comes ashore and announces that he has bought the cottage.

Alex felt the same sense of triumph when she thought about her own successes. What a turn her life had taken. The hair on her arms stood on end, and she stroked her bare skin. She backed away from the window, but decided to leave it open. The fresh air brought a sense of freedom.

Alex had no plans to leave her room that evening; she would stay in bed and order something delicious from room service.

The hotel dressing gown was thick and fluffy, and felt weighty in her arms. It smelled like it had been freshly laundered. Alex untied the belt knotted around the folded fabric and shook out the white towelling, pulling on the robe. In matching slippers with the grand old hotel's emblem embroidered on each foot, she shuffled over to the seating area and sat down. She picked up the phone and ordered a prawn sandwich and a glass of Chablis. Before hanging up, she also asked them to bring her a bowl of strawberries and a small bottle of sparkling wine. For later. Order placed, she moved back over to the bed and picked up the remote control from the nightstand. The theme for Go'kväll started playing as she switched on the TV, and though she was used to seeing Görel represent her on screen, she

still felt a flutter in her stomach as the host announced that evening's content.

Alex Carsén's success seems to know no bounds. Her debut novel Off-Key made a real splash when it was published eighteen months ago, and has now been sold to twenty-six countries. Carsén's clear feminist standpoint and her stinging criticism of society's failure to take responsibility and protect women from systemic male violence has led to a heated debate, and that is just one of the reasons why she made the decision to stay out of the public eye prior to the release of her debut. Last week, her second novel, The Harpy, was published, and we have Carsén's representative here with us today to talk about the book. A warm welcome to lawyer Görel Rudström!

The interview went off without a hitch. Emphasising a feminist voice and putting serious pressure on society and the laws governing it had kicked off a movement on par with #metoo. There seemed to be no limit to the amount of attention given to the book, nor to the witch hunt that had begun against Alex. Görel had been wise enough to anticipate the entire circus, and had come up with a plan to keep Alex out of the spotlight before her first novel was even published. She was the shield Alex needed in order to keep writing.

Görel dealt with the battery of questions from the TV host with intelligence and rigor. She was impeccably dressed, in a burgundy suit that clung to her curves. Her heels were sky high, her lipstick an exact match for her suit. Her glow radiated all the way from the TV studio to Alex's hotel room, and she said exactly what Alex would have said if she were there herself. Görel was a partner—and friend—she could trust.

Chapter 4

Over an hour had now passed, and Yvonne still hadn't come home. She hadn't replied to any of Harald's text messages, nor answered his calls—three of each by this point, the latest followed up with a brief voicemail.

Hi, honey. I'm at home and you're... not. I bought us lunch. Could you call me?

As Harald hung up, his stomach growled so loudly that he started eating the charcuterie from his plate right there at the counter. He barely even registered the taste of the salty ham or the cave matured cheese. His eye fell on Yvonne's clingfilm-wrapped plate as he finished, and he carried it over to the fridge. It was almost three o'clock, and on any other weekday he would still have another hour or two of work to finish off at office. Minimum. If he had a viewing he often didn't make it home before nine in the evening—though these days he never had more than one viewing a week. He offloaded a lot of things onto Hamid, with great success.

The house felt strange without Yvonne around. Quiet, empty and deserted. She had emptied the dishwasher after breakfast, leaving the door cracked open to allow it to dry out. Yvonne was very particular about not trapping any moisture inside.

Harald rarely spent any time home alone. In fact, most of his waking hours were spent either at the office or on the golf course. Wandering around without purpose was a waste of time. And yet here he was, drifting aimlessly between the kitchen and the other rooms he had given Yvonne free rein to decorate. The vases full of flowers were hers, the art on the walls her choice,

and the colour scheme she had picked—sober white with powder pink accents—was repeated throughout in the textiles, wallpaper and decorative details. Harald had never had any strong opinions on the décor, and had left all it to her. He had visited more than enough homes to know that an interest in interior design didn't necessarily come hand in hand with being well off. If the feeling wasn't there, then, as an estate agent, all you could hope was that the seller had enough sense to hire a decent interior designer. Otherwise the property could be a difficult sell.

Harald pulled on his shoes and did a loop of the garden. The dry summer had left its mark outside. Yvonne had done her best to keep both the flowers and the lawn alive, but she had given up all hope when the council introduced a hosepipe ban. She wasn't in the garden. The pines nodded mutely as he walked towards the garage, but there was no sign of her there either. Nor in the shed.

Feeling restless, Harald returned to the kitchen where he switched on the radio and grabbed the laptop from the top drawer beneath the counter. A picture of Yvonne beamed at him from the screen. Streaks of grey had appeared in her chestnut brown hair over the years, and Harald thought it suited her. The grandkids were standing on either side of her in the photograph, laughing. Surely she would be home by six. An hour before that, in all likelihood. She wouldn't have time to prepare dinner otherwise. In the Tengbom household, dinner was always ready at six o'clock on the dot during the week, no exceptions.

As the hours passed, it became harder and harder to focus on emails, floorplans and wide-angle interior shots. Yvonne hadn't responded to a single one of his messages, despite the fact that both she and Harald were usually quick to reply unless they were busy doing something particular. But

she didn't have any plans today. Harald double checked the calendar to make sure. It was empty.

He slammed the lid of the laptop and got to his feet. Could she have gone into town for lunch with Amanda? No, she always mentioned any plans with their daughter, and she definitely would have picked up when he called. Besides, the two women rarely met up. Amanda was much too busy living her life, as grown children often are.

He could always get in touch with Maud Bjurström. Living on the same street, she was the friend Yvonne spent most time with. They were probably laughing over a cup of coffee like usual, with Yvonne's phone out of earshot in her pocket. That was just one of several possible, logical explanations. Nothing felt particularly logical right now, but Harald just couldn't bring himself to call Maud.

He fiddled with his phone. His hands were shaking, and a lump had settled in the pit of his stomach. Harald scrolled to Maud's number in his contacts list, then changed his mind and called Amanda instead. His daughter picked up after just a few rings, and Harald had to make a real effort not to sound too distressed; he didn't want to worry her. Amanda repeated all of the same logical explanations that had already crossed his mind, but that still didn't help dampen the anxiety galloping in his chest. He heard himself disagreeing with her, and knew just how pathetic his arguments sounded. Amanda was probably right. Yvonne would be home any minute now. And if she wasn't then he could always call her back. When she asked whether he wanted her to come over and keep him company, Harald said no. It was considerate of her, but she was right, he was getting worked up over nothing.

The minute they hung up, he dialled Yvonne's number. Again. It rang five times, then her voicemail took over.

Thursday 10 September

Chapter 5

Estrid Berg picked up her coffee mug and waddled down the corridor from the office to the pantry. It was still pretty warm outside, which was fortunate because her feet no longer fit in anything other than sandals or a pair of worn out trainers. In all honesty, this entire pregnancy had been one long test of endurance—Robin’s unwavering enthusiasm aside. And the fact that it let her escape her usual PMS. Estrid would rather not think about whether his enthusiasm would falter once the baby arrived. As she spread butter and cheese onto two cinnamon crispbreads, she told herself that some things were just meant to be repressed.

“Morning! You’re in early.”

She turned around when she heard Reub Thelander’s voice. Robin had offered to take Alice to school, so Estrid had set off early. She still wasn’t used to the fact that Robin and Batman, his Alsatian, now lived with them. She would have preferred to wait a while longer before shacking up, but the situation was what it was, with a baby on the way and everything. Robin and his previous girlfriend Kattis had tried for years to get pregnant, so he had been over the moon at the news. “These things happen,” the midwife had said when Estrid asked a thousand questions about why her coil hadn’t worked. He had also taken care to point out that Estrid wasn’t exactly a spring chicken any more, and that this pregnancy could well be her last. *Thank God for that!* Her body had been taken hostage while the child in her belly grew big enough to be born into a world where both truths and lies awaited them.

Fortunately Alice had taken Estrid's relationship with Robin in her stride, ditto the arrival of a huge Alsatian and the news that she would soon be a big sister. That was more than could be said for Gustav, her ex. It had been stupid of Estrid not to mention Robin sooner, she knew that, but she had wanted to wait. It was just that she had waited so long that he'd been served up everything at once, which obviously wasn't ideal. "Hi, this is Robin, a colleague you've met a few times. We're a couple now, moving in together. And did I mention that I'm pregnant?" The situation was like a Kinder egg with three surprises inside, just months after the divorce. Hardly surprising that she and Gustav were no longer on speaking terms.

"Morning," said Estrid, picking up her crispbread. "Good meeting yesterday."

She had no intention of letting anyone know how she had reacted when Reub Thelander first stepped into the meeting room. She would almost certainly find a way to come to terms with the fact that they identified as neither male nor female, it would just take time. Before Reub started talking about the universe and non-binary people, Estrid had—she was embarrassed to admit—been searching for gender normative attributes. She had studied Reub's clothes. Shirt buttoned almost right up to the chin, no sign of a necklace, no earrings. Not even a rebellious nose piercing. Jeans, but anyone could wear those. And white trainers. Arms covered in tattoos and a shaved head, though she had noticed a reddish fuzz growing back in. Full lips and a dimpled chin, as though someone had pushed a pin into a notice board with a little too much force.

"Sorry about Michaela," said Reub, making themselves a cup of coffee. "Hope she's back on her feet soon."

Reub nodded to seating area, and they went over together. Estrid knew there was a risk she might not be able to get back up again, but God it felt good to slump back against the soft cushions.

“Yeah, it’s so sad,” she said. “Above all for her husband.”

Carla Lindblom, head of the Southern Skåne Police District, had sent out Reub’s CV the minute she knew who would be stepping in to replace Michaela, and for some reason Estrid had assumed that they must be a man. She had never heard the name Reub before, but she thought it sounded more masculine than feminine. Either way, Reub had plenty of experience as a detective, and had been part of the group that solved the infamous Tunnerstad murder, where a man was found beaten to death with a dumbbell out on Visingsö. After that case, Reub had quickly climbed the ranks and became head of the Violent Crimes unit in Jönköping. Estrid was curious to know why they had left such a prestigious role for a temporary post in Vellinge, but she decided it was probably too soon to ask.

“I hope I can live up to expectations,” said Reub.

Estrid did too. She was actually slightly surprised—disappointed, even—that neither she nor Claes had been asked to take the helm. After all, the position was only temporary, until Michaela came back. It wasn’t like they were in the middle of a big investigation, and staffing levels were usually on the verge of collapse before management was willing to bring in reinforcements. If even then.

“Something has come in,” said Reub, putting down their coffee to take out a tablet. “Someone called to report a missing person in Höllviken yesterday. One Harald Tengbom. It’s his wife, Yvonne Tengbom, who is missing. I was planning to bring it up in the morning meeting, but since you’re already here...”

Estrid took a bite of her crispbread. The name Tengbom sounded familiar, but she couldn't quite place it. Each chew crunched loudly, and she covered her mouth in an attempt to dampen the sound. Vellinge and Höllviken were relatively small communities, but not small enough for everyone to know everyone. That said, it was a fairly common occurrence for her to have heard of people, if nothing else.

“How old are they? And how long has she been missing?”

“The couple are in their sixties, and when the husband got home from work at lunchtime yesterday, his wife wasn't home. He called the police at seven p.m.”

Estrid frowned, her eyes narrowing.

“OK, so... the woman went out for a few hours in the middle of the day and he called the police? Is she ill?”

“Unclear, though we'll obviously have to look into that.”

“Or,” Estrid continued, “could it be that the husband is your typical resident of Höllviken, expecting every police car in the area to show up as soon as he makes the call? You know, most people round here are high earners, with the emphasis on high. They're used to getting their way at the click of their fingers. No patience whatsoever. No decency either, sometimes. Round here it's all about moving onwards and upwards, and being first in line. She's probably back home already. While we're sitting here, the Tengboms are probably making their morning coffee.”

Reub gave a brief laugh, which momentarily smoothed out the dimple on their chin.

“Well, I've got a very clear idea of the local residents now.”

Estrid immediately regretted going so hard. She lived in the area herself, and knew that far from everyone fit the description she had just given.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’ve lived here almost all my life, and I’m happy here. There are also plenty of people who moved here in the seventies, back when this place was seen as the end of the earth. But now those people are sitting pretty in houses they’ve long since paid off, and they’ll make a fortune whenever they decide to sell up.”

She wiped a few crumbs from the corner of her mouth with the back of her hand, then reached for her coffee cup.

“So what’s the next step?” she asked.

Reub stroked their chin and considered her question. Estrid couldn’t tear her eyes away from their tattooed arms, and once again found herself wondering whether Reub was a particularly feminine man or a masculine woman.

“I think we need to find out whether he’s been in touch again. And to check whether his wife is ill or not. If he hasn’t been in touch, then she’s probably already home, as you say.”

They sat quietly for a moment, and Estrid saw Reub studying her stomach and her laboured breathing. It felt good that the focus was somewhere other than the new boss’s gender identity.

“How long do you have to go?”

“Just over a month.”

“So when does your maternity leave start?”

Estrid shrugged and remembered that she needed to work that out so she could upload the details to the Social Insurance Agency website. That was where you had to both register and apply for maternity pay when the time came. The rules had changed since she was pregnant with Alice.

“Whenever I go into hospital.”

“Aha, got it.” Reub nodded and continued. “And then? I haven’t managed to read through all the personnel files yet—will you be away for a year or so?”

Estrid couldn’t help but let out a sigh. Clearly she wasn’t the only person in the room with preconceived notions.

“If everything goes to plan, I’ll be taking the first month off. But after that I’m hoping to come back to work.”

Reub looked embarrassed.

“Sorry. It was stupid of me to assume.”

Estrid moved to get to her feet, but quickly gave up. Instead she pretended to straighten the cushions behind her back. Judging by her current figure, it was impossible to tell that she was usually strong and supple.

“Don’t worry,” she said, though the assumption definitely bothered her. “Most people think the mum will be home for much longer than that.”

“Well, it’s good news for us. That means we’ll have a full team here more or less all autumn.”

Estrid bit into crispbread number two.

“The only person who’ll be missing is the baby’s father, Robin Johansson. He works here too, just not in this department. He’s a dog handler based in Vellinge, though he gets sent out across the whole of Trelleborg district. He takes Batman—that’s his Alsatian—wherever he’s needed.”

It felt so natural to say that Robin was the father, but the truth was that Estrid was far from sure. The pregnancy, unplanned and initially also unwelcome on her part—she hadn’t really wanted any more children—had taken some time to accept. The shock of being pregnant and the uncertainty surrounding whether or not she actually wanted to keep the baby meant that it had taken her a while to realise that she couldn’t be completely sure

whether the father was Robin or Gustav. The insight filled her with shame, and she had buried her head in the sand. She knew she should have told Robin right away, but she hadn't been able to bring herself to do it, and had now kept up the lie for almost nine months.

She could only hope that Robin really was the child's father.

Chapter 6

Reub felt like kicking himself.

“I didn’t mean to assume that you’d be the one to stay home with the baby.”

Estrid waved both hands like she wanted to erase all memory of the embarrassing situation.

“I mean it. If anyone should have the sense to avoid making assumptions like that, it’s me.”

Reub got up and, while Estrid struggled to do the same, carried their empty cups over to the worktop, where a laminated, coffee-flecked sign reminded the employees that no one’s mum was here to do their washing up for them. They rinsed out both cups and dutifully loaded them into the dishwasher.

The temporary position in Vellinge was a chance for Reub to get away from the station in Jönköping, the place where they had been given the opportunity both to start their career and to climb the ladder. It had once been an inclusive workplace, but that had changed following the arrival of a new boss, a Stockholmer who turned out to be a pompous arsehole. His way of looking at the world was much too similar to the Free Church attitude of Reub’s parents. You might have thought that a big city dweller would be less narrow minded than someone from a small town, but that didn’t seem to be the case. The man’s colleagues in Stockholm had probably grown tired of him and sent him packing to the forests of Småland.

It had started off innocuously enough. Walking past a bar in town one evening, Reub had spotted a couple of colleagues having a beer inside. One

of them had waved and made a questioning gesture, and Reub had shrugged, unable to read their body language. The officer came out and explained that the entire department was inside—why had Reub turned down the invitation? The truth was that there had never been any invitation *to* turn down. Reub had been convinced it was just a mistake, the kind of thing that could happen to anyone, even new bosses. But as the mistakes began to stack up, it quickly became clear that the new boss was deliberately excluding one of his staff. Reub was left out of important meetings, only finding out they had taken place once they were over. Their responsibilities were gradually transferred to colleagues with less experience and skill. Each incident in isolation was so minor that it seemed too insignificant to raise with a superior, but to Reub it was clear that the new boss was deliberately doing whatever he could to get rid of them.

When it reached the stage where notes were pushed into their locker, insults on par with the things Jonte and his gang had written during high school, Reub had realised that they couldn't keep quiet any longer. That kind of playground-level behaviour couldn't be allowed to prevail among grown adults in a workplace that was supposed to uphold safety and security in society. But the response from management and the workplace representative had been a disappointment; they would rather sweep things under the carpet than deal with the real problem.

The temporary position in Vellinge had seemed like a gift from above, and Reub had applied, been offered the post and accepted. During their exit interview Reub had explained to the new boss's superior that they were leaving because of the moron. That he was the only reason. If a person didn't want to acknowledge gender dysphoria, they would never bother to learn about it. There wasn't an equality training course on earth that could cure idiocy.

Taking a position elsewhere, even if it was only temporary, was a perfect opportunity to get away and start over. Reub had only ever come close to leaving Småland once before, as a teenager. Instead, they had moved—or fled—from their childhood home by a small lake in Hustorp to their grandmother’s apartment in central Jönköping. Moving those twenty kilometres had been like arriving in a new world. Reub hadn’t simply left their mother and father behind, but the Free Church community that had been ever-present throughout their childhood. The sense of belonging that had taken Adam away from them.

“Morning meeting soon?” Estrid asked, shutting the dishwasher with her hip as she scrunched up the sheet of kitchen roll containing the crumbs from her crispbread and tossed it into the bin.

Reub nodded and they walked down the corridor together, turning off into their respective offices. Reub sat down at the desk and shook the mouse to bring the screen to life. They skimmed through the various emails that had arrived so far that morning, pausing on one that had been flagged as important. Harald Tengbom had been in touch again early that morning. His wife Yvonne still hadn’t come home. Perhaps it really was something other than Estrid’s hasty conclusion about an impatient local resident. Reub wrote a quick reply to say that the investigation unit would take over the case, then gathered together all available information and set off for the room where the morning meeting was just about to begin.

Chapter 7

For over thirty years, dinner had always been ready on the table at six o'clock on the dot in the house on Trulsibrunnvägen. It didn't matter if Harald was working late or if Amanda's activities got in the way back when she did gymnastics. Anyone who got home later could always warm up a plate of leftovers. But yesterday both Yvonne and dinner had been conspicuous in their absence.

Harald knew he must have come across as a hysterical husband when he called the police at seven p.m., but they didn't know Yvonne like he did. A cool-headed operator had attempted to calm him down, but she had really only managed to wind him up. She had eventually agreed to take his report, though she had emphasised that the case wouldn't be prioritised until more time had passed. *More time?* By then it might be too late. It was after six in the evening and Yvonne still wasn't home. She hadn't been in touch, either. Something was very wrong.

Harald hadn't slept a wink all night. After spending the evening on the sofa, with the television muted and the phone in his lap, waking the display once every five minutes to make sure he hadn't missed any calls or messages, he had eventually gone to bed around midnight, lying down fully dressed and with his eyes wide open. It was the first time he had ever heard his heart pounding, his pulse thundering in his temples and the blood rushing through his veins. Every sound his body made seemed to become audible. The torture of lying there, unable to sleep eventually became too much, and he got up and shuffled aimlessly around the house. Being home alone though he knew Yvonne should be there was terrifying. Harald wasn't anxious or afraid of the

dark, and he rarely worried about anything, but when it came to Yvonne, catastrophic thoughts took over, and his theories about what might have happened to her got worse and worse as the night dragged on. At some time in the early hours, he had called the police again. He had almost no memory of that conversation. His mind was too clogged up with thoughts of stabbings, assaults and attempted rapes. The kind of thing you read about in the papers.

He continued to wander through the house like a zombie, peering into various rooms as though he was carrying out an inspection or a viewing. If Yvonne didn't come home, he wouldn't be able to handle going in to the office that morning. He needed to know where she was. As soon as the hour of the wolf was over and dawn broke, he would send a message to Hamid. Tell him he was sick. Aside from one week when Amanda gave him chicken pox, he had never in his working life stayed home due to ill health.

Amanda, of course. He would have to call her back and tell her that he'd filed a missing person report.

When he got back to the bedroom, he slumped down onto Yvonne's side of the double bed. The mattress bowed beneath him, moulding to his weight. He stroked her pillow with his left hand. The case felt rough under his fingers. Freshly washed, without any fabric softener. Yvonne liked to let everything air dry. He leaned in to breathe in the aroma. Harald picked up the pillow with both hands and shook it before putting it down again. He patted it absentmindedly, his eyes wandering around the room as though he might spot some clue.

There was a novel on Yvonne's bedside table, probably the title her book group was reading right now. She had added small neon post-it notes to a few of the pages, and they stuck out from the side of the book like

exclamation marks. Beside the book was a glass of water and a nasal spray. Everything had been left like it might be used again at any moment.

Harald pulled out the drawer in the bedside table. Her sleeping pills, a few shells from their holiday in Thailand and...

He dropped to his knees, his heart rate increasing as he pulled the drawer so far out that it practically fell to the floor. He pressed his hands to his face and rubbed his cheeks. Despite the heat in the room, a chill spread through his body, from the inside out. His hands felt weak as he picked up the phone. Yvonne's mobile phone, in its patterned By Malene Birger case. The same phone he had called some twenty or so times since yesterday afternoon. Clutching it in one hand, he got to his feet and paced back and forth across the room. Why was Yvonne's phone here when she wasn't?

It had been switched to silent, and though his fingers were trembling, Harald managed to unlock it. Pin codes weren't something they kept from one another, and the phone still had a charge—fifty-three percent. A steady stream of messages and missed calls filled the screen, every single one from him.

This was wrong. So damned wrong. His heart seemed to contract in his chest, making it difficult to breathe.

What had happened to Yvonne?

[pp. 85–111]

Chapter 17

The evening sun filtered mercilessly through the kitchen window, encouraging tiny flecks of dust to dance in its rays. The late summer weather outside felt totally wrong. How could the sky be this blue, the sun shining so relentlessly, when everything had become so dark and dreary?

Harald was sitting at the kitchen table, half way through a bottle of Barolo. The sense of intoxication, dulling all sharp edges and making his muscles relax, was a welcome change. The red wine swilled down into his stomach and warmed him up from the inside, as though someone had flicked a switch and filled his chest with heat.

On a normal day, he would have swirled the liquid in his glass before taking a deep breath and analysing the notes of cherry, lavender and cocoa, maybe even a hint of rosehip. He and Yvonne had taken several wine tasting classes—they had even done a course in Tuscany—and with her strong sense of smell, she was able to recognise both the grape and the vintage after just one sip. Harald wasn't quite so skilled.

Things were anything but normal today. Yvonne had been bundled away. Dragged into a car and taken from him. A police officer had come over that evening and installed a recording device on Harald's phone, giving him instructions on how to record any incoming calls. The officer had been calm and clear, but the situation was so stressful that Harald had struggled to take any of it in. His phone was now lying on the table in front of him, and he wasn't sure whether he wanted it to ring or not.

His thoughts turned back to the cleaner. The woman clearly worked off the books, but he knew he should tell the police about her visit. He had to lay all his cards on the table here. Any last detail that might lead to Yvonne being found was crucial.

What had the woman said her name was? Something beginning with D, he couldn't quite remember. She was probably from Poland, though she could easily be from Russia or one of the other Baltic states.

The rest of the Barolo disappeared, and Harald went over to the fridge in search of something to eat. There were leftovers from his trip to the deli counter yesterday, but he knew he wouldn't be able to manage any charcuterie. He took out a slice of Västerbotten pie instead and put the plate into the microwave. It was supposed to be served with finely chopped red onion, smetana and a daub of roe—ideally topped with prawns—but Harald didn't have the energy for finesse. When the microwave pinged, he retrieved the plate and carried it over to the kitchen table. He ate the slice of pie as it was, washing it down with more numbing red wine.

When his phone started ringing, he eagerly snatched it up. He had no idea where his glasses were, and the letters on the screen blurred together in a hazy sludge. *Oh God, please let it be Yvonne. My Yvonne.* He hit the green button and breathlessly clamped the phone to his ear. In his eagerness, he forgot to record the call.

“Hi, Harald. It's Hamid.”

He heard himself groan with disappointment that it was just his colleague.

“Shit, you sound rough. What do you think it is?”

My wife has been kidnapped and I'm currently drunk. That's what it is.

“Did you want anything in particular?”

Harald had to make a real effort to keep his voice under control.

“Well, I just wanted to say that we signed with von Matern today. It all happened much faster than expected. Greger has actually been pretty awkward about the whole thing, so I’d say it’s his wife—sorry, *ex-wife*—we have to thank. To be perfectly honest, I think Sylvia might have a bit of a thing for me.”

Who didn’t have a thing for Hamid? Harald also knew all too well why Greger had been awkward. The two men had known each other for years, but that wasn’t something Hamid was aware of. Nor did he need to be.

“Either way, the mood in the office is great,” Hamid continued. “We hoped you’d be here to celebrate. We thought we might finish off the week with some champagne and nibbles tomorrow. Do you think you’ll be back then?”

Champagne? Damn it! Harald leapt up and hurried over to the freezer with Hamid still on the line. He opened the door. Sure enough, the bottle of Moët he had put in to chill yesterday had exploded. It was everywhere: in the drawers, along the door, in the edging and on the shelves.

“Congratulations,” he managed to stutter, closing the door on the sorry scene. “But you know, I don’t think I’ll be back tomorrow. Haven’t felt this rough in a long time.”

Hamid sighed, but Harald could tell that his condition didn’t bother him too much. Of course not; they had just sealed the deal, and Hamid had done it without any help from Harald. Harald himself had managed to avoid having to tussle with the conceited Greger von Matern.

“Uff, that’s a shame. Do you need anything? I mean, I can come over if you keep your distance. Though I’m guessing Yvonne is probably fussing over you already? I bet she’s the type?”

Harald's throat tightened, making it difficult to breathe. He clutched his chest and undid the top button on his shirt. Yvonne was definitely the fussing type.

“Hamid...”

He ran a hand over his face and closed his eyes. How much should he share with his colleague? Amanda had come over a few hours earlier, but she had now gone home to her children. Harald was all alone, and he couldn't handle it.

“Yvonne is... missing.”

Harald groped for his wine glass, but as he raised it to his lips he discovered that it was empty. Just like the bottle.

“What did you say? What do you mean she's missing?”

“I came home early yesterday to surprise her with lunch, but she wasn't here. And she hasn't come home since.”

He gripped the glass. Let it float through the air in front of him like some kind of transparent UFO.

“Listen, Harald... She's probably just gone away somewhere with a friend. Don't you think? Have you called her friends? Your daughter?”

“Not Yvonne. She doesn't do that kind of thing. Never leaves without telling me. Besides, her phone is still here. And I found her wallet with her bank card, her bus pass and all the other damn cards a woman keeps in her handbag. One of the neighbours saw her being bundled into a car.”

His voice reached a falsetto before breaking. He opened his mouth to go on, but no words would come out. His throat was stinging, burning.

“Harald, listen to me. This doesn't sound right. Have you called the police?”

Harald put down his UFO on the coffee table, but misjudged the distance. The glass hit the table with such force that the stem snapped. He

left the broken glass lying on its side and watched as the last few drops of red wine trickled out onto the stone surface. It would sink in, leaving an ugly stain.

“The police are aware.”

Something rustled in the background as Hamid moved.

“Are you at home?”

Though his colleague couldn't see him, Harald nodded.

“I'm coming over. Give me ten minutes, tops. Stay where you are and I'll be there in no time.”

Oh, he would stay where he was. Where else was he meant to go? Harald ended the call and slumped back onto the sofa. Just a few minutes later, he was asleep.

Friday 11 September

Chapter 18

Alex let the heavy security door swing shut behind her before turning the keys in both locks, ordinary and seven-lever deadlock. The wrought-iron gate was still open. She had to draw the line somewhere, and had decided only to lock the gate at night or when she left the apartment. Görel had been an angel during her hotel stay, letting in the handymen every morning and locking up after them once they left. It meant that Alex hadn't had to hand out keys to anyone she didn't know.

She dumped her weekend bag on the floor in the hallway and carried the bags of food she had bought on the way home through to the kitchen. Alex wasn't particularly fond of cooking, but after spending the past few days eating in restaurants, throwing together a simple pasta dish felt absolutely fine. She passed the bathroom and was irritated to see that the workers had gone in with their shoes on. Still, the room looked fantastic. The turquoise and gold mosaic wall in the shower was truly the cherry on the cake.

Maybe she was being stupid, but she couldn't stop thinking about the man from Cadier Bar. It was rare for a man to catch her eye, but something about him seemed to be lingering in her—even though she had been badly burnt in the past and knew she should have the sense to steer well clear.

Once she had put away the food and unpacked her bag, Alex moved over to the kitchen island and opened the lid of her laptop. In an attempt to distract herself from the handsome man in the bar and return to reality, she decided to write another Vendela section for the book before she started making the pasta.

Vendela Jansdotter – 12 January

The wedding plans are moving forward, but Mark has been getting stressed out over how expensive it all is—even though he’s the one who insists on having a big party. I could’ve imagined having a more intimate ceremony with just our closest family, but whenever I bring it up he gets annoyed, verging on furious. Maybe it’s because he’s been working so much. Right now he’s taking every extra shift he can get to bring in as much money as possible. I don’t want him to work himself to death, but apparently there has been some promise of a promotion, which would mean a welcome boost to our finances. Still, he’s always grumpy and tired when he gets home. His eyes flash from time to time, and I back away because I don’t want us to fall out so close to the wedding.

We spent the autumn decorating our new home, and though we managed to furnish it with lots of heirlooms and the kind of thing we could borrow from our parents until we get a chance to buy our own, it still cost a lot of money—money that should have been spent on the wedding if we’re going to have the hundred-person party Mark wants. He says that anything else is out of the question. If we’re just going to have a crappy little ceremony, we might as well not bother. I keep my thoughts about marrying for love, rather than to throw a huge party for our vague acquaintances, to myself. I think his focus is all wrong.

Chapter 19

Staring into the mirror, Reub felt like they were looking straight into the eyes of the ten-year-old who had turned up at the first football practice of autumn only to discover that there were no longer any mixed teams. The boys and girls who had previously played side by side were now expected to do so separately. In a boys' team and a girls' team. The coaches stood on the half-way line and called out their names. Ellen, Vicky and Cilla went in one direction, while Jonas, Tom and Elton went in another. Reub could still feel the sweat trickling down their back beneath their kit, heart beating so loud that they could barely hear the names being called out. They hadn't gone to any more training sessions after that day.

Finding a sport to replace football had proved difficult, and Reub's parents had questioned their child's sudden refusal to go to practice. Reub hadn't dared explain, knew that neither parent would take the news well. The sense of being different was something that had to be hidden, like some kind of dark secret.

Reub had avoided all club activities, where the gender segregation began the moment you stepped into the changing room. The doors were clearly marked, one with a figure in trousers and the other wearing a skirt. The problem was that Reub didn't feel at home behind either door.

After some hesitation today, they had chosen the toilet behind the door with the skirt. In the cabinet above the sink, there was a can of Glade spray and a box of sanitary towels. Reub swallowed, closed the door and met their eye in the mirror again.

A rasping, scraping sound made Reub turn off the tap and listen. The noise grew louder, like someone was scratching the toilet door with something sharp. Was someone trying to get in?

It had happened before. Back in high school, a couple of boys had turned the lock from the outside using a five kronor coin, tearing the door open while Reub was sitting on the toilet, trousers around ankles. Jonte, in his faded Guns N Roses t-shirt, snus tobacco beneath his lip, had attempted to drag Reub from the toilet seat, but a passing teacher had stopped him. Later, in the principal's office, the teacher had dismissed the entire thing as a boyish prank. The principal had encouraged Reub to "try to be a bit more like the others."

Whenever anything happened after that day—when someone pushed a video camera into the gap between the floor and the cubicle door, for example, or when the insults started flying because Reub never took part in P.E. (because they didn't dare take a shower afterwards)—Reub decided not to say anything to the teachers. The adult world's only response was to award them an F in P.E.

Reub shook their head in an attempt to force back the memories, taking a couple of deep breaths and telling themselves that the sounds outside were all in their mind. But the scraping on the other side of the door continued, and Reub backed up against the wall, pressing against the tiles where the room came to an end. The air was about to run out in the cramped space. Or that was how it felt, anyway.

In an attempt to regain control of the situation, Reub wiped their hands on their jeans, turned the lock and flung open the door. There was a bang, as though the door had swung straight into a wall.

"Shit!"

Standing outside was a man in a pair of black dungarees and a black short sleeved t-shirt. He was the one who had sworn, but the most striking thing about him was the blood pouring from his nose. He clutched his face with both hands, trying to stem the flow.

Reub rushed out of the toilet and came to a halt in front of him, at a loss over what to do. The adrenaline, preparing Reub's body to take flight, was still pumping through their veins. Reub had to remind himself that this was neither high school nor the station in Jönköping; Vellinge was a new place, a fresh start.

"Sorry, sorry..." said the man in the overalls. "I didn't realise there was anyone in there."

The door had hit him with such force that it had practically sent him flying, yet here he was mumbling apologies from behind his hands. Reub reached out and awkwardly touched his shoulder, leading him through to the pantry where he could sit down and tip back his head. From the dispenser above the counter, Reub grabbed a couple of paper towels and handed them to the man, who pressed them to his nose.

"What's going on in here?"

Reub heard Claes's voice behind them, and the aroma of his eau de cologne drifted through the room as he came closer. One way or another, Reub would be given shit for what had just happened. Because even though it was an accident, it was ultimately Reub's fault that the man was sitting in the pantry with blood streaming from his nose.

"An accident," said Reub. "I managed to open the door and hit..."

"...Viggo," Claes filled in. "Our caretaker. Wait here, I'll get the first aid kit. That looks nasty."

Reub stayed behind, staring down at Viggo, who was still sitting with his head tipped back, gripping the bridge of his nose. It had finally stopped bleeding, but his cheeks and chin were smeared with red.

“I’m sorry. I thought...”

“No worries,” Viggo mumbled, nose blocked. He glanced up at Reub. “It was my own fault. I should’ve double checked there was no one in there before I got started.”

“Got started?”

Claes was back, interrupting their conversation with chlorhexidine and wadding. Reub hovered quietly in the background, watching as Claes tended to the caretaker. Before long the blood was gone from his face, revealing a thin patch of stubble.

“Are you OK?” asked Claes. He was crouching down in front of Viggo, and patted him on both shoulders.

“Yeah, probably looks worse than it is. I’ll sit here for a while, have a coffee, then I’ll get back to work.”

“I’ll get you a coffee!”

Reub hurried over to the counter and opened the cupboards overhead. There were mugs of all shapes and sizes inside, some chipped and others missing handles. Reub took out a blue and white one with the Malmö football club logo on it.

“Milk and sugar?”

“Black.”

As Reub handed Viggo the mug, they noticed his chestnut brown eyes. Round and alert despite just having been hit in the face.

“Don’t look so worried, it wasn’t your fault. You can’t tell from those damn locks whether the toilet’s occupied or not—the green and red wore off a long time ago. I could’ve knocked first. I’ve only got myself to blame.”

Back in Jönköping, there was no doubt about it: it would have been Reub's fault. The new boss would have immediately filed an incident report.

"Will you be OK, Viggo?" asked Claes. "I just need to have a quick word with Reub."

"I'm fine here."

Viggo patted the arm of his chair, and Claes turned his attention from him to Reub.

"Do you have a moment?"

Reub nodded. May as well take the bull by the horns. His task for the day—other than going through all the information the team had gathered so far—was to arrange individual meetings with each member of the group. They had been thrown straight in at the deep end with a new investigation. There was none of the hullabaloo that went hand in hand with a murder enquiry, true, but still. It was enough to rob Reub of the opportunity to get to grips with his new colleagues first. Getting to know each and every member of the group was important in order to be able to best make use of their professional and personal skills. So, it was time for an unwanted, spontaneous meeting with Claes.

"I have to say, your time here hasn't got off to the best start," Claes began once they got to Reub's office and sat down on either side of the desk.

Reub raised a hand in protest. This was the moment to take control and make it clear which of them was the boss, but Claes went on.

"I'm the workplace officer here, and regardless of what Viggo says I need to report this as a workplace incident."

So many reports.

"It was an accident," said Reub.

"Very possible. But that's the procedure."

Procedures, reports. Reub pushed their rolled up sleeves back past their elbows and ran a finger over the wise words that were tattooed there. The scars felt rough beneath their fingers.

“I thought the procedure was to check whether anyone was in the toilet before setting up to work outside the door—whatever work it was.”

A forced smile flickered across Claes’s face. It wasn’t kind hearted.

“Viggo was doing it for your sake. He’s been asked to change all of the signs so that the toilets are unisex. As far as the changing rooms are concerned, we’ll be keeping one for men and one for women, but we’ve got a separate changing room that’s currently unused. Apparently it’ll be yours, with this symbol on the door.”

Claes spoke quickly, and pushed a plastic folder across the table. Inside, Reub could see the trans symbol, which also covered non-binary people. The circle featured both a cross and an arrow, as well as a second arrow with a cross on the left-hand side. Reub made a real effort to keep a neutral face. None of their previous workplaces had ever bothered to add the symbol to either a toilet or a changing room.

“Management asked me to take charge of this,” Claes snorted, casting a weary glance at the plastic folder. “I did some googling. Seems like this should be right.”

“It’s the right symbol.”

Reub felt relieved. Claes may well be reluctant, but management seemed to be taking a different approach.

“Was there anything else?” they asked.

Claes picked up the vinyl decal from the table and shook his head.

“Good. If you’re going to write that report then I suggest you pop off and do it now, because we’ve got more important things to focus on. I assume you agree?”

Claes gave a brief nod before leaving the room.

If the boss in Jönköping was a mountain Reub had chosen not to climb, Claes was a pebble they had every intention of managing.

Chapter 20

Estrid shuffled forward on her chair in order to lean back. Her belly needed all the room it could get—stuffed to the brim with sandwiches and coffee.

She grabbed the kitchen roll and tore off a sheet to wipe her fingers. She noticed that Claes hadn't eaten anything. Was he at it again? The last woman he dated, or the last one Estrid knew about in any case, did yoga several times a week. If he was still seeing her maybe he felt under pressure to avoid any treats and tone up. She thought he was already in pretty good shape, but he definitely wasn't a yogi.

“OK,” said Reub. “Let's start by going through everything we've learned since we spoke yesterday. Who feels like going first?”

Estrid gave a brief recap of her meeting with Maud Bjurström the evening before. The only new information that had come to light was that Maud and Yvonne no longer saw each other as frequently as they once had—which could, of course, be nothing but a coincidence. That said, Maud had painted a picture of Harald as a hardnosed businessman.

“I thought what you said yesterday was interesting, about Yvonne telling Amanda she was thinking about changing to a different gym,” said Pedram, linking his computer to the screen on the wall.

While they waited for the devices to sync, he went on:

“It's just that I've started going through her phone. There's all kinds of stuff to delve into there, so it's hard to know where to start. I found an interesting message thread, for example, and thought we might take a closer look. From her gym app, I can see that she regularly works out twice week,

and her step tracker suggests she walks a lot. An active woman, in other words. I haven't managed to check her search history yet, or her emails."

The screen on the wall flickered, and Pedram's desktop came into view.

"OK, so let's start with the message thread."

Estrid shuffled back in her chair. The messages had been sent between Yvonne and someone called Tina K, and the latest one came at the bottom of the chain.

Yvonne: Thanks for today—you gave me a real workout. Though the reward after class was obviously the best thing...

Tina K: Great work. Love to see you sweat. Was especially nice to spend some time with you afterwards. Do we have to wait until next week?

Tina K: You're coming to training tomorrow, right? I've got a couple of hours free afterwards, if you want to go to the usual place. Just you and me...

Tina K: Waited for you by the treadmill, but gave up after fifteen minutes. You're never normally late. Are you ill?

Tina K: I'm starting to get worried now. Why aren't you replying? Write back please. I miss you.

"There are way more messages than that," said Pedram, "but I decided to show you a selection of the most recent."

Reub nodded and drummed the table with a pen.

"Do they speak on the phone too?"

Pedram shook his head. "Nope, no calls."

"Sounds more like a flirt than a friend," said Estrid. "Could Yvonne have a secret girlfriend?"

“It’d be a secret boyfriend, if anything,” said Pedram, “because Tina K seems to be an alias for Daniele Agnoletto. He works as a personal trainer at her gym; the number Tina K’s messages come from is registered to him.”

Claes chuckled and cast a covetous glance at the breakfast sandwiches before taking a sip of his coffee.

“Smart to hide her lover behind a woman’s name. Probably so her husband wouldn’t get suspicious at all the texts flooding in to her phone.”

Estrid nodded, that could definitely be the case. Claes was probably something of an expert in the area.

“OK,” said Reub. “Interesting information. Good work, Pedram. A potential affair. We’ll have to dig deeper there. Could it be one of the reasons Yvonne has been thinking about changing to a different gym? To stop her husband from getting suspicious?”

The others nodded.

“You mentioned something about a step tracker, too. Can you see how many steps she took the day she disappeared?”

“None at all. She doesn’t seem to have used her phone that day.”

Reub hummed.

“Claes, did you manage to get hold of anyone at the estate agent who could confirm that Harald was at work when Yvonne disappeared?”

Claes nodded. He had paid a visit to Nässet Estates the afternoon before, and several of the staff there had confirmed that Harald arrived around eight that morning, leaving just before lunch, when he told the receptionist he was heading home for the day.

“OK, then we can rule out Harald as the man driving the Golf.”

“He could’ve hired someone,” Estrid pointed out. “Suppose he knew or suspected whatever was going on between Yvonne and Daniele and it sent him into a rage.”

“That’s *if* there’s anything going on,” said Reub. “We don’t know. I suggest you and I go and have a chat with Daniele Agnoletto, Estrid.”

She nodded and met Claes’s eye over the table. They usually worked together, though of course Reub didn’t know that. Michaela had never been quite as involved as Reub seemed to want to be. Not that it mattered; it could only be a positive thing if she and Reub struck up a good working relationship.

“Do we have anything else?” asked Reub.

Pedram scrolled on his tablet.

“I found the names of the others in the book club Harald mentioned. All five women say that Yvonne hasn’t been involved for the past two years, and none of them are still in touch with her. I looked around to see whether she might have joined a different group, but haven’t found anything yet.”

“Wow,” said Estrid. “The thing is, Maud mentioned the book group too. She said that one of the reasons Yvonne kept cancelling their plans was because she needed time to read ahead of her book club meetings. Why would she say that if she’s no longer even in the club?”

“Good question,” said Claes. “And you have to wonder what she got up to instead. She had Harald thinking she was going to meet her book club friends, and she told her neighbour she needed time to read. Maybe she spent the time with Daniele?”

“Probably a pretty good guess, if you ask me,” said Estrid

“Let’s head over to the gym now,” said Reub. “Claes and Pedram, could you find out whether any of the neighbours have a cleaner? Harald had a visit from someone claiming she usually cleaned their house yesterday—a fact he had no idea about. According to him, she wanted cash in hand, so she’s probably not from a firm or anything like that, just working off the books.”

Chapter 21

When Harald woke, it felt like an angry carpenter was taking out their frustration over God knows what with a hammer and nails inside his head. Without even opening his eyes, he pulled out the drawer in the nightstand and groped for the box of painkillers. Hands shaking, he managed to pop out two pills and sent Hamid a silent, grateful thought for leaving a full glass of water by the bed. After his colleague came over yesterday, Harald had woken up and told him what had happened, and then they had drunk even more wine than Harald had already guzzled down earlier. Hamid had been smart enough to order takeaway, so at least they weren't drinking on an empty stomach.

Harald lay on his back, breathing through his mouth, taking care not to move until the painkillers took effect.

Waking up alone was like being in the middle of an ongoing nightmare. Yvonne wasn't by his side, and his breathing grew shallow when he thought about where she might be. What might have happened to her. If someone out there wanted his money, he would gladly pay. However much they wanted. He would empty every account, sell the house, the cars, everything they owned. It was just stuff, after all. Stuff that meant nothing to him without Yvonne.

Harald didn't like not being in control, but the uncertainty had taken over his body like some kind of malicious tapeworm.

At the very back of his mind, there was a niggling thought telling him that she was no longer alive. That whoever had taken her had killed her. A sick bastard who... He couldn't bring the thought to its conclusion.

Hamid had mentioned Missing People last night, and had promised Harald he would get in touch with the organisation to see if they could help.

His headache wouldn't go anywhere so long as his imagination kept running wild. Harald rubbed his temples.

In the distance, he heard the doorbell ring, and he tumbled out of bed in nothing but his boxer shorts. As he pulled on a pair of jeans and a shirt, it rang again. The carpenter was still taking out his anger on the inside of Harald's skull, and he clutched his head with both hands as he staggered down the hallway. Dear God, please let it be Yvonne. And please let her be unharmed.

"Maud?"

A whiff of stale red wine left his mouth as he said her name. She had just recoiled a little, hadn't she? Though that could also be down to his crumpled shirt, sloppily tucked into his jeans. Or the stubble spreading across his cheeks and chin like a shadow. Harald usually shaved every single morning, and didn't show his face to anyone but Yvonne before that.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, squinting in the merciless September sunshine.

She looked him up and down as he shoved the untucked sections of shirt into the waistband of his trousers.

"Can I come in?" she asked.

"Of course."

He stepped aside to make room for Maud, then closed the door behind her. She brought the scent of late summer into the hallway with her. Seaweed and damp sand.

"The police came over to talk to me yesterday evening."

Harald backed down the hallway, and Maud followed him.

"Do you want a coffee?" he asked.

“A whisky would be good,” Maud said, noticing the bottle of single malt on the counter in the kitchen. The sight reminded Harald that he and Hamid hadn’t stopped at wine.

But rather than arguing, telling her it was only eleven in the morning, he took out two tumblers and poured a decent amount of amber liquid into each.

“So what did they want?”

He gestured for her to sit down at the table and took the seat opposite. Couldn’t stop himself from grimacing as he took the first sip.

“Harald...” she said, giving him an accusative look. “Why didn’t you tell us that Yvonne was missing? We’re such good friends. It felt strange to hear it from a police officer.”

He swirled the whisky in his glass, the liquid coating the inside of the tumbler. Staying drunk probably wasn’t a bad idea. He noticed Maud glance over to the herbs on the counter. They had wilted with thirst, and the leaves of the basil had curled up and dried at the edges.

“I’m so worried, Harald. Tell me what’s going on!”

He lowered his head and stared down into his glass.

“I don’t know! One awful thought keeps following another. A kidnapping, assault, murder...”

Maud waved her hand to stop him.

“Easy, Harald. Easy. There’s no need to jump to the worst possible outcome here. Murder...” She shuddered, shook herself down. “We’ll just have to hope she comes home soon. Before we get really worried.”

Before? Harald was already petrified.

“What did you tell the police, then?”

“I told them how Yvonne and I know each other. Roughly how often we meet up and what we usually do together. They asked if I knew whether

she had any ‘enemies’ or whether she had seemed different lately. Whether she’d confided in me about anything. But what was I supposed to say? Yvonne is the most timid person I know. You’re far more likely to have enemies than her...”

She gripped the tumbler in her long, slim fingers. On her left hand, her platinum and diamond rings glittered in the light.

“What is that supposed to mean?” asked Harald.

She shrugged.

“I just mean that you don’t always use the most honest methods in your work. Take Greger von Matern, for example. I find it incredibly strange that he chose Näset Estates to sell his house.”

Harald gave a start at the mention of Greger’s name. The bitter taste of whisky was still stubbornly clinging on at the back of his mouth. No one knew about Harald’s past with Greger. No one other than Yvonne and Maud—and he had told the latter during a particularly weak moment. Why on earth had he done that?

Harald struggled to believe that Greger could be capable of kidnapping his wife. Besides, surely bygones were bygones by this point? It had been so long.

“Hey, are you OK?”

Maud’s voice was softer, and she cocked her head and reached across the table for Harald’s hands. She meant well, but the gesture felt too intimate.

“To be perfectly honest, I’m not OK at all.”

She stroked the back of his hand. Harald wanted to pull away, but he decided against it. It would be too dismissive.

“It’s tough, I know,” she said. “You know you’re always welcome to come over to our place if you need to talk, don’t you? Any time.”

Once Maud had gone, thoughts of Greger continued to swirl through Harald's mind. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to do a bit of digging? He could start by finding out whether Greger was even in the country the day Yvonne disappeared.