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An Owl Always Hunts at Night

Written by Samuel Bjork

Translated from the Norwegian by Charlotte Barslund

Published by Doubleday

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THE OWL ALWAYS HUNTS AT NIGHT

Samuel Bjork

Translated from the Norwegian by Charlotte Barslund



Doubleday

LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND • JOHANNESBURG

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA
www.transworldbooks.co.uk

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



First published in Great Britain in 2016 by Doubleday
an imprint of Transworld Publishers
Originally published in Norway as *Uglen*
Published by agreement with Ahlander Agency

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBNs 9780857522528 (hb)
9780857522535 (tpb)

Typeset in 11/14pt Sabon by Thomson Digital Pvt Ltd, Noida, Delhi.
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk.

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is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

One Friday in the spring of 1972, as the vicar of Sandefjord was locking up his church for the day, he received an unexpected visit that made him keep his office open a little longer.

He had never seen the young woman before, but he recognized the young man. He was the eldest son of one of the most respected men in the town, a shipping magnate who was not only one of the richest men in Norway but also a staunch supporter of the church, a man whose generosity had, among other things, made it possible ten years ago to commission the huge altarpiece in roughly carved mahogany which depicted seventeen scenes from the life of Jesus Christ, an altarpiece of which the vicar was extremely proud.

The young couple had a special request. They wished to get married, but they wanted the vicar to perform the ceremony with no one else present. That in itself was not unusual, but the reason behind their request was so peculiar that at first the vicar thought it had to be a joke. Then again, he knew the shipping magnate well, knew how religious and conservative the old man was, and began to realize that the couple were indeed serious. The shipping magnate had been in poor health recently, and rumour had it that he was on his deathbed. The young man now sitting in front of him would soon inherit a huge fortune; his father, however, had attached one condition to his son's inheritance: no outside blood could be mixed with the family's. The woman his heir chose to marry must under no circumstances have children from previous relationships. And herein lay the problem. The young woman with whom the son of the shipping magnate was deeply in love did have children from an earlier marriage. A little girl aged two and a boy aged four. The children

would be hidden away, and the vicar could then quietly marry the couple so that the bride would appear to comply with the shipping magnate's demand, and no one would be tempted to try to discover the truth. Was that possible?

This was the plan the couple had come up with: the young man had a distant relative in Australia. She had promised to look after the children until the shipping magnate died. A year, maybe two, and then the children would be brought back to Norway. You never knew, the shipping magnate might reach the pearly gates sooner than expected. What did the vicar think? Could he find room in his heart to help them in their hour of need?

The vicar pretended to ponder their request, but the truth was he had already made up his mind. The envelope the young man had discreetly placed on the desk was fat, and why not help the young lovers? After all, the old shipping magnate's demand was utterly unreasonable, wasn't it? The vicar agreed to wed the couple, and the following week, in a small ceremony held in a closed church in front of the magnificent altarpiece, they were married.

Less than a year later, in January 1973, the vicar received another visit; this time, the young woman came on her own. She was clearly distressed and told him she did not know where else to turn. The old shipping magnate had died, but something was wrong. She had not heard a word about her children. She had been promised pictures, letters, but nothing had arrived, not a single word, and she was starting to doubt if this relative in Australia even existed. The woman also confided in him that the man she had married had not turned out to be what she thought he was. They were no longer on speaking terms, nor did they share a bed; he had secrets, dark secrets, things she could not make herself say out loud; she could hardly bear even thinking about them. Could the vicar help? The vicar calmed her down, assured her that of course he would help her, that he would think things over, and he asked her to return in a few days.

The next morning the young woman was found dead, slumped over the wheel in her car in a deep ravine close to the shipping family's luxurious home on Vesterøya, outside the centre of Sandefjord.

The newspapers hinted that the woman had been intoxicated while driving, and the police did indeed treat her death as a tragic accident.

After assisting the family with the funeral arrangements, the vicar decided to pay the young shipping magnate a visit. He explained, as was the truth, that the young woman had sought him out the day before the accident. That she had been anxious about her children. That something, well, that something did not add up. The young shipping magnate listened and nodded. Explained that, sadly, his wife had been very sick recently. On medication. Drinking excessively. After all, the vicar himself had seen the tragic outcome. Then the young shipping magnate wrote a figure on a piece of paper which he slid across the desk. Surely this town was too small for the vicar? Would he not be better off serving the Lord in a different location, possibly nearer the capital? The vicar rose from the chair, and that was the last time he ever saw the young and powerful shipping magnate.

A few weeks later he packed his suitcase.

He never set foot in Sandefjord again.

The little girl lay as still as she could on the sofa under the blanket while she waited for the other children to fall asleep. She had made up her mind. She would do it tonight. She would be scared no longer. Wait no longer. She was seven years old and very grown up. She would leave once it started to get dark. She had not swallowed tonight's sleeping pill. Just pushed it under her tongue, where she had kept it when she showed Aunt Julia what a good girl she had been.

'Show me.'

Tongue out.

'Good girl. Next.'

Her brother had been doing it for a long time. Ever since the time they had locked him in the beaten-earth cellar. Every night he would hide the pill under his tongue without swallowing it.

'Show me.'

Tongue out.

'Good boy. Next.'

Three weeks in the dark for refusing to say sorry. All the children knew that he had done nothing wrong, but the grown-ups had put him in the cellar all the same. Since that time he had changed. Every night he would slip the pill under his tongue without swallowing it and, as her own pill started to take effect and she grew sleepy, she would see his shadow tiptoe out of the room and disappear.

The little girl waited until she could hear that the other children were asleep before she sneaked out of the house. It was winter now and still warm, though the twilight had settled softly between the trees. The little girl walked barefoot across the yard, keeping to the shadows until she was hidden by the trees. Having made

sure that she had not been spotted, she had run along the track between the big trees down towards the gate that bore the wording 'Trespassers will be prosecuted.' This was where she had decided to start her search.

She had heard her brother and one of the other boys whisper about this. An old, ramshackle shed, a small, forgotten cabin on the far side of the estate, but she had never seen it herself. They were woken up at six o'clock in the morning every day and went to bed at nine o'clock every night. Always the exact same routine, no variations, with only two fifteen-minute breaks from lessons, homework, yoga, laundry and all the chores that had to be done. The little girl smiled at the sound of the crickets, and she felt the soft grass tickle her feet as she veered from the path and moved cautiously along the fence towards the place which she, in her mind's eye, had decided must be the likely location of the cabin. For some reason, she was not scared. She felt almost light; the terror would not set in until later; right now she felt happy, free as a bird, all alone with her thoughts in the beautiful forest which smelt so good. She smiled broadly and trailed her fingers over a plant that looked like a star; it was almost like being in one of the dreams she often had when the pills they were given were not very strong. She ducked under a branch and did not even jump when she heard rustling in the bushes a short distance away. Perhaps a koala bear had ventured down from the trees. She giggled to herself and wondered what it would be like to pat one. She knew that they had sharp claws, and that they were not cuddly at all, but she tried to imagine what it must feel like, anyway, the fluffy, warm fur between her fingers, the soft nose tickling her neck. She had almost forgotten why she had come outside, then suddenly remembered and stopped in her tracks when the wall of the cabin came into view only a short distance ahead of her. The little girl tilted her head and studied the grey wooden boards. So it was true. There was a place in the forest. A place where you could hide. Be on your own. She crept cautiously closer to the hut and felt a delightful tingling under her skin as she approached the door.

The little girl did not know that the sight which awaited her would change her for ever, that it would haunt her every single night for years

to come: under the blanket on the hard sofa, on the plane crossing the globe after the police discovered the crying children, under the duvet in the soft bed in a new country, where the sounds were different. She knew nothing about this as she reached out her hand towards the wooden handle and slowly opened the creaking door.

It was dark inside. It took a few seconds before her eyes allowed her to see properly, but there was no doubt. At first just an outline, then everything came into focus; he was inside.

Her brother.

He wore no clothes. He was completely naked. Completely naked, and yet his body was covered by . . . feathers? He was curled up in a corner, a birdlike, crooked creature from another world, with something in his mouth. A small animal. A mouse? Her brother was covered in feathers and held a dead mouse between his teeth.

This was the image that would change her life. Her brother turned slowly and looked at her, his eyes filled with wonder, as if they did not know who she was. The light fell through the filthy window across his feather-clad hand, which was moving gradually through the air. His mouth turned into a grin over glistening white teeth as he took the mouse out of his mouth, locked his dead eyes on to hers and said: 'I'm the owl.'

ONE

Chapter 1

2012

Tom Petterson, a botanist, took the camera bag from his car and paused to enjoy the view across the calm fjord before heading up to the woods. It was early October and the cool Saturday sunshine bathed the landscape around him in a pretty glow, soft rays falling across red and yellow leaves which would soon be shed to make way for winter.

Tom Petterson loved his job. Especially when he was able to work outdoors. He had been hired by Oslo and Akershus County to register findings of Dracocephalum, or dragonhead as it was also known, a plant threatened by extinction but which grew in the woodlands around Oslo Fjord. He had received a fresh tip-off via his blog, and that was his task for today: log the number and exact location of newly discovered specimens of this very rare plant.

Dragonhead grew to a height of ten to fifteen centimetres and had blue, dark blue or purple flowers which would wither in the autumn, leaving behind a cluster of brown seeds reminiscent of a cereal grass. The plant was not only rare; it was also home to the even rarer dragonhead sap beetle, a tiny metallic-blue beetle which fed only on these flowers. The miracles of nature, Tom Petterson thought, and could not help smiling as he left the path and followed the route which an observant amateur biologist had sent him. Sometimes – he never said it out loud, because he had been brought up to believe that there was absolutely no God, his parents had been insistent on that, but even so – he could not help

marvelling at it: the wonder of creation. The delicate relationship between all things, from the smallest to the biggest. Birds flying south every autumn to nest, vast distances to the same place every year. The leaves changing colour every autumn, turning the trees and the ground into a living work of art. No, he would never say it out loud, but the thought would often cross his mind.

He turned right between two tall spruces and followed a brook up towards the location where the plants were supposed to be, smiling to himself again.

He crossed the brook and came to a complete standstill when he heard rustling in the shrub in front of him. Petterson raised his camera ready to shoot. A badger? Was that what he had heard? This shy animal was nowhere near as common as people thought. A good picture of a badger would be great for his blog, and it would make a nice story, some dragonheads and a badger, the perfect Saturday trip. He followed the noise and soon found himself in a small clearing, but was disappointed not to see any animals.

But there was something in the middle of the clearing.

A naked body.

A girl.

A teenager?

Tom Petterson was so shocked that he dropped his camera and didn't notice it falling into the heather.

There was a dead girl in the clearing.

Feathers?

Dear Lord.

There was a naked teenage girl in the forest.

Surrounded by feathers.

A white lily in her mouth.

Tom Petterson spun around, stumbled through the dense vegetation, found the path, ran as fast as he could back down to his car and called the police.

Chapter 2

Homicide investigator Holger Munch was sitting in his car outside his former home in Røa, deeply regretting having agreed to come over. He had lived in the white house with his then wife, Marianne, until ten years ago, and he had not been inside since. The fat investigator lit a cigarette and rolled down the window of the car. He had had his annual health check a few days ago, and the doctor had recommended, yet again, that he cut down on fatty food and quit smoking, but the fifty-four-year-old police officer had absolutely no intention of doing so, especially not the latter. Holger Munch needed cigarettes in order to think, and thinking was what he enjoyed more than anything.

Holger Munch loved chess, crossword puzzles, maths conundrums – anything that stimulated his brain cells. He would often sit in front of his laptop, chatting to friends about chess games, or solving brainteasers. Just now he had received an email from his friend Juri, a professor from Minsk he had met online some years ago.

There is a metal pole in a lake. Half the pole is in the seabed. A third of it is under water. Eight metres of the pole protrudes above the water. What's the total length of the pole? Best wishes, J.

Munch pondered the answer and was about to reply to the email when he was interrupted by his mobile ringing. He checked the display. Mikkelson. His boss at Oslo Police's headquarters in Grønland. Munch let the mobile ring for a few seconds; he considered taking the call but ultimately decided to ignore it. He pressed the red button and returned the mobile to his pocket. Family time

now. That was the mistake he had made a decade ago. He had not spent enough time with his family. He had worked round the clock and, even when he was at home, his mind had been on other things. Because of that he now found himself outside the house where Marianne now lived with another man.

Holger Munch scratched his beard and looked up in the rear-view mirror at the big, pink present with golden ribbons on the back seat. It was his granddaughter Marion's birthday. The six-year-old apple of his eye. The real reason he had agreed to drive up to Røa, although he had sworn never to set foot in the house ever again. Munch took a deep drag on his cigarette and realized he was rubbing his finger where his wedding ring used to be. He had worn it for ten years after the break-up, unable to make himself take it off. Marianne. She had been the love of his life. He had imagined that they would always be together, and he had not gone on a single date since the divorce. He had had opportunities. It had never felt right. But he had done it now, removed his wedding ring. It was in the bathroom cabinet at home. He had not been able to throw it away.

Holger Munch heaved a sigh, took another drag on his cigarette and had another quick look at the pink present. He had probably gone overboard – again. His daughter, Miriam, constantly reproached him for spoiling little Marion, giving her anything she wanted. He had bought her a present which he knew Miriam would disapprove of, but it was something his granddaughter had set her heart on. A Barbie doll with a massive Barbie house and her own Barbie car. He could already hear the lecture. About spoilt children. About the female body and role models and unattainable ideals, but for Christ's sake, it was only a doll. What harm could it do if it was what the little girl wanted?

His mobile rang again; Mikkelson for the second time, and again Munch pressed the red button. When his mobile rang a third time, he was tempted to pick up, because the caller was Mia Krüger. He was extremely fond of his younger colleague, yet still he did not take the call. He had to put his family first. He would call her back later. Perhaps they could have a cup of tea at Justisen

sometime tonight? Talking to Mia after the family reunion would probably do him good. He had not spoken to her for ages, and he only now realized how much he missed her.

Six months ago he had gone to bring Mia back from an island off the coast of Trøndelag. She had isolated herself from the world, had no telephone; he had had to fly all the way up to Værnes, rent a car and get the local police to sail him to the island to find her. He had brought with him a case file. It had persuaded her to return with him to the capital.

Holger Munch prided himself on the strength of his team, but Mia Krüger was unique. He had hired her while she was at the police college, still in her early twenties, after a tip-off from the head, an old colleague. Holger Munch had met her in a café, an informal meeting away from police headquarters. Mia Krüger. A young woman in a white jumper and tight black trousers, with long, dark hair almost like an American Indian, with the brightest blue eyes he had ever seen. Intelligent, self-assured and poised. He had been taken with her at once. She appeared to have guessed that he was there to test her, and yet she had answered his questions politely, with a glint in her eye: *do you think I'm dumb or something?*

Mia Krüger had lost her twin sister, Sigrid, many years ago. They had found her dead from a heroin overdose in a basement in Tøyen. Mia had blamed Sigrid's boyfriend for her death and, during a routine search of a campervan by Lake Tryvann some years later, they had happened to bump into him, now with another victim by his side. Mia Krüger had killed the boyfriend with two shots to the chest, a crime of passion. Holger Munch had witnessed the shooting and knew that it could be justified as self-defence on Mia's part, but, as a result of backing her, he had been transferred out of the city as punishment and Mia had been hospitalized. After two years in the sticks, Munch had finally been reinstated as head of the investigative unit in Mariboesgate in Oslo. Munch in turn had reinstated Mia. However, after that first case back on the job, Mikkelson still had concerns. He'd suspended Mia for a second time, with orders not to set foot inside

the building until she had seen a psychologist who was willing to declare her fit for duty.

Munch rejected yet another call from his boss in Grønland and continued to look at himself in the mirror. What was he really doing here? It had been ten years.

You're an idiot, Holger Munch. Mia's not the only one who should be seeing a therapist.

Munch sighed again and got out of the car. It had grown colder outside. Summer was definitely over, autumn, too, it would appear, though October had barely begun. He pulled his duffel coat across his stomach, took out his mobile and replied to Juri: *48 metres ;) HM*

He finished his cigarette, picked up the extravagant present from the back of the car, took two deep breaths and slowly made his way up the gravel path.

Chapter 3

The lips of the man with the thin moustache were moving, but Mia Krüger could not be bothered to listen to him. His words failed to reach her ears. She missed the seagulls. The smell of the sea as the waves crashed against the rocks. The silence. Yet again she wondered why she was putting herself through this. Seeing a therapist. Talking about herself. What good would that do? She took another lozenge from her pocket and regretted for the umpteenth time ever agreeing to therapy in the first place. She should have quit on the spot.

Unstable and unfit for duty.

Bloody Mikkelson. He didn't know which way was up; he'd never worked a case, he'd only got the job because he knew how to suck up to politicians.

Mia sighed and tried to work out what the man behind the desk had said; she was clearly meant to respond, but she had not heard his question.

'What do you think?' she said, as she remembered the waiting room filled with magazines whose covers made no sense to her. 'Mindfulness and wellness'. 'Easy ways to fitness'.

'The pills?' the therapist said, possibly for the third time, as he leaned back in his chair and took off his glasses.

It was a sign of intimacy. A signal that she was safe here. Mia sighed and placed the lozenge on her tongue. He really had no clue as to who he was dealing with, did he? Ever since she was a little girl, she had been able to look inside people's heads. It was the reason she was missing the seagulls. No evil to be found in them. Only nature. Waves crashing against rocks. The sound of silence and nothing else.

'Good,' Mia said, hoping it was the right answer.

'So you've stopped taking them?' the therapist said, and put on his glasses.

'Haven't been taking them for weeks.'

'And the drinking?'

'Haven't touched a drop for ages,' Mia said, lying again.

She looked at the clock above his head, at the hands, moving far too slowly, telling her she was doomed to stay here a while longer. She loathed Mikkelson. And this psychologist. But she couldn't blame him. He was only trying to help. And he was said to be one of the good ones. Mattias Wang. She had been incredibly lucky; she had picked a name from the Internet after agreeing to give therapy a try. No way was she going to see one of the people available through the police force. Patient confidentiality at police HQ? Not likely, not for her, not for Mia Krüger.

'I guess we ought to talk about Sigrid?'

Mia had dropped her guard slightly, but now the armour was back on. No matter how nice and empathetic he was, Mia was not here to talk about her feelings. She was here to get back to work. Have the required sessions with a psychologist. Get the piece of paper she needed. *She seems in good health, conversations are meaningful, she is working on her issues. I recommend that she is reinstated to full duties with immediate effect.*

She smiled to herself, and in her mind she gave Mikkelson the finger.

Unfit for duty.

Screw you, had been her first thought, but after five weeks alone in the new flat she had bought in Bislett, surrounded by removal crates she did not have the energy to open, trapped in a body still screaming for the pills she had drugged it with for so long, she had backed down. She had lost everyone she loved. Sigrid. Her mother. Her father. Her grandmother. The only person missing from the cemetery outside Åsgårdstrand was her. All she had wanted was to leave this world. Say goodbye to all this misery. But then Mia had begun to realize that she had grown fond of her colleagues. Being back at work after her solitary existence on the island had made

her believe that it might be possible, that life might be worthwhile after all. At least, she was prepared to give it a go. For a while. Her colleagues were fine people. Good people. People she actually cared about.

Munch. Curry. Kim. Anette. Ludvig Grønlie. Gabriel Mørk.

'Sigrid,' the man behind the desk prompted her.

'Yes?' Mia said, as her thoughts wandered back to the girl she had seen leave the consulting room who had had the appointment before her, probably fifteen years separating them, but equally shameful: *that's right, me too. I'm not normal, either.*

'We need to, don't we?'

Sigrid Krüger

Sister, friend and daughter.

Born 11 November 1979. Died 18 April 2002.

Much loved. Deeply missed.

The therapist took off his glasses again, and leaned back in his chair once more.

'We ought to talk about her soon, don't you think?'

Mia zipped up her leather jacket and pointed to the clock on the wall.

'Definitely.' She nodded and gave a small smile. 'But it'll have to wait until next time.'

Mattias Wang looked almost disappointed when he realized the hands of the clock were telling him that the appointment was over.

'Yes, of course,' he said, putting down his pen on the notepad on the desk in front of him. 'Same time next week?'

'OK.'

'Because it's important that . . .' he started, but Mia was already gone.

Chapter 4

Holger Munch felt irritable but also relieved when he entered his former marital home. Irritation at having agreed to this, celebrating Marion's birthday here. Relief because he had dreaded being surrounded by old memories; he could not have known how he would react, but the house he was inside now bore little resemblance to the one he remembered. They had renovated. Knocked down walls. Painted them in different colours. To his surprise, Munch found his old home very attractive and, the more he looked around, the calmer he grew. Nor could he see any signs of Rolf, the teacher from Hurum. Perhaps the afternoon would not be so bad after all?

Marianne had met him in the doorway with the same facial expression as on every other occasion they were forced to spend time together, be it confirmations, birthdays or funerals, with a polite and pleasant *hello*. No hugging or signs of affection, but nor had there been any signs of bitterness, disappointment or hatred in her eyes, which had certainly characterized the early days of their divorce. Just a measured yet pleasant smile: *Welcome, Holger. Why don't you take a seat in the living room? I'm just decorating Marion's cake – six candles. Can you believe she's growing up so fast?*

Munch hung up his duffel coat in the hallway and was about to carry the present into the living room when he heard a high-pitched squeal followed by eager little footsteps coming down the stairs.

'Grandad!'

Marion raced towards him and gave him a big hug.

'Is that for me?' the little girl exclaimed, her eyes widening as she gawped at the present.

'Happy birthday.' Munch smiled and stroked his granddaughter's hair. 'So what's it like to be six years old?'

'Not very different, actually, it's almost like yesterday when I was five.' Marion smiled precociously, never once taking her eyes off the present. 'Can I open it now, Grandad, right now? Oh, please may I?'

'We should probably wait until we've sung "Happy Birthday",' said Miriam, who had also come down from the first floor.

His daughter came over to Munch and hugged him.

'I'm glad you could come, Dad. How are you?'

'I'm well,' Munch said, helping her carry the big present into the living room, to a table that held several presents already.

'Oh, they're all for me! Please, please can we open them soon . . .' the little girl pleaded; it was clear she felt she had already been made to wait far too long.

Munch looked at his daughter, who returned his smile. The warmth in her eyes did him good. After the divorce, their relationship had been far from easy, but the hatred his daughter had felt for him all those years was slowly fading.

Ten years. A frosty relationship between father and daughter. Because of the divorce. Because he had been working too hard. And yet, oddly, it was his job that had brought them closer to each other again, almost as if there were some kind of justice in the world. A major case less than six months ago, possibly the most serious his unit had ever investigated, in which Miriam and Marion had been directly involved. The five-year-old girl had been abducted; Munch had feared that it would only widen the gap between them, that his daughter would hold him accountable for this, as with everything else, but the opposite had happened. Miriam had not blamed him once; she was only grateful that the unit had solved the case. A newfound respect. He thought he could see it in her eyes, the way she looked at him. It was different now; she finally understood how important his job was. They had had therapy, both of them, Miriam and Marion, with a skilled police psychologist, to help them process the terrible events, but, luckily, they did not appear to have left deep

scars in the little girl. Too young to understand how badly things could have ended, perhaps. Yes, there had been some broken nights, Marion crying after waking from distressing nightmares, but they had quickly passed. It had been worse for her mother, of course, and Miriam had continued with the sessions on her own for a while. Perhaps she still went, he was not sure; they were not so close that she told him absolutely everything, but at least they were heading in that direction. One step at a time.

'Where is Johannes?' Munch asked when they had sat down on the sofa.

'Oh, he was on duty and they called from Ullevål Hospital, so he had to go in. He'll try to get back if he can. It's not easy when you're an important person, you know,' his daughter said with a wink.

Munch reciprocated her wink with a friendly smile.

'The cake is ready,' Marianne announced, entering the living room with a smile on her lips.

Holger Munch watched her furtively. He did not want to stare, but neither was he able to take his eyes off her completely. She made eye contact with him for a moment, and Munch was overcome by the desire to drag her to the kitchen and hold her tight, just like the old days, but he managed to restrain himself. Marion, who also had trouble controlling herself, though for different reasons, provided a welcome distraction.

'Please let me open one? Presents are more important than some silly song.'

'We have to sing "Happy Birthday" and blow out the candles on the cake first, you know that,' Marianne said, stroking her granddaughter's hair. 'Besides, we need to wait until everyone is here, so we can all see the nice things you'll be getting.'

Marianne, Miriam, Marion and him. Holger Munch could not have wished for a better setting for a more pleasant afternoon. However, his ex-wife's words, saying they needed to wait for *everyone*, was like a line from a play, a cue for someone to make an entrance. The front door duly opened, and there was Rolf, the

teacher from Hurum, holding a huge bouquet of flowers in his hands and grinning from ear to ear.

'Hi, Rolf,' Marion chirped. She raced to the door and threw her arms around him.

Munch felt a pang of jealousy as he saw his granddaughter's small arms embrace the man he absolutely loathed. He prized the little girl more than anything in the world but, as far as she was concerned, it had always been like this: Grandad on his own. Grannie and Rolf together.

'Look how many presents I've got!'

She dragged Rolf into the living room so that he could admire the display.

'How nice,' he said, stroking her hair.

'Are they also for me?' Marion smiled, pointing to the big bouquet of flowers in his hand.

'No, they're for Grannie,' Rolf said, looking over his shoulder at a blushing Marianne, who was watching them from the doorway.

Munch saw the way his ex-wife looked at Rolf. And it was all over. The good feeling. Playing happy families. He stood up to shake Rolf's hand and watched as the man he despised gave his ex-wife the extravagant flowers and kissed her cheek.

Thankfully, Marion came to his rescue for the second time. Her face now red with excitement, she refused to wait any longer.

'Oh, please can we get that singing over with?' the little girl implored them.

They sang hurriedly. Marion was not paying attention, in any case. She blew out the candles on her cake and attacked her presents.

Less than thirty minutes later the little girl was done, and was sitting quite exhausted in front of her spoils. The Barbie doll had been a big hit. Marion had flung her arms around Munch's neck and, though he had expected a reproachful look from Miriam because he had ignored her wishes – again – it never came. His daughter had merely smiled, almost as a thank-you, and made him feel that everything was all right.

There was one awkward moment after the presents had been opened. Marianne and Rolf were sitting on the sofa on the other side of the coffee table, and there was pressure to engage in conversation, which none of them really wanted. Luckily, Munch was saved by his mobile. It was Mikkelson and, for once, his timing was perfect. Munch made his excuses and went outside, lit a much-needed cigarette and took the call.

'Yes?'

'Have you stopped answering your phone?' an irritable voice grunted on the other end.

'Family time,' Munch replied.

'How nice,' Mikkelson quipped. 'However, I'm afraid I'll have to wreck your family time. I need you.'

'What has happened?' Munch asked, curious.

'A 233. Teenage girl,' Mikkelson continued, less acerbic now.

'Where?' Munch said.

'On the outskirts of Hurum. A botanist found her earlier today.'

Munch took a deep drag on his cigarette. He could hear little Marion laugh on the other side of the door. Someone was chasing her around the house, probably that idiot who had usurped him. Munch shook his head irritably. Celebrate Marion's birthday in his former marital house – what had he been thinking?

'I need you to go there at once.' Mikkelson said.

'OK, I'm on my way,' Munch said, ringing off.

He discarded his cigarette and was about to go back inside when the door opened and Miriam appeared.

'Is everything all right, Dad?' his daughter asked, looking at him with a frown.

'What? Oh yes . . . It's just . . . work.'

'OK,' Miriam said. 'I thought I would just—'

'What, Miriam?' Munch said impatiently, but then checked himself and patted her shoulder affectionately.

'Prepare you for the big announcement,' his daughter said, avoiding eye contact.

'What announcement?'

'They're getting married,' Miriam said swiftly, still evading him.

'Who?'

'Mum and Rolf. I tried telling her that now might not be the best time to announce it, but, well . . .'

Miriam was looking at him now, clearly worried.

'So are you coming inside?'

'I've got a case,' Munch said abruptly, not knowing what else to say.

Getting married? The afternoon had started out with such promise, and he had, well, what had he really been hoping for? He got annoyed with himself. What was he thinking? There clearly was no fool like an old fool. But now he had something else to focus on.

'So you're off?' Miriam said.

'Yes.' Munch nodded.

'Hang on, I'll go and get your coat,' Miriam said, and returned with his duffel coat shortly afterwards.

'You'll have to pass on my congratulations,' Munch mumbled, and made a beeline for his car.

'Call me, won't you? I want to talk to you about something, it's important to me. When it's convenient for you, promise?' Miriam called out after him.

'Of course, Miriam. I'll call,' Munch said, before he jogged down the gravel path, quickly got into his black Audi and started the engine.

Chapter 5

It was barely five o'clock in the afternoon and yet it was nearly pitch black when Holger Munch reached the police cordons on the far side of Hurumlandet. He pressed his ID card against the windscreen and was quickly waved on by a young officer, who looked a little embarrassed at having stopped him.

Munch parked his car on the verge a few hundred metres inside the cordons and stepped out into the cold autumn air. He lit a cigarette and tightened his duffel coat around him.

'Munch?'

'Yes?'

'I'm Olsen. I'm the head of operations.'

Munch shook the glove-clad hand belonging to a tall, broad, middle-aged police officer he did not recognize.

'Status update, please?'

'The victim was found approximately six hundred metres from the road, in a north-north-westerly direction from here,' Olsen said, pointing through the dark forest.

'Who is up there now?'

'Forensics. Pathology. One of yours . . . Kolstad, is it?'

'Kolsø.'

Munch opened the boot of the Audi, took out his wellingtons and was about to put them on when his mobile rang.

'Munch?'

'It's Kim. Are you here?'

'Yes, I'm down by the road. Where are you?'

'I'm up by the tent. Vik has finished and is getting impatient, but I've told them not to move her until you get here. I'll come down to meet you.'

'Great. What does it look like?'

'We won't be getting much sleep for a while. This is one sick bastard.'

'What do you mean?' Munch said, as a sudden, uneasy feeling crept over him.

Holger Munch had nearly thirty years' experience as a homicide investigator under his belt; by now, he had seen most things. He could usually keep a professional distance from the scenes he encountered and, if the statement had been made by anyone other than Kim Kolsø, he would not have worried. Had it been Mia, who allowed herself to get emotionally caught up in every single case, or Curry, who was up and down like a yoyo all the time, he would have brushed it off, but Kim? This did not bode well.

'Do you want me to tell you, or see for yourself?' Kolsø went on.

'Give me a brief summary,' Munch said, sticking a finger into his ear as a patrol car from the crime scene suddenly turned on its siren and passed close by him.

'Are you still there?' he heard Kolsø say.

'Yes, yes. Please repeat what you just said.'

'Teenage girl; sixteen or seventeen, we think,' Kolsø continued. 'Naked. It looks like a kind of, how can I put it . . . ritual? Feathers all around her. And candles . . .'

Munch stuck the finger back into his ear when yet another patrol car followed its predecessor, with flashing blue lights.

'. . . arranged as a kind of symbol . . .'

Kolsø's voice cut out once more. Munch glared at Olsen, who was talking on his mobile while gesturing towards something that was happening near the cordons.

'I can't hear you,' Munch said.

'Some kind of pentagram formation,' Kolsø went on.

'What?'

'Naked teenage girl. Her body twisted into a strange position. Her eyes are wide open. Feathers all over the place . . .'

More static.

'I've lost you!' Munch shouted, sticking his finger into his ear once more.

'. . . a flower.'

'What?'

'Someone stuck a flower in her mouth.'

'A what?'

'You're breaking up,' Kim crackled. 'I'm coming to get you.'

'OK, I'm by the—' Munch shouted into his mobile, but Kolsø had already rung off.

Munch shook his head and took another deep drag on his cigarette as Olsen came up to him again.

'A couple of nosy reporters got a little too close at first, but I think we've finally managed to cordon off the whole area now.'

'Good.' Munch nodded. 'Have you started door-to-door inquiries? The houses up there?'

'Yes.' Olsen nodded in turn.

'Anyone seen anything?'

'Not that I've been told.'

'Right, make sure to include the camping site further up the road. I imagine it's closed down for the winter season, but the caravans are still there. You never know, we might be lucky.'

Olsen nodded again, and disappeared.

Munch put on his wellingtons and found a woolly hat in his coat pocket. He chucked aside the cigarette and lit a fresh one with raw, cold fingers which were barely able to flick the lighter. Good God, surely it had been summer just the other day? It was only late afternoon, and already it was as cold and dark as a winter's night.

Kim came towards him, appearing in between the trees, his face in darkness behind a large torch.

'Are you ready for this?'

Ready for this?

'Stay close behind me. The path is a trip hazard.'

Munch nodded, and followed his colleague towards the path which led up through the woods.