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Opening Extract from...

Cursed

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Translated by Kari Dickson

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PROLOGUE

August 2009

Daniel Schyman knew that people would talk about this day.

It was one of those days when the grass and bushes by the roadside sparkled. The air was sharp and clear. The sky above the trees was so blue it almost hurt the eye. He knew that, right now, the forest would smell raw and cold, but soon the adders would slither out, unsure about what time of year it was. And the larger animals in the forest would seek out the shade, where they would lie chewing on heather and on the berries that had started to ripen. And when the sun was at its highest, everything would smell warm and dry, and every step in the forest, every startled flap of the wing, would be heard from far away. Just thinking about it made his body tingle.

After Gunilla died, Schyman had struggled to find a reason to get up in the morning. They didn't have any children, nor did they have many friends. The silence frequently kept him chained to the armchair in the living room, from where he stared out at the surrounding fields and countryside with empty eyes, and wondered what more life had to offer a man like him.

Nothing, was what he most often concluded; an answer that made him wonder if perhaps he should follow Gunilla into eternity. But it was not like him to give up, so time and again he had hauled himself out of the chair and decided to devote himself to what he loved most in life. On days like today, he was in no doubt that he had made the right decision.

Schyman turned off the road, leaving the asphalt for the gravel, and

slowing down as he drove between the trees. It was almost as though he was holding back so he wouldn't experience everything too fast. When he reached the red barrier, he was surprised to see it was already open, but he thought no more about it and parked in a large open area beside the path that in winter served as a ski track. Another car was already there; it had obviously arrived quite recently – he could still see its tracks in the damp gravel. Schyman turned off his engine, got out of the car and opened the boot to let Lexie out. She had a harness on.

As always, he stood and looked at her, at her tail wagging back and forth, at the light in her eyes. He had paid nine and a half thousand for her, but there wasn't a sum large enough to cover her true value. Lexie was the best beagle in the world – always ready for a walk, always pleased to see him, even when he had only popped out to the shop.

Schyman took out his rucksack and shotgun, a Husqvarna that his father had given him on his sixteenth birthday, and he had used every autumn since. Perhaps it wasn't entirely right to call the man his father any more, given what he'd learned over the past few days.

To think that he was actually Norwegian.

He couldn't imagine what his parents – his *real* parents – must have gone through. What they must have sacrificed.

War was a board game from hell, in which you had no control over your fate, and rarely did any good come of it. Even though Sweden had remained neutral in the Second World War, its people were still affected by what happened. The couple who had brought him up had opened their home to give shelter and help to people they didn't know; and they weren't the only ones. Sacrificing oneself for others was an ideal that Schyman valued highly – it was perhaps the greatest of all virtues.

Schyman no longer felt sad or melancholy when he thought about the people he had grown up with, the people he had called family – mother and father – but in the past few days he had pondered what his life might have been like if they had lived just a little longer. He had been left on his own with the farm and forest when he was only seventeen. The man who had phoned him a few days ago, who was coming to see him later on today, had told him that it was originally intended

that he would be told about his background when he turned eighteen. If that had happened, things could and would have been very different.

But he was happy with his life all the same. A little more money wouldn't have changed that much. And he would never be Norwegian. Schyman would stay in Värmland until the day he died.

He looked over at the other car that was parked by the path. Funnily enough, it was Norwegian, too: the letters LJ sat beside the flag of red, white and blue – colours that always made him think of oil and the Winter Olympics. He had never seen the car before and didn't recognise the registration.

Did the owner have a hunting permit?

Perhaps the owner was not here to hunt, even though that was why most people came, especially so early in the morning. In his younger days, he might have tried to find out who had taken such a liberty; it was his forest, after all. But things like that weren't so important to him any more.

Schyman clipped a lead onto Lexie's harness and they started to walk. They had been out hunting every day for the past week and, as always, she tugged eagerly at the lead. He loved letting her take him deep into the forest; he listened to her panting, to the music around him – the twigs that snapped underfoot, the flapping wings of birds taking flight, the wind soughing in the trees, the spongy gurgle of trodden moss slowly rising again.

He didn't usually let Lexie off the lead straightaway. As a rule, it took a while before the hare was flushed out, and sometimes it didn't happen, but that was hunting. Every time, though, was just as thrilling as the last: when he took up his position in terrain where he guessed a hare might be hiding, with Lexie ready to get on its trail any minute. When he knew his quarry was close; when he felt his heart pounding in his throat; when he had to get things just right, everything he had practised, making it all as precise and effective as possible…

That was when he felt alive.

And the silence that followed. The release of tension.

There was nothing better.

⊙

They had been walking for about half an hour when Lexie stopped and pricked up her ears. Her tail stiffened. Schyman, too, heard something snap in the undergrowth somewhere further into the forest. It couldn't be a hare. In the sixty years or so that he had been hunting in the forests of Värmland, he had never yet heard a hare.

He wondered whether he should let Lexie off the lead, but quickly decided against it. Last autumn, a pack of four wolves had passed through his forest. There were more and more wolves in Sweden.

Lexie had her nose to the ground and was pulling at the lead. She held her head a few centimetres above the ground, moved from side to side, pulled, quivered, sniffed and stopped, turned her ears, then moved off again. Deeper into the forest, the ground alternated between clawing heather and boggy hollows, squelching underfoot.

Soon she stopped again.

Schyman called out a hello, but got no answer. Nor did he hear anything. Not straightaway. Not until he heard a click close by.

He turned his head quickly. Spotted the clothes that almost blended in with the surroundings. A green baseball cap. A barrel pointing straight at him from a distance of about twenty metres.

Then a bang.

A powerful force threw him backwards. His rucksack took some of the impact of his landing, as did the lingonberry bushes; and when his head fell back into the soft greenery, it tickled his cheeks. But he couldn't move, he just lay there, listening to the sound of the shot penetrating further and further into the forest.

And then silence.

It didn't hurt, not until Schyman tried to draw breath – then his mouth filled with blood. It felt like razor-sharp claws were tearing at his chest. He felt something warm and sticky running down the side of his stomach. The smell was metallic and pungent.

More snapping branches as the sound faded into the distance. He tried to keep his eyes open, but it was hard to see.

Schyman heard Lexie whining, felt her nose on his forehead, her wet, rough tongue against his cheek. He tried to get up and lift his hand to her neck, but couldn't; instead, he collapsed back onto the heather and lingonberry. Lexie blocked out the sunlight, which was now starting to warm.

He needed that warmth.

Daniel Schyman knew that people would talk about this day. He closed his eyes and felt the light evaporate.

Gunilla, he thought.

Eternity is waiting.

1

'Where is it? Where *is* it?' Nora Klemetsen hissed, angry with herself more than anything else. She didn't have time for this. It was nearly a quarter to eight; the bus would be just around the corner.

She rummaged through her bag to check that her mobile phone, keys and the cards she needed were there. Would she never learn? Why could she never get things ready the evening before?

Nora went into the kitchen, put her bag on the table and bent down. Her scarf fell over her eyes. Impatiently she threw it back over her shoulders, noticing a bit of eggshell and a pen under one of the chairs, breadcrumbs, and a ball of black fluff from the woollen socks she always wore when she was at home.

She straightened up, took off her jacket and the long scarf – it was too warm to wear it in here – and went into the living room. Maybe she'd had it in her lap when she sat watching TV after Iver had left? And then she put it down when she went to have a shower and brush her teeth?

She lifted up the cushions on the sofa, looked under the blue-flowered throw that had managed to conceal the remote control, then got down on her hands and knees and peered under the light-brown three-seater sofa, which she really hadn't been able to afford, before glancing under the table in the corner on which stood a lamp and the radio. But it wasn't there either.

Could it somehow have got under the TV unit?

Nora crawled over; the cold parquet floor hurt her knees, which were already tender from before. She studied the dust and crumbs that were a constant reminder of how long it was since she'd done a good clean, but that was all she could see.

Nora scrambled to her feet, feeling a bit dizzy; she hadn't eaten yet – she always ate three pieces of plain crispbread when she got to work.

She tried to think through what she had done the day before. Not much: Sunday papers in bed, brunch on the sofa in front of the telly, an hour's stroll up and down the river, supper with Iver and an evening forcing herself to think as little as possible.

No, she hadn't had it in her hand yesterday.

Nora went back to the kitchen table, turned her bag upside down and shook it hard so that all the coins, hair bands, receipts and dusty throat pastilles fell out – even a mitten she'd been looking for since the spring suddenly appeared on the kitchen table. And then there it was, under the worn mitten.

The ball.

She clasped it in her hand and sat down for a moment, squeezing it and rolling it around and around until all the glitter inside was dancing and whirling about. When it stopped, she saw the heart with an arrow through it, and the imprint of his teeth – as though Jonas had tried to bite it in two, unaware of what the consequences might be if he actually managed to. Glitter and fluid everywhere, on his lips, his sweater, the floor.

It wasn't a ball as such, it was a hard plastic sphere, but Jonas refused to see it as anything but a ball, and so that's what it was.

Nora couldn't bear to hold the thought, the memory, any longer, so she stood up and dropped the ball back in her bag, put her jacket and scarf on again and went to look in the full-length mirror in the hall. She picked off some hairs that were caught on her sleeve, fixed her fringe, straightened her jacket and put the bag over her shoulder.

There.

Now the day could begin.

⊙

It was autumnal outside.

Nora had always liked this time of year – when the weather was so

grey and wet that the only thing you could do was bury yourself under a blanket and enjoy all there was to do on a sofa. In that way, she was just like Henning. If there was an excuse not to go out – except to work, of course – he would find it: there was a good film or series on TV; it was such a long time since they'd lit the fire; he was in the middle of a great book, or trying to get through all the newspapers he hadn't managed to read during the week.

There was so much she loved about Henning. His sense of humour, his quick wit. But it wasn't just what he said or did, or who he was. It was more something she saw in his eyes. Even though she had short hair and freckles, and frightened everything that moved when she sneezed; even though she reminded people of a toad whenever she got drunk and started to hiccup; even though she got tetchy and slammed the door when he hadn't put the cushions back on the sofa or put away the laundry when it was dry, his eyes never changed. His eyes that said he still wanted her, no matter what.

When Nora was growing up, the walls were constantly changing. Her father was in the army, so it was hard to settle anywhere, hard to make lasting friendships – something she struggled with well into adulthood. Even when she finally did make friends, she wasn't very good at nurturing relationships.

Henning had been everything she wanted: a refuge, a lover, a friend – someone with whom she could share both her fleeting thoughts and her deeper meditations. Someone she could be completely honest with, without having to worry about the consequences. It had been perfect, as long as there was only the two of them.

Then Jonas came along.

To begin with, the little boy had only strengthened those feelings. They were a family. With a capital F. She loved going home, breastfeeding him, watching him grow. But Henning was not a reconstructed man; he wasn't the type to do the laundry and change nappies without being asked, didn't always know what was good for a child or a family. For the first year, in particular, he just buried himself in his work, sleeping in another room at night because he had to be fully functional

during the day, and using the weekends and any free time to relax, catch up on the news, and not least, cultivate his sources. Nora had to ask him to take Jonas out for a walk in the pram so she could get an hour's sorely needed nap.

Their love and friendship had faded. In the mornings, in the bathroom, they had passed each other like strangers. They had communicated almost exclusively by text message, and then only about practical, everyday things. The structure she had wanted for her life was crumbling. The walls were starting to move again. Whenever she said anything, he promised he would try harder, but it never took more than a week before he had slipped back into his difficult ways.

The separation was more a cry for help than anything else; that's to say, she'd hoped that Henning would see it as such. Instead, he became angry and sad, and not just a little suspicious – he kept accusing her of having found someone else. She sometimes saw him prowling up and down outside the building she had moved into, cigarette in hand, looking up at her windows.

They managed to work together regarding Jonas. But then came that awful day that neither of them could bear to think or talk about. Nothing could ever be the same again. They both knew that if they had only managed to find a way to carry on living together, Jonas would still be alive. They couldn't look each other in the eye. Divorce was the only sensible option, even though it represented a level of sorrow and defeat that she had never quite managed to accept.

Life carried on, in one way or another, and she had met Iver at a time when she desperately needed to laugh and to think about something other than Jonas and Henning. Iver was able to leap out of bed on a Sunday morning and drag her down to the quay at Vippetangen to catch a boat out to one of the islands. Or take her to a bowling alley; she had never had much interest in ball games, but had to admit afterwards it had actually been a lot of fun. Iver might also read a book to her in the evening, sometimes naked, when there was nothing they wanted to watch on TV.

Almost everything was different with Iver. And yes, he liked her, he

even liked her a lot, she was fairly certain of that. But he didn't have the same glow in his eyes. Perhaps it was unfair to compare Iver with Henning, she thought, or Henning with Iver, for that matter, but that's what happened when you started to wonder if you'd made the right choices in life – you asked yourself questions and had feelings, which, after the argument with Iver the night before, seemed even more relevant.

Perhaps 'argument' was the wrong word for what had happened. A prerequisite for an argument was that two people disagreed and gave voice to that disagreement. Iver had said nothing, just mumbled a few syllables into his three-day stubble, and then gone home, without giving her a hug or a kiss or *anything* that might indicate how he felt about what she had just told him.

It was so typical of Iver – to back off when things got serious. There was never a right time to talk about difficult things. And if she did manage to manoeuvre him into a corner, his response was always the same: 'Do we have to talk about this now?' As though the right moment would magically pop up out of nowhere one day.

The fact that he behaved like this was perhaps the only answer she needed, Nora thought. And now that he was back on his feet again, after having been signed off, she knew what it would be like. He'd be working late; his mates would have the beers lined up at the bar; there'd be jobs he just had to follow up – anything to avoid sitting down and talking to her. But he was going to have to say something at some point. Just as she was going to have to say something to Henning.

She had no idea how she was going to manage that.

The streets were damp and leaden; yellow leaves lay in the gutter like dull reminders of the summer that had been. The mornings were still light enough, but there was an ominous chill in the air, a shudder of winter that made Nora pull her jacket tighter round herself. She looked up Uelandsgate to see if the bus was coming, then stood in the queue at the bus stop and checked her watch. Thirty-five minutes until the morning meeting. That meant she needed to come up with something to write about, quick.

⊙

'Here, let me help you.'

Nora hurried into the Aftenposten building. Birgitte Kråkenes was bending over with her back to the door as she tried to wrestle a full bottle of water up onto the blue dispenser. Birgitte was the first person people met when they came into the editorial office.

'Oh, thank you,' she said, and turned towards Nora. 'These things weigh a ton.'

Nora was quickly beside her, and together they lifted the transparent plastic bottle, which was wet with condensation, up into position. Birgitte thanked her again and smiled.

As the receptionist, she was always smartly dressed and she had a welcoming, wrinkle-free face that made Nora green with envy. Birgitte's skin had a special glow about it, a hint of summer or something peppermint-fresh – Nora had to dig around in her memory to recall her own skin being like that. The worst thing was that Birgitte was only a few years younger than her and had two children. But Nora couldn't help liking her. She gave everyone who arrived at the newspaper office a pleasant welcome.

'There's someone here to see you, by the way,' Birgitte said, as she sat down behind the reception desk on a chair that didn't creak.

'At this time?' Nora asked, grabbing a freshly printed copy of the morning edition from the pile in front of her, and, with half an eye, glancing down at the headlines.

Birgitte nodded and pushed her dark, chestnut-framed glasses up on her nose. 'He's waiting for you.'

Nora stretched her neck to see. A man was sitting by her desk, his legs crossed and looking around restlessly. He was wearing dark clothes, in a style well suited to his colouring. His hair was longish and messy, black with some grey streaks through it.

'And does this man have a name?'

Birgitte examined the paper in front of her.

'Hugo Refsdal,' she said, looking up again.

'Never heard of him,' Nora commented. 'Did he say what it was about?'

Birgitte shook her head and shrugged.

'Fair enough,' Nora said. 'Nice jacket. Is it new?'

Birgitte smiled and glanced down at her dark-grey blazer. 'New? No, I've had this one for a long time.'

'Well, it's very nice,' Nora said.

Birgitte's smile lasted until the phone rang. She picked up the receiver with one hand and waved to Nora with the other.

Nora carried on walking through the editorial office, an open-plan room that was just as boring and neutral as any other editorial office she had been in over the course of what would soon be a ten-year career as a journalist. There was wall-to-wall carpeting, light-coloured walls, meeting rooms with big windows, and masses of cables and computer screens. The most recent IT bling was a 75-inch TV screen, placed in the middle of the room; it had become a gathering point, especially when the sport was on – which was practically all the time.

She nodded to some of her colleagues, who were already at their desks, ignored the incessant ringing of telephones and voices that rose and fell and focused on the man, who stood up as she approached.

Before she had reached the desk, he said, 'Hello,' and took a step towards her with an outstretched hand. 'We've never met before, my name is Hugo Refsdal. I'm Hedda's husband.'

Nora shook his hand. It was sweaty.

'Hedda?' she repeated, wiping her fingers discreetly on the back of her trouser leg.

'Hedda Hellberg.'

Nora stopped.

She hadn't heard from Hedda since they'd been at college together, when they shared a tiny flat up at St Hanshaugen. Nora didn't think that Hedda had ever worked as a journalist; she had certainly never seen her byline anywhere.

'Ah, yes,' Nora said, at last. 'Hedda.'

Nora had lots of good memories from that time. Every day had been

a party, and the world had been theirs for the taking. She had realised very early on that she wanted to be a journalist, whether it was for radio, TV or more traditional media. She had imagined herself covering wars and catastrophes, immersing herself in the problems and asking critical questions, teasing out the truth, becoming a wiser person and maybe even helping other people to become wiser at the same time. She had wanted to mean something to other people.

But reality proved to be very different. The only time that Nora actually heard from her readers was when they wrote to point out that she had got her facts wrong or simply to have a go at her. People had no shame when they could hide behind a keyboard.

Pulling herself back to the present, Nora looked at Hedda's husband, standing in front of her. It was hard to work out what he wanted, but Nora realised that something was amiss.

'Is there somewhere more private we can go?' he asked. 'I don't want to sit here and—'

He broke off as one of the foreign correspondents walked past. Refsdal followed him with his eyes until he was well out of hearing. Nora had the feeling that Hedda's husband might burst into tears at any moment.

'Yes, of course,' Nora replied. 'We can go over there,' she pointed to the room where the management meetings were always held.

Refsdal waved his hand as though to say 'lead the way'. Nora put down her jacket, found her mobile phone and headed over.

'Would you like a cup of coffee?' she asked, over her shoulder.

'No, thank you.'

'A glass of water? Anything else?'

'I'm fine, thanks. I drank enough coffee before I came out.'

Nora carried on towards the meeting room, greeting colleagues as she went, and wondering what Refsdal wanted to talk to her about. He followed, a couple of paces behind, negotiating the chairs and desks.

They entered the IKEA-yellow room with its oblong table in the middle, covered with the day's papers, and sat down, each in a red fabric chair at opposite sides of the table.

'So,' Nora said, leaning forwards, 'how can I help you?'

Although Refsdal seemed to acknowledge her direct question, he struggled to reply. He looked away and focused on something outside the room. He clasped his hands together, only to let go of them again, and then laid them flat on the table.

'Do you know who Oscar Hellberg is?' he eventually asked.

Nora thought about it. 'He's Hedda's father, isn't he?'

'He *was* Hedda's father,' Refsdal corrected her. 'He died almost two months ago now. Lung cancer, even though he never smoked a single cigarette in his life.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' Nora said.

She had met Hedda's father once, when he came to Oslo to visit his daughter. Because Nora shared a flat with Hedda, he had taken them both out for a meal. She remembered him as a handsome man – attractive and well dressed – and genuinely curious about the people he met. Especially the waitresses.

'It was very hard for Hedda,' Refsdal continued. He picked up a pen that was lying on the table in front of him and played with the top.

'She sat by his bedside day and night for the last couple of weeks.' Refsdal fidgeted in his chair, and held the pen as though it were a knife. 'Even though she knew that Oscar would die, she still struggled to accept it when he finally did. She became more and more detached. We have a son, and she barely paid any attention to him.'

Nora noted that he was talking about Hedda in the past tense.

'She came to me some weeks after he died and said that she wanted to get away for a while – to "rest", as she put it. And I thought, great! Whatever she needs to be herself again.'

Refsdal put the top back on the pen and then used it to scratch his stubbled chin.

'I was a little taken aback when she said she wanted to go to a clinic in Italy for three weeks, but maybe that was what she needed. How could I know? So I thought, OK, fair enough, don't begrudge her those three weeks. We can see how things are when she gets back.'

It took a little time before Refsdal continued. Nora sat patiently and

waited, watching his eyes, which seemed to be looking for something on the wall. He didn't blink until his eyes filled with fluid.

'She wanted total peace, she said – didn't even want to take her mobile phone with her. She didn't want us to call her at the clinic, she just wanted to be alone and "find her feet again". She even wanted to take the train to the airport alone, but in the end, I finally managed to persuade her to let me drive her. Which I did, I drove her to Gardermoen, and when I dropped her off, she said that she loved me, that she loved us, our family. Smiled, for the first time in weeks. Obviously, I was glad and thought that everything would be fine. But...'

Refsdal ran his free hand through his hair, a movement that reminded Nora of Iver. He always did the same with his hair, as if it needed an airing every now and then.

Refsdal carried on talking: 'At the end of the three weeks, I went to Gardermoen to pick her up. I even took Henrik out of school for the day so he could be there when his mum came home.' He put the pen down on the table, folded his hands. 'But Hedda wasn't on the plane.'

There was silence in the room.

'We waited and waited, looked everywhere – all over the airport – tried to talk to the people who have the passenger lists and things like that, but they weren't allowed to say anything. So I called the clinic in Italy where she said she was going to stay. And that was when things started to get very odd indeed.'

Nora leaned even further forwards across the table.

'The lady I spoke to said that she'd never heard of Hedda, and that Hedda had never booked to stay at the clinic.' Refsdal played with the ring on his finger, turning it round and round. 'You can imagine what went on in my head.'

Nora nodded slowly.

'I phoned everyone I could think of; asked if they had heard from Hedda. But no one had, so the only thing I could do was to call the police.'

'When did you do that?' Nora asked.

'Eleven days ago.'

Nora regretted that she hadn't brought a notebook with her. 'I don't remember seeing anything in the papers,' she said.

Refsdal gave her an exasperated smile. 'Hedda's family have always been anxious to keep up appearances,' he said. 'They didn't want anything about it in the papers. They thought that maybe Hedda would turn up again, and then there wouldn't be any awkward questions. But eleven days have passed now, and we still haven't heard a word from her.'

'So, in effect, Hedda has been missing for a little over a month?'

Refsdal nodded.

'And what have the police done about it?'

'Well, they've done everything they can,' he said, and exhaled loudly. 'They've confirmed that Hedda did not get on the 09.50 flight to Milan that day, and that any traces of her stop at Gardermoen. No one has seen her since that morning outside Departures.'

Nora looked at him thoughtfully. 'What about the surveillance cameras at the airport?'

'There are hundreds of them, of course, and they're recording all the time. But if the police don't ask for the relevant recordings within seven days, they're deleted.'

'And as she was supposedly away for three weeks, to begin with…'

'…there are no pictures of her.' Refsdal completed Nora's sentence. 'Not from Gardermoen, at least.'

'But the police haven't said anything about her being missing?'

Nora already knew the answer to this question. The police preferred not to involve the media in cases where there was a clear suspicion that the missing person might either have committed suicide or run off with someone else. Media attention always made it harder to come back.

'No,' Refsdal said, and looked down.

Nora thought for a moment.

'Given how hard she took her father's death, the police assume that she's committed suicide, is that it?'

Refsdal lifted his head slightly, then nodded.

'I don't know if Hedda ever told you,' he said, wiping away a little

wetness from the tip of his nose with his sleeve, 'but her aunt disappeared as well, sometime in the nineties. Everyone assumed that she had committed suicide.'

Nora recalled that Hedda had spoken about her Aunt Ellen.

'Which is why everyone now thinks Hedda has done the same,' Refsdal said. 'That it runs in the family.'

'But you don't think that's what happened?'

Refsdal picked up the pen again.

'Which is why you're here,' Nora continued. 'You want me to write something about her.'

He looked down again. Was silent for a long time.

Finally he said: 'Hedda and I once talked about smart people.' He smiled tenderly at the memory. 'If we'd ever met anyone we envied because they were so smart.' He shook his head gently, a smile still playing on his lips. 'And Hedda said that she'd never met anyone smarter than you.'

Refsdal looked up at her.

Nora held his gaze, before she suddenly realised what he had said. 'Than me?'

'That's what she said. And I remembered because of your name. You both have names from Ibsen plays.'

Nora was embarrassed, but she flashed him a quick smile, and a memory popped up of one evening when she and Hedda had drunk a lot of red wine and, for some reason, had started to talk about Ibsen. In their drunkenness, they both dug out their copies of *Hedda Gabler* and *A Doll's House* and tried to have a conversation using only the lines of their namesakes.

Happy memories.

'I thought you could perhaps investigate a bit more,' Refsdal continued. 'You knew her, after all. And you're a journalist. You can engage people in a different way from me.'

Nora nodded slowly as she thought this through.

'What do the rest of her family say about it? Do they think it's the right way to go?'

'They don't know that I'm here.'

Nora pushed out her chin.

'And I don't care what they think. Henrik and I are closest to her, we're her immediate family, and we have to find out what's happened to her. If Hedda is dead, I'd like to be able to visit a grave. The rest of the family couldn't disagree with that.'

There was a half-full jug of water in the middle of the table, with a stack of plastic glasses beside it. Refsdal stood up, reached out for the water and poured himself a glass, looking at Nora to see if she wanted any.

'I think that's been there since yesterday,' she said.

'Doesn't matter,' he said, and emptied the glass in a few swift gulps.

Nora carried on: 'Has there been any activity on Hedda's mobile phone or email accounts since she disappeared? I'm assuming the police have checked?'

Refsdal swallowed and sat down. 'Nothing,' he said, drying his mouth with the back of his hand.

'What about money? Did she make any withdrawals before she went missing?'

He shook his head. 'I did ask if she was going to get any euros before she left, but she said that she could sort that out down there. In Italy.'

Clearly a lie, Nora thought to herself. She realised that she was becoming increasingly curious as to why Hedda had lied about a trip she was never going to make, especially as she then promptly disappeared.

'So Hedda has left no data traces from the day you drove her to the airport until now?'

Refsdal shook his head in silence.

Nora activated the screen on her mobile phone and saw that she only had four minutes left until the morning meeting. She took a deep breath and said: 'I'm going to be honest with you, Hugo. On first impressions, I would say the police were right. Not a single email, no movement in her bank account…'

'But her father's death wouldn't have made her that depressed…' Refsdal stood up again. His cheeks were flushed now. 'Oscar had been

ill for some time, and not only that – Hedda has a son, and I'm sure she would never abandon him of her own free will.'

Nora looked up at him with sympathetic eyes. 'I realise that you still have hope, Refsdal, but—'

'It's not a matter of hope,' he interrupted. 'I have slowly started to accept that I may never get Hedda back, but I have to find out what happened to her.'

Nora stood up as well. 'So what do you think has happened then? You clearly don't believe she's disappeared of her own free will. Did someone abduct her at Gardermoen, in front of thousands of potential witnesses?'

The first of the managers looked in through the window.

'I don't know,' was Refsdal's muted response. 'I really don't know. All I know is that, when Henrik goes to bed at night and wonders where his mum is, I have nothing to tell him that makes any sense.'

Nora looked at him, could understand how he felt, and yet at the same time couldn't. For two years, she had found it hard to understand that Jonas was dead. And even though she knew that something that was in some way related to Henning had happened, she couldn't get past the paralysing grief. She couldn't bear to think about whose fault it was. It was no one's fault, and it was everyone's fault. Nothing could make Jonas come back, anyway.

She picked up her phone from the table. 'I'm sure I can do a good article for the paper and internet editions. I'll ask anyone who was at Gardermoen that day to come forward if they saw her; and anyone else who knows anything, for that matter. Something might turn up.'

Refsdal nodded enthusiastically.

'But, before I do that,' Nora said and looked him straight in the eye, 'I need to know that you are one hundred per cent certain about doing it. The article will put a lot of pressure on everyone who knows you – your son included. Other newspapers, magazines, television, radio will probably contact you. Are you ready for that?'

Refsdal gave her a hard look and balled his fists so tight his knuckles turned white.

'I'm ready for it. I'm prepared to do whatever it takes, as long as I get an answer I can at least try to live with.'

'Good,' Nora said, and took a step towards the door. 'Do you have a car?'

'Sorry?'

'Did you come here by car?' she asked over her shoulder.

'Yes, I...'

'Excellent,' she said, and put her hand on the door handle. 'Let's go for a drive then. I'll just pick up my camera first.'