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The Ice Beneath Her

Written by Camilla Grebe

Translated by Elizabeth Clark Wessel

Published by Zaffre

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Camilla Grebe

THE ICE BENEATH HER

Translated by Elizabeth Clark Wessel

ZAFFRE

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Peter

I'm standing in the snow by my mother's headstone when I get the call. Her stone is simple, barely knee high, in rough-hewn granite. We've been talking for a while – my mother and I – about how hard it is to be a police officer in this city, where nobody gives a damn about anything but themselves. And – perhaps more important – how hard it is to live in that kind of city, in this kind of time.

I stamp wet snow off my trainers and turn away from her headstone. It doesn't feel right to talk on the phone at her grave. The rolling hills of the Woodland Cemetery lie spread out before me. Mist hovers between the tops of tall pines, and beneath it the dark tree trunks shoot up out of the snow like exclamation marks, as if emphasising life's transience. There's dripping from the treetops and from the gravestones. Meltwater runs over everything. It finds its way into my thin shoes, too, collecting around my toes like a wet reminder to buy those boots I have yet to allow myself. Somewhere in the distance I catch a glimpse of dark figures receding into the pine forest. Maybe they're here to light votive candles or place pine boughs.

Christmas will be here soon.

I take a few steps towards the neatly snowploughed footpath and throw a glance at the phone screen, even though I already know who it is. The feeling is unmistakable. A sinking, pounding sensation that I know all too well.

Before I answer, I turn back one last time to her headstone. Wave awkwardly and mumble something about coming back soon. It's unnecessary, of course – she knows I always come back.

The road stretches out black and shining as I drive into the city. The brake lights of other cars glisten in front of me on the road, lighting

the way. Thick drifts of dirty brown snow and squat, depressing, conformist buildings line the road to Stockholm. The occasional illuminated Christmas star brightens up a window, like a torch in the night. It's started snowing again. A rainy slush settles on the windscreen, blurring all the edges, softening the landscape. The only sound is the rhythmic swish of the wipers married to the soft purr of the motor.

A murder.

Yet another murder.

Many years ago, back when I was still a novice detective inspector, getting called to the scene of a murder always provoked a kind of exhilaration. Death was synonymous with a mystery that needed solving, like tangled wool that needed unravelling. Back then I thought everything could be unravelled and explained. As long as you had the energy, the stamina, and knew which threads to pull and in what order. Reality was nothing more than a complex web of threads.

In short, it could be mastered, figured out.

Now I don't know any more. Maybe I've lost interest in the web itself, lost my intuition for which thread to pull. Over time, death has taken on new meaning. Mum, resting in the wet ground of the Woodland Cemetery. Annika, my sister, lying in the same cemetery not far away. And Dad, who's bent on drinking himself to death on the Costa del Sol, will be here soon enough. The crimes that come my way no longer feel as important. Of course, I can help figure out what happened. Put the inconceivable into words – someone has had their life taken from them – and describe the events leading up to it. Maybe find the culprit, too, and in the best-case scenario, help to prosecute him. But the dead are still dead, aren't they? These days, I have difficulty finding meaning in what I do.

By the time I reach Roslagstull dusk is falling, and it occurs to me that it never really got light today. This day passed unnoticed through the same colourless December fog as yesterday and the

day before. There's more traffic once I merge onto the E18 motorway heading north. I pass by roadworks, and potholes shake the car so the Little Tree hanging from the rear-view mirror jumps alarmingly.

Manfred calls again when I'm driving past the university. Tells me it's a bloody mess, some kind of bigwig is involved, and it would be great if I stopped taking so bloody long and just turned up. I peer out into the cement-grey dusk, tell him to hold his horses, the road has more holes than Swiss cheese, and I'll bruise my balls if I drive any faster.

Manfred fires off his familiar grunting laugh, like the snort of a pig. Or maybe I'm being unfair: Manfred is fat; maybe that colours my view of his laugh, makes me think of a voluptuous grunting. Maybe his laugh sounds just like mine.

Maybe we all sound the same.

We've been working together for more than ten years, Manfred and me. Year after year, we've stood side by side at the autopsy table, interrogating witnesses and meeting distraught relatives. Year after year, we've taken on the bad guys and done our best to make the world a safer place. But have we, really? All those people slumbering in cold storage at Forensic Medicine in Solna are still dead and nothing will change that. For ever and ever. We are no more than society's cleaning crew, tying up loose ends after the fabric frays and the unthinkable has already happened.

Janet says I'm depressed, but I don't trust Janet. Besides, I don't believe in depression. Because that's how it is: I don't believe in it. In my case, I've just realised the true state of our existence, and I'm looking soberly at life for the first time. Janet says that's a textbook response, that the depressed person isn't able to see beyond his own perceived misery. In return I tell her depression is one of the pharmaceutical industry's most profitable inventions, and I don't have the time or the desire to make obscenely rich pharmaceutical companies even richer. And if Janet wants to talk any more about

how I'm feeling after that, I always hang up. After all, we broke up more than fifteen years ago; there's no need to discuss that kind of thing with her. That she happens to be the mother of my only child doesn't change that fact.

Albin, by the way, is the child we never should have had. Not because there's anything wrong with Albin – he's a normal enough teenage boy: pimply, oversexed and pathologically interested in computer games – but because I truly wasn't ready to be a parent. In my darker moments (which are becoming more and more frequent over the years) I think she did it on purpose. Threw away her contraceptive pills and got pregnant as revenge for that thing with the wedding. Maybe that's the case. I'll never know, and it doesn't really matter now. Albin very much exists and lives in comfort with his mother. We see each other sometimes, not often – at Christmas and Midsummer and on his birthday. I think it's best for him if we don't have much contact. Otherwise, he'd probably end up disappointed with me too.

Sometimes I think I should carry a picture of him in my wallet, like the other (real) parents. A clumsy school picture taken against a sepia-toned panel in a gym by a photographer whose dreams have led no further than the Farsta Secondary School. But then I realise that wouldn't fool anyone, least of all myself. Parenthood is something you earn, I think. A right that comes from suffering sleepless nights, changing nappies and all that other stuff you have to do. It has very little to do with genetics, the sperm I unknowingly donated fifteen years ago so Janet could fulfil her dream of being a mother.

I spot the house from a distance. Not because the white, boxy building stands out in any way in this exclusive suburb, but because it's surrounded by police cars. Blue lights flash across the snow and the unmistakable white van of the forensic technicians is parked neatly not far away. I leave my car at the bottom of the hill and walk

the last stretch up towards the house. Greet the uniforms, flash my badge, and slip under the blue-and-white barrier tape fluttering gently in the breeze.

Manfred Olsson is standing at the front door. His huge body obscures most of the doorway as he raises a hand in greeting. He's wearing a tweed jacket with a bit of pink silk handkerchief poking out of the breast pocket. His generous wool trousers are tucked firmly into blue plastic shoe covers.

'Bloody hell, Lindgren. I thought you'd never turn up.'

I meet his eyes. His small, impish peppercorn eyes are set deeply in his ruddy face. His thin ginger hair is combed neatly in a style that calls to mind an actor in a fifties movie. He looks more like an antiques dealer or historian or sommelier than a police officer. In fact the last thing he looks like is a detective – something he's undoubtedly aware of. I suspect it might just be a ploy, that he actually loves exaggerating his eccentric style in order to provoke more hidebound officers.

'Like I said . . .'

'Yeah, yeah. Blame it on the traffic,' Manfred says. 'I know how it is when you get hold of a good fucking porno. Hard to tear yourself away.'

Manfred's rough language is in sharp contrast to his elaborate and conservative style of dress. He hands me a pair of shoe covers and gloves and says in a quieter voice:

'Listen. This is some truly fucked-up shit . . . Come on, see for yourself.'

I put on the shoe covers and latex gloves and step onto the transparent plastic foot pads that the technicians have placed seemingly at random in the hall. The smell of blood is so intense and nauseating that I almost retreat, even though I know it all too well. The pounding in my gut is growing stronger. Despite all the crime scenes I've been at, all the corpses I've seen, there's something about being in the proximity of cold, naked death that still makes the hair

on the back of my neck stand up. Maybe it's the reality of how fast it can happen. How quickly a life can be extinguished. But then again sometimes it's the opposite – the way a crime scene, or a body, bears witness to unbearably protracted agony.

I nod to the forensic technicians in white coveralls and look around the hall. It's noticeably anonymous, verging on austere. Or is it just very masculine? They're almost the same thing when it comes to interior design. White walls, grey floor. No sign of the personal belongings you would normally find in an entrance hall: coats, bags or shoes. I step onto the next plastic square and peek into a kitchen. Black-lacquered kitchen cabinets, high gloss. An elliptical table with chairs around it that I recognise from some home decor magazine. Knives on parade along the wall. I note that none seem to be missing.

Manfred puts his hand on my arm.

'Here. This way.'

I continue down the hall on the plastic pads. Pass by a forensic technician equipped with a camera and notepad. A large bloodstain spreads out under the plastic. No, it's no bloodstain, it's a sea. A red, sticky sea of fresh blood that seems to cover this entire section of the hall, from wall to wall and further down the stairs to the basement. From this sea there are tons of footprints in different sizes that lead towards the front door.

'A hell of a lot of blood,' Manfred mumbles, and steps forward with surprising agility, even though the plastic pads buckle under his weight. A numbered sign stands next to a bloody bundle of clothing. I catch a glimpse of a leg and a high-heeled black boot, and then the lower body of a woman lying on her back. It takes a few seconds for me to realise she's been beheaded and that what I first mistook for a bundle of clothing is in fact a head lying on the floor. Or rather, it stands there, as if it were growing from the floor.

Like a mushroom.

Manfred groans and sinks down on his haunches. I lean forward, taking in the macabre scene. Letting it in – that's important. The natural reaction is to shrink back, look away from this terror, but as a detective inspector I have long since learned to suppress that reflex.

The woman's face and brown hair are clotted with blood. If I had to guess, which is a little difficult given the condition of the body, I'd say she's around twenty-five. Her body is also soaked with blood, and I glimpse what look like deep wounds on the forearms. She's wearing a black skirt, black tights, and a grey pullover. Beneath her, soaked in blood, I glimpse a winter coat.

'Fucking hell.'

Manfred nods and strokes his stubble. 'She's been beheaded.'

I nod. There's nothing to add to that statement. It's obvious that's exactly what happened. It requires a considerable strength, or at least laborious effort, to separate a head from its body. It says something about the killer. Exactly what I don't know yet, but it was certainly no cripple who did this. The killer was reasonably strong. Or very motivated.

'Do we know who she is?'

Manfred shakes his head. 'No. But we know who lives here.'

'And who's that?'

'Jesper Orre.'

The name sounds familiar, in the way of a retired athlete or former politician. It rings a bell, but I can't remember where I've heard it before.

'Jesper Orre?'

'Yes, Jesper Orre. The CEO of Clothes&More.'

Then I remember. The controversial head of Scandinavia's fastest-growing clothing chain. The man the media loves to hate. For his management practices, for his many love affairs, and for his frequent politically incorrect statements to the media.

Manfred sighs deeply and stands up. I follow his lead. 'The murder weapon?' I ask.

He points silently down the hall. At the far end, next to a staircase that seems to lead down to a basement, lies a large knife, or maybe a machete. I can't see it clearly. Beside it stands a small sign neatly placed with the number 5 on it.

'And Jesper Orre, have we got hold of him?'

'No. No one seems to know where he is.'

'What else do we know?'

'The body was found by a passing neighbour who noticed the front door was open. We talked to her. She's at the hospital now – apparently she's having heart problems from the shock. Anyway, she hasn't seen anything else of note. Unfortunately, she stomped around quite a bit in the hall, so we'll see if the technicians can lift any useful footprints. There's blood in the snow outside too. Presumably the killer tried to wipe it off after the murder.'

I look around. The floor next to the front door is covered with a jumble of red tracks. Along the walls there are blood splatters and bloody handprints. The scene resembles a Jackson Pollock painting: it looks like someone poured red paint onto the floor, rolled around in it, and then splashed paint all over everything else as well.

'The murder seems to have been preceded by a pretty bad fight,' Manfred continues. 'The victim has defensive wounds on her forearms and hands. The coroner's preliminary assessment is that she died between three and six p.m. yesterday. The victim is a female around twenty-five years old and the cause of death is likely the many injuries to the throat when the head was . . . Well, you can see for yourself.'

Manfred falls silent.

'And the head,' I say. 'How did it end up like that, the right way up? Could that be by chance?'

'The coroner and technicians say it's probable that the killer placed it that way.'

'So fucking sick.'

Manfred nods and holds my gaze with his small brown eyes. Then he lowers his voice, as if he doesn't want anyone else in the room to hear what he says, for whatever reason. The only people left in here are the technicians.

'Listen, this is eerily similar to . . .'

'But that was ten years ago.'

'Still.'

I nod. I can't deny that there are similarities to a murder we investigated on Södermalm ten years ago, one we failed to solve, despite being one of the most extensive investigations in Swedish criminal history.

'As I said, that was ten years ago. There's no reason to believe that . . .'

Manfred waves his hand dismissively.

'No. I know. You're probably right.'

'And this Orre fella, the guy that lives here, what do we know about him?'

'Not much yet, beyond what you can read in the papers. But Sanchez is working on it. She promised to come back with something by tonight.'

'And what do the papers say?'

'Well, the usual gossip. They call him a slave driver. The union hates him and has filed several lawsuits against the company. Apparently he's a well-known womaniser, too. Tons of ladies.'

'No wife? Children?'

'No, he lives alone.'

I look around the hall, letting my eyes glide across the large kitchen. 'Do you really need a mansion if you live alone?'

Manfred shrugs.

‘“Need” is a relative term. The neighbour, the lady they took to the hospital, said there have been different women living here every now and then, but she’s lost count of how many.’

We walk out again, take off our shoe covers and gloves. About thirty feet away, near the side entrance, there appears to be a burnt-down shed, half covered by snow.

Manfred lights a cigarette, coughs and turns towards me.

‘I forgot to mention that. There was a fire in his garage three weeks ago. His insurance company is investigating the matter.’

I look at the charred remains of beams sticking up out of the snow and it reminds me of the pines at the Woodland Cemetery. The same silent, dark figures silhouetted against the snow, evoking the same disquieting sense of impermanence as well as death.

During the car ride into the city, I think of Janet again. There’s something about the most heinous crimes, the worst horrors, that always makes me think about her. I guess because Janet set me off balance, the way a crime like this does. Or maybe, on some primitive, subconscious level I sometimes wish she were dead, like the woman in the white house. Obviously I don’t really want to kill her – she is Albin’s mother, after all – but the feeling is there.

My life was infinitely simpler before we met.

Janet worked in a cafe near the central police station on Kungsholmen. We always said hello to each other when I went in. Sometimes, if there weren’t many customers, she’d sit with me for a bit, treat me to a coffee, and we’d chat. She had short, blonde, punky hair and a gap between her front teeth that was sometimes charming, sometimes not. It was something to keep your eyes focused on, a fixed point like the picture of a fly in a urinal. Plus she had amazing tits. Of course I’d had women before. Quite a few actually, but no serious relationships. They came and went without making much of an impression on me. I doubt I made much of an impression on their lives either.

But Janet was different. She was stubborn, unbelievably stubborn. I think we'd gone out to dinner maybe three or four times, ended up in bed together about the same, when she started going on at me about moving in together. Of course I said no. I didn't want to live with her. Janet's non-stop babbling had already started to get on my nerves. I found myself wishing more and more often that she would shut up. But sometimes when she was sleeping, naked in my narrow bed, I found her indescribably beautiful. Stillness and silence suited her so much better than nagging. I wished she could always be like that. But it was an absurd wish. You can't ask your girlfriend to be quiet and naked.

At least not all the time.

In the beginning most of her badgering was about small things, like taking trips together. She would come home with a bag full of travel brochures and devote an entire evening to judging which destinations were the best. Mallorca or Ibiza. Canary Islands or Gambia. Rhodes or Cyprus. It might be about where the weather was best, the food was most delicious, or where you could buy the most exciting junk.

In the end, of course, we did take a trip, and it wasn't that bad. There wasn't much to do in that little village on the east coast of Mallorca, and Janet spent most of the week in her bikini reading *The Clan of the Cave Bear*, which meant she was quiet at least. And almost naked.

And then there was the sex.

The sex was incredible, I can't deny it. All that wine and sangria in the heat might have helped. She was like an animal, uninhibited and vulnerable at the same time. Sometimes I caught myself thinking there was something almost masculine about her behaviour in bed. With that demanding, impatient desire that wanted to be satisfied immediately and in a surprisingly selfish way. She took what she wanted, and at that time it was me, my body. And maybe it

happened that, in the heat of the moment, I did seriously consider a life with her. Maybe I said so too. I don't remember.

There's so much you don't remember.

But we were hardly home again before she started talking about buying an apartment together. I explained to her as clearly as I could that I wasn't ready to move in with her, but it was as if she didn't want to hear what I said. As usual, she had set her sights on a goal – an apartment and a family – and shouldn't I feel the same since, after all, I was thirty-three?

She had my name tattooed on her lower back as well, 'Peter' on a banner carried by two doves. It made me uneasy, though I didn't really know why. I guess because a tattoo is for ever and just the thought of spending eternity with Janet gave me the willies.

This all coincided with my new job as a detective, so naturally I was busy at work. I took every single case very seriously back then, actually thought I was helping to create a better world. I even believed it was possible to imagine what that world might look like.

A better world?

Now, fifteen years later, I know that nothing changes. I've realised that time isn't linear, but circular. It might sound pretentious, but it's really quite banal. Time is a circle, like a ring of sausage. It's not something to spend too much time contemplating. It is the way it is. New murders and new police officers with a romantic idea of the profession throwing themselves into their jobs. New criminals who, as soon as they're imprisoned, are replaced by even newer ones.

It never ends.

Eternity is a ring of sausage. And Janet wanted to share it with me.

I tend to think I was firmer at the beginning of our relationship. Back then I'd actually stand up to her crazy ideas. But over time she broke down my resistance, or maybe I gave up my defence

strategy. Became more evasive. Replied that we 'might move in together next year' when she brought it up. Then found fault with all the apartments she dragged me to: too far down in the building, too high up in the building (it's a fire hazard!), too far away from the city, too centrally located (so loud!), or whatever I could come up with.

She always looked crushed as we walked home from those viewings. Staring down at the pavement without saying a word, her long blonde fringe draped like a curtain in front of her eyes. Holding her bag tightly in front of her chest, like a shield. Lips pressed together into a thin, bloodless dash.

Janet knew all the tricks. Knew that the guilt she provoked in me would make me even weaker and more manageable. Sometimes I wondered where she'd learned all that, how someone so young could be so skilled at manipulation.

Maybe it was my experiences from the relationship with Janet that made me so fascinated with Manfred when we started working together a few years later. Although on the surface he gave an almost comical impression – partly due to the tension between his appearance and his unpolished language – he also possessed an inner strength that I admired immediately. After just a few days he took me aside and explained that he was getting a divorce, and it was probably best that I was informed since it might affect his work.

Manfred was married to Sara at the time, and they had three teenagers together. I remember I asked what Sara thought about the divorce, and Manfred responded, 'It doesn't matter, because I've made up my mind.' Something about that statement got me thinking. He had made the decision on his own, and he was going to get that divorce no matter what Sara thought.

I couldn't quite put it together.

At the same time, it worried me. There was a risk that Manfred, who was so clear-sighted and strong, might see right through

me. See my weakness, my ambivalence and my unwillingness to commit myself. Qualities I'd learned were so ugly that you were better off hiding them. Qualities that smelled bad when they surfaced, like rotting leaves floating on a river.

A few years later I actually told Manfred about the wedding thing. At first he looked perplexed, as if he couldn't really understand what I'd said, then he started laughing. He laughed and laughed until tears ran down his round, ruddy cheeks and his double chins bobbed. He laughed until he almost had to lie down on the floor.

There's a lot you can say about Manfred, but he certainly does see the brighter side of life.

It's dark by the time I arrive at the police station on Kungsholmen. It seems to have got colder, too, because instead of sleet, large, downy flakes are falling over Polhemsgatan. If the police station hadn't been so unbelievably ugly, the scene might have been a beautiful one, but instead the gigantic buildings dominate, a reminder of the post-industrial brutalist architectural style that was so in vogue in the sixties. The screens of light silhouetted on the facade reveal my colleagues hard at work inside; the fight against crime never calls it a night. Not even on a Friday evening just before Christmas. And especially not when a young woman has been brutally murdered.

On the stairway to the second floor, I run into Sanchez. 'You look tired,' she says.

She's wearing a cream-coloured silk blouse and smart black trousers that make her look just like the desk officer she is. She has her dark hair in a ponytail, and I can see the tattoo on her neck. It appears to be a snake winding its way up from her back towards her left ear, as if trying to nip at her earlobe.

'You don't look so good yourself,' I answer.

She smiles with deceptive smoothness, and I know immediately that I will have to pay for that comment later.

'I've put together some information on Jesper Orre. I gave the material to Manfred.'

'Thanks,' I say and continue up the stairs.

Manfred is drinking tea in front of his computer and waves me over when I come in. On his desk are photos of Afsaneh, his young wife, and their soon-to-be one-year-old daughter, Nadja.

'Have you eaten?' he asks.

'Not hungry. Thanks.'

'No. That visit wasn't too good for the appetite.'

I think of the head in the middle of a puddle of blood. People do strange things to each other, sometimes for no reason and sometimes because of feuds that last for generations. I remember a TV programme I saw a few months ago, which tried to answer the question: Is man a peaceful or a murderous animal? I thought the question itself was strange. There is no doubt humans are the planet's most dangerous animal; we constantly hunt and kill not only other species, but our own. The membrane of civilisation is as thin and cosmetic as the garish nail varnish Janet loves to wear.

'Get anything on Jesper Orre?'

Manfred nods and runs his thick finger over the text in front of him. 'Jesper Andreas Orre. Forty-five years old. Born and raised in Bromma.'

Manfred pauses and reaches for his reading glasses, while I reflect on this. Forty-five years old, four years younger than me, and possibly guilty of a brutal murder. Or maybe he too is a victim; too soon to tell, though it's statistically likely he's involved in the crime. The simplest explanation is also usually the right one in the end.

Manfred clears his throat. He continues:

'Has been CEO of the clothing chain Clothes&More for two years. He's . . . what we'd call controversial. Not well liked, considered a tough nut. Apparently fired people for being at home with sick children, that sort of thing. According to the union anyway. They've filed several civil lawsuits against the company. He made 4,378,000 kronor in taxable income last year. No criminal record, never married. Often mentioned in the media, mostly by tabloids, and mostly about his love life. Sanchez spoke to his parents and his secretary, and nobody has heard from him in the last few hours. But he went to work as usual on Friday and apparently seemed completely "normal".'

Manfred makes air quotes when he says the word 'normal' and meets my eyes over the top of his glasses.

'In a relationship?'

'According to the parents, no. And the secretary indicated that he's been very reticent about his private life since the media started writing about him. We got contact information for some of his friends, too. Sanchez is getting in touch with them.'

'And what about that fire?'

'Right. The fire.' Manfred flips through the stack of papers again. 'Jesper Orre was in the process of building a garage, but three weeks ago it burnt down, along with two cars he owned. Quite expensive cars apparently. A . . . let me see now . . . an MG and a Porsche. The insurance company is investigating whether the fire was arson. Sanchez is going talk to them, too.'

I look out the window. The snow is falling more heavily, obscuring the view. Manfred sees my expression.

'Soon,' he says. 'I have to go home. Nadja has an ear infection.'

'Again?'

'You know how it is at that age.'

I nod, thinking that I actually don't know. It has been a long time since Albin was little, and when he was I almost never saw him. Ear infections, stomach flu – all that passed me by.

'Peter,' Manfred says. 'It wouldn't hurt to dig around a little in that old investigation again. The method is a little too similar to just ignore it. I could talk to the people involved. Maybe dig up that witch-lady, too. What was her name again? Hanne?'

I turn towards Manfred, slowly. Careful not to reveal the kind of effect that name has on me. How the memories rush out, spreading through every cell in my body.

Hanne.

'No,' I say, perhaps a little too shrilly, I'm not sure. I no longer have control over my voice. 'No, we definitely don't need to contact her.'