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The Stonecutter

Written by Camilla Lackberg

Translated from the Swedish by Steven T. Murray

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CAMILLA LACKBERG

The Stonecutter

Translated from the Swedish
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To Ulle
All possible happiness



The lobster fishery was not what it once was. Back then, hard-working, professional lobstermen trapped the black crustaceans. Now, summertime visitors spent a week fishing for lobsters purely for their own enjoyment. And they didn't obey the regulations either. He had seen plenty of it over the years. Brushes discreetly used to remove the visible roe from the females to make the lobsters look legal, poaching from other people's pots. Some people even dived into the water and plucked the lobsters right out of the pots. Sometimes he wondered where it would all end and whether there was any honour left among lobstermen. On one occasion there had even been a bottle of cognac in the pot he pulled up, instead of the unknown number of lobsters that had been stolen from it. At least that thief had some honour, or a sense of humour.

Frans Bengtsson sighed deeply as he stood hauling up his lobster-pots, but his face brightened when he saw two marvellous lobsters in the first pot. He had a good eye for where lobsters tended to congregate, as well as a number of favourite spots where the pots could be placed with the same luck from one year to the next.

Three pots later and he had accumulated a passable heap

of the valuable creatures. He didn't really understand why they commanded such scandalous prices. Not that they were unappetizing in any way, but if he had to choose he'd rather have herring for dinner. They were tastier and a better buy. But the income from the lobster fishery was a more than welcome addition to his pension at this time of the year.

The last pot seemed to be stuck, and he stood with his foot on the rail of the boat for a bit more support as he tried to wrench it loose. He felt the pot slowly begin to give, and he hoped it wasn't damaged. He peered over the rail of his old wooden *snipa* to see what sort of shape it was in. But it wasn't the pot that came up first. A white hand broke the heaving surface of the water, looking for a moment like it was pointing at the sky.

His first instinct was to release the line and let whatever was floating beneath the surface vanish into the depths again along with the lobster-pot. But then his expertise took over, and he resumed pulling on the line that was attached to the pot. He still had a good deal of strength in his body, and he needed it. He had to haul with all his might to manoeuvre his macabre find over the rail. He didn't lose his composure until the pale, lifeless body fell to the deck with a thud. It was a child he'd pulled up from the sea. A girl, with her long hair plastered round her face, and lips just as blue as her eyes, which now stared unseeing at the sky.

Bengtsson threw himself against the rail and vomited.

Patrik was more exhausted than he'd ever thought possible. All his illusions that babies slept a lot had been thoroughly crushed in the past two months. He ran his hands through his short brown hair but managed only to make it look even more tousled. And if he thought *he* was tired, he couldn't even imagine how Erica must feel. At least he didn't have to keep getting up at night to nurse. Besides, he was really worried about her. He couldn't recall seeing her laugh since

she came home from the maternity ward, and she had dark circles under her eyes. When he saw Erica's look of despair in the morning, it was hard for him to leave her and Maja. And yet he had to admit that he felt a great relief at being able to drive off to his familiar adult world. He loved Maja more than anything, but bringing home a baby was like stepping into a foreign, unfamiliar world, with all sorts of new worries lurking behind every corner. Why won't she sleep? Why is she shrieking? Is she too hot? Too cold? What are those strange spots on her skin? Grown-up hooligans were at least something he knew about, something he knew how to handle.

He stared vacantly at the papers in front of him and tried to clear the cobwebs out of his brain enough to keep working. When the telephone rang, he almost jumped out of his seat, and it rang three times before he collected himself enough to pick up the receiver.

'Patrik Hedström.'

Ten minutes later, he grabbed his jacket from a hook by the door, dashed over to Martin Molin's office and said, 'Martin, some old guy out pulling up lobster pots, a Frans Bengtsson, has brought up a body.'

'Whereabouts?' Martin said, looking confused. The dramatic news had broken the listless Monday morning at Tanumshede police station.

'Outside Fjällbacka. He's moored at the wharf by Ingrid Bergman Square. We have to get moving. The ambulance is on the way.'

Martin didn't have to be told twice. He too grabbed his jacket to face the bitter October weather and then followed Patrik out to the car. The trip to Fjällbacka went quickly, and Martin had to hold on anxiously to the handle above the door when the car careened onto the verge around the sharp curves.

'Is it a drowning accident?' Martin asked.

‘How the hell should I know?’ said Patrik, instantly regretting snapping at Martin. ‘Sorry – not enough sleep.’

‘That’s okay,’ said Martin. Thinking about how worn-out Patrik had looked the past few weeks, he was more than willing to forgive him.

‘All we know is that she was found about an hour ago. According to the old man, it didn’t look like she’d been in the water very long. But we’ll see about that soon,’ Patrik said as they drove down Galärbacken towards the wharf, where a wooden *snipa* was moored.

‘Did you say “she”?’

‘Yes, it’s a girl, a kid.’

‘Oh, shit,’ said Martin, wishing he’d followed his first instinct and stayed in bed with Pia instead of coming in to work this morning.

They parked at Café Bryggan and hurried over to the boat. Incredibly enough, no one had yet noticed what had happened, so there was no need to ward off the usual gawkers.

‘The girl’s lying there in the boat,’ said the old man who came to meet them on the wharf. ‘I didn’t want to touch her more than necessary.’

Patrik had no trouble recognizing the pallor on the old man’s face. It was the same on his own face whenever he had to look at a dead body.

‘Where was it you pulled her up?’ asked Patrik, using the question to postpone having to confront the dead girl for another few seconds. He hadn’t even seen her yet, and already his stomach was turning over uneasily.

‘Out by Porsholmen. The south side of the island. She got tangled in the line of the fifth pot I pulled up. Otherwise it would have been a long time before we found her. Maybe never, if the currents had swept her out to sea.’

It didn’t surprise Patrik that Bengtsson knew how a dead body would react to the effect of the sea. All the old-timers

knew that a body first sank, then slowly came up to the surface after it was filled with gases, until finally, after more time passed, it sank back into the deep. In the old days drowning had been a real risk for a fisherman, and Bengtsson had surely been out searching for unfortunate victims before.

As if to confirm this the lobsterman said, 'She couldn't have been down there long. She hadn't begun to float yet.'

Patrik nodded. 'You said that when you called in the report. Well, I suppose we'd better have a look.'

Martin and Patrik walked very slowly out to the end of the wharf where the boat was moored. Not until they were almost there did they have enough of a view over the rail to discern what was lying on the deck. The girl had landed on her back when the old man pulled her into the boat, and her wet, tangled hair covered most of her face.

'The ambulance is here,' said Patrik.

Martin nodded feebly. His freckles and reddish-blond hair seemed several shades redder against his white face, and he was fighting to keep his nausea in check.

The greyness of the weather and the wind that had begun to gust created a ghastly backdrop. Patrik waved to the ambulance team, who seemed in no hurry to unload a gurney from the vehicle and roll it towards them.

'Drowning accident?' The first of the two EMTs nodded inquiringly towards the boat.

'Looks like it,' replied Patrik. 'But the Medical Examiner will have to make that call. There's nothing you can do for her, in any case, besides transporting her.'

'No, we heard that,' said the man. 'We'll start by getting her up on the gurney.'

Patrik nodded. He had always thought that situations in which children had fallen victim to misfortune were the worst things a police officer could encounter on the job. Ever since Maja was born the discomfort he felt seemed multiplied a thousandfold. Now his heart ached at the thought of the task

that lay before them. As soon as the girl had been identified they would have to destroy her parents' lives.

The medics had hopped down into the boat. They carefully picked the girl up and lifted her onto the wharf. Her wet red hair fell on the planking like a fan around her pale face, and her glazed eyes seemed to be watching the scudding grey clouds.

At first Patrik had turned away, but now he reluctantly looked down at the girl. Then a cold hand gripped his heart.

'Oh no, oh no, Jesus God.'

Martin looked at him in dismay. Then it dawned on him what Patrik meant. 'You know who she is?'

Patrik nodded mutely.

STRÖMSTAD 1923

Agnes never would have dared to say it out loud, but sometimes she thought it was lucky that her mother had died when she was born. That way she'd had her father all to herself, and considering what she'd heard about her mother, she wouldn't have been able to wrap her round her little finger so easily. But her father didn't have the heart to deny his motherless daughter anything. Agnes was well aware of this fact and exploited it to the utmost. Certain well-meaning relatives and friends had tried to point this out to her father, but even if he made half-hearted attempts to say no to his darling, sooner or later her lovely face won out. Those big eyes of hers could so easily well up with heavy tears that would run down her cheeks. When things reached that point, his heart would relent, and she usually got what she wanted.

As a result she was now, at the age of nineteen, an exceptionally spoiled girl. Many of the people who had known her over the years would probably venture to say that she had quite a nasty side to her. It was mostly girls who dared say that. The boys, Agnes had discovered, seldom looked further than at her beautiful face, big eyes, and long, thick hair, all of which had made her father give her anything she wanted.

Their villa in Strömstad was one of the grandest in town.

It stood high up on the hill, with a view over the water. It had been paid for partly with her mother's inherited fortune and partly with the money her father had made in the granite business. He had been close to losing everything once, during the strike of 1914, when to a man the stonecutters rose up against the big companies. But order was eventually restored; after the war, business had begun flourishing anew. The quarry in Krokstrand outside Strömstad, in particular, began pulling in big profits with deliveries primarily to France.

Agnes didn't care much about where the money came from. She was born rich and had always lived as rich people do. It made no difference whether the money was inherited or earned, as long as she could buy jewellery and fine clothes. She knew that not everyone viewed things this way. Her mother's parents had been horrified when their daughter married Agnes's father. His wealth was newly acquired, and his parents had been poor folk. They didn't fit in at big dinner parties; they were only invited when no one outside the immediate family was present. Even these gatherings were embarrassing. The poor things had no idea how to behave in the finer salons, and their contributions to the conversation were hopelessly meagre. Agnes's maternal grandparents had never understood what their daughter could see in August Stjernkvist, or rather Persson, which was his surname at birth. His attempt to move up the social ladder by simply changing his last name was nothing that could fool them. But they were enchanted with their granddaughter, and they competed with her father in spoiling Agnes after her mother died so suddenly after giving birth.

'Sweetheart, I'm driving down to the office.'

Agnes turned round when her father came into the room. She had been playing the grand piano that stood facing the window, mostly because she knew how lovely she looked sitting there. Musicality was not her strong point. Despite the expensive piano lessons she had taken since she was

little, she could only struggle passably through the sheet music on the stand in front of her.

‘Father, have you thought about that dress I showed you the other day?’ She gave him an entreating look and saw how he was torn, as usual, between his desire to say no and his inability to do so.

‘My dear, I just bought you a new dress in Oslo . . .’

‘But it had a quilted lining, Father. You can’t expect me to wear a dress with a quilted lining to the party on Saturday, when it’s so warm outside, can you?’

She gave him a vexed frown and waited for his reaction. If contrary to habit he put up more resistance, she would have to make her lip quiver, and if that didn’t help, well, a few tears usually did the trick. But today he looked tired, and she didn’t think it would take any more effort on her part. As usual she was correct.

‘Yes, all right, run down to the shop tomorrow and order it, then. But you’re going to give your old father grey hair one day.’ He shook his head but couldn’t help smiling when she bounded over to him and kissed him on the cheek.

‘Now look,’ he said, ‘you’d better sit down and practice your scales. It’s possible that they might ask you to play a little on Saturday, so you’d better be prepared.’

Satisfied, Agnes sat back down on the piano bench and obediently began practising. She could already picture the scene. Everyone’s eyes would be fixed on her as she sat at the piano in the flickering candlelight, wearing her new red dress.



The migraine was finally beginning to subside. The iron band across her forehead was gradually releasing its grip, and she could cautiously open her eyes. It was quiet upstairs. Good. Charlotte turned over in bed and closed her eyes again, enjoying feeling the pain fade. Slowly it was replaced by a relaxed feeling in her limbs.

After resting for a while she gingerly sat up on the edge of the bed and massaged her temples. They were still a bit tender after the attack, and she knew from experience that the soreness would linger for a couple of hours.

Albin must be taking a nap upstairs. That meant that in good conscience she could wait a bit before going up to him. God knows she needed all the rest she could get. The increased stress in recent months had made the migraines come on more often, sapping her of every last ounce of energy.

She decided to give her fellow sufferer a ring and hear how she was doing. Even though Charlotte was stressed out at the moment, she couldn't help worrying about Erica's state of mind. The two women hadn't known each other long. They'd started talking because they kept running into each other when they were out walking with the baby prams. Erica with Maja, and Charlotte with her eight-month-old son Albin.

After they had discovered that they only lived a stone's throw from each other, they began meeting almost every day. But Charlotte soon began to worry about her new-found friend. Of course, she had never met Erica before Maja arrived, but her intuition told her that it was unusual for her friend to be as apathetic and depressed as she most often was these days. Charlotte had even carefully brought up the subject of post-natal depression with Patrik. But he had dismissed the idea, saying that having a new baby was a big adjustment and that everything would be fine as soon as they got into a routine.

She reached for the phone on the nightstand and punched in Erica's number.

'Hi, it's Charlotte.'

Erica sounded groggy and subdued when she replied, and Charlotte felt even more uneasy. Something wasn't right. Not right at all.

But after a while Erica perked up a bit. Even Charlotte thought it felt good to be able to chat for a few minutes and postpone the inevitable a little longer. But soon she would have to go upstairs to the reality that awaited her there.

As if sensing what Charlotte was thinking, Erica asked how the house-hunting was going.

'Slow. Much too slow. Niclas is working all the time, it seems. He never has time to drive around and look at houses. And there isn't much to choose from right now anyway, so I suppose we're stuck here for a while longer.' She gave a deep sigh.

'It'll all work out, you'll see.' Erica's voice was comforting, but unfortunately Charlotte didn't put much faith in her reassurance. She, Niclas and the children had already been living with her mother and Stig for six months. The way things looked now, they were going to have to stay for another half a year. That might be all right for Niclas, who was at the clinic from morning to night, but for Charlotte being cooped up with the kids was unbearable.

In theory it had sounded so good when Niclas suggested the idea. A position for a district physician had opened up in Fjällbacka, and after five years in Uddevalla they had felt ready for a change of scene. Besides, Albin was on the way, conceived as a last attempt to save their marriage. So why not start their life over completely? The more he had talked about the plan, the better it had sounded. And the thought of having close access to babysitting, now that they were going to have two kids, had also sounded tempting. But reality was an entirely different story. It took no more than a few days before Charlotte remembered exactly why she had been so eager to leave her parents' house. On the other hand, a few things had definitely changed the way they had hoped. But this wasn't a topic she could discuss with Erica, no matter how much she would have liked to. It had to remain a secret, otherwise it might destroy their whole family.

Erica's voice interrupted her reverie. 'So how's it going with your mum? Is she driving you nuts?'

'To say the least. Everything I do is wrong. I'm too strict with the kids, I'm too lenient with the kids, I make them wear too many clothes, I make them wear too few clothes, they don't get enough to eat, I stuff them with too much food, I'm too fat, I'm too sloppy . . . The list never ends, and I've had it up to here,' she said, holding her hand at chin level.

'What about Niclas?'

'Oh no, Niclas is perfect in Mamma's eyes. She coos and fawns all over him and feels sorry that he has such a worthless wife. He can do no wrong as far as she's concerned.'

'But doesn't he see how she treats you?'

'Like I said, he's almost never at home. And she's on her best behaviour whenever he's around. You know what he said yesterday when I had the audacity to complain? "But Charlotte, dear, why can't you just give in a little?" Give in a little? If I gave in any more I'd be completely obliterated.

It made me so mad that I haven't said a word to him since. So now he's probably sitting there at work feeling sorry for himself because he has such an unreasonable wife. No wonder I came down with the world's worst migraine this morning.'

A sound from upstairs made Charlotte get up reluctantly.

'Erica, I've got to run upstairs and see to Albin. Otherwise Mamma will be doing the whole martyr bit before I get there . . . But remember, I'm coming by this afternoon with some pastries. Here I've been going on about myself, and I haven't even asked how you're doing. But I'll be over later.'

She hung up and combed her fingers quickly through her hair before she took a deep breath and went upstairs.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. It wasn't supposed to be like this at all. She had ploughed through lots of books about having a child and what life would be like as a parent, but nothing she'd read had prepared her for the reality of the situation. Instead, she felt that everything that had been written was part of a huge plot. The authors raved about happy hormones and floating on a pink cloud as you held your baby, feeling a totally overwhelming natural love-at-first-sight towards the little bundle of joy. Of course it was mentioned, in passing, that you would probably be more exhausted than you'd ever been in your life. But even that fact was surrounded by a romantic halo and deemed to be part of the wondrous motherhood package.

Bullshit! was Erica's honest assessment after two months as a mother. Lies, propaganda, utter crap! She had never in her entire life felt so miserable, tired, angry, frustrated and worn out as she had since Maja arrived. And she hadn't experienced any all-consuming love when the red, shrieking, and yes, ugly bundle was placed on her breast. Even though her maternal feelings had crept in ever so slowly, it still felt as though a stranger had invaded their home. Sometimes

she almost regretted she and Patrik had decided to have a child. They'd been getting along so well, just the two of them. Then the selfishness they shared with the rest of humanity had combined with their desire to see their own excellent genes reproduced. In one stroke they had changed their lives and reduced her to a round-the-clock milking machine.

How such a little baby could be so ravenous was beyond her comprehension. Maja was constantly clinging to Erica's breasts, swollen with milk, which had also exploded in size so that she felt that she was just two huge walking breasts. Nor was her physique in general anything to cheer about. When she came home from the maternity hospital she still looked very pregnant, and the kilos had not dropped away as fast as she wanted. Her only consolation was that Patrik had also gained weight when she was pregnant, eating like a horse. Now he too carried a few extra kilos around the middle.

Thank goodness the pain was almost gone by now, but she still felt sweaty, bloated, and generally lousy. Her legs had not seen a razor in several months, and she was in desperate need of a haircut and maybe some highlights to get rid of the mousy-brown colour of her normally blonde, shoulder-length hair. Erica got a dreamy look in her eye, but then reality took over. How the hell could she get out of the house to do that? Oh, how she envied Patrik. For at least eight of the hours in the day he could be in the real world, the world of grown-ups. Nowadays her only company was Ricki Lake and Oprah Winfrey, as she listlessly zapped the remote while Maja sucked and sucked.

Patrik assured Erica that he would rather stay home with her and Maja than go to work, but she could see in his eyes that what he really felt was relief at being able to escape their little world for a while. And she sympathized. At the same time she could feel bitterness growing inside her. Why did she have to bear such a heavy load when it had been a

mutual decision and should have been a mutual project? Shouldn't he carry an equal share of the burden?

So every day she kept close tabs on the time he had promised to come home. If he was only five minutes late she would be consumed by annoyance, and if he lingered even longer he could expect a real onslaught of fury. As soon as he came in the door she would dump Maja into his arms, if his arrival coincided with one of the rare breaks in her breastfeeding schedule. Then Erica would fall into bed wearing earplugs, just to get away from the shrieks of the baby for a while.

Erica sighed as she sat holding the phone in her hand. Everything seemed so hopeless. But her chats with her friend were a welcome break in the gloom. As the mother of two kids Charlotte was a steady rock to lean on, and full of calm assurances. Erica was ashamed to admit that it was also rather nice to listen to her hardships instead of always focusing merely on her own.

Of course, there was one other source of concern in Erica's life – her sister Anna. She had only talked to her a few times since Maja was born, and she felt that something was not as it should be. Anna sounded subdued and distant when they talked on the phone, but claimed that everything was fine. And Erica was so wrapped up in her own misery that she didn't feel like pressing her sister for more information. But something was wrong, she was sure of that.

She pushed aside the troubling thoughts and shifted Maja from one breast to the other, which made the baby fuss a bit. Listlessly she picked up the remote and changed the channel. 'Glamour' was about to start. The only thing she had to look forward to was this afternoon's coffee break with Charlotte.

Lilian stirred the soup with brisk strokes. She had to do everything in this house. Cook, clean, and take care of the kids.

At least Albin had finally gone to sleep. Her expression softened at the thought of her grandson. He was a little angel. Hardly made a peep. Not at all like the other one. She frowned and stirred even faster, making little drops of soup splash over the edge to sizzle and stick to the surface of the stove.

She had already prepared a tray on the worktop with glasses, soup plates, and spoons. Now she carefully took the pot from the stove and poured the hot soup into the bowl. She inhaled the aroma rising up with the steam and smiled contentedly. Chicken soup, that was Stig's favourite. She hoped that he would eat it with a good appetite.

She cautiously picked up the tray and, using her elbow, pushed open the door to the stairs. Always this dashing up and down stairs, she thought peevishly. Some day she'd end up lying at the bottom with a broken leg, and then they'd see how hard it was to get along without her. She did everything for them, like a house slave. At this very moment, for instance, Charlotte was downstairs in the basement loafing in bed, with some lame excuse about a migraine. What bloody rubbish. If there was anyone with a migraine around here it was Lilian herself. She couldn't imagine how Niclas could stand it. All day long he worked hard at the clinic, doing his best to support the family, and then came home to a basement where it looked like a bomb had gone off. Just because they were living there only temporarily didn't mean they couldn't clean up and keep the place tidy. And Charlotte had the nerve to insist that her husband help her take care of the kids when he came home in the evening. What she ought to do instead was let him rest after a hard day's work, sit in peace in front of the TV and keep the kids away as best she could. No wonder the older girl was so impossible. No doubt she could see how little respect her mother showed her father. It could lead to only one thing.

With determined steps Lilian ascended the last steps to the top floor, taking the tray to the guest room. That was where

she installed Stig when he was sick. It wouldn't do to have him moaning and groaning in the bedroom. If she was to take care of him properly, she had to get a good night's sleep.

'Dear?' She cautiously pushed open the door. 'Wake up now, I'm bringing you a little something. It's your favourite: chicken soup.'

Stig wanly returned her smile. 'I'm not hungry, maybe later,' he said weakly.

'Nonsense, you'll never get well if you don't eat properly. Come on, sit up a little and I'll feed you.'

She helped him up to a half-sitting position and then sank down on the edge of the bed. As if he were a child, she fed him soup, wiping off any dribbles at the corners of his mouth.

'See, that wasn't so bad, was it? I know exactly what my darling needs, and if you just eat properly you'll be back on your feet in no time, you'll see.'

Once again the same weak smile in reply. Lilian helped him lie back down and pulled the blanket over his legs.

'The doctor?'

'But, sweetie, have you entirely forgotten? It's Niclas who's the doctor now, so we have our very own doctor right here in the house. I'm sure he'll look in on you this evening. He just had to go over his diagnosis again, he said, and consult with a colleague in Uddevalla. It will all work out very soon, you'll see.'

Lilian fussily tucked in her patient one last time and took the tray with the empty soup bowl. She headed for the stairs, shaking her head. Now she had to be a nurse as well, on top of everything else that needed her attention.

She heard a knock at the front door and hurried downstairs.

Patrik's hand struck the door with a sharp rap. Around them the wind had come up quickly to gale force. Droplets of rain were landing on them, not from above but from behind, as

the stormy gusts whipped up a fine mist from the ground. The sky had turned dark, its light-grey hue streaked with darker grey clouds, and the dirty brown of the sea was far from its summery blue sparkle, with whitecaps now scudding along. There were white geese on the sea, as Patrik's mother used to say.

The door opened and both Patrik and Martin took deep breaths in order to summon extra reserves of strength. The woman standing before them was a head shorter than Patrik and very, very thin. She had short hair curled in a permanent wave and tinted to an indeterminate brown shade. Her eyebrows were a bit too severely plucked and had been replaced by a couple of lines drawn with a kohl pencil, which gave her a slightly comical look. But there was nothing funny about the situation they were now facing.

'Hello, we're from the police. We're looking for Charlotte Klinga.'

'She's my daughter. What is this regarding?'

Her voice was a bit too shrill to be pleasant. Patrik had heard enough about Charlotte's mother from Erica to know how trying it must be to listen to her all day long. But such trivial matters were about to lose any importance.

'We'd appreciate it if you could tell her that we'd like to talk to her.'

'Of course, but what's this all about?'

Patrik insisted. 'We would like to speak with your daughter first. If you wouldn't mind —' He was interrupted by footsteps on the stairs, and a second later he saw Charlotte's familiar face appear in the doorway.

'Well, hi, Patrik! How nice to see you! What are you doing here?'

All at once an expression of concern settled on her face. 'Has something happened to Erica? I spoke to her recently and she sounded all right, I thought . . .'

Patrik held up his hand. Martin stood silently at his side

with his eyes fixed on a knothole on the floor. He usually loved his job, but at the moment he was cursing the day he'd decided to become a cop.

'May we come in?'

'Now you're making me nervous, Patrik. What's happened?' A thought struck her. 'Is it Niclas, did he have an accident in the car, or something?'

'Let's go inside first.'

Since neither Charlotte nor her mother seemed capable of budging from the spot, Patrik took charge and led them into the kitchen with Martin bringing up the rear. He noted absently that they hadn't taken off their shoes and were surely leaving wet footprints behind. But a little mud wouldn't make much difference now.

He motioned to Charlotte and Lilian to take a seat across from them at the kitchen table, and they silently obeyed. Patrik and Martin sat down across from them.

'I'm sorry, Charlotte, but I have . . .' he hesitated, 'terrible news for you.' The words lurched stiffly out of his mouth. His choice of words already felt wrong, but was there any right way to say what he had to say?

'An hour ago a lobsterman found a little girl drowned. I'm so, so sorry, Charlotte . . .' Then he found himself incapable of going on. Even though the words were in his mind, they were so horrific that they refused to come out. But he didn't need to say any more.

Charlotte gasped for breath with a wheezing, guttural sound. She grabbed the tabletop with both hands, as if to hold herself upright, and stared with empty eyes at Patrik. In the silence of the kitchen that single wheezing gasp seemed louder than a scream. Patrik swallowed to hold back the tears and keep his voice steady.

'It must be a mistake. It couldn't be Sara!' Lilian looked wildly back and forth between Patrik and Martin, but Patrik only shook his head.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said again, ‘but I just saw the girl and there’s no doubt that it’s Sara.’

‘But she said she was just going over to Frida’s to play. I saw her heading that way. There must be some mistake. I’m sure she’s over there playing.’ As if in a trance Lilian got up and went over to the telephone on the wall. She checked the address book hanging next to it and briskly punched in the numbers.

‘Hello, Veronika, it’s Lilian. Listen, is Sara over there?’ She listened for a second and then dropped the receiver so it hung from the cord, swaying back and forth.

‘She hasn’t been there.’ She sat down heavily at the table and stared helplessly at the police officers facing her.

The shriek came out of nowhere, and both Patrik and Martin jumped. Charlotte was screaming, motionless, with eyes that didn’t seem to see. It was a loud, primitive, piercing sound. The raw pain that pitilessly forced out the scream gave both officers gooseflesh.

Lilian threw herself at her daughter, trying to put her arms round her, but Charlotte brusquely batted her away.

Patrik tried to talk over the scream. ‘We’ve tried to get hold of Niclas, but he wasn’t at the clinic. We left him a message to come home as soon as he can. And the pastor is on his way.’ He directed his words more to Lilian than to Charlotte, who was now beyond their reach. Patrik knew that he’d handled the situation terribly. He should have made sure that a doctor was present to administer a sedative if needed. Unfortunately the only doctor in Fjällbacka was the girl’s father, and they hadn’t been able to get hold of him. He turned to Martin.

‘Ring the clinic on your mobile and see if you can get the nurse over here at once. And ask her to bring a sedative.’

Martin did as he asked, relieved to have an excuse to leave the kitchen for a moment. Ten minutes later Aina Lundby came in without knocking. She gave Charlotte a pill to calm

her down, and then with Patrik's help led her into the living room, so she could lie down on the sofa.

'Shouldn't I be given a sedative too?' asked Lilian. 'I've always had bad nerves, and something like this . . .'

The district nurse, who looked to be about the same age as Lilian, merely snorted and continued tucking a blanket round Charlotte with maternal care as she lay there, teeth chattering as if she were freezing.

'You'll survive without it,' she said, gathering up her things.

Patrik turned to Lilian and said softly, 'We'll probably have to talk to the mother of the friend Sara was going to visit. Which house is it?'

'The blue one just up the street,' said Lilian without looking him in the eyes.

By the time the pastor knocked on the door a few minutes later, Patrik felt that he and Martin had done all they could. They left the house which had been plunged into grief with their news and got into their car in the driveway. But Patrik didn't start the engine.

'Bloody hell,' said Martin.

'Bloody hell indeed,' said Patrik.

Kaj Wiberg peered out of the kitchen window facing the Florins' driveway.

'I wonder what the old cow's up to now?' he muttered petulantly.

'What?' his wife Monica called from the living room.

He turned halfway in her direction and shouted back, 'There's a police car parked outside the Florins'. I bloody well bet there's some mischief going on. I've been saddled with that old woman as a neighbour to pay for my sins.'

Monica came into the kitchen with a worried look. 'You really think it's about us? We haven't done anything.' She was combing her smooth, blonde page-boy but stopped with the comb in mid-air to peer out of the window.

Kaj snorted. 'Try to tell her that. No, just wait till the small claims court agrees with me about the balcony. Then she'll be standing there with egg on her face. I hope it'll cost her a bundle to tear it down.'

'Yes, but do you think we're really doing the right thing, Kaj? I mean, it only sticks over a few centimetres into our property, and it's not really bothering us. And now poor Stig is sick in bed and everything.'

'Sick, oh yeah, thanks a lot. I'd be sick too if I had to live with that damn bitch. What's right is right. If they build a balcony that infringes on our property, they're either going to have to pay or tear the bleeding thing down. They forced us to cut down our tree, didn't they? Our fine old birch tree, reduced to firewood, just because Lilian Florin thought it was blocking her view of the sea. Or am I wrong? Did I miss something here?' He turned spitefully towards his wife, incensed by the memory of all the injustices that had been done to them in the ten years they had been the Florins' neighbours.

'No, Kaj, you're quite right.' Monica looked down, well aware that retreat was the best defence when her husband got in this mood. For him Lilian Florin was like a red flag to a bull, and it was no use talking to him about common sense and reason when her name came up. Though Monica had to admit that it wasn't only Kaj's fault there had been so much trouble. Lilian wasn't easy to take, and if she'd only left them in peace it never would have come to this. Instead she had dragged them through one court appearance after another, for everything from incorrectly drawn property lines, a path that went through the lot behind her house, a garden shed that she claimed stood too close to her property, and not least the fine old birch tree they'd been forced to cut down a couple of years ago. And it had all started when they began building the house they lived in now. Kaj had just sold his office supply business for

several million kronor, and they had decided to take early retirement, sell the house in Göteborg, and settle down in Fjällbacka where they had always spent their summers. But they certainly hadn't found much peace. Lilian had voiced a thousand objections to the new construction. She had organized petitions and collected complaints to try and put obstacles in their way. When she failed to stop them, she'd begun to quarrel with them about everything imaginable. Exacerbated by Kaj's volatile temperament, the feud between the neighbours had escalated beyond all common sense. The balcony that the Florins had built was only the latest bone of contention in the battle. The fact that it looked as though the Wibergs would win had given Kaj the high ground, and he was happy to exploit it.

Kaj whispered excitedly as he stood peering out behind the curtain. 'Now two guys are coming out of the house and getting in the police car. Just you wait, now they're going to come knock on our door any minute. Well, whatever it's about, I'm going to tell them the facts. And Lilian Florin isn't the only one who can file a police report. Didn't she stand there screaming insults over the hedge a couple of days ago, saying she'd make sure I got what I deserved? Illegal intimidation, I think that's what it's called. She could go to jail for that . . .' Kaj licked his lips in anticipation and prepared for the coming battle.

Monica sighed and went back to the easy chair in the living room. She picked up a women's magazine and began to read. She no longer had the energy to care.

'We might as well drive over and talk to the friend and her mother, don't you think? As long as we're here.'

'All right,' said Patrik with a sigh, backing out the driveway. They didn't really need to take the car since it was only a few houses up the street to the right, but he didn't want to block the Florins' drive with Sara's father on his way home.

Looking solemn, they knocked on the door of the blue house, which was only three houses away. A girl about the same age as Sara opened the door.

‘Hello, are you Frida?’ asked Martin in a friendly voice. She nodded in reply and stepped aside to let them in. They stood awkwardly in the hall for a moment as Frida observed them from under her fringe. Ill at ease, Patrik finally said, ‘Is your mother at home?’

The girl still didn’t say a word but ran a little way down the hall and turned left into a room that Patrik guessed was the kitchen. He heard a low murmur and then a dark-haired woman in her thirties came out to meet them. Her eyes flitted nervously and she gave the two men standing in her hall an inquisitive look. Patrik saw that she didn’t know who they were.

‘Good afternoon, Mrs Karlgren. We’re from the police,’ said Martin, apparently thinking the same thing. ‘May we have a word with you? In private?’ He gave Frida a meaningful glance. Her mother blanched, drawing her own conclusions about why they didn’t think what they had to say was suitable for her daughter’s ears.

‘Frida, go up and play in your room.’

‘But Mamma —’ the girl protested.

‘No arguments. Go up to your room and stay there until I call you.’

The girl looked as if she had a mind to object again, but a hint of steel in her mother’s voice told her that this was one of those battles she was not going to win. Sullenly Frida dragged herself up the stairs, casting a few hopeful glances back at the adults to see whether they might relent. No one moved until she reached the top of the stairs and the door to her room slammed behind her.

‘We can sit in the kitchen.’

Veronika Karlgren led them into a big, cosy kitchen, where apparently she’d been making lunch.

They shook hands politely and introduced themselves, then sat down at the kitchen table. Frida's mother took some cups out of the cupboard, poured coffee, and put some biscuits on a plate. Patrik saw that her hands were shaking as she did so, and he realized that she was trying to postpone the inevitable, what they had come to tell her. But finally there was no putting it off any longer, and she sat down heavily on a chair across from them.

'Something has happened to Sara, hasn't it? Why else would Lilian ring and then hang up like that?'

Patrik and Martin sat in silence a few seconds too long, since both hoped the other would start. Their silence was a form of confirmation that made tears well up in Veronika's eyes.

Patrik cleared his throat. 'Yes, unfortunately we have to inform you that Sara was found drowned this morning.'

Veronika gasped but said nothing.

Patrik went on, 'It seems to have been an accident, but we're making inquiries to see whether we can determine exactly how it happened.' He looked at Martin, who sat ready with his pen and notebook.

'According to Lilian Florin, Sara was supposed to come over here and play with your daughter Frida today. Was that something the girls had planned? It is Monday, after all, so why weren't they in school?'

Veronika was staring at the tabletop. 'They were both ill this weekend, so Charlotte and I decided to keep them home from school, but we thought it was okay if they played together. Sara was supposed to come over sometime before noon.'

'But she never arrived?'

'No, she never did.' Veronika said no more, and Patrik had to keep asking questions to get more information.

'Didn't you wonder why she never showed up? Why didn't you ring and ask where she was?'

Veronika hesitated. 'Sara was a little . . . what should I say? . . . different. She more or less did whatever she liked. Quite often she wouldn't come over as agreed because she suddenly decided she felt like doing something else. The girls sometimes quarrelled because of that, I think, but I didn't want to get involved. From what I've heard, Sara suffered from one of those problems with all the initials, so it wouldn't be good to make matters worse . . .' She sat there shredding a paper napkin to bits. A little pile of white paper was growing on the table before her.

Martin looked up from his notebook with a frown. 'A problem with all the initials? What do you mean by that?'

'You know, one of those things that every other child seems to have these days: ADHD, DAMP, MBD, and whatever else they're called.'

'Why do you think something was wrong with Sara?'

She shrugged. 'People talked. And I thought it fit quite well. Sara could be utterly impossible to deal with, so either she was suffering from some problem or else she hadn't been brought up right.' She cringed as she heard herself talking about a dead girl that way, and quickly looked down. With even greater frenzy she resumed tearing up the napkin, and soon there was nothing left of it.

'So you never saw Sara at all this morning? And never heard from her by phone either?'

Veronika shook her head.

'And you're sure the same is true for Frida?'

'Yes, she's been at home with me the whole time, so if she had talked to Sara I would have known. And she was a bit peeved that Sara never showed up, so I'm quite sure they didn't talk to each other.'

'Well then, I don't suppose we have much more to ask you.'

With a voice that quavered a bit Veronika asked, 'How is Charlotte doing?'

‘As can be expected under the circumstances,’ was the only answer Patrik could give her.

In Veronika’s eyes he saw the abyss open that all mothers must experience when for an instant they picture their own child a victim of an accident. And he also saw the relief that this time it was someone else’s child and not her own. He couldn’t reproach her for feeling that way. His own thoughts had all too often shifted to Maja in the past hour. Visions of her limp and lifeless body had forced their way in and made his heart skip a few beats. He too was grateful that it was someone else’s child and not his own. The feeling may not have been honourable, but it was human.