

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Hidden Child

Written by Camilla Lackberg

Published by Harper

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

CAMILLA LACKBERG

The Hidden Child

Translated by Tiina Nunnally

HARPER

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

Harper

An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers
77-85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A paperback original 2011

1

Copyright © Camilla Lackberg 2007
Published by agreement with Bengt Nordin Agency, Sweden
Translation copyright © Tiina Nunnally 2011
First published in Swedish as *Tyskungen*

Camilla Lackberg asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

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

ISBN: 978-0-00-741949-4

Set in Meriden by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not,
by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or
otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent
in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it
is published and without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.



Mixed Sources

Product group from well-managed
forests and other controlled sources
www.fsc.org Cert no. SW-COC-001806
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

FSC is a non-profit international organization established
to promote the responsible management of the world's forests.
Products carrying the FSC label are independently certified
to assure consumers that they come from forests that are managed
to meet the social, economic and ecological needs
of present and future generations.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

To Wille & Meja



In the stillness of the room the only sound was from the flies. A constant buzzing from the frantic beating of their wings. The man in the chair didn't move, and he hadn't for a long time. He wasn't actually a man any more. Not if a man was defined as someone who lived, breathed, and felt. By now he'd been reduced to fodder. A haven for insects and maggots.

The flies buzzed in a great swarm around the motionless figure. Sometimes landing, their mandibles moving. Then flying off again in search of a new spot to land. Feeling their way and bumping into one another. The area around the wound in the man's head was of particular interest though the metallic odour of blood had long since vanished, replaced by a different smell that was mustier and sweeter.

The blood had coagulated. At first it had poured from the back of his head and down the chair, on to the floor where it formed a pool. Initially it was red, filled with living corpuscles. Now it had changed colour, turning black. The puddle was no longer recognizable as the viscous fluid that ran through a person's veins. Now it was merely a sticky black mass.

Some of the flies had had their fill. They had laid their eggs. Now, sated and satisfied, they simply wanted out. Their

wings beat against the windowpane in their futile attempts to get past the invisible barrier, striking the glass with a faint clicking sound. Eventually they gave up. When their hunger returned, they went back to what had once been a man but was now nothing but meat.

All summer long Erica had circled around the thoughts that were always on her mind. Weighing the pros and cons, she would find herself tempted to go up there. But she never got further than the bottom of the stairs leading to the attic. She could blame it on the fact that the past few months had been so busy, with everything that had to be done after the wedding and the chaos in the house when Anna and her kids were still living with them. But that wasn't the whole truth. She was simply afraid. Afraid of what she might find. Afraid of rooting around and bringing things to the surface that she would have preferred not to acknowledge.

She knew that Patrik was wondering why she didn't want to read the notebooks they'd found up in the attic. Several times he had seemed on the verge of asking her about it, but he'd held back. If he had asked, she wouldn't have been able to answer. What scared her most was that she might have to change her view of reality. The image she'd always had of her mother – who she was as a person and how she'd treated her daughters – was not very positive. But it was Erica's, all the same. An image that was familiar, an unshakable truth that had held up through the years and had been something she could count on. Maybe it would be confirmed. Maybe it would even be reinforced. But what if it was undermined? What if she was forced to relate to a whole new reality? Up until now she hadn't been brave enough to find out.

Erica set her foot on the first step. From downstairs in the living room she heard Maja's happy laughter as Patrik played with her. The sound was comforting, and she put her

other foot on the stairs. Only five more steps to the top.

The dust swirled in the air when she pushed open the trap door and climbed up into the attic. She and Patrik had talked about remodelling the space sometime in the future, maybe as a cosy hideaway for Maja when she was older and wanted some privacy. But thus far it remained an unfinished attic with wide planks for the floor and a sloping ceiling with exposed beams. It was partially filled with clutter. Christmas decorations, clothes that Maja had outgrown, and boxes of items that were too ugly to have downstairs but too expensive or too fraught with memories to discard.

The chest stood way at the back, near the gable wall. It was old-fashioned, wood with metal fittings. Erica had a vague notion that it was what they called an 'America trunk'. She went over and sat down on the floor next to it, running her hand over the top. After taking a deep breath she gripped the latch and lifted the lid. A musty smell rose up, making her nose twitch. She wondered what created such a distinct, heavy odour of age. Probably mildew, she thought, noticing that her scalp was beginning to itch.

She could still recall the emotion that had overwhelmed her when she and Patrik first discovered the chest and went through its contents, slowly lifting each item out. Drawings that she and Anna had done when they were children, little things they had made at school. All of them saved by their mother Elsy. The mother who had never seemed interested when her young daughters had come home and eagerly presented her with their creations.

Erica did the same thing now, taking out one item after another and setting everything on the floor. What she was looking for was at the very bottom of the chest. Carefully she took out the piece of cloth, finally holding it in her hands again. The infant's shirt had once been white, but as she held it up to the light she could see how it had yellowed with age. And she couldn't take her eyes off the

small brown stains on the garment. At first she had assumed they were rust spots, but then she'd realized they must be dried blood. There was something so heartbreaking about finding spots of blood on the child's shirt. How had it ended up here in the attic? Whose was it? And why had her mother saved it?

Erica gently placed the shirt next to her on the floor. When she and Patrik first found the garment, an object had been wrapped inside, but it was no longer there. That was the only thing she had removed from the chest – a Nazi medal that had been hidden in the stained cloth. The emotions awakened in her when she first saw the medal had been surprising. Her heart had begun pounding, her mouth went dry, and images from old newsreels and documentaries about the Second World War flickered before her eyes. What was a Nazi medal doing here in Fjällbacka? In her own home and among her mother's possessions? The whole situation seemed absurd. She had wanted to put the medal back in the chest and close the lid, but Patrik had insisted that they take it to an expert to find out more. Reluctantly Erica had agreed, but she felt as if voices were whispering inside her; ominous voices, warning her to hide the medal away and forget all about it. But her curiosity had won out. In early June she'd taken it to an expert specializing in World War II artefacts, and with a little luck they would soon know more about the medal's origin.

But what interested Erica most was what they'd found at the very bottom of the chest. Four blue notebooks. She recognized her mother's handwriting on the covers. That elegant, right-slanted writing, but in a younger, rounder version. Now Erica removed the notebooks from the chest, running her index finger over the cover of the one on top. Each of them had been labelled 'Diary', a word that aroused mixed feelings in her. Curiosity, excitement, eagerness. But also fear, doubt, and a strong feeling that she was invading

her mother's privacy. Did she have the right to read these notebooks? Did she have the right to delve into her mother's innermost thoughts and feelings? A diary was not intended for anyone else's eyes. Her mother hadn't written the books so that others might share the contents. Maybe she would have forbidden her daughter to read them. But Elsy was dead, and Erica couldn't ask for permission. She would have to decide for herself what to do with the notebooks.

'Erica?' Patrik's voice interrupted her thoughts.

'Yes?'

'The guests are arriving!'

Erica glanced at her watch. Oh lord, was it already three o'clock? Today was Maja's first birthday, and their closest friends and family members were coming over. Patrik must have thought she'd fallen asleep up here.

'I'm coming!' She brushed the dust off her clothes and, after a moment's hesitation, picked up the notebooks and the child's shirt before descending the steep attic stairs.

'Welcome!' Patrik stepped aside to let in the first of their guests. It was through Maja that they'd met Johan and Elisabeth, who had a son the same age. The boy loved Maja to bits, but sometimes he was a little too aggressive in showing it. Now, as soon as William caught sight of Maja in the hall, he bulldozed into her like an ice-hockey player. Unsurprisingly, Maja didn't particularly care for this, and his parents had to extricate the shrieking object of his affections from William's embrace.

'William, that's no way to behave! You have to be more careful with girls.' Johan gave his son an admonishing look as he tried to restrain him.

'I think his pickup technique is about the same as the one you used to use,' Elisabeth said with a laugh, but her husband was clearly not amused.

'There, there, sweetheart, it wasn't that bad,' Patrik said

to Maja. 'Upsy-daisy.' He picked up his sobbing daughter and hugged her until her cries dwindled to whimpers. Then he set her down again and gave her a gentle push in William's direction. 'Look what William has brought for you. A present!'

The magic word had the intended effect. Maja's tears evaporated as William tottered across to hand her a present tied with ribbon. With Patrik's help she got the package open and pulled out a cuddly grey elephant, which was an instant success. She hugged it to her chest, wrapping her arms around the soft body and stamping her feet in delight, but William's attempt to pat the elephant was repelled with a look of defiance. Rising to the challenge, her little admirer immediately redoubled his efforts.

'Let's go through to the living room,' said Patrik, scooping his daughter up in his arms to prevent further conflict. William's parents followed, and when the boy was placed in front of the big toy box, peace was restored. At least temporarily.

'Hi, everybody!' said Erica as she came downstairs. She gave their guests a hug and patted William on the head.

'Who wants coffee?' Patrik called from the kitchen. All three said 'I do' in unison.

'So how is life as a married woman?' asked Johan with a smile, putting his arm around Elisabeth as they sat on the sofa.

'About the same. Except that Patrik keeps calling me "the missus". Any tips on how I can get him to stop?' Erica turned to Elisabeth and winked.

'You might as well give up trying. It won't be long before he'll stop talking about the "missus" and go on and on about the government instead, so make the most of it. Where's Anna, by the way?'

'She's over at Dan's house. They've already moved in together.' Erica raised an eyebrow significantly.

‘Oh, really? That was fast.’ Elisabeth’s eyebrow went up too.

They were interrupted by the sound of the doorbell, and Erica jumped up. ‘That’s probably them now. Or Kristina.’ The latter name was spoken with ice cubes audibly clinking between the syllables. Since the wedding, Erica’s relationship with her mother-in-law had grown even frostier. This was mostly due to Kristina’s zealous campaign to convince Patrik that it wouldn’t be right for a real man to take four months’ paternity leave. To her great dismay, he had refused to budge an inch. In fact, he was the one who had insisted on taking care of Maja through the autumn.

‘Hello, is there a birthday girl here?’ Anna could be heard asking from the front hall. Erica couldn’t help shivering with contentment every time she heard how happy her little sister sounded. For so many years there had been no joy in her voice, but now it was back. Anna sounded strong and happy and in love.

At first Anna had been worried that Erica might be upset that she and Dan had taken up with each other. But Erica had merely laughed at her concern. It seemed an eternity since she and Dan had been a couple. And even if she had found it a bit awkward, she would have set aside her own feelings just to see Anna happy again.

‘Where’s my favourite girl?’ Dan, big, blond and boisterous, came in and looked around for Maja. The two of them had a special rapport, and she immediately came toddling towards him, holding out her arms. ‘Present?’ she asked, now that she’d started to understand the whole concept of a birthday.

‘Of course we have a present for you, sweetie,’ said Dan. He nodded to Anna, who held out a big package wrapped in pink paper with a silver ribbon. Maja pulled out of Dan’s arms and began struggling to open the present. This time Erica helped her, and together they took out a big doll with eyes that opened and closed.

‘Dolly,’ said Maja gleefully, giving the present another of her bear hugs. Then she set off to show William her latest treasure.

The doorbell rang again, and a second later Kristina came into the room. Erica couldn’t help gritting her teeth. She hated the way her mother-in-law would press the doorbell in what was largely a symbolic gesture before barging into the house.

The presentation and unwrapping of a gift was repeated, but this time it wasn’t such a hit. Maja hesitantly held up the undershirts that she found inside the package, then searched the wrapping paper again to make sure that she hadn’t overlooked a toy. Then she stared at her grandmother, wide-eyed.

‘Last time I was here I noticed that she’d almost outgrown the undershirt she was wearing, and since Lindex had a three-for-the-price-of-two sale on, I bought her a few. I’m sure they’ll come in handy.’ Kristina smiled with satisfaction and seemed completely oblivious to Maja’s disappointed expression.

Erica fought back the urge to say how stupid she thought it was to buy clothes for a child’s first birthday. Besides the fact that Maja was clearly disappointed, Kristina had also managed to slip in one of her customary barbs. Apparently Erica and Patrik were incapable of properly clothing their daughter.

‘Time for cake,’ called Patrik, who had an infallible knack for knowing the exact moment to distract everyone from an awkward situation. Swallowing her annoyance, Erica joined the blowing-out-the-candles ceremony. Maja’s attempts to blow out the solitary candle succeeded only in spraying the cake with saliva. Patrik discreetly extinguished the tiny flame, and then everyone sang happy birthday and shouted ‘Hurrah’. Over Maja’s blonde head, Erica caught her husband’s eye. A lump formed in her throat, and she saw

that Patrik was equally moved by the occasion. One year. Their baby was a year old. A little girl who toddled around on her own, who clapped her hands whenever she heard the theme music for *Bolibompa*, who could feed herself, who doled out the softest kisses in all of northern Europe, and who loved the whole world. Erica smiled at Patrik. He smiled back. At that particular moment, life was perfect.

Bertil Mellberg sighed heavily. That was something he did frequently these days. The setback from last spring was still making him depressed. But he wasn't surprised. He'd allowed himself to lose control, allowed himself merely to be, to feel. And that sort of thing never went unpunished. He should have known better. It might even be said that he deserved what had happened to him. Well, he'd learned his lesson, and he wasn't the sort to make the same mistake twice; that much was certain.

'Bertil?' Annika called urgently from the reception area. With a practised gesture, Mellberg pushed back the lock of hair that had slipped down from his nearly bald pate and reluctantly got up. There were very few females from whom he was willing to take orders, but Annika Jansson belonged to the exclusive club. Over the years he'd even developed a reluctant respect for her, and he couldn't think of another woman of whom he could say that. The disastrous consequences of hiring that female officer last spring had only served to reinforce his view. And now they were going to have another woman join the team. He sighed again. Was it so hard to find male officers? Why did they insist on sending girls to replace Ernst Lundgren? It was a miserable situation.

He frowned when he heard a dog barking out in the reception area. Had Annika brought one of her dogs to work? She knew what he thought about mutts. He'd have to have a talk with her about that.

But it was not one of Annika's Labradors paying a visit. Instead he was confronted by a mangy-looking mongrel of indeterminate colour and breed, tugging at a lead held by a short, dark-haired woman.

'I found him outside the station,' she said with a broad Stockholm accent.

'So what's he doing in here?' asked Bertil crossly, turning to go back to his office.

'This is Paula Morales,' Annika hastened to say, prompting Mellberg to turn around again. Jesus. Now he remembered that the bird who was supposed to be joining had a Spanish-sounding name. She was certainly small. Short and slender. Although the gaze she fixed on him was anything but weak. She held out her hand.

'Nice to meet you. The dog was running around loose outside. And judging by the shape he's in, he doesn't belong to anyone. At least not to anyone who's capable of taking care of him.'

Her words had a demanding tone, and Bertil wondered what she had in mind.

'Well, take him somewhere then.'

'There isn't any place for lost dogs. Annika already told me that.'

'There isn't?' said Mellberg.

Annika shook her head.

'So, I suppose you'll just have to take him home with you then,' he said, swatting away the dog, which was pressing itself against his trouser leg. Ignoring his efforts, the dog sat down on Mellberg's right foot.

'I can't. We already have a dog, and she wouldn't like a companion,' replied Paula calmly, giving him the same penetrating stare.

'So what about you, Annika? He could . . . keep company with your dogs, couldn't he?' said Mellberg, beginning to sound resigned. Why did he always have to deal with

such trivial matters? He was the boss here, for God's sake!

But Annika shook her head. 'They're not used to other dogs. It wouldn't go down too well.'

'You'll have to take him,' said Paula, handing the lead to Mellberg. Stunned by her boldness, he took the lead, and the dog reacted by pressing even harder against his leg and uttering a whimper.

'See, he likes you,' said Annika.

'But I can't . . . I can't . . . ' Mellberg stammered.

'You don't have any other pets at home. I promise I'll ask around to see if he belongs to anyone. Otherwise we'll just have to find somebody to adopt him. We can't let him out to run loose; he'll get hit by a car.'

Against his will, Mellberg felt himself yielding. He looked down at the dog. The dog looked up at him, its eyes moist and plaintive.

'Okay, okay, I'll take the damn dog. But only for a couple of days. And you're going to have to wash him off before I take him home.' He shook his finger at Annika, who looked relieved.

'No problem, I'll give him a bath here at the station,' she said eagerly. Then she added, 'Thanks so much, Bertil.'

Mellberg grunted. 'Just make sure that the next time I see that dog, he's squeaky clean! Otherwise he's not setting foot in my place!'

He stomped angrily down the corridor and slammed the door to his office behind him.

Annika and Paula smiled at each other. The dog whimpered and happily thumped his tail against the floor.

'Have a good day,' said Erica, waving at Maja, who ignored her mother. She was sitting on the floor in front of the TV, watching *Teletubbies*.

'We're going to have a cosy time together,' said Patrik,

giving Erica a kiss. 'This little girl and I will be just fine for the next few months.'

'You make it sound as if I'm going to be off sailing the seven seas,' said Erica with a laugh. 'But I'll be coming downstairs for lunch.'

'Do you think this will work out, you staying in the house to work?'

'We can at least give it a try. Just pretend I'm not here.'

'No problem. As soon as you close the door to your workroom, you no longer exist for me.' Patrik gave her a wink.

'Hmm. Well, we'll see,' replied Erica and headed upstairs. 'But it'll be worth it if I can avoid having to rent office space.'

She went into her workroom and closed the door with mixed feelings. In the twelve months she'd been at home taking care of Maja, she'd found herself longing for the day she could pass the baton to Patrik and devote herself to grown-up matters again. She'd grown sick and tired of playgrounds, sandboxes, and children's TV programmes. Making the perfect sand pie didn't exactly qualify as intellectual stimulation, and no matter how much she loved her daughter if she was forced to sing 'Itsy-bitsy Spider' one more time she'd go crazy. Now it was Patrik's turn to look after the child.

With a certain feeling of reverence, Erica sat down in front of the computer, pressed the 'on' button, and listened with pleasure to the familiar hum. The deadline for the new book in her true crime series was February, but she'd already managed to do some of the research over the summer, so she felt ready to get started. She opened the Word document she'd dubbed 'Elias', since that was the name of the murderer's first victim, and placed her fingers on the keyboard. A discreet knock on the door interrupted her.

'Sorry for disturbing you . . .' Patrik opened the door and peered at Erica from under the shock of hair that fell over

his forehead ' . . . but I was wondering where you put Maja's zip suit.'

'In the drier.'

Patrik nodded and closed the door.

Again she placed her fingers on the keyboard and took a deep breath. Another knock.

'I'm sorry, I promise to leave you alone, but I just need to ask what sort of clothes Maja should wear today. It's really chilly outside, but she always gets overheated, and then it might be easier for her to catch cold . . .' Patrik smiled sheepishly.

'All she needs is a thin shirt and trousers under the zip suit. And she usually wears the thin cotton cap.'

'Thanks,' said Patrik and shut the door again. Erica was just about to type the first sentence when she heard cries from downstairs. They quickly rose to a crescendo, and after listening for two minutes, she pushed back her chair and went downstairs.

'I'll give you a hand. It's hopeless trying to get her dressed.'

'Yeah, I can see that,' said Patrik, sweat dripping from his brow after the struggle to shoehorn a complaining and resistant Maja into her outdoor clothing.

Five minutes later she was still sulky but fully dressed, and Erica gave both daughter and husband a kiss on the lips before she hustled them out the door.

'Take a long walk so Mamma can have some peace and quiet to work,' she said. Patrik looked embarrassed.

'I'm sorry. I guess it will take a few days to get into the swing of things, but then you should have all the peace and quiet you want. I promise.'

'That'll be nice,' said Erica and firmly closed the door after them. She poured herself a big mug of coffee and went back upstairs to her workroom. Finally she could get started.

'Shh . . . Stop making such a damn racket.'

'What's the problem? My mother says that they're both

away. Nobody has bothered to take in the post all summer. They must have forgotten to get it redirected, so she's been emptying their letter box since June. Take it easy, we can make as much noise as we want.' Mattias laughed, but Adam still looked sceptical. There was something creepy about the old house. And there was something creepy about those old men too, no matter what Mattias said. He wasn't taking any chances.

'So how do we get in?' He hated the fact that his fear made his voice go up a notch, but he couldn't help it. He often wished that he was more like Mattias. Brave and fearless, sometimes bordering on reckless. But he was also the one who got all the girls.

'We'll see. There's bound to be some way for us to get inside.'

'And you're speaking from your vast experience breaking into houses?' Adam laughed, but he still made sure to keep his voice down.

'Hey, I've done a lot of things you don't know about,' said Mattias loudly.

Oh, right, thought Adam, but he didn't dare contradict his friend. Sometimes Mattias liked to play the tough guy, and Adam let him do it. He knew better than to get into that sort of discussion with Mattias.

'What do you think he's got inside there?' Mattias's eyes were shining as they slowly made their way around the house, looking for a window or a hatch, anything that might allow them access.

'No idea,' said Adam, looking over his shoulder anxiously. He was feeling less happy about the situation with each passing second.

'Maybe some cool Nazi souvenirs. What if he has uniforms and stuff like that?' There was no mistaking the enthusiasm in Mattias's voice. Ever since they'd done a class project on the SS, he'd been obsessed, reading everything he could find

about World War II and Nazism. Everyone knew that the neighbour down the road was some sort of expert on Germany and the Nazis, so Mattias had felt an irresistible urge to find out what he had in his possession.

‘But maybe he doesn’t keep anything like that in his house,’ Adam attempted to object, even though he knew it was hopeless. ‘Pappa said he was a history teacher before he retired, so he probably just has a lot of books and things like that. It doesn’t mean he has any cool stuff.’

‘We’ll see soon enough.’ Mattias’s eyes flashed triumphantly as he pointed at a window. ‘Look. That window is open a crack.’

Adam noted with dismay that Mattias was right. He’d been quietly hoping that it would turn out to be impossible to get inside the house.

‘We just need something to push up the window with.’ Mattias glanced around. He settled on a window latch that had come off and landed on the ground.

‘Okay, let’s see now.’ Mattias held the latch overhead and poked one end into a corner of the window. The window didn’t budge. ‘Shit! This has to work.’ Sticking out his tongue in concentration, he had another go. It wasn’t easy to hold the latch overhead and apply force at the same time, and he was breathing hard from the effort. Finally he managed to insert the latch another half an inch.

‘They’re going to notice that someone broke in!’ Adam protested weakly, but Mattias didn’t seem to hear him.

‘I’m going to make this fucking window open!’ Sweat rolling down his face, he gave it one last prod, and the window swung up.

‘Yes!’ Mattias clenched his fist in a gesture of victory and then turned in excitement to Adam.

‘Give me a leg-up.’

‘But maybe there’s something we can use to climb up on, a ladder or . . .’

‘Forget it, just give me a boost, and then I’ll pull you up afterwards.’

Obediently Adam moved close to the wall, lacing his fingers to form a step for Mattias. He winced as Mattias’s shoe dug into the palms of his hands, but he ignored the pain and lifted his friend upwards.

Mattias caught hold of the window ledge and managed to hoist himself so that he could plant first one foot and then the other on the sill. He wrinkled his nose. God, what a smell! The place stank. He moved aside the blind and peered into the room. It looked like it might be a library, but all the blinds were down, so the room was wrapped in shadow.

‘Hey, it smells like shit in here.’ Holding his nose, he turned to look at Adam.

‘Then let’s forget it,’ said Adam with a hopeful glint in his eye.

‘No way! Not now we’re finally in. This is where the fun begins! Here, take my hand.’ Letting go of his nose, he gripped the window ledge with his left hand as he reached out his right to Adam. ‘Come on, you’re not chicken, are you?’

By way of response Adam grabbed his hand, and Mattias began pulling with all his might. For a moment it looked as though he wasn’t going to make it, but then Adam caught hold of the window sill, and Mattias hopped down on to the floor to make room for him. There was a strange crackling sound as he landed. He looked down at the floor. Something covered the surface, but in the dim light he couldn’t tell what it was. Probably just some dried leaves.

‘What the –?’ said Adam as he too jumped down on to the floor. But he couldn’t identify what the crunching sound came from. ‘Shit, it really smells in here,’ he said, looking as if he might gag from the stench.

‘That’s what I told you,’ said Mattias. He was growing

accustomed to the smell, and it didn't bother him as much any more.

'Let's see what the old man's got in here. Pull up the blind.'

'But what if somebody sees us?'

'Who's going to see? Pull up the fucking blind.'

Adam did as he was told. The blind rolled up with a swishing sound, letting light pour into the room.

'Cool room,' said Mattias, looking around with awe. All the walls were covered with bookshelves, floor to ceiling. In one corner stood two leather armchairs on either side of a small table. Presiding over the far end of the room was an enormous desk and an old-fashioned chair, turned halfway round so the high back was facing them. Adam took a step closer, but the crunching noise under his feet made him look down again. This time he saw what they were walking on.

'What the . . .' The floor was covered with flies. Disgusting black flies, all of them dead. The windowsill, too, was covered in flies, and without thinking Adam and Mattias both wiped their hands on their trousers.

'Shit, that's disgusting.' Mattias grimaced.

'Where did all these flies come from?' Adam stared at the floor in amazement. Then his *CSI*-indoctrinated brain put two and two together. Dead flies. A revolting stench . . . He tried to push the thought away, but his eyes were drawn inexorably to the desk chair.

'Mattias?'

'What?' his friend replied, sounding annoyed. He looking for somewhere to put his feet where he wouldn't be stepping on dead flies.

Adam didn't answer. Instead he slowly moved towards the chair. He had a feeling that he should turn round, leave the way they'd come, and run until he couldn't run any more. But curiosity got the better of him, and his feet seemed to move of their own accord, taking him to the chair.