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Opening Extract from...

The Gallows Bird

Written by Camilla Lackberg

Translated by Steven T. Murray

Published by HarperCollins

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CAMILLA LACKBERG

The Gallows Bird

Translated by Steven T. Murray



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To Wille & Meja

1

What he remembered most was her perfume. The one she kept in the bathroom. That shiny lavender bottle with the sweet, heavy fragrance. As an adult he had searched in a perfume shop until he found the exact same one. He had chuckled when he saw the name: 'Poison'.

She used to spray it on her wrists and then rub it on her throat and, if she was wearing a skirt, on her ankles too.

He thought that was so beautiful. Her fragile, delicate wrists gracefully rubbing against each other. The scent spread through the space around her, and he always longed for the moment when it came really close, when she leaned over and kissed him. Always on the mouth. Always so lightly that sometimes he wondered if the kiss was real or if he was just dreaming.

'Take care of your sister,' she always said before she left, seeming to float rather than walk out the door.

Afterwards he could never remember if he had answered out loud or only nodded.



The springtime sun shone in through the windows at the Tanumshede police station, mercilessly exposing the dirt on the windowpanes. The winter grime lay like a film over the glass, and Patrik felt as though the same film were covering him. It had been a hard winter. Life with a child in the house was infinitely more fun but also infinitely more work than he ever could have imagined. And even though things were going much more smoothly with Maja than they had in the beginning, Erica was still not used to the life of a stay-at-home mum. This knowledge tormented Patrik every second and every minute he spent at work. And everything that had happened with Anna had placed an extra burden on their shoulders.

A knock on the door-jamb interrupted his gloomy thoughts.

'Patrik? We just got a call about a traffic accident. A single car on the road to Sannäs.'

'Okay,' said Patrik, getting up. 'By the way, isn't this the day that Ernst's replacement is arriving?'

'Yes,' said Annika. 'But it's not quite eight yet.'

'Then I'll take Martin with me. Otherwise I thought I'd have her ride with me for a while until she gets the hang of things.'

‘Well, I do feel a bit sorry for the poor woman,’ said Annika.

‘Because she has to ride with me?’ said Patrik, pretending to take offence.

‘Naturally. I know the way you drive . . . But seriously, it’s not going to be easy for her with Mellberg.’

‘After reading her CV I’d say that if anyone can handle him, it would be Hanna Kruse. Seems to be a tough cookie, judging by her service record and the great references.’

‘The only thing that seems fishy to me is why she would want to apply to Tanumshede.’

‘Yes, you may have a point there,’ said Patrik, pulling on his jacket. ‘I’ll have to ask her why she wants to sink so low as to work in this career blind alley with us law-enforcement amateurs.’ He winked at Annika, who slapped him lightly on the shoulder.

‘You know that wasn’t what I meant.’

‘Sure, I was just giving you a hard time. By the way, have you got any more information about the accident site? Any injuries? Fatalities?’

‘According to the person who called it in, there seems to be only one person in the car. Dead.’

‘Damn. I’ll get Martin and we’ll ride out there to have a look. We’ll be back soon. You can show Hanna around in the meantime, can’t you?’

At that moment they heard a woman’s voice from the reception area. ‘Hello?’

‘That must be her now,’ said Annika, hurrying off towards the door. Curious about the new female addition to the force, Patrik followed her.

He was surprised when he saw the woman standing in reception waiting for them. He wasn’t sure just what he’d expected, but someone . . . larger, perhaps. And not quite so good-looking . . . and blonde.

She held out her hand first to Patrik and then to Annika and said, ‘Hello, I’m Hanna Kruse. I’m starting here today.’

Her voice more than lived up to his expectations. Rather deep, with a resolute tone to it.

Her handshake testified to many hours in the gym, and Patrik again revised his first impression.

'Patrik Hedström. And this is Annika Jansson, the backbone of the station.'

Hanna smiled. 'The sole female outpost in the land of males here, I understand. Till now, at least.'

Annika laughed. 'Yes, I have to admit it feels good to have a counterbalance to all the testosterone inside these walls.'

Patrik interrupted their banter. 'You girls can get acquainted with each other later. Hanna, we have a call about a single-car accident with a fatality. I thought you should come along with me right now, if that's okay with you. Get a jump start on your first day here.'

'Works for me,' said Hanna. 'Can I just leave my bag somewhere?'

'I'll put it in your office,' said Annika. 'We can do the tour later.'

'Thanks,' said Hanna, hurrying after Patrik, who was already heading out the main door.

'So, how does it feel?' Patrik asked after they'd got in the police car and headed off in the direction of Sannäs.

'Fine, thanks. It's always a little nerve-wracking to start a new job.'

'You've already managed to move around quite a bit, judging by your CV.'

'Yes, I wanted to pick up as much experience as possible,' Hanna said as she gazed out of the window with curiosity. 'Different parts of Sweden, different-sized service areas, you name it. Anything that can broaden my experience as a police officer.'

'But why? What's your ultimate goal, so to speak?'

Hanna smiled. Her smile was friendly but at the same time staunchly determined. 'A position as chief, of course. In one of the larger police districts. So I've been taking all

sorts of courses, learning as much as possible and working as hard as I can.'

'Sounds like a recipe for success,' said Patrik with a smile, but the enormous sense of ambition radiating towards him also made him feel uncomfortable. It wasn't something he was used to.

'I hope so,' said Hanna, still watching the countryside passing by. 'And what about you? How long have you worked in Tanumshede?'

To his chagrin Patrik heard himself sounding a bit ashamed when he replied. 'Oh . . . ever since police academy, actually.'

'Ooh, I never could have managed that. I mean, you must really enjoy it. That's a good omen for my time here.' She laughed and turned to look at him.

'Well, I suppose you could think of it that way. But a lot of it has to do with habit and my comfort zone too. I grew up here, and I know the area like the back of my hand. Although I actually don't live in Tanumshede anymore. Now I live in Fjällbacka.'

'That's right, I heard you were married to Erica Falck! I love her books! Well, the ones about murders, that is; I haven't read the biographies, I have to admit.'

'You don't have to be ashamed about that. Half of Sweden has read the latest crime novel, judging by the sales figures, but most people don't even know that she published five biographies of Swedish women writers. The one that sold best was about Karin Boye, and I think it got up to around two thousand copies. Anyway, we aren't married yet – but we will be soon. We're getting married on Whitsun Eve!'

'Oh, congratulations! How lovely to have a Whitsuntide wedding.'

'Well, we hope so. Although to be honest, at this point I'd rather fly off to Las Vegas and get away from all the hullabaloo. I had no idea it was such an undertaking to plan a wedding.'

Hanna gave a hearty laugh. 'Yes, I can imagine.'

'But you're married too, I saw in your file. Didn't you have a big church wedding?'

A dark shadow passed over Hanna's face. She turned away and mumbled so faintly he could barely hear her: 'We had a civil wedding. But that's a story for some other time. It looks like we're here.'

Up ahead they saw a wrecked car in the ditch. Two firemen were busy cutting through the roof, but they were in no hurry. After a look in the front seat Patrik understood why.

It was not by chance that the town council were meeting in his own home rather than the community centre. After months of intense remodelling, at a cost of two million kronor, the house was ready to be inspected and admired. It was one of the oldest and largest houses in Grebbestad, and it had taken a good deal of persuasion to get the previous owners to sell. Their protests about how it 'belonged in the family' had soon subsided when he raised the offer. It never even occurred to them that he had offered considerably less than he would have been willing to pay.

'As you can see, we took great pains to respect the integrity of the place. In fact the photographer sent by *Residence* said he'd never seen such a tasteful renovation. If anyone missed last month's issue, we have a few extra copies – do help yourself on the way out, then you can leaf through it at your leisure.'

Ushering his guests into the dining room, Erling W. Larson pointed to the large dining-room table that was set for coffee. 'Let's get down to business, shall we.' His wife had made all the arrangements while he was showing the house, and now she stood silently by the table waiting for them to sit down. Erling gave her an appreciative nod. She was worth her weight in gold, that Viveca; a bit quiet perhaps, but better a woman who knew when to keep her mouth shut than a chatterbox.

‘Well, you know where I stand,’ said Uno Brorsson, dropping four sugar cubes into his cup. Erling regarded him with distaste. He didn’t understand men who neglected their health. For his part he jogged ten kilometres every morning and had also had some discreet work done. But only Viveca knew about that.

‘We certainly do,’ said Erling, a hint more sharply than he’d intended. ‘But there’s no point debating the matter now that an agreement has been reached. The TV team will be arriving shortly, so let’s be reasonable and make the best of things, eh? Just look at the boost Åmål got from the seasons they filmed there, and that was nothing compared with the publicity generated by *Sodding Töreboda.* Over the coming weeks, the whole country will be sitting down to watch *Sodding Tanum.* What a unique opportunity for us to show off our little corner of Sweden from its best side!’

‘Best side?’ Uno snorted. ‘Boozing and sex and dumb reality show bimbos – is that how we want to depict Tanumshede?’

‘Well, I for one think it’s bound to be terribly exciting!’ said Gunilla Kjellin in her strident voice, her eyes sparkling at Erling. Though she would never admit it, she had a massive crush on him. Which suited Erling, so long as it guaranteed him her vote.

‘Yes, listen to Gunilla. This is the spirit in which we should be welcoming the upcoming project. It’s an exciting adventure we’re embarking on, and an opportunity we should embrace whole-heartedly!’ Erling was using the persuasive tone he’d employed with such success over the years as director of a huge insurance firm. Every once in a while he grew nostalgic for those halcyon days. It hadn’t been easy, taking early retirement after his heart attack, but it had proved to be the best decision he’d ever made. And he’d got out in the nick of time. Right before the press, scenting blood, began ripping his former colleagues to pieces.

‘What are we doing about the risk of damage? I heard that Töreboda had a lot of that while they were filming there. Will the TV company cover it?’

Erling snorted impatiently. Erik Bohlin, the town’s young financial officer, was forever fussing about trivialities instead of looking at ‘the big picture’. What the hell did he know about finance anyway? He was barely thirty, and in his whole life he’d probably never dealt with as much money as Erling used to spend in a single day.

Fixing Bohlin with a withering stare, he said dismissively: ‘Compared to the increased tourist influx we’re expecting, a few broken windows are nothing to worry about. Besides, I’m sure the police will do their utmost to earn their salaries and keep on top of the situation.’

He let his gaze rest for a few seconds on each of the council members. One by one their eyes fell as they abandoned any notion of protest.

‘It’ll be fine,’ said Jörn Schuster.’

For the life of him, Erling couldn’t understand why Jörn had chosen to remain on the council. Ignominiously voted out after fifteen years as town commissioner, he ought to have crept off with his tail between his legs. But if Jörn wanted to wallow in his humiliation, fine. There were certain benefits in having the old fox present, even though he was now both exhausted and toothless, figuratively speaking. He had his faithful supporters, and they would keep quiet as long as they saw that Jörn was still actively involved.

‘So, now it’s a matter of showing our enthusiasm. I’m going to welcome the team in person at one o’clock, and of course you’re all welcome to attend. Otherwise we’ll see one another at the regular meeting on Thursday.’ He stood up to indicate that the meeting was adjourned.

Uno was still muttering when he left, but Erling reckoned he’d done a pretty good job in mustering the troops. This venture reeked of success, he was sure of it.

Pleased, he went out onto the veranda and lit a victory cigar. In the dining room Viveca silently cleared the table.

'Da da da da.' Maja sat in her high chair prattling as she evaded with great skill the spoon that her mother was trying to stick in her mouth. After taking aim for a moment Erica finally managed to get a spoonful of porridge in, but her joy was short-lived when Maja chose that instant to demonstrate that she could make a noise like a car. '*Brrrrr*,' she said with such feeling that the porridge sprayed all over her mother's face.

'Damn brat,' said Erica, exhausted, but she regretted her choice of words at once.

'*Brrrrr*,' Maja said happily, managing to eject the remains of the porridge onto the table.

'Amn brat,' said Adrian, and his big sister Emma chided him at once.

'You mustn't swear, Adrian!'

'But Ica just did.'

'You still shouldn't swear, isn't that so, Aunt Erica?' Emma planted her hands firmly on her hips and gave Erica an insistent look.

'You're absolutely right. It was very naughty of me to swear, Adrian.'

Pleased with this answer, Emma went back to eating her kefir. Erica gave her a loving but worried glance. The girl had been forced to grow up so fast. Sometimes she behaved more like a mamma than a big sister to Adrian. Anna didn't seem to notice, but Erica saw it all too well. She knew all too well what it was like to shoulder that role at such a young age.

And now she was doing it again. Mamma to her sister. At the same time she was mamma to Maja and a sort of substitute mamma to Emma and Adrian, while she waited for Anna to snap out of her lethargy. Erica cast a glance at the ceiling as she began clearing the mess off the table. But

there was no sound from upstairs. Anna seldom woke up before eleven, and Erica let her sleep. She didn't know what else to do.

'I don't want to go to kindergarten today,' Adrian announced, putting on an expression that clearly said 'and try to make me if you can.'

'Of course you're going to kindergarten, Adrian,' said Emma, again propping her hands on her hips. Erica intervened before the bickering erupted, at the same time as she tried to clean up her eight-month-old daughter as best she could.

'Emma, go and put on your coat and boots. Adrian, I don't have time for this discussion today. You're going to kindergarten with Emma, and that's non-negotiable.'

Adrian opened his mouth to protest, but something in his aunt's face told him that on this particular morning he should probably obey her. Displaying uncharacteristic obedience he went out to the hall.

'Okay, now try putting on your shoes.' Erica set out Adrian's trainers, but he just shook his head.

'I can't, you have to help me.'

'You can so. You put your shoes on at kindergarten.'

'No, I can't. I'm little,' he added for emphasis.

Erica sighed and put Maja down. The baby began crawling off even before her hands and knees touched the floor. She had started to crawl very early and was now a master in that event.

'Maja, stay here, sweetie,' said Erica as she tried to put Adrian's shoes on him. But Maja chose to ignore the urgent plea and set off happily on a voyage of discovery. Erica could feel the sweat beginning to run down her back and under her arms.

'I'll fetch Maja,' said Emma helpfully, taking Erica's lack of an answer as a sign of assent. Puffing a bit, Emma came back carrying Maja, who was squirming in her arms like an intractable kitten. Erica saw that her daughter's face had

begun to assume the red colour that usually warned a wail was on its way, and she hurried to take the child. Then she hustled the older kids out the front door towards the car. Damn, how she hated mornings like these.

'Get in the car, we're in a hurry. We're late again and you know what Miss Ewa thinks about that.'

'She doesn't like it,' said Emma, shaking her head in concern.

'No, she certainly doesn't,' said Erica, strapping Maja into the car seat.

'I want to sit up front,' Adrian announced, crossing his arms and preparing for battle. But now Erica's patience was at an end.

'Get in your chair,' she yelled, feeling a certain satisfaction when she saw him practically fly into his car seat. Emma sat on her forward-facing cushion in the middle of the back seat and put on her seat belt herself. With great haste and still feeling annoyed Erica began belting Adrian in, but stopped when she felt a small hand on her cheek.

'I lo-o-ove you, Ica,' said Adrian, trying to look as sweet as he could. Undoubtedly an attempt to win her favour, but it worked every time. Erica felt her heart swell, and she leaned over and gave him a big kiss.

The last thing she did before she backed out of the driveway was to cast an uneasy glance at the window of Anna's bedroom. But the shade was still pulled down.

Jonna pressed her forehead against the cool bus window and looked out at the countryside passing by. A tremendous apathy filled her. As always. She tugged at the sleeves of her jumper so they covered her hands. Over the years it had become a habit of hers. She wondered what she was doing here. How had she ended up in all this? Why was there such a fascination with following her everyday life? Jonna simply didn't understand it. A broken and odd loner girl who fucking cut herself. But maybe that was precisely

why she had been voted to stay on, week after week in the House. Because there were so many other girls like her all around the country. Girls who hungrily recognized themselves in her, when she constantly ended up in confrontation with the other participants, when she sat crying in the lavatory, slashing her forearms to shreds with razor blades, when she radiated so much helplessness and desperation that the others in the House avoided her as though she were infected with rabies. Maybe that was why.

'Gawd, how exciting! Imagine if we were, like, given one more chance.' Jonna heard the endless anticipation in Barbie's voice but refused to respond. The girl's name alone made her want to puke. But the tabloids loved it. BB-Barbie was doing great on the news placards. Her real name was Lillemor Persson. One of the evening newspapers had dug up that fact. They had also found old photos of her from the time when she was a skinny little brown-haired girl with oversized glasses. Nothing like the silicone-boobed blonde bombshell she was today. Jonna had a good laugh when she saw those pictures. They had got a copy of the paper for the House. But Barbie had cried. Then she'd burnt the newspaper.

'Look what a crowd there is!' Barbie pointed excitedly to a group of people at the square, where the bus seemed to be heading. 'Don't you understand, Jonna? They're all here for us, don't you get it?' She could hardly sit still, and Jonna gave her a contemptuous look. Then she stuck in the earbuds of her MP3 player and closed her eyes.

Patrik walked slowly around the car. It had driven off a steep slope and finally stopped when it hit a tree. The front was bashed in, but the rest of the car was intact. It hadn't been able to take the curve at such speed.

'The driver seems to have slammed into the steering wheel. I'd guess that's the cause of death,' said Hanna, squatting down by the driver's side.

‘We’ll leave that to the medical examiner, I think,’ said Patrik, hearing himself sound more critical than he intended. ‘I just mean –’

‘That’s okay,’ said Hanna with a dismissive wave. ‘It was a stupid remark. I’ll stick to observing from now on, not drawing conclusions – yet,’ she added.

Patrik finished his circuit round the car and was now squatting next to Hanna. The door on the driver’s side stood wide open, and the accident victim was still strapped into the seat, leaning forward against the steering wheel. Blood had run down from a head wound and collected on the floor.

They heard one of the techs snapping photos behind them to document the accident scene.

‘Are we in your way?’ Patrik asked, turning round.

‘No, we’ve already taken most of the shots we need. Thought we’d just straighten up the victim now and take some pictures. Is that all right? Have you seen what you need to for the time being?’

‘Have we, Hanna?’ Patrik was scrupulous about including his colleague. It couldn’t be easy to be the new person, and he intended to do his best to make her feel welcome.

‘Yes, I think so.’ They both stood up and moved away to give the tech more room. Carefully he grasped the victim’s shoulder and pressed the body back against the seat. Only now could they see that the victim was a woman. Short hair and unisex clothing had made them think at first that it was a man, but one look at the face told them that the victim was a woman in her forties.

‘It’s Marit,’ said Patrik.

‘Marit?’ Hanna queried.

‘She has a shop on Affärsvägen. Sells tea, coffee, chocolate and things like that.’

‘Does she have a family?’ Hanna’s voice sounded a bit strange when she asked the question, and Patrik glanced at her. But she looked the same as usual, so maybe he was imagining things.

‘I don’t really know. We’ll have to check that out.’

The technician was now done taking photos and stepped back. Patrik and Hanna moved in closer again.

‘Be careful not to touch anything,’ Patrik said out of reflex. Before Hanna could reply he went on, ‘Sorry, I keep forgetting that you may be new in our department, but you’re an experienced cop. You’ll have to cut me some slack,’ he said apologetically.

‘Don’t be so sensitive,’ his new colleague said with a laugh. ‘I don’t take offence that easily.’

Patrik laughed too, with relief. He hadn’t realized how accustomed he’d become to working with people he knew well, people whose work habits were familiar. It would probably be a good thing to have some new blood on the force. Besides, compared to Ernst, anything was an improvement. The fact that he finally got the boot after taking the law into his own hands, so to speak, last autumn was – well, nothing short of a miracle.

‘So, what do you see?’ asked Patrik, leaning in close to look at Marit’s face.

‘It’s not so much what I see but what I smell.’ Hanna took a couple of deep sniffs. ‘She stinks of booze. She must have been dead drunk when she drove off the road.’

‘It certainly seems so,’ said Patrik. He sounded a bit distracted. With a concerned frown he peered inside the car. There was nothing out of the ordinary. A wrapper from a chocolate bar on the floor, an empty plastic Coke bottle, a page that seemed to have been torn out of a book, and in the far corner, on the floor by the passenger seat, an empty vodka bottle.

‘This doesn’t seem too complicated. A single-car accident with a drunk driver.’ Hanna took a couple of steps back and seemed to be preparing to leave. The ambulance was ready to take the body, and there wasn’t much more they could do.

Patrik scrutinized the wounds on Marit’s face. Something didn’t add up.

‘Can I wipe off the blood?’ he asked one of the crime scene techs packing up his equipment.

‘That should be okay, we have plenty of documentation. Here, I’ve got a rag.’ The tech handed Patrik a piece of white cloth and Patrik nodded his thanks. Cautiously, almost tenderly, he wiped off the blood that had come primarily from a wound on her forehead. The victim’s eyes were open, and before he continued Patrik carefully closed them with his index fingers. Beneath the blood Marit’s face was a study of wounds and bruises. She had struck the steering wheel with great force; the car was an older model without an airbag.

‘Could you take some more pictures?’ he asked the man who had given him the rag. The tech nodded and grabbed his camera. He quickly took some more shots and then gave Patrik a quizzical look.

‘That’ll be fine,’ said Patrik, stepping over to Hanna, who looked puzzled.

‘What was it you saw?’ she asked.

‘I’m not sure. There’s just something that . . . I don’t know.’ He waved his hand dismissively. ‘It’s probably nothing. Let’s go back to the station. The others can finish up the work here.’

They got in the police car and headed towards Tanumshede. They drove the whole way back in silence. And in that silence something was tugging at Patrik’s mind. He simply didn’t know what it was.

Bertil Mellberg felt strangely light-hearted. The way he usually felt only when he was spending time with Simon, the son whose existence he hadn’t known of for fifteen years. Unfortunately Simon didn’t come to see him very often, but at least he came, and they’d been able to form some sort of relationship. It wasn’t an exuberant sort of bond, nor was it visible from the outside; it lived a rather hidden existence. But it was there.

The feeling, difficult to describe, came from something odd that had happened to him last Saturday. After months of nagging and pressure from Sten, his good friend – or rather his only friend, and even he might be characterized as an acquaintance – Mellberg had agreed to go along to a barn dance in Munkedal. Even though he considered himself a good dancer, it had been many years since he'd frequented a dancing establishment. And a barn dance conjured up images of hicks cavorting to fiddle music. But Sten was a regular participant and had finally managed to persuade him that barn dances were excellent hunting grounds. 'They just sit there in a row, waiting to be picked,' as Sten had said. Mellberg couldn't deny it sounded good; he hadn't met many women in recent years, so he was certainly feeling a need to air out that little guy. But his scepticism was based on his expectation of what sort of women went to barn dances. Desperate old crows who were more interested in sinking their talons into an old guy with a good pension than having a roll in the hay. But if there was one thing he knew, it was how to protect himself from birds with marriage on their minds; so he finally decided to accompany Sten and try his luck.

Just in case, he had put on his best suit and splashed a little 'smell-good' here and there. And Sten had come over and they had fortified themselves with a few shots before they headed off. Sten had thought to call a cab, so they didn't have to worry about how much they drank. Not that Mellberg often worried much about that, but it wouldn't look good if he was caught driving under the influence. After the incident with Ernst, the higher-ups had their eye on him, so he had to be careful. Or at least make it look like he was being careful. What they didn't know wouldn't hurt them.

Despite all the preparations it was not with great anticipation that Mellberg stepped into the big hall, where the dancing was already in full swing. And his prejudices were confirmed.

Only old women his own age everywhere he looked. On that subject he and Uffe Lundell were in complete agreement – who the hell wanted a wrinkled, flabby, middle-aged body next to him in bed when there was so much fine, solid, young flesh out there? Though Mellberg had to admit that Uffe had a bit more success on that front than he did. It was that whole rock-star thing that did it. Bloody unfair.

He was just about to go to the bar and fortify his courage when he heard someone speaking to him.

'What a place. And here we stand feeling old.'

'Well, I'm here under protest,' Mellberg replied with a glance at the woman who had come up beside him.

'Same here. It was Bodil that dragged me along,' said the woman, pointing at one of the ladies already out on the dance floor working up a sweat.

'Sten, in my case,' said Mellberg, pointing him out on the dance floor.

'My name is Rose-Marie,' she said, holding out her hand.

'Bertil,' replied Mellberg.

The instant his palm met hers, his life was changed. During his sixty-three years he had experienced desire, randiness, and a compulsion to possess certain women he had met. But never before had he fallen in love. And so it struck him with even greater force. He regarded her in wonderment. Mellberg's objective self registered a woman around sixty, about 5'3", a bit plump, with her short hair dyed a spirited red colour, and a happy smile. But his subjective self saw only her eyes. They were blue and looked at him with curiosity and intensity; he felt himself drowning in those eyes, as it might be described in trashy paperback novels.

After that the evening passed much too rapidly. They danced and talked. He fetched drinks for her and pulled out her chair for her. Behaviour that was definitely not part of his normal repertoire. But nothing had been normal on that evening.

When they parted he felt at once awkward and empty. He simply had to see her again. So now he sat here at the office on a Monday morning, feeling like a schoolboy. Before him on the desk lay a piece of paper with her name and phone number.

He looked at the piece of paper, took a deep breath, and punched in the number.

They had quarrelled again. For the umpteenth time in a row. Far too many times the quarrels had turned into verbal boxing matches between them. And as usual, each of them had defended her own position. Kerstin wanted them to come out of the closet. Marit still wanted to keep it all secret.

'Are you ashamed of me – of us?' Kerstin had yelled. And Marit, like so many times before, had turned away and refused to look her in the eye. Because that was precisely where the problem lay. They loved each other, and Marit was ashamed of it.

At first Kerstin had persuaded herself that it didn't matter. The important thing was that they had found each other. That the two of them, after being thoroughly knocked about by life and by people who inflicted injuries on their souls, had actually found each other. What did a lover's gender matter? Who cared what other people said or thought? But Marit hadn't viewed it that way. She wasn't ready to subject herself to the opinions and prejudices of people around her, and she wanted everything to remain as it had been for the past four years. They would continue to live together as lovers but outwardly pretend that they were just two friends who for financial reasons and the sake of convenience shared the same apartment.

'Why do you care so much what people say?' Kerstin had said when they quarrelled the previous evening. Marit had cried as she always did whenever they had a falling out. And as usual, that made Kerstin madder than ever.

The tears were like fuel for the anger that had accumulated behind the wall created by their secret. She hated making Marit cry. Hated that circumstances and other people made her hurt the one she loved most of all.

'Imagine how it would be for Sofie if it came out.'

'Sofie is much tougher than you think. Don't use her as an excuse for your own cowardice.'

'How tough do you think someone can be when she's fifteen and kids are taunting her because her mother is a dyke? Do you have any idea how much shit she would get at school? I can't do that to her!' Marit's tears had distorted her face into an ugly mask.

'Do you honestly think that Sofie hasn't figured it all out, that we're fooling her when you move into the guest room during the weeks she visits us and we go about acting out some sort of charade at home? Look, Sofie worked it out long ago. And if I were her I'd be more ashamed of a mum who's prepared to live a lie just so "people" won't talk. That's what I'd be ashamed of!'

By this point Kerstin was yelling so loudly that she could hear her voice cracking. Marit had given her that wounded look that over the years Kerstin had learned to hate, and she also knew from experience what would come next. Sure enough, Marit had leapt up from the table and started putting on her jacket, sobbing.

'Go ahead and run away. That's what you always do. Go on! And this time don't bother coming back!'

When the door slammed behind Marit, Kerstin sat down at the kitchen table. She was breathing hard, and she felt as if she'd been running. And in a way she had been. Running after the life she wanted for the two of them, but which Marit's fear prevented them from having. And for the first time she had meant what she had said. Something inside her told her that soon she wouldn't be able to take it any longer.

But now, the morning after, that feeling had been replaced

by a deep, consuming worry. She had sat up all night. Waiting for the door to open, waiting to hear the familiar footsteps across the parquet floor, waiting to hug Marit and console her and beg her forgiveness. But she hadn't come home. And the car keys were gone; Kerstin had checked on that during the night. Where the hell was she? Had something happened? Had she driven to the house of her ex-husband, Sofie's pappa? Or could she have fled all the way to her mother's place in Oslo?

With trembling fingers Kerstin picked up the phone to start calling around.

'What do you think this is going to mean for the tourist trade in Tanum?' The reporter from *Bohusläningen* stood ready with notepad and pen, waiting to jot down his reply.

'Plenty. It'll be huge. There will be a half-hour show broadcast from Tanumshede on television every day. This area has never seen such a gigantic marketing opportunity.' Erling beamed. A big crowd had gathered outside the old community centre, waiting for the bus with the participants. It was mostly teenagers who had gathered and could hardly stand still in their eagerness to finally see their idols *live*.

'But couldn't it have the opposite effect? I mean, in previous seasons the show ended up dealing with quarrels, sex, and drunkenness, and that's hardly what we'd want to present as a message to tourists, is it?'

Erling gave the reporter an annoyed look. Why were people always so damned negative? He'd had enough of that from his own town council, and now the local press was starting to harp on the same thing.

'Surely you've heard the saying, "There's no such thing as bad publicity"? And let's face it Tanumshede does have a rather invisible image – nationally, that is. Now that's all going to change with *Sodding Tanum*.'

'Obviously,' the reporter began, but was cut off by Erling who had lost all patience.

'Unfortunately I don't have time to comment further at the moment, I'm here as the welcoming committee.' He turned on his heel and strode off towards the bus, which had just pulled up. The young people crowded round the door of the bus in anticipation, waiting with excited expressions for the door to open. The sight of the youthful crowd was enough to confirm Erling's view that this was just what the town needed. Now Tanumshede was going to be put on the map.

When the bus doors swung open with a whooshing sound, it was a man in his forties who got out first. Disappointed murmurs from the teenagers indicated that he was not one of the cast. Erling hadn't watched any of the many reality shows that had been broadcast, so he had no clue who or what to expect.

'Erling W. Larson,' he said, holding out his hand as he switched on his most winning smile. The cameras clicked.

'Fredrik Rehn,' said the man, shaking the proffered hand. 'We spoke on the phone. I'm the producer of this circus.' Now they both smiled.

'Well, let me welcome you to Tanumshede. On behalf of the community I'd like to say that we're extremely happy and proud to have you here, and we look forward to a very exciting season.'

'Thank you, thank you. Yes, we have high hopes for it. With two hit seasons behind us we're feeling very optimistic; we know that this is a successful format, and we look forward to working with you. But let's not keep the fans waiting any longer,' said Fredrik with a broad smile, flashing his improbably white teeth at the anxious crowd. 'Here they come. The cast of *Sodding Tanum*: Barbie from *Big Brother*, Jonna from *Big Brother*, Calle from *Survivor*, Tina from *The Bar*, Uffe from *Survivor* and, last but not least, Mehmet from *The Farm*.'