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Opening Extract from...

The Drowning

Written by Camilla Lackberg

Translated from the Swedish by Tiina Nunnally

Published by HarperCollins

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CAMILLA LACKBERG

The Drowning

Translated from the Swedish by Tiina Nunnally



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He had known that sooner or later it would come to light again. Something like that was impossible to hide. Every word had led him closer to what was unnameable and appalling. What he had been trying for so many years to repress.

Now escape was no longer an option. He felt the morning air fill his lungs as he walked as fast as he could. His heart was pounding in his chest. He didn't want to go there, but he had to. So he had chosen to let fate decide. If someone was there, he would have to speak. If nobody was there, he would continue on his way to work, as if nothing had happened.

But the door opened when he knocked. He stepped inside and squinted in the dim light. The person standing in front of him was not the one he had expected to see. It was somebody else.

Her long hair swung rhythmically from side to side as he followed her into the next room. He started talking, asking questions. His thoughts were whirling round and round in his head. Nothing was what it appeared to be. This was all wrong, and yet it seemed right.

Suddenly he fell silent. Something had struck him in the solar plexus with a force that stopped his words in

mid-sentence. He looked down and saw blood starting to seep out as the knife was pulled from the wound. Then a new stab, more pain, and the sharp blade twisting inside his body.

He knew it was over. It would all end here, even though there was still so much he had left to do and see and experience. At the same time there was a kind of justice in what was happening. He hadn't deserved the good life he'd enjoyed, or all the love he'd been given. Not after what he had done.

After the pain had numbed his senses and the knife stopped moving, the water came. The rocking motion of a boat. And when he was enveloped by the cold sea, all other sensations ceased.

The last thing he remembered was her hair. Long, and dark.



‘But it’s been three months! Why haven’t you found him?’

Patrik Hedström gazed at the woman in front of him. She looked more exhausted every time he saw her. And she came into the police station in Tanumshede once a week. Every Wednesday. She’d been doing this ever since her husband disappeared in early November.

‘We’re doing everything we can, Cia. You know that.’

She nodded without saying a word. Her hands were trembling as she held them clasped in her lap. Then she looked at him, her eyes filled with tears. It wasn’t the first time Patrik had seen this happen.

‘He’s not coming back, is he?’

Now her voice was trembling as well as her hands, and Patrik had to resist the urge to go round his desk and give the fragile woman a comforting hug. Somehow, even though it went against all his protective instincts, he remained cool and professional, considering how to respond. Finally he took a deep breath and said:

‘No, I don’t think he is.’

She didn’t ask any more questions, but he could see that his words had only reinforced what Cia Kjellner already knew. Her husband was never coming home. On the third of November Magnus had got up at six thirty,

showered, dressed, waved goodbye first to his two children and then to his wife as they left for the day. Just after eight o'clock Magnus was seen leaving the house on the way to Tanum Windows, his place of work. After that nobody knew where he had gone. He never showed up at the house of his colleague, who was supposed to give him a ride to the office. Somewhere between his own home in the neighbourhood near the sports pitch and his colleague's house by the Fjällbacka miniature golf course, Magnus Kjellner had vanished.

The police had examined every aspect of his life. They had put out an APB and spoken with more than fifty people, including co-workers, family members and friends. They had searched for debts that might have compelled him to flee, and for secret lovers. They investigated the possibility that he might have embezzled money from his employer – anything that might explain why a respectable man of forty with a wife and two teenage kids would suddenly just leave the house and disappear. But the police hadn't found a single lead. There was nothing to indicate that he had travelled abroad, nor had any money been withdrawn from the couple's joint bank account. Magnus Kjellner had simply vanished without trace.

After Patrik had shown Cia out, he knocked cautiously on Paula Morales's door. 'Come in,' she said at once. He stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

'Was it his wife again?'

'Yes,' said Patrik with a sigh, sitting down on the visitor's chair. He put his feet up on the desk, but after a fierce look from Paula he quickly took them down.

'Do you think he's dead?'

'I'm afraid so,' said Patrik. For the first time voicing the suspicion he had felt ever since Magnus went missing. 'We've checked out everything, and the guy had none of

the usual reasons for disappearing. It seems he just left home one day and then . . . he was gone.'

'But no body has been found.'

'No, there's no body,' said Patrik. 'And where are we supposed to look? We can't drag the whole sea or search all the woods around Fjällbacka. All we can do is twiddle our thumbs and hope that someone finds him. Either dead or alive. Because I have no idea what else to do. And I don't know what to say when Cia shows up here each week, expecting us to have made some sort of progress in the case.'

'That's just her way of dealing with the situation. It makes her feel like she's doing something instead of simply sitting at home waiting for news. I know that would drive me crazy.' Paula glanced at the photograph she kept next to her computer.

'I understand that,' said Patrik. 'But it doesn't make things any easier.'

'No, of course not.'

For a few moments silence descended over the cramped office. At last Patrik stood up. 'We'll just have to hope that he turns up. One way or another.'

'I suppose you're right,' said Paula. But she sounded just as dejected as Patrik.



'What a fatty.'

'You should talk!' Anna pointed at Erica's belly as she stared at her sister in the mirror.

Erica Falck turned so that she stood in profile, just like Anna, and she had to agree. Good God, she was huge. She looked like a gigantic belly with a tiny Erica stuck on to it, just for the sake of appearances. And that was exactly how she felt. By comparison, her body had been a miracle of suppleness when she was pregnant with Maja. But this time she was carrying two babies.

'I'm really not the least bit envious of you,' Anna said with the brutal honesty of a younger sister.

'Thanks a lot,' said Erica, bumping her with her stomach. Anna bumped her back, and both of them almost lost their balance. For a moment they stood flailing their arms in the air in an effort to stay on their feet, but then they started laughing so hard that they had to sit down on the floor.

'What a joke!' said Erica, wiping tears from her eyes. 'Nobody should look like this. I'm a cross between Barbapapa and the man in the Monty Python film who explodes when he eats a wafer-thin mint.'

'Well, I'm eternally grateful that you're having twins.

Thanks to you, I feel like a slender nymph in comparison.'

'You're welcome,' replied Erica, making a move to get up. But nothing came of her efforts.

'Wait, I'll help you,' said Anna, but she too lost the battle with gravity and ended up on her backside again. They both had the same thought as they looked at each other. And then they yelled in unison: 'Dan!'

'What is it?' they heard from downstairs.

'We can't get up!' Anna called.

'What'd you say?'

They heard him coming up the stairs towards the bedroom where they were sitting on the floor.

'What on earth are you two doing?' Dan said with amusement when he caught sight of his fiancée Anna and her sister sitting in front of the full-length mirror.

'We can't get up,' said Erica with as much dignity as she could muster, reaching out her hand.

'Hold on, I'll go get the forklift,' said Dan, pretending to head back downstairs.

'Cut that out,' said Erica, as Anna laughed so hard she had to lie down.

'Okay, I'll give it a try.' Dan took hold of Erica's hand and began to pull her up. 'Ergggggg!' he groaned.

'Skip the sound effects, if you don't mind,' Erica told him as she slowly got to her feet.

'Damn, you're huge,' exclaimed Dan, and Erica punched him in the arm.

'You've said that at least a hundred times, and you're not the only one. Why don't you stop staring at me and focus on your own little chubette instead?'

'Okay. Sure.' Dan now pulled Anna to her feet, and then gave her a big kiss on the lips.

'You guys should get a room if you're going to do that,' said Erica, poking Dan in the side.

'This *is* our room,' said Dan, kissing Anna again.

'Okay. Then let's concentrate on the reason I'm here,' said Erica, going over to her sister's wardrobe.

'I don't know why you think I can help you,' said Anna, waddling after Erica. 'I can't imagine that I have anything that'll fit you.'

'So what am I supposed to do, then?' Erica was looking through the clothes on the hangers. 'Christian's book launch is tonight, and the only thing I can fit into is Maja's wigwam.'

'Okay, we'll work something out. The trousers you have on look fine, and I think I have a shirt that might fit you. It's a little too big for me, at any rate.'

Anna reached for an embroidered lavender tunic hanging in the wardrobe. Erica took off her T-shirt and pulled the tunic over her head with Anna's help. Getting it down over her stomach was like stuffing a Christmas sausage, but she managed it. Then she turned towards the mirror and stared at herself with a critical expression.

'You look fantastic,' Anna said, and Erica grunted in response. With her present figure, 'fantastic' sounded way beyond reach, but at least she looked decent and as if she'd made an effort.

'It'll do,' she said. She tried to take the tunic off by herself, but had to give up and let Anna help her.

'Where's the party?' Anna asked as she smoothed out the tunic and put it back on the hanger.

'At the Grand Hotel.'

'Nice of the publisher to throw a launch party for a first-time author,' said Anna, heading for the stairs.

'The company is really enthusiastic about the book. And the advance orders are incredibly good for a first novel, so they're more than happy to host a party. There seems to be plenty of support from the press as well, according to what I've heard from the publisher.'

'So what do you think of the book? I assume you like it, or else you wouldn't have recommended it to your publisher. But how good is it?'

'It's . . .' Erica pondered what to say about the book as she cautiously made her way down the stairs, following her sister. 'It's magical. Dark and beautiful, disturbing and powerful and . . . well, magical is the best word I can think of to describe it.'

'Christian must be over the moon.'

'Yes, I suppose he is.' Erica sounded a bit doubtful as she went into the kitchen. Knowing where everything was, she went straight for the coffee-maker. 'At the same time he seems . . .' She stopped talking so she wouldn't lose count as she spooned coffee into the filter. 'He was ecstatic when his book was accepted for publication, but I get the feeling the writing process has stirred up something for him. It's hard to say, because I don't really know him that well. I'm not sure why he asked me for advice, but I was happy to help. And I do have a lot of experience when it comes to editing manuscripts, even though I don't write novels. At first everything went smoothly, and Christian seemed open to all my suggestions. But towards the end he would sometimes withdraw when I wanted to discuss certain issues. I can't really explain it. But he *is* a bit eccentric. Maybe that's all there is to it.'

'Then I suppose he found the right profession,' said Anna solemnly.

Erica turned to face her. 'So now I'm not only fat but eccentric too?'

'And don't forget absent-minded.' Anna nodded towards the coffee-maker that Erica had just turned on. 'It helps if you put water in it first.'

The coffee-maker puffed in agreement, and with a stern look at her sister Erica shut it off.

* * *

Moving as if on automatic, she took care of all the usual household chores. She put the dishes in the dishwasher after rinsing off the plates and cutlery. She cleaned the food scraps out of the plughole with her hand and scrubbed the sink with the dish brush and soap. Then she wet the dishcloth, wrung it out, and wiped the kitchen table to remove any remaining crumbs and sticky spots.

'Mamma, can I go over to Sandra's?' Elin asked as she came into the kitchen. The defiant look on the fifteen-year-old's face showed that she was resigned in advance to hearing a negative response.

'You know you can't do that. Grandpa and Grandma are coming over tonight.'

'But they come over so often. Why do I have to be here every time?' Elin's voice rose, taking on the whiny tone that Cia couldn't stand.

'You and Ludvig are who they want to see. You know they'd be disappointed if you weren't here.'

'But it's so boring! And Grandma always starts crying, and then Grandpa tells her to stop. I want to go to over to Sandra's house. All my friends are going to be there.'

'Now you're exaggerating,' said Cia, rinsing out the dishcloth and hanging it over the tap. 'I doubt they'll "all" be there. You can go to Sandra's some other night, when Grandma and Grandpa aren't coming to visit.'

'Pappa would've let me go.'

Cia's lungs seemed to constrict. She couldn't do this. She couldn't handle the anger and defiance right now. Magnus would have known how to deal with things. He would have handled the situation with Elin. But she couldn't do it. Not by herself.

'Pappa isn't here now.'

'So where is he?' Elin shrieked, and the tears began to flow. 'Where did he go? He probably just got tired of you and your nagging. You . . . you . . . bitch!'

Utter silence settled over Cia's mind. It was as if all sound vanished and everything around her was transformed into a grey fog.

'He's dead.' Her voice sounded like it was coming from somewhere else, as if a stranger were speaking.

Elin stared at her.

'He's dead,' Cia said again. She felt strangely calm, as if she were hovering above herself and her daughter, peacefully observing the scene.

'You're lying,' Elin said, her chest heaving as if she had run several miles.

'I'm not lying. That's what the police think. And I know it's true.' When she heard herself say the words, she realized how true the statement was. She had refused to believe it, clinging to a faint hope. But the truth was that Magnus was dead.

'How do you know that? How do the police know?'

'He wouldn't just leave us.'

Elin shook her head as if to prevent the idea from taking hold. But Cia saw that her daughter knew it too. Magnus would never simply up and leave them.

She took a few steps across the kitchen floor and put her arms around her daughter. Elin stiffened, but then relaxed and allowed herself to be embraced, as if she were a little child. Cia stroked Elin's hair as the girl sobbed harder.

'Hush now,' Cia whispered, feeling her own strength grow as her daughter surrendered to grief. 'You can go to Sandra's this evening. I'll explain to Grandma and Grandpa.'

Christian Thydell looked at himself in the mirror. Sometimes he really didn't know how to relate to his own appearance. He was forty years old. Somehow the years had raced by, and he found himself gazing at a man

who was not only grown up but who had even begun to go grey at the temples.

'How distinguished you look.'

Christian jumped as Sanna appeared behind him and put her arms around his waist.

'You scared me. Don't sneak up on me like that.' He extricated himself from her embrace and caught a glimpse of her disappointed expression in the mirror before he turned round.

'Sorry.' She sat down on the bed.

'You look lovely too,' he said, and felt even guiltier when he saw how the compliment made her eyes light up. But he also felt annoyed. He hated it when she acted like a little puppy wagging its tail at the slightest attention from its master. His wife was ten years younger, but sometimes it felt as if there were at least twenty years between them.

'Could you help me with my tie?' He went over to Sanna, who got up and knotted it expertly. It was perfect on the first try, and she took a step back to inspect her work.

'You're going to be a big hit tonight.'

'Mmm . . .' he said, mostly because he didn't know what she expected him to say.

'Mamma! Nils hit me!' Melker dashed into the room as if a pack of wolves was after him. Looking for refuge, he wrapped his sticky fingers around the first things within reach: Christian's legs.

'Damn!' Christian brusquely shook off his five-year-old son, but it was too late. Both trouser legs now had bright splotches of ketchup around the knees. He struggled to keep his temper – something that was proving more and more difficult lately.

'Can't you keep the kids in line?' he snapped, demonstratively unbuttoning his suit trousers so he could change.

'I'm sure I can clean that off,' said Sanna as she grabbed

for Melker, who was on his way towards the bed with his sticky fingers.

'And how do you expect to do that, when I have to be there in an hour? I'll just have to change.'

'But I think I can . . .' Sanna sounded on the verge of tears.

'Look after the kids instead.'

Sanna flinched at every word, as if he had struck her. Without replying, she took Melker by the arm and hustled him out of the room.

After she left, Christian sat down heavily on the bed. He glanced at himself in the mirror. A tight-lipped man. Dressed in a suit jacket, shirt, tie, and underwear. Hunched over as if all the troubles of the world were resting on his shoulders. He tried straightening up and puffing out his chest. He looked better already.

This was his night. And nobody could take it away from him.

'Anything new?' asked Gösta Flygare as he held up the coffee pot towards Patrik, who had just stepped into the police station's little kitchen.

Patrik nodded that he'd like some coffee and sank down on to a chair at the table. Ernst the dog, hearing that they were taking a break, came plodding into the room and lay down under the table in the hope some morsel would be dropped on the floor for him to lick up.

'Here you go.' Gösta placed a cup of black coffee in front of Patrik and then sat down across from him.

'You're looking a bit pale around the gills,' said Gösta, studying his younger colleague.

Patrik shrugged. 'Just a bit tired. Maja isn't sleeping well and that makes her cranky. And Erica is totally worn out. Understandably so. Which means things haven't exactly been easy on the home front.'

'And it's only going to get worse,' said Gösta.

Patrik laughed. 'Wow, that's encouraging. But you're right, it probably will.'

'So you haven't come up with anything new on Magnus Kjellner?' Gösta discreetly sneaked a biscuit under the table, and Ernst happily thumped his tail against Patrik's feet.

'No, not a thing,' said Patrik, taking a sip of coffee.

'I saw that Cia was here again.'

'Yes, it's like some sort of obsessive ritual – but I suppose that's not surprising. How is a woman supposed to act when her husband suddenly vanishes?'

'Maybe we should interview some more people,' said Gösta, sneaking another biscuit under the table for Ernst.

'Who do you have in mind?' Patrik could hear how annoyed he sounded. 'We've talked to his family and his friends. We've knocked on doors throughout the neighbourhood, and we've put up notices and appealed for information via the local paper. What else can we do?'

'It's not like you to give up so easily.'

'Well, if you've got any suggestions, I'd like to hear them.' Patrik immediately regretted his brusque tone of voice, even though Gösta didn't seem to take offence. 'It sounds terrible to hope that the man will turn up dead,' he added in a calmer manner. 'But I'm convinced that only then will we work out what happened to him. I'll bet you he didn't disappear voluntarily, and if we had a body then at least there'd be something to go on.'

'I think you're right. It's horrible to think that his body will float ashore somewhere or be discovered in the woods. But I have the same feeling you do. And it must be awful . . .'

'Not to know, you mean?' said Patrik, shifting his feet, which were getting hot underneath the heavy weight of the dog.

'Well, just imagine not knowing where the person you love has gone. It's the same thing for parents when a child goes missing. There's an American website devoted to kids who have disappeared. Page after page of pictures of missing kids. All I can say is Jesus H. Christ.'

'Something like that would kill me,' said Patrik. He pictured his whirlwind of a daughter. The thought of her being taken from him was unbearable.

'What on earth are you guys talking about? The atmosphere in here is positively funereal.' Annika's cheerful voice broke the dismal mood as she joined them at the table. The station's youngest member, Martin Molin, came in right behind her, lured by all the voices coming from the kitchen and the smell of coffee. He was working only part-time now, since he was on paternity leave, and he seized every possible opportunity to hang out with his colleagues and take part in adult conversations.

'We were discussing Magnus Kjellner,' said Patrik, his tone of voice making it clear that the conversation was over. To make sure the others understood, he changed the subject.

'How's it going with the little girl?'

'Oh, we got new pictures yesterday,' said Annika, taking some photos out of the pocket of her tunic.

'Look how big she's getting.' She put the pictures on the table, and Patrik and Gösta took turns looking at them. Martin had already been given a preview when he arrived that morning.

'Ah, she's so pretty,' said Patrik.

Annika nodded in agreement. 'She's ten months old now.'

'When do you two get to go there to collect her?' Gösta asked with genuine interest. He was fully aware that he had played a part in convincing Annika and Lennart to seriously consider adoption. So he took a

slightly proprietary interest in the little girl in the photographs.

'Well, we're getting some mixed messages,' Annika told him. She gathered up the pictures and put them carefully back in her pocket. 'But in a couple of months, I should think.'

'It must seem like a long wait.' Patrik got up and put his cup in the dishwasher.

'Yes, it does. But at the same time . . . At least the process has been started. And we know that she'll be ours.'

'Yes, she certainly will,' said Gösta. On impulse he put his hand on Annika's and then snatched it away. 'Right, back to work. Haven't got time to sit around here chatting,' he muttered in embarrassment, getting to his feet.

His three colleagues looked at him in amusement as he slouched out of the kitchen.

'Christian!' The publishing director, reeking of perfume, came over to give him a big hug.

Christian held his breath so he wouldn't have to inhale the cloying scent. Gaby von Rosen was not known for subtlety. Everything was always excessive when it came to Gaby: too much hair, too much make-up, too much perfume, all combined with a fashion sense that, putting it politely, could best be described as startling. This evening, in honour of the occasion, she wore a shocking pink ensemble with a green cloth rose on the lapel, and teetered on dangerously high stilettos. But despite her slightly ridiculous appearance, as the head of Sweden's hot new publishing house she was a force to be reckoned with. She had over thirty years' experience in the field and an intellect as acute as her tongue was sharp. Those who underestimated her as a competitor never made the same mistake twice.

'This is going to be such fun!' Gaby held Christian at arm's length as she beamed at him.

Christian, still struggling to breathe in the cloud of perfume, could only nod.

'Lars-Erik and Ulla-Lena here at the hotel have been simply fantastic,' she went on. 'What delightful people! And the buffet looks wonderful. This feels like the perfect venue to launch your brilliant book. So how does it feel?'

Christian finally managed to extricate himself and took a step back.

'Well, a little unreal, I have to admit. I've been working on this novel for so long, and now . . . well, now here it is.' He glanced at the stacks of books on the table by the exit. He could read his own name on the spine of each copy, along with the title: *The Mermaid*. He felt his stomach flip. It was really happening.

'So this is what we have in mind,' Gaby said, tugging at his sleeve and pulling him along. Christian followed, offering no resistance. 'We'll start by meeting with the journalists who are here, so they can talk to you in peace and quiet. We're very pleased with the media response. Journalists from *Göteborgs Posten*, *Göteborgs Tidningen*, *Bohusläningen*, and *Strömstads Tidning* – they're all here. None from the national newspapers, but that's all right, considering today's rave review in *Svenska Dagbladet*.'

'A review?' said Christian as he was escorted to a small dais next to the stage where he would talk to the press.

'I'll tell you later,' said Gaby, pushing him down on to a chair next to the wall.

He tried to regain some control of the situation, but he felt as if he'd been sucked into a tumble drier with no possibility of escape. The sight of Gaby already on her way out, leaving him behind, merely reinforced that feeling. Assistants were dashing about, setting the tables. Nobody paid any attention to him. He permitted himself

to close his eyes for a moment. He thought about his book, *The Mermaid*, and all the hours he'd spent sitting at the computer. Hundreds, thousands of hours. He thought about her, about the Mermaid.

'Christian Thydell?'

A voice roused him from his reverie and he looked up. The man standing before him was holding his hand out and seemed to be waiting for him to respond. So he stood up and shook hands.

'Birger Jansson, *Strömstads Tidning*.' The man set a big camera bag on the floor.

'Oh, er, welcome. Please have a seat,' said Christian, not sure how to act. He looked around for Gaby, but caught only a glimpse of her shocking pink outfit, fluttering about near the entrance.

'They're really putting a lot of PR behind your book,' said Jansson, looking around.

'Yes, it seems so,' said Christian. Then both of them fell silent and fidgeted a bit.

'Shall we get started? Or should we wait for the others?'

Christian gave the reporter a blank look. How should he know? He'd never done anything like this before. But Jansson seemed to take the whole situation in his stride as he placed a tape recorder on the table and switched it on.

'So,' he said, fixing Christian with a penetrating gaze. 'This is your first novel, right?'

Christian wondered whether he was supposed to do more than confirm this statement. 'Yes, it is,' he said, clearing his throat.

'I liked it a lot,' said Jansson in a gruff tone of voice that belied the compliment.

'Thank you,' said Christian.

'What did you intend to say with this novel?' Jansson checked the tape recorder to make sure it was recording properly.

'What did I intend to say? I don't really know. It's a novel, a story that I've had in the back of my mind and that needed to come out.'

'It's an awfully dark story. I'd almost call it bleak,' said Jansson, studying Christian as if trying to peer inside the deepest recesses of his soul. 'Is this how you view society?'

'I don't know if it's my view of society that I was trying to communicate through the book,' said Christian, searching frantically for something intelligent to say. He'd never thought of his writing in this way before. The story had been part of him for so long, inside his head, and finally he'd felt compelled to put it down on paper. But did it have anything to do with what he wanted to say about society? The thought had never even occurred to him.

Finally Gaby came to his rescue, arriving with the other reporters in tow, and Jansson turned off his tape recorder as they all greeted one another and sat down around the table. The whole process took several minutes, and Christian used the opportunity to gather his thoughts.

Gaby then motioned for everyone's attention.

'Welcome to this gathering in honour of the new superstar in the literary firmament, Christian Thydell. All of us at the publishing company are incredibly proud of producing his first novel, *The Mermaid*. And we think this marks the beginning of a long and amazing writing career. Christian hasn't yet seen any of the reviews. So it's with great joy that I can tell you, Christian, that today there were fantastic reviews in *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter*, and *Arbetarbladet*, just to name a few. Let me read a few quotes to all of you.'

She put on her reading glasses and reached for a stack of papers lying in front of her on the table. A pink highlighter had been used to mark phrases against the white newsprint.

'"A linguistically virtuoso performance depicting the plight of ordinary people without losing sight of the larger perspective." That was from *Svenska Dagbladet*,' Gaby explained with a nod to Christian. Then she turned to the next review. '"It's both pleasant and painful to read Christian Thydell's book, since his pared-down prose shines light on society's false promises of security and democracy. His words cut like a knife through flesh, muscle and conscience, which kept me reading with feverish urgency and seeking, like a fakir, more of the torturous but wonderfully cleansing pain." That's from *Dagens Nyheter*,' said Gaby, taking off her glasses as she handed the small stack of reviews to Christian.

In stunned disbelief, he took the reviews. He'd heard the words, and it felt good to be showered with praise, but he honestly didn't understand what the critics were talking about. All he'd done was write about her, told her story. Let out the words and everything about her in an outpouring that had occasionally left him completely drained. It wasn't his intention to say anything about society. He just wanted to say something about her.

But he bit back the protests. No one would understand, and maybe it was better just to let things be. He'd never be able to explain.

'How marvellous,' he said, hearing how the words fell meaninglessly from his lips.

Then came more questions. More praise and comments about his book. And he realized that he couldn't give a sensible answer to a single question. How could he describe something that had filled the smallest corners of his life? Something that wasn't merely a story – it was also about survival. About pain. He did the best he could, trying to speak clearly and thoughtfully. Apparently he succeeded, because Gaby kept nodding her approval.

When the interview session was finally over, all

Christian wanted to do was go home. He felt totally drained. But he was forced to linger on in the beautiful dining room of the Grand Hotel. He took a deep breath and prepared himself to meet the guests who had started to stream in. He smiled, but it was a smile that cost him more effort than anyone would ever know.

'Could you manage to stay sober tonight?' Erik Lind quietly snapped at his wife so that the others waiting in the queue to get into the party wouldn't hear him.

'Could you manage to keep your hands to yourself tonight?' Louise replied, not bothering to whisper.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' said Erik. 'And lower your voice, please.'

Louise eyed her husband coldly. He was an elegant man – that much she couldn't deny. And once upon a time that had attracted her. They'd met at the university, and plenty of girls had looked at her with envy because she'd nabbed Erik Lind. Since then he had slowly but surely fucked away any love, respect, or trust she'd ever felt for him. Not with her. God, no. On the other hand, he didn't seem to have any problem finding willing lovers outside of the marriage bed.

'Hi, there! You're here too? How nice!' Cecilia Jansdotter made her way over to them and gave them both the obligatory kiss on the cheek. She was Louise's hairdresser, and she and Erik had also been lovers for the past year. But of course they didn't think Louise knew about that.

'Hi, Cecilia,' said Louise with a smile. She was a sweet girl, and if Louise held a grudge against everyone who had slept with her husband, she wouldn't have been able to carry on living in Fjällbacka. Besides, she'd stopped caring years ago. She had the girls. And that wonderful invention: wine in a box. What did she need Erik for?

'It's so exciting that we have another author here in Fjällbacka! First Erica Falck, and now Christian.' Cecilia was practically jumping up and down. 'Have either of you read his book?'

'I only read business journals,' said Erik.

Louise rolled her eyes. How typical of Erik to flirt by saying that he never read books.

'I'm hoping that we'll get to take a copy home with us,' she said, drawing her coat tighter around her. She hoped the queue would move a little faster so they could get inside where it was warm.

'Yes, Louise is the big reader in the family. But then, what else is there to do when you don't have to work? Right, sweetheart?'

Louise shrugged, letting the spiteful remark roll right off her. It wouldn't do any good to point out that it was Erik who had insisted that she stay home while the girls were young. Or that she slaved from morning to night to make sure that everything ran smoothly in the well-ordered home that he took for granted.

The small talk continued as they slowly moved forward. At last they were able to enter the lobby and hang up their coats before descending the stairs to the dining hall.

With Erik's eyes burning into her back, Louise headed straight for the bar.

'Now don't wear yourself out,' Patrik told Erica, giving her a kiss before she swept out the door, her stomach leading the way.

Maja whimpered a bit when she saw her mother disappear, but she stopped fussing as soon as Patrik set her down in front of the TV to watch *Bolibompa*. The show with the green dragon had just started. Maja had been much more fretful and difficult to handle during the past few months, and the fits of temper that followed

whenever she was told 'no' were enough to make any diva envious. Patrik could partly understand. She must feel the excited anticipation, combined with apprehension, regarding the arrival of her two siblings. Good Lord. Twins. Even though they'd known from the very first ultrasound, done in Erica's eighteenth week, he still hadn't really been able to take in the news. Sometimes he wondered how they were going to manage. It had been hard enough with one baby; how were they going to cope with two? How would they handle the breastfeeding and trying to get some sleep, and everything else? And they needed to buy a new car that was big enough for three kids and their pushchairs. And that was just one of many matters to consider.

Patrik sat down on the sofa next to Maja and stared into space. He'd been so tired lately. It felt as though his energy was just ebbing away, and some mornings it was all he could do to haul himself out of bed. But maybe that wasn't so strange. In addition to everything going on at home, with Erica so worn out and Maja transformed into a tiny defiant monster, he was having a hard time at work. In the years since he'd met Erica, he and his colleagues had handled several difficult murder investigations; the grim nature of his work and the constant battle with his boss, Bertil Mellberg, was beginning to take its toll on Patrik.

And now they were dealing with Magnus Kjellner's disappearance. Patrik didn't know whether it was experience or instinct, but he was convinced that something had happened to the man. Whether he was the victim of an accident or foul play, it was impossible to say, but Patrik would bet his police badge that Kjellner was no longer alive. The fact that every Wednesday he had to meet with the man's wife, who looked smaller and shabbier each time, had really begun to wear on him. The

police had done absolutely everything they could, but he still couldn't get the sight of Cia Kjellner's face out of his mind.

'Pappa!' Maja roused him from his reveries, using vocal powers that were far stronger than she knew. She was pointing her finger at the TV, and he saw at once what had caused the crisis. He must have been lost in thought much longer than he realized, because *Bolibompa* was over, replaced by a show for grown-ups that didn't interest Maja in the least.

'Pappa will fix it,' he said, holding up his hands. 'How about Pippi Longstocking?'

Since Pippi was currently the big favourite, Patrik knew what his daughter's answer would be. He got out the DVD, and when *Pippi in the South Seas* began to play, he sat down next to Maja again, putting his arm around her. Like a warm little animal, she snuggled happily into his armpit. Five minutes later Patrik was asleep.

Christian was sweating profusely. Gaby had just told him that it would soon be time for him to go up on stage. The dining hall wasn't exactly packed, but about sixty guests with expectant expressions on their faces were seated at the tables, with plates of food and glasses of beer or wine in front of them. Christian himself hadn't been able to eat a thing, but he was drinking red wine. He was now on his third glass, even though he knew that he shouldn't be drinking so much. It wouldn't be good if he ended up slurring his words into the microphone when he was interviewed. But without the wine he wouldn't be able to function at all.

He was surveying the room when he felt a hand on his arm.

'Hi. How's it going? You look a little tense.' Erica was peering at him with concern.

'I guess I'm just nervous,' he admitted, finding consolation in telling someone about it.

'I know exactly how you feel,' said Erica. 'I made my first public appearance at an event for first-time authors in Stockholm, and they practically had to scrape me off the floor afterwards. And I can't remember a single thing I said when I was on stage.'

'I have a feeling they're going to have to scrape me off the floor too,' said Christian, touching his hand to his throat. For a second he thought about the letters, and then he was overwhelmed by panic. His knees buckled, and it was only thanks to the fact that Erica was holding on to him that he didn't fall on his face.

'Upsy-daisy,' said Erica. 'Looks like you've had a few stiff drinks. You probably shouldn't have any more before your appearance.' She carefully removed the glass of red wine from Christian's hand and set it on the nearest table. 'I promise you that everything will go just fine. Gaby will start off by introducing you and your novel. Then I'll ask you a few questions – and you and I have already discussed what they'll be. Trust me. The only problem is going to be hauling this body of mine up on stage.'

She laughed, and Christian joined in. Not wholeheartedly, and he sounded a bit shrill, but the joke worked. Some of the tension eased out of him, and he could feel himself breathing again. He pushed all thought of the letters far away. He wasn't going to let that affect him tonight. The Mermaid had been given a voice through his book, and now he was done with her.

'Hi, honey.' Sanna came over to join them, her eyes sparkling as she looked around the hall. Christian knew that this was a big moment for her. Maybe even bigger than for him.

'How lovely you look,' he said, and she basked in the praise. She really did look lovely. He knew that he'd been

lucky to meet her. She put up with a great deal from him, more than most people would have been willing to endure. It wasn't her fault that she couldn't fill the empty space inside of him. Probably nobody could. He put his arm around her and kissed her hair.

'How sweet you two are!' Gaby came striding over to them, her high heels clacking. 'Someone has sent you flowers, Christian.'

He stared at the bouquet she was holding. It was beautiful but simple, composed solely of white lilies.

With fingers that trembled uncontrollably, he reached for the white envelope fastened to the bouquet. He was shaking so much that he could hardly open it, and he was barely aware of the surprised glances from the women standing around him.

The card was also very simple. A plain white card of heavy stock, the message written in black ink, with the same elegant handwriting used in the letters. He stared at the words. And then everything went black before his eyes.

She was the most beautiful person he'd ever seen. She smelled so good, and her long hair was tied back with a white ribbon. It shone so brightly that he almost felt the need to squint. He took a tentative step towards her, uncertain whether he would be allowed to partake of all this beauty. She held out her arms to give him permission, and with quick steps he leapt into her embrace. Away from the blackness, away from the evil. Instead he was enveloped in whiteness, in light, in a floral scent and with silky soft hair against his cheek.

'Are you my mother now?' he said at last, reluctantly taking a step back. She nodded. 'Really?' He was waiting for someone to come in and, with some brusque remark, smash everything to pieces, telling him that he'd only been dreaming. And that this wonderful creature couldn't possibly be the mother of somebody like him.

But no voice spoke. Instead, she simply nodded, and he couldn't help himself. He threw himself into her arms again and never, ever wanted to leave. Somewhere inside his head there were other pictures, other scents and sounds that wanted to surface, but they were drowned out by the floral perfume and the rustling of her dress. He pushed those images away. Forced them to disappear, to be replaced by all that was new and amazing. All that was unbelievable.

He looked up at his new mother, and his heart beat twice as fast with joy. When she took his hand and led him away from there, he went with her quite willingly.