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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Lost Boy

Written by Camilla Lackberg

Translated from the Swedish by Tiina Nunnally

Published by HarperCollins

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CAMILLA LACKBERG

# *The Lost Boy*

Translated from the Swedish by Tiina Nunnally



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*For Charlie*



It was only when she placed her hands on the steering wheel that she saw they were bloody. Her palms felt sticky against the leather. But she ignored the blood as she shifted into reverse and a bit too hastily backed out of the driveway. She heard the gravel spray out from under the tyres.

They had a long drive ahead of them. She cast a glance at the back seat. Sam was asleep, wrapped up in a blanket. He really ought to be strapped in with a seat belt, but she didn't have the heart to wake him. She would just have to drive as carefully as possible. Immediately she let up on the accelerator.

The summer night had already started to brighten. At this time of year the hours of darkness were practically over before they even began. And yet this night seemed endless. Everything had changed. Fredrik's brown eyes had stared rigidly up at the ceiling, and she realized that there was nothing she could do. She had to save herself and Sam. She couldn't think about the blood. She couldn't think about Fredrik.

There was only one place she could go.

Six hours later, they reached their destination. Fjällbacka was just starting to wake up. She parked the car near the

Coast Guard building, taking a moment to work out how she could manage to carry everything. Sam was still sound asleep. She took out a package of tissues from the glove compartment and wiped her hands as best she could. It was hard to get all the blood off. Then she took the suitcases out of the boot of the car and quickly dragged them over to Badholmen, the island with the diving platform, where the boat was docked. She was worried that Sam might wake up, but she had locked the car so he wouldn't be able to get out and tumble into the water. With an effort she stowed the luggage on board the boat and unlocked the chain, which was meant to keep the vessel from being stolen. Then she ran back to the car, relieved to see that Sam was sleeping as calmly as when she'd left him. Picking him up, she carried him, still wrapped in the blanket, over to the boat. She kept her eyes fixed on her feet as she stepped on board so she wouldn't slip. Carefully she placed Sam on the deck and then turned the key in the ignition. The motor coughed but started up on the first try. Though she hadn't driven a motorboat in a long time, she was certain she could manage. She backed out of the mooring berth and then headed out of the harbour.

The sun was shining but hadn't yet had time to warm the air. She felt the tension slowly seeping away, and the horror of the night lost some of its grip on her. As she looked at Sam she wondered if what had happened would scar him for life. A five-year-old was fragile. Who knew what might have been destroyed inside him? She would do everything in her power to make him whole again. She would take away the evil with a kiss, just as she did when he fell off his bike and scraped his knee.

The route across the water was a familiar one. She knew every island, every skerry. She steered towards Väderöbad, heading further and further out along the

coast. The waves were getting bigger, and the hull of the boat slammed against the surface after each swell. She enjoyed the feeling of the salty spray on her face, allowing herself to close her eyes for a few seconds. When she opened them again, she could see Gråskär in the distance. Her heart leaped. That always happened when the island came into view and she saw the small cottage and the lighthouse rising up white and proud against the blue sky. She was still too far off to see the colour of the cottage, but in her mind she pictured the light grey of the façade with the white trim. She also thought about the pink hollyhocks that grew along the wall, most sheltered from the wind. This was her refuge, her paradise. Her island called Gråskär.

‘I can proudly report that we’re right on schedule. In a little over two weeks the Badhotel will be splendidly reopened in Fjällbacka.’

Erling W. Larson beamed as he looked from one board member to the next, as if expecting applause. He had to settle for a number of approving nods.

‘This is a real triumph for the region,’ he clarified. ‘A complete renovation of something that we might well consider a priceless historic icon. At the same time we can now offer people a modern and competitive wellness centre. Or spa, which is perhaps a better word for it.’ He sketched quotation marks in the air around the word ‘spa’, which was foreign to many Swedes. ‘All that remains

is to take care of the finishing touches, invite several companies to try out the services in advance, and of course make preparations for the grand opening celebration.'

'That sounds great. I just have a few questions.' Mats Sverin, who had assumed the position of town finance officer a couple of months back, waved his pen to attract Erling's attention.

Erling, who detested anything to do with administrative work and financial reports, pretended not to notice. Hastily declaring the meeting adjourned, he withdrew to his spacious office.

After the fiasco of the *Sodding Tanum* reality show, no one had expected Erling to recover, yet here he was promoting an even bigger project which was on the brink of success. Personally, he'd never had any doubts, not even when the negative criticism had been at its worst. He was a born winner.

Of course it had taken a toll on him, which was why he had gone to the Ljuset wellness centre in the Dalecarlian region of Sweden to recuperate. That had been a fortuitous turn of events, because if he hadn't gone there, he never would have met Vivianne. Meeting her had heralded a turning point for him, both professionally and personally. She had won him over as no other woman had ever done before, and it was her vision that he was now turning into reality.

He couldn't resist the temptation to pick up the phone and call her. It was the fourth time he'd done so today, but the sound of her voice always made him tingle all over. He held his breath as he listened to the ringtone.

'Hi, darling,' he said when she answered. 'I just wanted to hear how you're doing.'

'Erling,' she said, using that special tone of voice that made him feel like a lovesick schoolboy, 'I'm as fine as I was when you called an hour ago.'

‘Good,’ he said, grinning sheepishly. ‘I wanted to make sure everything was all right.’

‘I know that, and I love you for it. But we still have so much to do before the opening, and you don’t want me to have to work evenings, do you?’

‘Absolutely not, my darling.’

He resolved not to call and disturb her any more. Their evenings were sacred.

‘Okay. Get back to work, and I’ll do the same.’ He made a few kissing noises into the receiver before he replaced the receiver. Then he leaned back in his chair, clasped his hands behind his head, and allowed himself a few minutes to daydream about the impending delights of the evening.

It smelled stuffy inside the cottage. Nathalie opened all the doors and windows to let the brisk wind blow through the rooms. A vase was nearly knocked over by the draught, but she grabbed it at the last second.

Sam lay in the small room next to the kitchen. They had always called it the guest room, even though it had been her bedroom when she was a child. Her parents had slept upstairs. She looked in on him, tucking a shawl around his shoulders. Then she took down the big, rusty key that always hung on a nail just inside the front door and went out on to the rocks. The wind cut through her clothes as she stood there, her back to the house, gazing towards the horizon. The only other building on the island was the lighthouse. The little boathouse down by the dock was so small that it didn’t really count.

She walked over to the lighthouse. Gunnar must have oiled the lock, because the key turned with surprising ease. The door creaked as she pulled it open. Nathalie only had to take a few steps inside before starting up the narrow, steep stairs, holding on to the railing as she climbed.

The view was so beautiful that it left her breathless. It had always had that effect on her. In one direction all she saw was the sea and the distant horizon; in the other direction the archipelago spread out below her, with all the islands, rocks, and skerries. It had been years since the lighthouse was in use. Nowadays it stood as a monument to bygone times. The lamp had been extinguished, and the metal plates and bolts were slowly rusting away from exposure to saltwater and wind. As a child she had loved playing up here. It was so small, like a playroom elevated high above the ground. The only furniture that would fit into the confined space was a bed where the lighthouse keepers could rest during their long shifts, and a chair where they could sit and peer out across the waters.

She lay down on the bed. A musty smell rose up from the bedspread, but the sounds all around her were the same as when she was a child: the shrieking of the gulls, the waves crashing against the rocks, and the groaning sound of the lighthouse itself. Everything had been so simple back then. Her parents had been concerned that she would be bored on the island, since she had no siblings. They needn't have worried. She loved being here. And she had not been alone. But that was something that she couldn't have explained to them.

Mats Sverin sighed and shuffled the papers piled on the desk in front of him. Today was one of those days when he couldn't stop thinking about her. Couldn't stop wondering. On such days, he got very little done, but they happened less frequently now. He had begun to let go; at least he wanted to think so. He could still see her face so clearly in his mind, and in a sense he was grateful for that. At the same time, he wished the image would start to blur and fade.

He tried to refocus his attention on his work. On good days he quite enjoyed his job. It was a challenge to immerse himself in the town finances, with the constant need to find a balance between political considerations and what was reasonable in terms of the marketplace. During the months that he'd worked here so far, much of his time had naturally been spent on Project Badis. He was pleased that the old hotel building was finally being restored. Like the majority of Fjällbacka residents, both those who still lived in the area and those who had moved away, every time he passed the beautiful structure he had bemoaned the fact that it had been allowed to fall into disrepair. Now it had been returned to its former grandeur.

Mats hoped that Erling's bombastic promises about the tremendous success this enterprise would enjoy were more than hot air, but he was sceptical. The project had already run up huge expenses for the restoration itself, and the proposed business plan was based on calculations that were far too optimistic. He had tried on a number of occasions to present his view of the situation, without success. And though he had gone over the figures time and time again without finding anything amiss – aside from the massive expenses accrued – nevertheless he had an uneasy feeling that something wasn't quite right.

He glanced at his watch and saw that it was lunchtime. It had been ages since he'd had any real appetite, but he knew that he needed to eat. Today was Thursday, which meant pancakes and pea soup at the Källaren restaurant. He should be able to get a few bites down, at the very least.

Filled with a restless energy, Nathalie began cleaning the house. It had helped to air out the place, but the stuffy

smell still clung to the curtains and bed linens. She threw them all into a big laundry basket, which she lugged down to the dock. Equipped with some laundry detergent and the old scrubbing-board that had been in the house for as long as she could remember, she rolled up her sleeves and began the hard work of doing the wash by hand. Every once in a while she would glance up towards the cottage to make sure that Sam hadn't awakened and come running outside. He'd been asleep for an unusually long time. Maybe it was in response to the shock. In that case, it was probably best to let him sleep. One more hour, she decided, and then she'd wake him up and see to it that he got something to eat.

Suddenly Nathalie realized that there actually wasn't much food in the house. She hung the laundry on the clothesline outside and then went in to have a look at the pantry. All she found was a tin of Campbell's tomato soup and a tin of Bullen's pilsner sausages. She didn't dare look at the expiry dates. Surely that sort of tinned food would last for ever? Regardless, she and Sam would have to settle for that today.

There was no temptation to go into town. She felt safe here. She didn't want to talk to anyone. She wanted to be left in peace. Nathalie paused to consider the situation as she held the soup tin in her hand. There was only one solution. She would have to call Gunnar. He had looked after the house for her after her parents died, and she could undoubtedly ask him for help. The landline no longer worked, but she was able to get good reception on her mobile, so she tapped in his number.

'Sverin.'

The name stirred up so many memories that Nathalie gave a start. It took a few seconds before she composed herself enough to speak.

'Hello? Is anyone there?'

‘Yes. Hi. It’s Nathalie.’

‘Nathalie!’ exclaimed Signe Sverin.

Nathalie smiled. She had always loved Signe and Gunnar, and the feeling was mutual.

‘Sweetie, is that really you? Are you calling from Stockholm?’

‘No, I’m here on the island.’ To her surprise she felt the words catch in her throat. She’d slept only a few hours, and fatigue must be making her overly sensitive. She cleared her throat. ‘I got here yesterday.’

‘But, my dear, you should have warned us so we could go out there and do some cleaning. The place must look terrible, and—’

‘Don’t worry about the cleaning.’ Nathalie interrupted Signe’s torrent. She’d forgotten how much she talked, and how fast. ‘You’ve kept everything so nice out here. And it did me good to clean up a bit and do the laundry.’

Signe snorted. ‘Well, you could have at least asked for help. We’ve got nothing to occupy ourselves these days, Gunnar and I. Not even any grandchildren to look after. But Matte has moved home from Göteborg. He’s got a job working for Tanum council.’

‘That’s nice for you. Why did he decide to do that?’ She pictured Matte. Blond, tanned, and always cheerful.

‘I don’t really know. It all happened rather fast. He was involved in an accident, and afterwards I had the impression that . . . No, it’s nothing. Don’t pay any attention to an old woman who talks too much. So what’s on your mind, Nathalie? Is there something we can do for you? And do you have the little guy with you? It would be so nice to see him.’

‘Yes, of course, Sam is here. Only he’s not feeling very well.’

Nathalie fell silent. Nothing would make her happier than to introduce Signe to her son. But not until they

were settled on the island; not until she saw what effect the recent events might have had on him.

'That's why I thought I'd ask for your help. We don't have much food out here, and I don't want to make Sam get up so we could go into—'

Before she could finish her sentence, Signe interrupted.

'But of course we'd love to help. Gunnar is taking the boat out this afternoon anyway, and I can do your grocery shopping for you. Just tell me what you need.'

'I can pay Gunnar back in cash, if you wouldn't mind buying the food for me.'

'Absolutely. That's no problem, dear. So, what should I add to my shopping list?'

Nathalie could picture Signe putting on her reading glasses, sliding them down to the very tip of her nose as she reached for pen and paper. Gratefully Nathalie rattled off everything she could imagine they might need. Including a bag of sweets for Sam. Otherwise things could get difficult when Saturday arrived. He always kept track of the weekdays, and on Sunday he was already counting down to the next bag of Saturday sweets.

When she finished the phone conversation, Nathalie considered waking Sam. But something told her that she should let him sleep another hour.

‘So how’s it going with your job?’ Signe tried to strike a light tone as she piled meatloaf, peas, mashed potatoes, and cream gravy on to a plate. A huge serving.

Ever since Matte had moved back to the area, he’d hardly touched his food, even though she’d made his favourite meals every time he had dinner with them. The question was whether he ate anything at all when he was alone in his flat. He was as thin as a rail. Thank goodness he at least looked better now that all traces of the assault had disappeared. When they went to see him

at Sahlgrenska Hospital, she hadn't been able to hold back a cry of dismay. He had been beaten to a pulp. His face was so swollen that she could hardly tell whether it was really Matte lying in that hospital bed.

'It's fine.'

Signe jumped at the sound of his voice. The answer to her question came after such a delay that she'd forgotten she asked it. Matte ploughed his fork through the mashed potatoes and then stabbed a bite of meatloaf. She realized she was holding her breath as she watched him raise the fork to his mouth.

'Stop staring at the boy while he's eating,' muttered Gunnar. He was already helping himself to seconds.

'I'm sorry,' she said, shaking her head. 'It's just that I'm . . . I'm so glad to see you eating something.'

'I'm not about to starve to death, Mamma. See? I'm eating.' As if in defiance, he loaded his fork and quickly stuffed the food into his mouth before it toppled off.

'They're not working you too hard at the office, are they?'

Signe received yet another annoyed look from Gunnar. She knew that he thought she was being over-protective, that she ought to leave their son in peace for a while. But she couldn't help it. Matte was her only child, and ever since that December day when he was born, which was almost forty years ago, she'd regularly woken up in the middle of the night, her nightgown soaked with sweat and her head filled with nightmares about the terrible things that might have happened to him. Nothing in life was more important to her than seeing him happy. She had always felt that way. And she knew that Gunnar was every bit as devoted to their son as she was. But he was better equipped to shut out the ominous thoughts that love for a child always entails.

She, on the other hand, was constantly aware that she

might lose everything in a matter of seconds. When Matte was a baby, she'd dreamt that he had a heart defect, and so she had persuaded the doctors to do a thorough examination, which showed that her son was perfectly healthy. During his first year she slept no more than an hour at a time, because she kept getting up to make sure he was still breathing. As he got bigger, up until he started school, she would cut his food into small pieces so they wouldn't get stuck in his throat and cause him to choke. And she had nightmares about cars driving right over his soft little body.

By the time he was a teenager, her dreams had become even worse, filled with alcoholic comas, drunken driving, and fist-fights. Sometimes she tossed and turned so much in bed that she woke Gunnar. One feverish nightmare after another until she forced herself to sit up and wait for Matte to come home, her gaze fixed first on the window, then on the telephone. Her heart gave a leap every time she heard someone outside, approaching the house.

The nights were a bit calmer after he moved away from home. Which was rather odd, because it seemed as if her fears should have grown when she was no longer able to keep watch over him. But she knew that he wouldn't take any unnecessary risks. He was a cautious person – that much she'd managed to teach him. He was also considerate and would never think of hurting anyone. In her mind, this meant that no one, in turn, would ever try to harm him either.

She smiled at the memory of all the animals he had brought home over the years. Injured, abandoned, or generally in a bad way. Three cats, two hedgehogs that had been hit by a car, and a sparrow with an injured wing. Not to mention the snake that she happened to find when she was just about to put his newly laundered

underwear in his drawer. After that episode, he had to swear to her that he'd leave all reptiles to their fate, no matter how injured or abandoned they might be. He had reluctantly agreed.

It had surprised Signe that he hadn't become a veterinarian or a doctor. But he seemed to enjoy his studies at the business school, and from what she understood, he definitely had a head for numbers. He also seemed to like his job at the council. Yet there was something about him that worried her. She couldn't put her finger on what it was, but the bad dreams had started up again. Every night she awoke, bathed in sweat, with fragments of images in her head. Something was amiss, but her tactful queries were merely met with silence. That was why she had decided to focus her efforts on getting him to eat. If only he would put on a few pounds, everything would probably be fine.

'Wouldn't you like some more?' she ventured as Matte put down his fork. Half of the huge portion of food was still left on his plate.

'That's enough, Signe,' said Gunnar. 'Leave the boy alone.'

'It's okay,' said Matte, giving them a wan smile.

Mamma's boy. He didn't want her to suffer a scolding for his sake, even though after forty years with her husband, she knew that Gunnar's bark was worse than his bite. In fact, it would be hard to find a kinder man. She knew that the problem was hers, that she worried too much.

'I'm sorry, Matte. Of course you don't have to eat any more.'

She called him by the nickname that he'd had since he first learned to talk but couldn't say his name properly. He'd called himself Matte, and everybody else had done the same.

‘Guess who’s home for a visit,’ she went on, cheerfully, reaching for the plates so she could clear the table.

‘I have no idea.’

‘Nathalie.’

Matte gave a start and looked at her.

‘Nathalie? My Nathalie?’

Gunnar chuckled. ‘I knew that would wake you up. You’ve always had a bit of a crush on her.’

‘Hey, knock it off.’

Signe suddenly pictured in her mind the teenage boy, a lock of hair falling into his eyes, as he told her with a stammer that he had a girlfriend.

‘I took some groceries over to her today,’ said Gunnar. ‘She’s over on Ghost Isle.’

‘Oh, don’t call it that.’ Signe shuddered. ‘Its name is Gråskär.’

‘When did she arrive?’ asked Matte.

‘Yesterday, I think. And she has the boy with her.’

‘How long is she staying?’

‘She said she doesn’t know.’ Gunnar stuck a wad of snuff under his upper lip and contentedly leaned back in his chair.

‘Was she . . . was she the same?’

Gunnar nodded. ‘Sure, of course she was just the same, our little Nathalie. Exactly the same. Although I thought she had a slightly sad look in her eyes, but maybe that’s my imagination. Maybe they had a quarrel back home. What do I know?’

‘Don’t go speculating about such matters,’ Signe scolded him. ‘Did you see the boy?’

‘No. Nathalie met me down at the dock, and I didn’t stay long. Why don’t you go out there and say hello?’ Gunnar said, turning to Matte. ‘I’m sure she’d be happy to have a visitor out there on Ghost Isle. Sorry. I mean, Gråskär,’ he added, giving his wife an annoyed look.

‘That’s all a bunch of nonsense and old superstitions. I don’t think we should be encouraging that sort of thing,’ said Signe, a deep furrow appearing between her brows.

‘Nathalie believes it,’ said Matte quietly. ‘She always said that she knew they were there.’

‘What do you mean by “they”?’ Much as Signe would have preferred to change the subject, she was curious to hear what Matte would say.

‘The dead. Nathalie said that she sometimes she saw them and heard them, but they didn’t mean any harm. They just ended up staying there.’

‘That’s awful. Now I think it’s time for dessert. I’ve made rhubarb pudding.’ Signe stood up abruptly. ‘Pappa’s right about one thing, though, even if he does talk a lot of drivel. It would make her happy to have you visit.’

Matte didn’t reply. He looked as if he were far away in his thoughts.

# FJÄLLBACKA 1870

*Emelie was terrified. She had never even seen the sea, let alone sailed on it in what seemed to be a very unstable boat. She had a tight grip on the railing. It felt as if she was being tossed forward and backward by the waves, with no chance of putting up any resistance or governing her own body. She sought Karl's eye, but he was standing there with a resolute expression, staring out at what awaited them far ahead.*

*The words were still ringing in her ears. They were probably nothing more than the superstitious ramblings of an old woman, but she couldn't help thinking about them. The woman had asked where they were headed when they loaded their belongings on to the small sailboat down at the Fjällbacka harbour.*

*'Gråskär,' Emelie had answered happily. 'My husband Karl is the new lighthouse keeper on the island.'*

*The woman didn't seem impressed. Instead, she had snorted and with a strange little smile she said, 'Gråskär? Oh, I see. In these parts nobody calls it Gråskär.'*

*'Is that right?' Emelie had the feeling that she really shouldn't ask, but her curiosity got the better of her. 'So what do you call it then?'*

*At first the old woman didn't reply. Then she lowered her voice and said, 'In these parts we call it Ghost Isle.'*

*'Ghost Isle?' Emelie's nervous laughter had carried over the water in the early morning haze. 'How strange. Why?'*

*The old woman's eyes glittered when she spoke. 'Because it's said that those who die out there never leave the island.' Then she turned on her heel and left Emelie standing there among all the bags and suitcases, with an awful lump in her stomach instead of the joy and anticipation that had filled her only a few moments ago.*

*And now it felt as if she might meet death at any second. The sea was so vast, so untamed, and it seemed to be drawing her towards it. She couldn't swim. If any of the waves, which looked so big even though Karl said they were only small swells, should capsize the boat, she was convinced that she would be pulled down into the deep. She gripped the railing harder, fixing her eyes on the floor, or the deck as Karl claimed it was called.*

*'Over there is Gråskär.'*

*Karl's voice demanded that she look, so she took a deep breath and raised her eyes to stare in the direction he was pointing. Her first thought was that the island was so beautiful. The cottage, though small, seemed to sparkle in the sunlight, and the grey rocks gleamed. She saw hollyhocks growing at one end of the house, and she was amazed that they could thrive in such a barren setting. To the west the island shoreline was very steep, as if the cliffs had been sheared in half. But in the other directions the rocks sloped gradually towards the water.*

*Suddenly the waves didn't seem so rough. She still longed to feel solid ground under her feet, but Gråskär had already enchanted her. And she pushed the old woman's words about Ghost Isle to the very back of her mind. Something that was so beautiful couldn't possibly conceal anything bad.*



She had heard them in the night. The same whispering, the same voices that she recalled from when she was a child. Her watch told her that it was three a.m. when she awoke. At first she didn't know what had caused her to wake up. Then she heard them. They were talking downstairs. A chair scraped. What did the dead talk about with each other? About things that had happened before they died? Or about what was taking place now, many years later?

Nathalie had been aware of their presence on the island for as long as she could remember. Her mother had said that, even as a baby, Nathalie would suddenly start laughing and waving her arms, as if she saw things that no one else could see. As she grew older, she became more and more conscious of them. A voice, something flitting past, the feeling that somebody else was in the room. But they didn't mean her any harm. She knew that back then, and she knew that now. For a long time she lay awake, listening to them until the voices finally lulled her back to sleep.

When morning arrived, she remembered the sounds as nothing more than a far-away dream. She made breakfast for herself and Sam, but he refused to eat his favourite cereal.

‘Please, sweetie. Just one spoonful. Just a teeny bit?’ she coaxed him but was unable to get him to take a single bite. With a sigh she put down the spoon. ‘You have to eat, you know.’ She stroked his cheek.

He hadn’t uttered a word since everything happened. But Nathalie pushed her concern to a far corner of her mind. She needed to allow him time and not try to pressure him; she simply had to be available to him as he processed the memories, putting them away and replacing them with others. And there was no better place to do that than here on Gråskär, far away from everything else, near the cliffs, the sun, and the salty sea.

‘You know what, let’s skip breakfast and go out for a swim instead.’ When she received no answer, she simply picked him up and carried him outside into the sun. Tenderly she took off his clothes and carried him down to the water, as if he were only a year old and not a big boy of five. The water wasn’t very warm, but he offered no objections as she sank down, immersing both of them while pressing his head protectively to her chest. This was the best medicine. They would stay here until the storm subsided. Until everything was back to normal.