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Opening Extract from...

The Ice Princess

Written by Camilla Lackberg

Translated from the Swedish by Steven T. Murray

Published by Harper

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Camilla Lackberg

the ice princess

'Heart-stopping ... a masterclass in Scandinavian crime writing'
Val McDermid



CAMILLA LACKBERG

The Ice Princess

Translated from the Swedish by
Steven T. Murray

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The house was desolate and empty. The cold penetrated into every corner. A thin sheet of ice had formed in the bathtub. She had begun to take on a slightly bluish tinge.

He thought she looked like a princess lying there. An ice princess.

The floor he was sitting on was ice cold, but the chill didn't bother him. He reached out his hand and touched her.

The blood on her wrists had congealed long ago.

His love for her had never been stronger. He caressed her arm, as if he were caressing the soul that had now left her body.

He didn't look back when he left. It was not 'good-bye', it was 'until we meet again'.



Eilert Berg was not a happy man. His breathing was strained and his breath came out of his mouth in little white puffs, but his health was not what he considered his biggest problem.

Svea had been so gorgeous in her youth, and he had hardly been able to stand the wait before he could get her into the bridal bed. She had seemed tender, affectionate, and a bit shy. Her true nature had come out after a period of youthful lust that was far too brief. She had put her foot down and kept him on a tight leash for close to fifty years. But Eilert had a secret. For the first time, he saw an opportunity for a little freedom in the autumn of his years and he did not intend to squander it.

He had toiled hard as a fisherman all his life, and the income had been just enough to provide for Svea and the children. After he retired they had only their meagre pensions to live on. With no money in his pocket there was no chance of starting his life over somewhere else, alone. Now this opportunity had appeared like a gift from above, and it was laughably easy besides. But if someone wanted to pay him a shameless amount of money for a few hours' work each week, that wasn't his problem. He wasn't about to complain. The banknotes in the wooden box behind the compost heap

had piled up impressively in only a year, and soon he would have enough to be able to move to warmer climes.

He stopped to catch his breath on the last steep approach to the house and massaged his arthritic hands. Spain, or maybe Greece, would thaw the chill that seemed to come from deep inside him. Eilert reckoned that he had at least ten years left before it would be time to turn up his toes, and he intended to make the most of them, so he'd be damned if he'd spend them at home with that old bitch.

His daily walk in the early morning hours had been his only time spent in peace and quiet; it also meant that he got some much-needed exercise. He always took the same route, and people who knew his habits would often come out and have a chat. He particularly enjoyed talking with the pretty girl in the house farthest up the hill by the Håkebacken school. She was there only on weekends, always alone, but she was happy to take the time to talk about the weather. Miss Alexandra was interested in Fjällbacka in the old days as well, and this was a topic that Eilert enjoyed discussing. She was nice to look at too. That was something he still appreciated, even though he was old now. Of course there had been a good deal of gossip about her, but once you started listening to women's chatter you wouldn't have much time for anything else.

About a year ago, she had asked him whether he might consider stopping in at the house as long as he was passing by on Friday mornings. The house was old, and both the furnace and the plumbing were unreliable. She didn't like coming home to a cold house on the weekends. She would give him a key, so he could just look in and see that everything was in order. There had been a number of break-ins in the area, so he was also supposed to check for signs of tampering with the doors and windows.

The task didn't seem particularly burdensome, and once a month there was an envelope with his name on it waiting

in her letter-box, containing what was, to him, a princely sum. He also thought it was nice to feel useful. It was so hard to go around idle after he had worked his whole life.

The gate hung crookedly and it groaned when he pushed on it, swinging it in towards the garden path, which had not yet been shovelled clear of snow. He wondered whether he ought to ask one of the boys to help her with that. It was no job for a woman.

He fumbled with the key, careful not to drop it into the deep snow. If he had to get down on his knees, he'd never be able to get up again. The steps to the front porch were icy and slick, so he had to hold on to the railing. Eilert was just about to put the key in the lock when he saw that the door was ajar. In astonishment, he opened it and stepped into the entryway.

'Hello, is anybody at home?'

Maybe she'd arrived a bit early today. There was no answer. He saw his own breath coming out of his mouth and realized that the house was freezing cold. All at once he didn't know what to do. There was something seriously wrong, and he didn't think it was just a faulty furnace.

He walked through the rooms. Nothing seemed to have been touched. The house was as neat as always. The VCR and TV were where they belonged. After looking through the entire ground floor, Eilert went upstairs. The staircase was steep and he had to grab on hard to the banister. When he reached the upper floor, he went first to the bedroom. It was feminine but tastefully furnished, and just as neat as the rest of the house. The bed was made and there was a suitcase standing at the foot. Nothing seemed to have been unpacked. Now he felt a bit foolish. Maybe she'd arrived a little early, discovered that the furnace wasn't working, and gone out to find someone to fix it. And yet he really didn't believe that explanation. Something was wrong. He could feel it in his joints, the same way he sometimes felt an approaching storm.

He cautiously continued looking through the house. The next room was a large loft, with a sloping ceiling and wooden beams. Two sofas faced each other on either side of a fireplace. There were some magazines spread out on the coffee table, but otherwise everything was in its place. He went back downstairs. There, too, everything looked the way it should. Neither the kitchen nor the living room seemed any different than usual. The only room remaining was the bathroom. Something made him pause before he pushed open the door. There was still not a sound in the house. He stood there hesitating for a moment, realized that he was acting a bit ridiculously, and firmly pushed open the door.

Seconds later, he was hurrying to the front door as fast as his age would permit. At the last moment, he remembered that the steps were slippery and grabbed hold of the railing to keep from tumbling headlong down the steps. He trudged through the snow on the garden path and swore when the gate stuck. Out on the pavement he stopped, at a loss what to do. A little way down the street he caught sight of someone approaching at a brisk walk and recognized Tore's daughter Erica. He called out to her to stop.

She was tired. So deathly tired. Erica Falck shut down her computer and went out to the kitchen to refill her coffee cup. She felt under pressure from all directions. The publishers wanted a first draft of the book in August, and she had hardly begun. The book about Selma Lagerlöf, her fifth biography about a Swedish woman writer, was supposed to be her best, but she was utterly drained of any desire to write. It was more than a month since her parents had died, but her grief was just as fresh today as when she received the news. Cleaning out her parents' house had not gone as quickly as she had hoped, either. Everything brought back memories. It took hours to pack every carton, because with each item she was engulfed in images from a life that sometimes felt

very close and sometimes very, very far away. But the packing couldn't be rushed. Her flat in Stockholm had been sublet for the time being, and she reckoned she might as well stay here at her parents' home in Fjällbacka and write. The house was a bit out of town in Sälvik, and the surroundings were calm and peaceful.

Erica sat down on the enclosed veranda and looked out over the islands and skerries. The view never failed to take her breath away. Each new season brought its own spectacular scenery, and today it was bathed in bright sunshine that sent cascades of glittering light over the thick layer of ice on the sea. Her father would have loved a day like this.

She felt a catch in her throat, and the air in the house all at once seemed stifling. She decided to go for a walk. The thermometer showed fifteen degrees below zero, and she put on layer upon layer of clothing. She was still cold when she stepped out the door, but it didn't take long before her brisk pace warmed her up.

Outside it was gloriously quiet. There were no other people about. The only sound she heard was her own breathing. This was a stark contrast to the summer months when the town was teeming with life. Erica preferred to stay away from Fjällbacka in the summertime. Although she knew that the survival of the town depended on tourism, she still couldn't shake the feeling that every summer the place was invaded by a swarm of grasshoppers. A many-headed monster that slowly, year by year, swallowed the old fishing village by buying up the houses near the water, which created a ghost town for nine months of the year.

Fishing had been Fjällbacka's livelihood for centuries. The unforgiving environment and the constant struggle to survive, when everything depended on whether the herring came streaming back or not, had made the people of the town strong and rugged. Then Fjällbacka had become picturesque and began to attract tourists with fat wallets. At the same

time, the fish lost their importance as a source of income, and Erica thought she could see the necks of the permanent residents bend lower with each year that passed. The young people moved away and the older inhabitants dreamed of bygone times. She too was among those who had chosen to leave.

She picked up her pace some more and turned left towards the hill leading up to the Håkebacken school. As Erica approached the top of the hill she heard Eilert Berg yelling something she couldn't really make out. He was waving his arms and coming towards her.

'She's dead.'

Eilert was breathing hard in small, short gasps, a nasty wheezing sound coming from his lungs.

'Calm down, Eilert. What happened?'

'She's lying in there! Dead.'

He pointed at the big, light-blue frame house at the crest of the hill, giving her an entreating look at the same time.

It took a moment before Erica comprehended what he was saying, but when the words sank in she shoved open the stubborn gate and plodded up to the front door. Eilert had left the door ajar, and she cautiously stepped over the threshold, uncertain what she might expect to see. For some reason she didn't think to ask.

Eilert followed warily and pointed mutely towards the bathroom on the ground floor. Erica was in no hurry. She turned to give Eilert an enquiring glance. He was pale and his voice was faint when he said, 'In there.'

Erica hadn't been in this house for a long time, but she had once known it well, and she knew where the bathroom was. She shivered in the cold despite her warm clothing. The door to the bathroom swung slowly inward, and she stepped inside.

She didn't really know what she had expected from Eilert's curt statement, but nothing had prepared her for the blood.

The bathroom was completely tiled in white, so the effect of the blood in and around the bathtub was even more striking. For a brief moment she thought that the contrast was pretty, before she realized that a real person was lying in the tub.

In spite of the unnatural interplay of white and blue on the body, Erica recognized her at once. It was Alexandra Wijkner, née Carlgren, daughter of the family that owned this house. In their childhood they had been best friends, but that felt like a whole lifetime ago. Now the woman in the bathtub seemed like a stranger.

Mercifully, the corpse's eyes were shut, but the lips were bright blue. A thin film of ice had formed around the torso, hiding the lower half of the body completely. The right arm, streaked with blood, hung limply over the edge of the tub, its fingers dipped in the congealed pool of blood on the floor. There was a razor blade on the edge of the tub. The other arm was visible only above the elbow, with the rest hidden beneath the ice. The knees also stuck up through the frozen surface. Alex's long blonde hair was spread like a fan over the end of the tub but looked brittle and frozen in the cold.

Erica stood for a long time looking at her. She was shivering both from the cold and from the loneliness exhibited by the macabre tableau. Then she backed silently out of the room.

Afterwards, everything seemed to happen in a blur. She rang the doctor on duty on her mobile phone, and waited with Eilert until the doctor and the ambulance arrived. She recognized the signs of shock from when she got the news about her parents, and she poured herself a large shot of cognac as soon as she got home. Perhaps not what the doctor would order, but it made her hands stop shaking.

The sight of Alex had taken her back to her childhood. It was more than twenty-five years ago that they had been

best friends, but even though many people had come and gone in her life since then, Alex was still close to her heart. They were just children back then. As adults they had been strangers to each other. And yet Erica had a hard time reconciling herself to the thought that Alex had taken her own life, which was the inescapable interpretation of what she had seen. The Alexandra she had known was one of the most alive and confident people she could imagine. An attractive, self-assured woman with a radiance that made people turn around to look at her. According to what Erica had heard through the grapevine, life had been kind to Alex, just as Erica had always thought it would be. She ran an art gallery in Göteborg, she was married to a man who was both successful and nice, and she lived in a house as big as a manor on the island of Särö. But something had obviously gone wrong.

Erica felt that she needed to divert her attention, so she punched in her sister's phone number.

'Were you asleep?'

'Are you kidding? Adrian woke me up at three in the morning, and by the time he finally fell asleep at six, Emma was awake and wanted to play.'

'Couldn't Lucas get up for once?'

Icy silence on the other end of the line, and Erica bit her tongue.

'He has an important meeting today, so he needed his sleep. Besides, there's a lot of turmoil at his job right now. The company is in a critical strategic stage.'

Anna's voice was getting louder, and Erica could hear an undertone of hysteria. Lucas always had a ready excuse, and Anna was probably quoting him directly. If it wasn't an important meeting, then he was stressed out by all the weighty decisions he had to make, or his nerves were shot because of the pressure associated with being, in his own words, such a successful businessman. So all responsibility

for the children fell to Anna. With a lively three-year-old and a baby of four months, Anna had looked ten years older than her thirty years when the sisters saw each other at their parents' funeral.

'Honey, don't touch that,' Anna shouted in English.

'Seriously, don't you think it's about time you started speaking Swedish with Emma?'

'Lucas thinks we should speak English at home. He says that we're going to move back to London anyway before she starts school.'

Erica was so tired of hearing the words 'Lucas thinks, Lucas says, Lucas feels that . . .' In her eyes her brother-in-law was a shining example of a first-class shithead.

Anna had met him when she was working as an *au pair* in London, and she was instantly enchanted by the onslaught of attention from the successful stockbroker Lucas Maxwell, ten years her senior. She gave up all her plans of starting at university, and instead devoted her life to being the perfect, ideal wife. The only problem was that Lucas was a man who was never satisfied, and Anna, who had always done exactly as she pleased ever since she was a child, had totally eradicated her own personality after marrying Lucas. Until the children arrived, Erica had still hoped that her sister would come to her senses, leave Lucas, and start living her own life. But when first Emma and then Adrian were born, she had to admit that her brother-in-law was unfortunately here to stay.

'I suggest that we drop the subject of Lucas and his opinions on child-rearing. What have auntie's little darlings been up to since last time?'

'Well, just the usual, you know . . . Emma threw a tantrum yesterday and managed to cut up a small fortune in baby clothes before I caught her, and Adrian has either been throwing up or screaming non-stop for three days.'

'It sounds as though you need a change of scene. Can't

you bring the kids with you and come up here for a week? I could really use your help going through a bunch of stuff. And soon we'll need to tackle all the paperwork too.'

'Er, well . . . We were planning to talk to you about that.'

As usual when she had to deal with something unpleasant, Anna's voice began to quaver noticeably. Erica was instantly on guard. That 'we' sounded ominous. As soon as Lucas had a finger in the pie, it usually meant that there was something that would benefit him to the detriment of all others involved.

Erica waited for Anna to go on.

'Lucas and I have been thinking about moving back to London as soon as he gets the Swedish subsidiary on its feet. We weren't really planning to bother with maintaining a house here. It's no fun for you, either, having the hassle of a big country house. I mean, without a family and all . . .'

The silence was palpable.

'What are you trying to say?'

Erica twirled a lock of her curly hair around her index finger, a habit she'd had since childhood and reverted to whenever she was nervous.

'Well . . . Lucas thinks we ought to sell the house. It would be hard for us to hold on to it and keep it up. Besides, we want to buy a house in Kensington when we move back, and even though Lucas makes plenty of money, the cash from the sale would make a big difference. I mean, a house on the west coast in that area would go for several million kronor. The Germans are wild about ocean views and sea air.'

Anna kept pressing her argument, but Erica felt she'd heard enough and quietly hung up the phone in the middle of a sentence. Anna had certainly managed to divert her attention, as usual.

She had always been more of a mother than a big sister to Anna. Ever since they were kids she had protected and

watched over her. Anna had been a real child of nature, a whirlwind who followed her own impulses without considering the results. More times than she could count, Erica had been forced to rescue Anna from sticky situations. Lucas had knocked the spontaneity and *joie de vivre* right out of her. More than anything else, that was what Erica could never forgive.

By morning, the events of the preceding day seemed like a bad dream. Erica had slept a deep and dreamless sleep, but still felt as though she'd barely had a catnap. She was so tired that her whole body ached. Her stomach was rumbling loudly, but after a quick peek in the fridge she realized that a trip to Eva's Mart would be necessary before she was going to get any food to eat.

The town was deserted, and at Ingrid Bergman Square there was no trace of the thriving commerce of the summer months. Visibility was good, without mist or haze, and Erica could see all the way to the outer point of the island of Valö, which was silhouetted against the horizon. Together with Kråkholmen it bordered a narrow passage to the outer archipelago.

She met no one until she had walked halfway up Galärbacken. It was an encounter she would have preferred to avoid, and she instinctively looked for a possible escape route.

'Good morning.' Elna Persson's voice chirped with unabashed sprightliness. 'Well, if it isn't our little authoress out walking in the morning sun.'

Erica cringed inside.

'Yes, I was just on my way down to Eva's to do a little shopping.'

'You poor dear, you must be completely distraught after such a horrible experience.'

Elna's double chins quivered with excitement, and Erica

thought she looked like a fat little sparrow. Her woollen coat was shades of green and covered her body from her shoulders to her feet, giving the impression of one big shapeless mass. Her hands had a firm grip on her handbag. A disproportionately small hat was balanced on her head. The material looked like felt, and it too was an indeterminate moss-green colour. Her eyes were small and deeply set in a protective layer of fat. Right now they were fixed on Erica. Clearly she was expected to respond.

'Yes, well, it wasn't very pleasant.'

Elna nodded sympathetically. 'Yes, I happened to run into Mrs Rosengren and she told me that she drove past and saw you and an ambulance outside the Carlgrens' house, and we knew at once that something horrid must have happened. And later in the afternoon when I happened to ring Dr Jacobsson, I heard about the tragic event. Yes, he told me in confidence, of course. Doctors take an oath of confidentiality, and that's something one has to respect.'

She nodded knowingly to show how much she respected Dr Jacobsson's oath of confidentiality.

'So young and all. Naturally one has to wonder what could be the reason. Personally I always thought she seemed rather overwrought. I've known her mother Birgit for years, and she's a woman who has always been a bundle of nerves, and everyone knows that's hereditary. She turned all stuck-up, too, Birgit I mean, when Karl-Erik got that big management job in Göteborg. Then Fjällbacka wasn't good enough for her anymore. No, it was the big city for her. But I tell you, money doesn't make anyone happy. If that girl had been allowed to grow up here instead of pulling up roots and moving to the big city, things wouldn't have ended this way. I think they even packed the poor girl off to some school in Switzerland, and you know how things go at places like that. Oh yes, that sort of thing can leave a mark on a person's soul for the rest of her life. Before they moved away from here, she was the

happiest and liveliest little girl one could imagine. Didn't you two play together when you were young? Well, in my opinion . . .'

Elna continued her monologue, and Erica, who could see no end to her misery, feverishly began searching for a way to extricate herself from the conversation, which was beginning to take on a more and more unpleasant tone. When Elna paused to take a breath, Erica saw her chance.

'It was terribly nice talking to you, but unfortunately I have to get going. There's a lot to be done. I'm sure you'll understand.'

She put on her most pathetic expression, hoping to entice Elna onto this sidetrack.

'But of course, my dear. I wasn't thinking. All this must have been so hard for you, coming so soon after your own family tragedy. You'll have to forgive an old woman's thoughtlessness.'

By this point Elna was almost moved to tears, so Erica merely nodded graciously and hurried to say good-bye. With a sigh of relief she continued walking to Eva's Mart, hoping to avoid any more nosy ladies.

But luck was not with her. She was grilled mercilessly by most of the excited residents of Fjällbacka, and she didn't dare breathe freely until her own house was within sight. But one comment she heard stayed with her. Alex's parents had arrived in Fjällbacka late last night and were now staying with her aunt.

Erica set the bags of groceries on the kitchen table and began putting away the food. Despite all her good intentions, the bags were not as full of staples as she had planned before she walked into the shop. But if she couldn't buy herself treats on a day as miserable as this, when could she? As if on signal, her stomach started growling. With a flourish, she plopped twelve Weight Watchers points onto a plate in the form of two cinnamon buns. She ate them with a cup of coffee.

It felt wonderful to sit and look at the familiar view outside her window, but she still hadn't got used to the silence in the house. She had been at home alone before, of course, but it wasn't the same thing. Back then there had been a presence, an awareness that somebody could walk through the door at any moment. Now it seemed as if the soul of the house had gone.

Pappa's pipe lay by the window, waiting to be filled with tobacco. The smell still lingered in the kitchen, but Erica thought it was getting fainter each day.

She had always loved the smell of a pipe. When she was little she often sat on her father's lap and closed her eyes as she leaned against his chest. The smoke from the pipe had settled in all his clothing, and the scent had meant security in the world of her childhood.

Erica's relationship with her mother was infinitely more complicated. She couldn't remember a single time when she was growing up that she'd ever received a sign of tenderness from her mother; not a hug, a caress, or a word of comfort. Elsy Falck was a hard and unforgiving woman who kept their home in impeccable order but who never allowed herself to be happy about anything in life. She was deeply religious, and like many in the coastal communities of Bohuslän, she had grown up in a town that was still marked by the teachings of Pastor Schartau. Even as a child she had been taught that life would be endless suffering; the reward would come in the next life. Erica had often wondered what her father, with his good nature and humorous disposition, had seen in Elsy, and on one occasion in her teens she had blurted out the question in a moment of fury. He didn't get angry. He just sat down and put his arm round her shoulders. Then he told her not to judge her mother too harshly. Some people have a harder time showing their feelings than others, he explained as he stroked her cheeks, which were still flushed with rage. She refused to listen to him then, and she was

still convinced that he was only trying to cover up what was so obvious to Erica: her mother had never loved her, and that was something she would have to carry with her for the rest of her life.

Erica decided on impulse to visit Alexandra's parents. Losing a parent was hard, but it was still part of the natural order of things. Losing a child must be horrible. Besides, she and Alexandra had once been as close as only best friends can be. Of course, that was almost twenty-five years ago, but so many of her happiest childhood memories were intimately associated with Alex and her family.

The house looked deserted. Alexandra's maternal aunt and uncle lived in Tallgatan, a street halfway between the centre of Fjällbacka and the Sälvik campground. All the houses were perched high up on a slope, and their lawns slanted steeply down towards the road on the side facing the water. The main door was in the back of the house, and Erica did not hesitate before ringing the doorbell. The sound reverberated and then died out. Not a peep was heard from inside, and she was just about to turn and leave when the door slowly opened.

'Yes?'

'Hi, I'm Erica Falck. I'm the one who . . .'

She left the rest of her sentence hanging in mid-air. She felt foolish for introducing herself so formally. Alex's aunt, Ulla Persson, knew very well who she was. Erica's mother and Ulla had been active in the church group together for many years, and sometimes Ulla would come over on Sundays for coffee.

She stepped aside and let Erica into the entryway. Not a single light was lit in the entire house. Of course, it wouldn't be evening for several hours yet, but the afternoon dusk was beginning to descend and the shadows were growing longer. Muted sobs could be heard from the room straight down the

hall. Erica took off her shoes and coat. She caught herself moving extremely quietly and cautiously because the mood in the house permitted nothing else. Ulla went into the kitchen and let Erica find her own way. When she entered the living room, the weeping stopped. On a sectional sofa in front of an enormous picture window, Birgit and Karl-Erik Carlgren sat desperately holding on to each other. Both had wet streaks running down their faces, and Erica felt that she was trespassing in an extremely private space. Perhaps she shouldn't intrude. But it was too late to worry about that now.

She sat down cautiously on the sofa facing them and clasped her hands in her lap. No one had yet uttered a word since she entered the room.

'How did she look?'

At first Erica didn't understand what Birgit had said. Her voice was tiny, like a child's. Erica didn't know what to answer.

'Lonely,' was what finally came out, and she regretted it at once. 'I didn't mean . . .' The sentence faded away and was absorbed by the silence.

'She didn't kill herself!'

Birgit's voice all at once sounded strong and determined. Karl-Erik squeezed his wife's hand and nodded in agreement. They probably noticed Erica's sceptical expression, because Birgit repeated: 'She didn't kill herself! I know her better than anyone, and I know that she would never be capable of taking her own life. She would never have had the courage to do it! You must realize that. You knew her too!'

She straightened up a bit more with each syllable, and Erica saw a spark light up in her eyes. Birgit was opening and closing her hands convulsively, over and over, and she looked Erica straight in the eye until one of them was forced to look away. It was Erica who yielded first. She shifted her gaze to look around the room. Anything to avoid fixing her eyes on the grief of Alexandra's mother.

The room was cosy but a bit over-decorated for Erica's taste. The curtains had been skilfully hung with enormous flounces matching the sofa pillows that had been sewn from the same floral fabric. Knick-knacks covered every available surface. Hand-carved wooden bowls decorated with ribbons with cross-stitch embroidery shared the room with porcelain dogs with eternally moist eyes. What saved the room was the panoramic window. The view was wonderful. Erica wished that she could freeze the moment and keep looking out the window instead of being drawn into the grief of these people. Instead she turned her gaze back to the Carlgrens.

'Birgit, I'm really not sure. It was twenty-five years ago that Alexandra and I were friends. I really don't know a thing about her. Sometimes you just don't know someone as well as you think you do . . .'

Even Erica could hear how lame this sounded. Her words seemed to ricochet off the walls. This time Karl-Erik spoke up. He extricated himself from Birgit's convulsive grip and leaned forward as if wanting to make sure that Erica wouldn't miss one word of what he intended to say.

'I know it sounds as if we're denying what happened, and perhaps we're not presenting a very coherent impression right now. But even if Alex did take her own life for some reason, she would never, and I repeat *never*, have done it this way! You probably remember that Alex was always hysterically afraid of blood. If she got the slightest cut she was absolutely uncontrollable until someone put a bandage on it. Sometimes she even fainted when she saw blood. That's why I'm quite sure that she would have chosen some other method, like sleeping pills, for instance. There is no way in hell that Alex could have managed to take a razor blade and cut herself, first on one arm and then on the other. And then, it's like my wife says: Alex was fragile. She was not a courageous person. An inner strength is required for someone to decide to take her own life. She didn't have that kind of strength.'

His voice was compelling. Even though Erica was still convinced that she was listening to the hope of two people in despair, she couldn't help feeling a flicker of doubt. When she thought about it, there was something that hadn't felt right when she stepped into that bathroom yesterday morning. Not because it would ever feel right to discover a dead body, but there was something about the atmosphere in the room that didn't really fit. A presence, a shadow. That was as close to a description as she could come. She still believed that something had driven Alexandra Wijkner to suicide, but she couldn't deny that something about the Carlgrens' stubborn insistence had struck a chord.

It suddenly occurred to her how much the adult Alex looked like her mother. Birgit Carlgren was petite and slender, with the same light-blonde hair as her daughter, except that instead of Alex's long mane she wore hers cut in a chic page-boy. Birgit was dressed all in black, and despite her sorrow she seemed aware of what a startling appearance she made, thanks to the contrast between light and dark. Tiny gestures betrayed her vanity. A hand carefully patting her coiffure, a collar straightened to perfection. Erica recalled that Birgit's wardrobe had seemed a veritable Mecca to eight-year-olds who loved to dress up, and her jewellery case had been the closest thing to heaven they could imagine in those days.

Next to Birgit, her husband looked ordinary. Far from unattractive, but simply unremarkable. Karl-Erik Carlgren had a long, narrow face engraved with fine lines. His hairline had receded far up his scalp. He too was dressed all in black, but unlike his wife the colour made him look even greyer. Erica could sense that it was time for her to leave. She wondered what she actually had wanted to accomplish by visiting them.

She stood up and the Carlgrens did too. Birgit gave her husband an urgent look, as if exhorting him to say something. Apparently it was something they had discussed before Erica arrived.

'We'd like you to write an article about Alex. For publication in *Bohusläningen*. About her life, her dreams – and her death. A commemoration of her life. It would mean a great deal to Birgit and me.'

'But wouldn't you rather have something in *Göteborgs-Posten*? I mean, she did live in Göteborg, after all. And you do too, for that matter.'

'Fjällbacka has always been our home, and it always will be. And that was true for Alex too. You can start by talking to her husband Henrik. We spoke with him and he's willing to help. Of course you'll be compensated for all your expenses.'

With that they apparently considered the subject closed. Without actually having accepted the assignment, Erica found herself standing outside on the steps, with the telephone number and address of Henrik Wijkner in her hand, as the door closed behind her. Even though she really had no desire to take on this task, to be perfectly honest the germ of an idea had begun to sprout in her writer's brain. Erica pushed away the thought and felt like a bad person for even thinking it, but it was persistent and refused to go away. An idea for a new book of her own, an idea that she had long been searching for, was right here in front of her. The account of a woman's path towards her destiny. An explanation of what had driven a young, beautiful, and obviously privileged woman to a self-inflicted death. She would not mention Alex's name, of course, but it would be a story based on what she could dig up about the path she had taken towards death. To date Erica had published four books, but they were all biographies about other prominent female authors. The courage to create her own stories had not yet emerged, but she knew that there were books inside her just waiting to be put down on paper. This one might give her the push she needed, the inspiration she'd been waiting for. The fact that she had once known Alex would only be to her advantage.

As a human being she writhed with repugnance at the thought, but as a writer she was jubilant.

The brush spread broad swathes of red across the canvas. He had been painting since dawn, and for the first time in several hours he now took a step back to look at what he had created. To the untrained eye it was merely large patches of red, orange and yellow, irregularly arranged over the large canvas. For him it was humiliation and resignation re-created in the colours of passion.

He always painted using the same colours. The past shrieked and mocked him from the canvas, and now he went back to painting with growing frenzy.

After another hour he realized that he had earned the first beer of the morning. He took the tin standing closest to him, ignoring the fact that he had flicked cigarette ashes into it sometime the night before. Flakes of ash stuck to his lips, but he eagerly downed the stale beer, then tossed the tin to the floor after he had slurped the last drop.

His underwear, which was all he was wearing, was yellow in front from beer or dried urine, he couldn't tell which. Possibly a combination of the two. His greasy hair hung over his shoulders, and his chest was pale and sunken. The overall impression of Anders Nilsson was of a wreck, but the painting that stood on his easel showed a talent that was in sharp contrast to the artist's own degeneration.

He sank to the floor and leaned against the wall to face the painting. Next to him lay an unopened can of beer, and he liked the popping sound it made when he pulled the tab. The colours shrieked loudly at him, reminding him of something he had spent the greater part of his life trying to forget. Why in hell was she going to ruin everything now! Why couldn't she just let things be? That selfish fucking whore, she was thinking only of herself. Sweet and innocent as a bloody princess. But he knew what was beneath the surface.

They were cast from the same mould. Years of mutual pain had shaped them, welding them together, yet suddenly she thought she could unilaterally change the order of things.

'Shit.'

He roared and flung the half-full can of beer straight at the canvas. It didn't rip, which infuriated him even more. The canvas merely buckled and the can slid to the floor. The liquid sprayed across the painting, and red, orange and yellow began to flow together, blending into new shades. He observed the effect with satisfaction.

He still hadn't sobered up after yesterday's 24-hour binge. The beer did its work quickly despite his many years of hard drinking and his high tolerance for alcohol. He slowly sank into the familiar fog with the smell of old vomit hanging in his nostrils.

She had her own key to the flat. In the hall, she carefully wiped off her shoes, although she knew it was a complete waste of time. Things were cleaner outdoors. She set down the bags of groceries and hung her coat neatly on a hanger. It wasn't a good idea to announce her arrival. By this time he had probably already passed out.

The kitchen to the left of the entryway was in its usual wretched state. Several weeks' worth of dirty dishes were stacked up, not only in the sink but on the table and chairs and even on the floor. Fag-ends, beer cans, and empty bottles were everywhere.

She opened the door of the fridge to put in the food and saw that she was in the nick of time. It was completely empty. She spent several minutes putting things away, and then it was full again. She stood still for a moment, marshalling her strength.

The flat was a small bed-sit. She was the one who had brought in the few pieces of furniture, but there wasn't much she could contribute. The room was dominated by the big

easel next to the window. A shabby mattress was flung in one corner. She could never afford to buy him a regular bed.

At first she had tried to help him keep everything tidy, both the flat and himself. She mopped, picked up after him, washed his clothes and even gave him baths. Back then she still hoped that everything would turn around. That everything would blow over by itself. But that was many years ago now. Somewhere along the way she just couldn't face it anymore. Now she contented herself with seeing that at least he had food to eat.

She often wished that she still had the energy. Guilt weighed heavy on her shoulders and chest. In the past when she knelt down to wipe up his vomit, she had sometimes felt for a moment that she was paying off some of that guilt. But now she bore it without hope.

She looked at him as he lay slumped against the wall. A foul-smelling wreck, but with an incredible talent hidden behind that filthy exterior. Countless times she had wondered how things would have been if she had made a different choice that day. Every day for twenty-five years she had wondered how life would have turned out if she had acted differently. Twenty-five years is a long time to brood.

Sometimes she just let him lie there on the floor when she left. The cold had seeped in from outside, and the floor felt ice cold to her feet through the thin tights. She pulled on his arm that hung limp and lifeless at his side. He didn't respond. Wrapping both hands around his wrist, she dragged him towards the mattress. She tried to roll him onto it and shuddered a little when she pressed her hands against the slack flesh of his waist. After a bit of manoeuvring she got most of his body onto the mattress. Since there was no blanket she took his jacket from the entryway and spread it over him. The effort made her pant, and she sat down. Without the strength in her arms that many years of cleaning had given her, she would never have managed this at her age. She was

worried about what would happen on the day she could no longer physically cope with the effort.

A lock of greasy hair had fallen over his face, and she tenderly brushed it aside with her index finger. Life had not turned out the way she had imagined for either of them, but she would devote the rest of hers to preserving what little they had left.

People averted their eyes when she met them in the street, but not quickly enough that she didn't notice the look of pity. Anders was notorious in the whole town, and a permanent member of the local AA. Sometimes he would stagger through town when he was drunk, screaming abuse at everyone he met. He received the loathing and she received the pity. Actually, it should have been the other way round. She was the one who was loathsome, and Anders the one who deserved pity. It was her weakness that had shaped his life. But she would never again be weak.

She sat there for several hours, stroking his forehead. Sometimes he would stir in his sleep, but he was soothed by her touch. Outside the window life went on as usual, but inside that room time stood still.

Monday came with temperatures above freezing and clouds heavy with rain. Erica was always a careful driver, but now she drove a bit slower to give herself some leeway in case she happened to skid. Driving wasn't her strong suit, but she preferred the solitude of a car to being crowded into the E6 express bus or the train.

When she turned right onto the motorway the condition of the road improved and she allowed herself to increase her speed a bit. She was supposed to meet Henrik Wijkner at noon, but she had left Fjällbacka early and had plenty of time for the trip to Göteborg.

For the first time since she saw Alex in that icy-cold bathroom she thought about the phone conversation with Anna.

She still had a hard time imagining that Anna would really go through with selling the house. It was their childhood home, after all, and their parents would have been upset if they knew. But anything was possible when Lucas was involved. It was because she could see how lacking in scruples he was that she even considered the likelihood. He kept sinking to ever lower depths, but this was far beyond almost anything he'd done before.

But before she seriously began worrying about the house, she ought to find out where she stood from a purely legal point of view. Until then, she refused to let Lucas's latest ploy get her down. Right now, she had to concentrate on the upcoming talk with Alex's husband.

Henrik Wijkner had sounded pleasant on the telephone, and he had already heard the news when she rang. Of course she could come over and ask him questions about Alexandra, since the memorial article was so important to her parents.

It would be interesting to see what Alex's home looked like, even though Erica wasn't eager to confront another person's grief. The meeting with Alex's parents had been heart-wrenching. As a writer, she preferred to observe reality from a distance. Study it from afar, safely and objectively. At the same time it would be an opportunity to get her first inkling of what Alex had been like as an adult.

From their first day at school Erica and Alex had been inseparable. Erica was tremendously proud that Alex had chosen her as a friend. Alex was like a magnet to all who came near her. Everyone wanted to be with Alex, yet she was totally oblivious to her popularity. She was withdrawn in a way that displayed a self-confidence which Erica now, as an adult, perceived as very unusual for a child. And yet Alex was open and generous and showed no sign of shyness despite her reserved manner. She was the one who chose Erica as her friend. Erica never would have dared approach Alex on her own. They were inseparable until the last year

before Alex moved away and then vanished from her life for good. Alex had begun to withdraw more and more, and Erica spent hours alone in her room mourning for their lost friendship. Then one day when she rang the doorbell at Alex's house, nobody answered. Twenty-five years later Erica could still remember in detail the pain she felt when she realized that Alex had moved without even mentioning it to her, without saying good-bye. She still had no idea what had happened. Being a child, she'd put all the blame on herself and simply assumed that Alex had grown tired of her.

Erica manoeuvred her way with some difficulty through Göteborg in the direction of Särö. She knew her way around the city after having studied there for four years, but back then she hadn't owned a car, so in that respect Göteborg was still a blank space on the map. If she could have driven on the bike paths things would have been much easier. Göteborg was a nightmare for an insecure driver, with plenty of one-way streets, roundabouts with heavy traffic, and the stressful ringing of trams coming at her from every direction. It also felt as though all roads were leading to Hisingen, northwest of the city. If she took the wrong exit she was bound to end up there.

The directions that Henrik had given her were clear, and she found the address on the first try, managing to stay out of Hisingen this time.

The house exceeded all her expectations. An enormous white villa from the turn of the last century, with a view of the water and a small gazebo that held the promise of warm summer nights to come. The garden, now hidden beneath a thick white mantle of snow, had been carefully laid out. Because of its sheer size, it would demand the tender care of a skilled gardener.

Erica drove down an avenue of willow trees and through a tall wrought-iron gate onto the gravel courtyard in front of the house.

Stone steps led up to a substantial oak door. There was no modern doorbell; instead she banged hard with a massive door-knocker. The door was opened at once. She had almost expected to be greeted by a housemaid in a starched apron and cap, but instead she was received by a man she realized at once had to be Henrik Wijkner. He was unabashedly good-looking, and Erica was glad she had devoted a little extra effort to her appearance before she left home.

She stepped into a huge entrance hall and saw immediately that it was bigger than her entire flat back in Stockholm.

'Erica Falck.'

'Henrik Wijkner. We met last summer as I recall. At that restaurant down by Ingrid Bergman Square.'

'Yes, that's right. At Café Bryggan. It seems like an eternity ago that we had summer. Especially considering this weather we're having.'

Henrik muttered something polite in reply. He helped her off with her coat and showed her the way to a parlour off the hall. She sat down gingerly on a sofa. Even with her limited knowledge of antiques she could tell the sofa was old and probably very valuable. She said yes to Henrik's offer of coffee. As he pottered about with the coffee and they exchanged comments about the wretched weather, she watched him surreptitiously, concluding that he didn't look particularly bereaved. But Erica also knew that it might not mean anything. Different people had different ways of grieving.

He was casually dressed in perfectly pressed chinos and a sky-blue Ralph Lauren shirt. His hair was dark, almost black, and cut in a style that was elegant but not excessively fastidious. His eyes were dark brown and gave him a slightly Southern European look. She happened to prefer men who looked considerably more rough-and-tumble, but she couldn't help being affected by the attractive power of this man who looked as if he'd stepped right out of a fashion magazine. Henrik and Alex must have made a strikingly good-looking couple.

'What an incredibly lovely house.'

'Thank you. I'm the fourth generation of Wijkners to live here. My paternal great-grandfather had the house built early in the last century and it's been in the family ever since. If these walls could talk . . .' He made a sweeping gesture and smiled at Erica.

'Well, it must feel strange to have so much of your family's history around you.'

'Yes and no. But it is a great responsibility. In the footsteps of my ancestors and all that.'

He chuckled softly and Erica didn't think he looked particularly weighed down by responsibility. She, however, felt helplessly out of place in this elegant room and struggled in vain to find a comfortable way to sit on the lovely but spartan sofa. Finally she perched on the very edge and carefully sipped her coffee, which was served in small mocha cups. Her little finger twitched a bit but she resisted the impulse. The cups were perfect for crooking one's little finger, but she suspected that it would probably seem more of a parody than a sign of sophistication. She also struggled briefly when confronted with the plate of cakes on the table, but lost the battle in a duel with a thick slice of sponge cake. She estimated it at ten Weight Watchers points.

'Alex loved this house.'

Erica had been wondering how to broach the real reason why she was sitting here. She was grateful when Henrik himself brought up the topic of Alex.

'How long did you live here together?'

'Ever since we were married, fifteen years. We met when we were both studying in Paris. She was reading art history, and I was trying to acquire enough knowledge about the business world to run the family empire. And I did, but just barely.'

Erica strongly suspected that Henrik Wijkner had never done anything 'just barely'.

'Directly after the wedding we moved back to Sweden, to this house. My parents were both dead, and the house had stood empty for a couple of years while I was abroad, but Alex immediately began to renovate it. She wanted everything to be perfect. All the details in the house, all the wallpaper, rugs and furniture, have either been here since the house was built and restored to its former appearance, or else they were purchased by Alex. She went round to, well, I don't know how many antique dealers to find exactly the same items that were in the house when my great-grandfather lived here. She had stacks of old photographs to help her, and the result is fantastic. At the same time she was busy setting up her own gallery. I still don't understand how she found time to do everything.'

'What was Alex like as a person?'

Henrik took his time before answering the question.

'Beautiful, calm, a perfectionist to her fingertips. She might have seemed vain to people who didn't know her, but that was because she didn't easily let anyone into her life. Alex was the sort of person one had to fight to get to know.'

Erica was acutely aware of what he meant. Alex's air of remoteness was both intriguing and marked her as stuck-up, even as a child. Yet the same girls who called her that often fought the hardest to sit next to her.

'How do you mean?'

Henrik looked out of the window and for the first time since she entered the Wijkner home, Erica thought she saw some feeling behind that charming exterior.

'She always went her own way. She didn't take anyone else into account. Not out of malice, there was nothing malicious about Alex, but out of necessity. The most important thing for my wife was to avoid getting hurt. Everything else, all other feelings, had to take a back seat to that priority. But the problem is, if you don't let anyone through the wall out of fear that they might be an enemy, then you end up locking out all your friends as well.'

He fell silent. Then he looked at Erica. 'She talked a lot about you.'

Erica couldn't conceal her surprise. In view of the way their friendship had ended, Erica assumed that Alex had turned her back on her and had never given her another thought.

'I vividly remember one thing she told me. She said that you were the last real friend she ever had. "The last pure friendship." That's exactly what she said. I thought it was a rather odd thing to say, but she never mentioned it again, and by that time I'd learned not to question her. That's why I'm telling you things about Alex that I've never told anyone else. Something tells me that despite all the years that have passed, you still had a place in my wife's heart.'

'You loved her?'

'More than anything else in the world. Alexandra was my whole life. Everything I did, everything I said, revolved around her. The ironic thing is that she never even noticed. If only she had let me in, she wouldn't be dead today. The answer was always right in front of her nose, but she refused to see it. My wife had a strange mixture of cowardice and courage.'

'Birgit and Karl-Erik don't think she took her own life.'

'Yes, I know. They assume that I wouldn't believe she did it either, but to be honest, I don't quite know what I think. I lived with her for over fifteen years, but I never really knew her.'

His voice was still dry and matter-of-fact. Judging by his tone of voice he could have been talking about the weather, but Erica realized that her first impression of Henrik couldn't have been more off the mark. The depth of his sorrow was enormous. He just didn't put it on public display the way Birgit and Karl-Erik Carlgren did. Perhaps because of her own experiences, Erica understood instinctively that he was not suffering merely from grief over his wife's death but also from forever losing the chance to get her to love him the

way he loved her. It was a feeling with which she was intimately familiar.

'What was she afraid of?'

'I've asked myself that question a thousand times. I really don't know. As soon as I tried to talk to her about it she would shut the door, and I never managed to get in. It was as though she harboured a secret that she couldn't share with anyone. Does that sound odd? But because I don't know what that secret was, I can't say whether she was capable of taking her own life.'

'How was her relationship with her parents and her sister?'

'Well, how should I describe it?' He thought for a long time before he replied. 'Tense. As if they were all tiptoeing round one another. The only one who ever said what she thought was her little sister Julia, and she's a very strange person in general. It always felt as if a whole different dialogue were going on underneath what was being said out loud. I don't quite know how to explain it. It was as if they were speaking in code, and someone had forgotten to give me the key.'

'What do you mean when you say that Julia is odd?'

'As you probably know, Birgit gave birth to Julia quite late in life. She was already a good bit past forty, and it wasn't planned. So Julia has somehow always been the cuckoo in the nest. And it couldn't have been very easy to have a sister like Alex. Julia was not a pretty child. She hasn't grown any more attractive as an adult, and you know how Alex looked. Birgit and Karl-Erik have always been extremely focused on Alex, and Julia was simply forgotten. Her way of dealing with it was to turn inward. But I like her. There's definitely something underneath her surly exterior. I only hope that someday, someone will make the effort to find it.'

'How has she reacted to Alex's death? What was their relationship like?'

'You'll probably have to ask Birgit or Karl-Erik about that. I haven't seen Julia in more than six months. She's studying

to be a teacher up north in Umeå, and she doesn't like coming back here. She didn't even come home for Christmas last year. As far as her relationship with Alex goes, Julia has always worshipped her big sister. Alex had already started boarding school when Julia was born, so she wasn't home much, but whenever we visited the family Julia would follow her sister around like a puppy. Alex didn't like it much but she left her alone. Sometimes she could get angry at Julia and snap at her, but usually she just ignored her sister.'

Erica felt that the conversation was nearing an end. In the pauses the silence in the house had been total, and she could sense that in the midst of all this luxury it had now become a lonely house for Henrik Wijkner.

Erica stood up and held out her hand. He took it in both of his, held it for a few seconds, then released it. He walked her to the door.

'I think I'll drive down to the gallery and look around a bit,' she said.

'That's a good idea. Alex was incredibly proud of it. She built the business from the ground up, together with a friend from her student years in Paris, Francine Bijoux. Well, now her name is Sandberg. We used to socialize with Francine and her husband a good deal, although that became less frequent after they had children. Francine is probably at the gallery. I'll give her a ring and explain who you are. I'm sure she'll be glad to help out and tell you a bit about Alex.'

Henrik held open the door for Erica. With a last thank you, she turned away from Alex's husband and walked to her car.

At the same moment that she got out of her car, the heavens opened up. The gallery was in Chalmersgaten, parallel to the main shopping street Avenyn, but after half an hour of looking for a parking spot Erica resigned herself and parked at Heden. It wasn't so far away, really, but in the pouring rain it felt like ten kilometres. And the parking fee was twelve kronor

an hour. Erica could feel her mood sinking. Naturally she hadn't brought an umbrella with her, and she knew that her curly hair would soon look like a bad home-perm.

She hurried across Avenyn and just managed to dodge the number 4 tram that came thundering in the direction of Mölndal. After passing Valand, where she had spent many an evening during her student years, she turned left into Chalmersgaten.

Galleri Abstract was on the left, with big display windows facing the street. A bell over the door pinged as she entered, and she saw that the space was much bigger than it looked from outside. The walls, floor and ceiling were painted white so as not to distract from the works of art hanging on the walls.

At the far end of the gallery she saw a woman who looked unmistakably French. She exuded sheer elegance as she discussed a painting with a customer, gesturing eagerly as she talked.

'I'll be right there, please have a look around in the meantime.' Her French accent sounded charming.

Erica took the woman at her word. With her hands clasped behind her back she walked slowly around the room as she looked at the artworks. As the gallery's name indicated, all the paintings were done in the abstract style. Cubes, squares, circles and strange figures. Erica tilted her head and squinted, trying to see what the art aficionados saw. But it completely eluded her. Nope, still only cubes and squares like any five-year-old could produce, in her opinion. She would just have to accept that this was beyond her comprehension.

She was standing before a gigantic red painting with yellow, irregularly divided sections when she heard Francine come up behind her with heels clacking on the chequerboard floor.

'That one is certainly wonderful,' said Francine.

'Yes, indeed. Exquisite. But to be honest, I'm not really at home in the world of art. I think Van Gogh's sunflowers are great, but that's about as far as my knowledge goes.'

Francine smiled. ‘You must be Erica. Henri just rang and told me you were on your way here.’

She held out a finely contoured hand. Erica hastily wiped off her own hand, still wet with rain, before she took Francine’s.

The woman facing her was small and slender, with an elegance that Frenchwomen seem to have patented. Erica was five foot nine in her stockinged feet, and she felt like a giant in comparison.

Francine’s hair was raven-black. It was pulled back smoothly from her forehead and gathered in a chignon at the nape of her neck. She wore a form-fitting black dress. The colour was no doubt chosen in view of the death of her friend and colleague; she seemed more the type to dress in dramatic red, or perhaps yellow. Her make-up was light and perfectly applied, but it could not conceal the telling red rims of her eyes. Erica hoped that her own mascara wasn’t running – no doubt a vain hope.

‘I thought we ought to sit down and talk over a cup of coffee. The weather is very mild today. Let’s go out back.’

She led Erica towards a small room behind the gallery that was fully equipped with a refrigerator, microwave oven, and coffeemaker. The table was small and had room for only two chairs. Erica sat down and was instantly served a cup of steaming hot coffee by Francine. Her stomach protested after all the cups she had drunk when she was visiting Henrik. But she knew from experience, from the innumerable interviews she had conducted to dig up background material for her books, that for some reason people talked more easily with a coffee cup in their hand.

‘From what I understood from Henri, Alex’s parents asked you to write a commemorative article about her life.’

‘Yes. I’ve only seen Alex on brief occasions in the last twenty-five years, so I need to find out more about what she was like as a person before I can start writing.’

‘Are you a journalist?’

'No, I write biographies. I'm only doing this because Birgit and Karl-Erik asked me. And besides, I was the first one to find her, well, almost the first. And in some strange way I feel as though I need to do this to create another picture of Alex for myself, a living picture. Does that sound odd?'

'No, not at all. I think it's fabulous that you're taking so much trouble on behalf of Alex's parents – and Alex.'

Francine leaned across the table and placed a well-manicured hand over Erica's.

Erica felt a warm blush spread across her cheeks and tried not to think of the draft of the book she'd been working on for large parts of the previous day.

Francine went on, 'Henri also asked me to answer your questions with the utmost candour.'

She spoke excellent Swedish. She rolled her R's softly, and Erica noticed that she used the French Henri rather than Henrik.

'You and Alex met in Paris?'

'Yes, we studied art history together. We ran into each other the very first day. She looked lost and I felt lost. The rest is history, as they say.'

'How long have you known each other?'

'Let's see, Henri and Alex celebrated their fifteenth anniversary last fall so it would be . . . seventeen years. For fifteen of those years we've run this gallery together.'

She fell silent and to Erica's astonishment lit a cigarette. For some reason she hadn't pictured Francine as a smoker. The Frenchwoman's hand shook a little as she lit the cigarette, and then she took a deep drag without taking her eyes off Erica.

'Didn't you wonder where she was?' Erica asked. 'She must have been lying there a week before we found her.'

It occurred to Erica that she hadn't thought to ask Henrik the same question.

'I know it sounds strange, but no, I didn't. Alex . . .' she

hesitated. 'Alex always did pretty much as she liked. It could be incredibly frustrating, but I suppose I got used to it over the years. This wasn't the first time she was gone for a while. She usually popped up later as if nothing had happened. Besides, she did more than her share when she took care of the gallery all alone when I was on maternity leave. You know, in some way I still think the same thing is going to happen. That she's going to come walking in the door. But this time I know she won't.' A tear threatened to spill from her eye.

'No, she won't.' Erica looked down into her coffee cup to allow Francine to dry her eyes discreetly. 'How did Henrik react whenever Alex simply vanished?'

'You've met him. Alex could do no wrong in his eyes. Henri has spent the past fifteen years worshipping her. Poor Henri.'

'Why poor Henri?'

'Alex didn't love him. Sooner or later he would have been forced to realize that.'

She stubbed out the first cigarette and lit another.

'You must have known each other inside-out after so many years,' said Erica.

'I don't think anyone really knew Alex. Although I probably knew her better than Henri did. He has always refused to take off his rose-tinted glasses.'

'During our conversation Henrik hinted that in all the years of their marriage it felt as though Alex was hiding something from him. Do you know whether that's true? And if so, what it could be?'

'That was unusually perceptive of him. I may have underestimated Henri.' She raised a finely shaped eyebrow. 'To your first question I will answer yes: I've always known that she was carrying some sort of baggage. To the second question I must answer no: I don't have the faintest idea what it could be. Despite our long friendship there was always a point at

which Alex would signal, "so far, and no farther". I accepted it, while Henri did not. Sooner or later it would have broken him. And it probably would have been sooner.'

'Why is that?'

Francine hesitated. 'They're going to do an autopsy on Alex, aren't they?'

The question took Erica by surprise.

'Yes, that's always done for a suicide. Why do you ask?'

'Because then I know that what I'm about to tell you will come out anyway. My conscience feels lighter, at least.'

She stubbed out the cigarette carefully. Erica held her breath in tense expectation, but Francine took her time lighting a third cigarette. Her fingers didn't have the characteristic yellow discolouration of a smoker, so Erica suspected that she didn't usually chain-smoke like this.

'You must know that Alex has been going to Fjällbacka much more often for the past six months or so?'

'Yes, the grapevine works very well in small towns. According to the local gossip, she was in Fjällbacka more or less every weekend. Alone.'

'Alone is not exactly the whole truth.'

Francine hesitated again. Erica had to check her impulse to lean across the table and shake the woman to make her spit out whatever she was holding back. Her interest was definitely aroused.

'She had met someone there. A man. Well, it wasn't the first time that Alex had an affair, but somehow I got the feeling that this was different. For the first time in all the years we've known each other, she seemed almost content. And I know that she couldn't have taken her own life. Someone must have murdered her, I have no doubt about that.'

'How can you be so sure? Not even Henrik could say for certain whether she might have committed suicide.'

'Because she was pregnant.'

Francine's reply caught Erica off guard.

'Does Henrik know about this?'

'I don't know. At any rate, it wasn't his child. They haven't lived together in that way for many years. And even when they did, Alex always refused to have a child with Henrik. No matter how much he begged her. No, the child must have been fathered by the new man in her life – whoever he may be.'

'She never said who he was?'

'No. As you probably realize by now, Alex was very sparing with her confidences. I have to admit that I was quite shocked when she told me about the child, but that's also one of the reasons why I'm absolutely sure she didn't kill herself. She was literally brimming with happiness and simply couldn't keep the news to herself. She loved that baby and never would have done anything to harm it, certainly not take its life. For the first time, I saw an Alexandra who had a zest for life. I think I would have grown quite fond of her.' Her voice sounded sad. 'You know, I also had a feeling that she intended to come to terms with her past. I don't know exactly how, but a few scattered remarks here and there gave me that impression.'

The door to the gallery opened and they heard somebody stamping the wet snow from their shoes on the doormat. Francine got up.

'That's probably a customer. I have to go. I hope I've been of some help.'

'Oh yes, I'm very grateful that you and Henrik have both been so frank. You've been a great help.'

After Francine assured the customer that she would be right back, she showed Erica to the door. In front of an enormous canvas with a white square on a blue field they stopped and shook hands.

'Just out of curiosity, what would a painting like this go for? Five thousand, ten thousand?'

Francine smiled. 'More like fifty.'

Erica gave a low whistle. 'So, there you see. Art and fine wine. Two areas that remain complete mysteries to me.'

'And I can barely write a shopping list. We all have our specialities.'

They laughed. Erica pulled her coat tighter even though it was still damp and headed out into the rain.

The rain had transformed the snow to slush, and she drove a bit below the speed limit just to be on the safe side. After wasting almost half an hour trying to get out of Hisingen, where she had ended up by mistake, she was now approaching Uddevalla. A dull rumble in her stomach reminded her that she had totally forgotten to eat all day. She turned off the E6 at the Torp shopping centre north of Uddevalla and drove into McDonald's. She gulped down a cheeseburger as she sat in the parking lot and was soon back out on the motorway. The whole time her thoughts were filled with the conversations she'd had with Henrik and Francine. What they had told her created an image of a woman who had built high defensive walls around herself.

What Erica was most curious about was who could be the father of Alex's baby. Francine didn't think that it was Henrik's, but no one could ever be completely sure what happened in other people's bedrooms, and Erica still reckoned it was a possibility. If not, the question was whether the father was the man that Francine hinted Alex had gone to meet every weekend in Fjällbacka, or whether she had a lover in Göteborg.

Erica had got the impression that Alex was leading some sort of parallel life. She did as she liked, without worrying about how it would affect those close to her, and Henrik in particular. Erica had the feeling that Francine had a hard time understanding how Henrik could accept a marriage under those conditions. She also thought that Francine disdained him for that reason. Yet Erica could understand all too well

how these sorts of things happened. She had been observing Anna and Lucas's marriage for many years.

What depressed Erica most about Anna's inability to change her situation was that she couldn't help wondering whether she was part of the reason for Anna's lack of self-respect. Erica was five years old when Anna was born. From the first instant she saw her little sister she had tried to protect her from the reality she carried round with her like an invisible wound. Anna would never have to feel alone and rejected because of their mother's lack of love for her daughters. The hugs and loving words that Anna did not get from her mother, Erica supplied in abundance. She watched over her little sister with motherly concern.

Anna was an easy child to love. She was totally immune to the sadder aspects of life and took each moment as it came. Erica, who was old beyond her years and often upset, was fascinated by the energy with which her sister loved every minute of her life. Anna took Erica's anxieties in stride but seldom had the patience to sit on her lap or let herself be cuddled for very long. She grew up to be a wild teenager who did precisely whatever she pleased, an unflappable and self-centred girl. In moments of clarity, Erica admitted to herself that she had probably both protected and coddled Anna far too much. She was just trying to give her what she herself had never received.

When Anna met Lucas she became easy prey. She was enthralled by his surface charm but failed to see the stifling forces underneath. Slowly, very slowly he broke down her *joie de vivre* and self-confidence by playing on her vanity. Now she sat in Östermalm like a lovely bird in a cage and did not have the power to realize her mistake. Every day Erica hoped that Anna of her own free will would reach out her hand and ask her for help. Until that day, Erica could do no more than wait and remain available. Not that she'd had any great luck with relationships herself. She had a long string of broken

relationships and promises behind her; she was usually the one who had broken them off. There was something that snapped whenever she reached a certain point in a relationship. A feeling of panic so strong that she could hardly breathe; she had to clear out, lock and stock, without looking back. And yet, as long ago as she could remember, Erica had paradoxically yearned to have children and a family. She was now thirty-five and the years were slipping away from her.

Damn it, she had managed to repress the thought of Lucas all day long, but now he had got under her skin again, and she knew she would have to find out how vulnerable her position actually was. She was altogether too tired to deal with it now. It would have to wait till tomorrow. She felt an acute need to relax for the rest of the day, without thinking about either Lucas or Alexandra Wijkner.

She punched in a speed-dial number on her mobile.

'Hi, it's Erica. Are you two at home tonight? I thought I'd drop by for a while.'

Dan gave a warm laugh. 'Are we at home? Don't you know what tonight is?'

The silence that met her at the other end of the line was alarmingly total. Erica thought hard but couldn't recall that there was anything special about this evening. Not a holiday, nobody's birthday. Dan and Pernilla had been married in the summer, so it couldn't be their anniversary.

'No, I really have no idea. Tell me.'

There was a deep sigh on the line and Erica realized that the big event had to be sports-related. Dan was an enormous sports fan, which sometimes caused a bit of friction between him and his wife Pernilla. Erica had found her own way of retaliating for all the evenings she had to spend looking at some meaningless sporting event on TV when they were together. Dan was a fanatic follower of the Djurgården hockey team, so Erica had taken on the role of rabid AIK fan. Actually she was totally uninterested in sports in general

and hockey in particular, and so it seemed to annoy Dan even more. What really got his goat was when AIK lost and she didn't seem to care.

'Sweden is playing Belarus!'

He sensed her lack of comprehension and heaved another deep sigh. 'The Olympic Games, Erica, the Olympics. Aren't you aware that such an event is going on . . . ?'

'Oh, you mean the football match? Yes, of course I know about that. I thought you meant that there was something special tonight *besides* that.'

She spoke in an exaggerated tone, clearly showing she had no idea that there was a match tonight. She smiled because she knew Dan was literally tearing his hair out over such blasphemy. Sports were not a joking matter for him.

'But I'll come over and check out the match with you so I can see Salming crush the Russian defence . . .'

'Salming! Don't you know how many years it's been since he retired? You're kidding me, right? Tell me you're kidding.'

'Yes, Dan, I'm kidding. I'm not that daft. I'll come over and check out Sundin, if that suits you better. Incredibly cute guy, by the way.'

He sighed heavily yet again. This time because she had been sacrilegious enough to speak of such a giant in the hockey world in terms other than purely athletic.

'All right, come on over. But I don't want a repeat of last time! No yakking during the match, no comments about how sexy the players look in their shinguards, and above all, no questions about whether they're wearing jockstraps and if they wear underpants over them. Understood?'

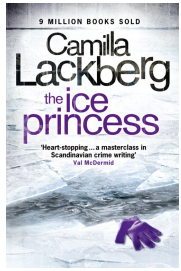
Erica suppressed a laugh and said seriously, 'Scout's honour, Dan.'

He grunted. 'You've never been a scout.'

'No, precisely.'

Then she pressed the off button on her mobile phone.

* * *



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