

ONCE BITTEN

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Chapter 1

2 JULY 1983

“Want to play again?”

“Okay. One more. But it’s getting kinda late.”

Eli picked up the sticks, then dumped them out to start a fresh game. She glanced at Oskar and smiled.

“Your hair is getting long. We really ought to cut it.”

Oskar sat facing her on the floor in his shorts and t-shirt. A warm, summer night’s breeze blew in through the half-open window.

He made a dismissive, farting sound and ran a hand through his straight blond hair. “I like it long. And don’t tell me you’re a hairdresser, too.”

Eli released the sticks and they fell onto the floor in a jumbled circle. She hunkered down to study them, then carefully pulled the first one out.

“Well, no--my hair stopped growing a long time ago. But you sure are starting to look shaggy. And besides, it doesn’t look too complicated. How hard could it be?”

“I dunno. Are you good with scissors?”

Eli laughed. “I don’t even think we *have* scissors, come to think of it. Now be *careful* . . .”

Oskar looked up at her and grinned before focusing on the sticks. Then he deftly slid one out of the pile. “Piece of cake.”

“Cheater. I saw it move.”

“Did not.”

“Did too.”

“Huh uh.” He stuck his tongue out at her.

False thunderclouds rolled across her face. “Don’t you point that thing at *me*. Or else—”

“Or else what?” He grinned at her with impish delight.

“Oh, *you*—” She lunged at him across the little pile of sticks, scattering them. But he had already spun around and was crawling away as he giggled.

Eli grabbed Oskar’s ankle and pulled herself on top of him. He lay half on his side, trying to get away, but got no further as she began to tickle him mercilessly.

“I’ll teach you to cheat at Mikado!”

They tumbled and rolled on the floor, laughing and giggling as each of them sought to out-tickle the other. Finally Eli declared defeat and they lay together, sweaty and panting. Oskar put his head on Eli’s chest and she held him, gently stroking his hair and his back.

“Eli, I—”

He felt her lips on his throat—a kiss? Then he felt a sharp pain.

At first he was so startled, he did not think it was her. It had to be . . . something else. A bug? A spider? He flinched and tried to get up, but couldn’t. And when he couldn’t get up, he realized what was happening. Her arms were locked around him like iron. A warm wetness trickled down his neck.

“Eli! *Eli!* Stop it! *Stop!*” He struggled, completely panic-stricken, in her arms. *Not happening Not Happening NOT HAPPENING—*

Suddenly her mouth left him and for a moment he could feel the outpouring of blood from the wound, warmed by her panting breath.

In an anguished, terrified tone he heard her say, “Sorry, Oskar, I . . . I . . . Oh n--” Then once again her teeth spiked into him with a kissing sound.

Excruciating pain shot through him like electricity. Oskar continued to writhe in her steely embrace, but like a lioness with a gazelle in her claws, she moved with him, her mouth firmly latched onto his neck. They thrashed this way and that on the floor for several seconds. Then the pain began to leave him with his strength, and his movements slowed.

“*Eli, Eli . . . please . . . don’t . . .*”

As the wet, rhythmic gulping sound of his blood passing down her throat continued, Oskar’s movements became languorous. The painful wound was transformed into a pleasurable sensation of her lips upon his neck. Now he liked how it felt. He tried to look

at her and began to smile. He stopped trying to escape and relaxed; then embraced her weakly. Eli sensed the change and loosened her grip upon him. Then she, too, was merely embracing him. Slowly, she rolled him over so that he was lying on his back.

Oskar gazed dreamily with half-lidded eyes at the ceiling. Eli was a warm softness upon his chest, gently lapping at his throat. It felt so good to give himself to her, and as he began repeating her name over and over, he thought that there was nothing better that he *could* give her. He never wanted it to end, never wanted her and her mouth to leave him. His hands drifted, semi-purposefully, through her hair; he arched his back and neck to give her total exposure. Then the ceiling became indistinct, and the darkness closed in. He moaned softly as he began to fade away, his speech slurred and almost incomprehensible. “Eli . . .”

Then her lips left him and with their departure, a sense of disappointment overtook him. *Back; back; want you back.* Instead, he felt something strange pressed against his mouth. Hard skin split open and something wet and sticky. He heard Eli’s voice, calling to him as if from a long ways off, down a dark tunnel. The voice was firm and commanding, but underneath it sounded scared. “Oskar, drink. *Drink.*”

He didn’t want to drink; it was too nice where he was, and drinking required effort. It was warm and dark, like fading off to sleep, and that was where he wanted to go. But her voice was incessant, he could hear the urgency in it, and the thing followed his mouth, no matter how he turned his head to avoid it.

At last he took it firmly into his lips and licked it. The bittersweet wetness began to flow across his tongue, and then it was good. It was . . . All Things Good. He felt a growing urgency inside him; wanted more. He began to suck, and with the sucking consciousness slowly returned.

The thing in his mouth was Eli’s wrist. The wetness was her blood.

Her blood flowing into him brought renewed strength. First he became aware that his heartbeat had slowed to a near standstill, but now it was increasing, its thudding staccato loud in his ears. He reached for her arm and seized it so that her open vein could not escape his mouth. With his tongue he probed into the wound to keep it open and enlarge it; noticed that the blood seemed to come in waves, and realized he could feel her heartbeat with his lips. Her wound had become his life, flowing into him, and he sucked her with all his strength.

Somewhere above his racing heart he heard Eli gasp in pain. But she did not pull back, and he continued.

After what felt like a long time, he began to feel satiated and his demand for her slackened. He felt very strange, yet drowsy and fulfilled. The flow into his mouth seemed to taper off to a trickle; then stopped altogether. He slowly, lovingly licked the remaining blood off her wrist. Then it was withdrawn from him.

He felt himself being picked up and carried. Like a little boy, being carried by his mother. And he was placed in someplace soft and warm, with sheets and covers. He became even more sleepy, and then Eli was with him. She was holding him, and he could hear her softly crying.

And as he fell asleep he thought, *Sorry, Eli . . . didn't mean to hurt you.*

Chapter 2

3 JULY 1983

Oskar woke up with a start from a bad dream.

In his dream, Eli had been smothering him with a pillow. He would kick and thrash desperately to get free, but she always came back and put the pillow back over his head, her eyes vacant, her face impassive. He struggled and struggled, unable to breathe, as she held its softness tightly over his face, sealing off his mouth and nose

He was in his bed, lying on his side, with his head on his pillow. He gasped sharply and drew in a breath, felt a sharp aching across his chest as the muscles there complained. Realized he hadn't been using them, because . . . he hadn't been breathing.

Eli was lying next to him, wide awake. Watching him. He could see her clearly, as if it was noon on a bright Spring day, and he was disoriented for a moment, because she shouldn't be awake during the day. A confused thought entered his head: was she cured? Had he cured her last night?

No--it's night. I'm the one who's changed. It all came back to him. Her violent, completely unexpected attack; her mouth and body stuck upon him like glue; the sensation of

He began to feel sick to his stomach. Something weighty, deep down below his intestines, pressing against his backside. He felt like he had to go to the bathroom, only . . .

"Oskar." She reached for him. She looked very apprehensive, as if she were waiting for something terrible to happen.

He took her hand into his before it could reach his face and squeezed it. "It really happened, didn't it?"

She slowly nodded her head, and with her affirmation the last vestige of something died in him; the last little sliver of hope that maybe, somehow, it had all been a bad dream. *It finally happened: I've become a vampire.*

"I'm . . . so sorry."

“I have to go to the bathroom.” He rolled over and got up from the bed. As soon as he was upright whatever was going on down below seemed to increase in urgency and he began to feel as though he might be sick, too.

“I’d better come with you, Oskar.” She slid across the bed and got up behind him.

He gave her a puzzled look over his shoulder as he stumbled down the hallway toward the bathroom. “Uh, Eli . . . I think I’d rather . . . be alone.”

“Oskar, please. Let me—”

“Eli, no. *Please.*” He reached the door, stepped in, and shut her out. Barely in time.

His bottom had not even hit the ring when things gave way. A sudden release of pressure, accompanied by a groan from his abdomen. Then a sharp pain. This wasn’t just a crap, what the hell—

He moaned loudly in pain as something that felt like the largest dump he’d ever taken splattered into the toilet. At the same time he peed the last pee he would take in his life. The odor that rose up from below him was incredible; a choking miasma. He wrapped his arms tightly around himself and doubled over; moaned again.

Eli spoke, her voice muffled through the door. “Oskar, listen to me. Don’t look into the toilet. Whatever you do, don’t look. I’m coming in there.”

His desire for privacy easily collapsed in the face of the strangeness of what was happening and the certainty that he needed her help, because he was reasonably sure that some part of himself had just left him. “Okay.” He almost glanced down, caught himself, then looked at the doorhandle as it turned and the door swung open.

Eli came in and knelt down beside him. He was horrified that she would smell whatever disgusting mess he’d just deposited into the toilet, but if she noticed, she didn’t show it. She immediately reached behind him and pushed down the handle. Flushing the bowl brought some improvement; things didn’t smell so bad, and the cool overspray on his behind actually made him feel better.

He locked eyes with her as he rocked back and forth, sensing that more was coming. “Oh God, Eli, what *was* that? What’s *happening?*” But he already had some inkling, and it came as no shock when she told him.

“Your body is changing, Oskar.” She was trying hard to stay calm, but he could hear the trembling in her voice. “It’s . . . it’s getting rid of what it doesn’t need any more, that’s all. You’ll be all right, it just--”

She was interrupted by another loud, involuntary groan as he felt a bolt of pain in his abdomen and more came down. He couldn't see what was happening, but a sudden mental image flashed through his mind—scooping out the inside of a pumpkin, turning it upside down to shake out all that—pumpkin goo. Pumpkin guts. Tears welled up in his eyes from the pain and he grabbed Eli's arm as he continued to moan.

Eli started to talk softly to him, trying to keep him calm. "It's okay, Oskar, it won't go much longer. It's almost over, hang in there." He glanced over at her and saw a face consumed with remorse and anxiety. He suddenly hated her for getting him into this. But this was not the time or the place for such emotions.

As soon as the toilet tank filled up she flushed it again. Oskar could tell from the sound of the water that this time it was having a hard time with whatever he'd just left, and for a moment he was certain that it was plugged and would overflow. But then, as if by some miracle to spare him the indignity of seeing his intestines float out onto the floor, it went down with a throaty chugging sound.

At last he felt better; weak and wiped out, but better. Felt like there was nothing else. The pain slackened, then disappeared. Eli got up, went to the shower, knelt and turned on the water. She held her hand under the faucet as the water warmed up, and turned her head to talk to him over her shoulder. "You're going to have to get in here so I can wash you off. Think you can get off the toilet and into the tub?"

He nodded weakly and unbundled himself. She took one his arms and put the other around his waist and helped him in.

"Turn and face the wall. Lean on it, if you need to." Oskar did as she instructed. He suddenly realized how weak and rubbery his legs felt.

She took the spray handle down from its bracket by his head and then he felt the warm water spray across his bottom. She angled it to get up underneath and asked him to spread his legs a little. He looked down as he did and saw bright red blood mixed with water swirling past his foot on its way to the drain. Just seeing it made him feel dizzy and detached from his surroundings. *This isn't happening.*

But it was happening. Eli was spraying his ass with a shower handle and he was bleeding into the tub. He felt light-headed and for a brief moment, felt as though he might faint.

"Do you feel like you have anything else?"

Her asking him made him realize: yes, there was some more. Only . . . more liquid, less solid. He swallowed and felt utterly humiliated. *Oh my God, I can't believe this is about to happen. Please tell me it's not going to happen.* He didn't want to admit it to her, but he finally spoke with a forlorn whimper. "Yeah . . . I think there is."

Eli didn't hear him over the shower. "What?"

Louder this time. What the hell; why not shout it!—it can't get any worse. "I said, yes, there's—"

He couldn't hold it any more and he relaxed. *Don't look down; don't look down.* He closed his eyes and rested his head against the cold ceramic tiles as he felt the warm fluid spurt and run down the side of his leg, then the soothing shower spray as she quickly caught it and went to work.

At last she turned off the water. She grabbed a towel off the rack and wrapped it around his shoulders. With her help he stepped, trembling, out of the tub.

"Do you want to go lie down?"

"Yeah. That would be nice, I think. No—wait." He didn't feel like he was quite ready to get too far from the toilet. And sure enough, when he glanced down at the bowl and saw the redness splashed on the underside of the ring, his gorge rose in his throat. But—

. . . don't want my face close to that.

He turned around, collapsed next to the tub, and with a loud barking sound, vomited onto the shower handle that she'd left lying near the drain. Brownish-red and lots of it, emitting that sickly sweetish odor peculiar to vomit. He coughed to get the stringy strand off his lips; then bent over and rested, waiting to see if there was more.

Eli was again by his side, her arm over his back, patting him as she turned on the water in the tub once again. She kept telling him that it would be okay as she washed off the shower hose, then used it to spray down the tub.

A minute or so passed, and Oskar finally realized that there was nothing further. Thank God he hadn't eaten very much last night; a small thing that he now counted as a huge blessing.

He felt as weak as a kitten. She helped him back to the bed, then sat down next to him and sadly stroked his hair. He looked at her in the dark with his new eyes.

"Eli . . . why?"

She slowly shook her head as she replied. "There was no good reason for it, Oskar. It just happened."

He looked carefully at her face, searching for the slightest trace of dishonesty, but saw none. He did not know what to say. He almost wished she had said she'd done it deliberately; at least that, maybe, he could understand. But this . . .

"Just happened. What the hell does *that* mean, Eli—'just happened'? Come on."

She looked down, bit her lip, and began to rub her hands together in her lap. To Oskar, she looked like a little kid, about ready to fess up to breaking a window. “I . . . I don’t know. One minute we were having fun wrestling and all, then we stopped and we were hot and you laid down on me, and you were so close—your neck was . . . was right there, and . . . and . . .”

She stopped kneading her hands together and looked up at him as she continued, her voice beginning to waver.

“—and you were so beautiful to me. So . . . *warm*, so . . . *alive*. And I—”

“You *what*?”

“I wanted to kiss you. And I did. I knew it might be dangerous, but it felt right. But the moment my mouth touched you, touched your—pulse, it got . . . *twisted*. And then I lost control, I was locked up, and the thing that lives inside of me took over. And I couldn’t, I couldn’t—” She began to shake her head again, more forcefully this time. “regain control. And once you started to bleed like that, it was all over. There was nothing I could do.”

She looked away from him and stared at the wall as she began to sob. “You can kill me if you want. I won’t stop you. Right now, if you want. I’ll understand.”

“You told me once that there are worse things than death. I would’ve died if you hadn’t fed me. Why’d you do that?”

She looked at him, her face wet with tears. “Because I couldn’t bear the thought of killing you. Because . . . I can’t live without you. Even if that means—you having to be like me. So . . . I did it.”

The silence drew out between them.

Chapter 3

His eyes flashed. “How *dare* you. That was supposed to be *my* choice. And I told you—*remember*? You asked me, and I said no—I *didn’t* want to be like you. *With* you, *yes*. But not the *other*.” He looked away from her, then rolled over to face the opposite wall. “Oh, I’m *so* angry right now. I *trusted* you, Eli! How *could* you?”

“I’m sorry. I said *I’m sorry!*”

He turned back over to stare at her, his rage burning hot in his chest as he shouted. “*Sorry?* *I just blew my guts into the toilet, Eli! Sorry doesn’t cut it right now!*”

“I said you can kill me, if that’s what you want! I know I deserve it!”

He could not restrain a cynical laugh. “You know damn well that’s the *last* thing I could want right now.”

“Then I’ll leave.”

He rolled away from her again in disgust. “*Jesus*. And leave me like this? *Uh uh*. Not in a *million years* are you doing *that*.”

“I’ll train you, then. So you won’t need me. *Then* I’ll leave.”

He didn’t turn around before replying. “You won’t need to ‘train’ me. I’m not killing *anyone*. I’ll never drink another drop. *Never*.”

There was a pause. Then, Eli suddenly realized that Oskar sounded just like her, more than 200 years ago.

And with this thought she began to cry for him; for what she’d made of him. She wept for his strong, beautiful heart. With that one statement, he had proven how innocent he was. And she’d ruined it—ruined him. The *one* good thing in all the world that had ever been given to her.

She put her face into her hands and wept bitterly. “Dear God . . . please forgive me for this. *Please*.”

He snorted. “Do you know how pathetic you sound? Just *shut up*. You’re such a *baby*. Praying to God for forgiveness for what you’ve done to me. Well let me tell you—He’s not *listening*. No one’s home up there. *Couldn’t* be, to let things like this happen. No fucking *way*.”

Eli abruptly stood up and looked around the room for something, anything, to ram through her chest. But of course, the room was nearly empty, because they had nothing. It was, as always, barren and destitute.

The anger roiled inside her, a living thing that demanded expression. He saw it in her eyes. “How *dare* you? How *DARE* you say that? *You . . . YOU* shut up! You—*Ohh!*” She pulled her hair and shook with pent-up fury.

She couldn’t hurt him, couldn’t hurt herself, and so her anger settled upon the nearest thing that she *could* destroy. She picked up the old metal lampstand and hurled it like a lightning bolt against the wall. It crashed against it, the globe and bulb exploding and leaving an ugly gouge in the drywall, and then fell to the floor, a twisted mess.

“Eli, don’t!” he hissed. “The neighbors will hear!”

She stared at him in an absolute rage, her hands balled into fists at her sides. “The neighbors. The *NEIGHBORS!* I don’t give a *fuck* about the neighbors or what they *hear!* I’ve been afraid of neighbors *all my LIFE!* Well, *FUCK THEM!* Let them hear *THIS!*”

She grabbed the bedroom door and wrenched it from its hinges, then threw it out into the hallway. It crashed heavily against the wall next to the bathroom, splintered and thumped to the floor. Oskar watched, his anger replaced by fear, as she spun about, looking for something, *anything*, to break. She grabbed a cardboard box full of some of her toys they hadn’t bothered to unpack and hurled it against the bifold closet doors. It split apart on impact and buckled the doors, the toys flying in all directions. She scrambled over to them and began to grunt and growl as she picked up whatever was within reach and started flinging them in every direction. With each object she vented her frustration.

“*I HATE THEM!*” A porcelain doll whizzed across the room and smashed into the wall, narrowly missing the window. “*I HATE this LIFE!*” A heavy, bronze, lion-shaped paperweight spun through the air and struck the light dangling from the ceiling, shattering it and spraying Oskar’s mattress with glass shards as he cringed in a ball in his blanket, before imbedding itself into the molding and thudding to the floor. “And *I HATE* being *ME!*” She flung her chinaman statuette through the doorway and into the bathroom, shattering the mirror.

A voice came, muffled, through the ceiling. “Quiet down, down there! People are trying to sleep, Goddamn it!”

Eli spun around to look at the ceiling where the voice was coming from. Her eyes glowed and her face was livid; and when she shouted at the top of her voice, Oskar saw her fangs. “*Come down and make me, you BASTARD! Come down and MAKE ME!*”

Eli felt as if she would explode. She suddenly saw herself running through the apartment building, killing each and every occupant—man, woman and child. Then she could curse all she wanted; could shake her fist and swear at God, at herself, at the whole *world*, and no one would complain. And she knew she could do it, too. She would be a beam of pure hatred and destruction, blasting and destroying every living thing around her.

She felt the sudden urge to run, to get away from here. From *everything*. She ran out of the bedroom.

“Eli, *wait!* Don’t go!” Oskar stumbled out of the bed and ran after her. He didn’t fully understand why, but he knew for a certainty that it would be disastrous for them if she left their apartment this way.

She dashed to the front door and started to unbolt it. Oskar caught up with her, grabbed her around the waist, and pulled her away. “No, Eli! Don’t! Not *now!*” His voice was full of fear and anger.

Eli twisted around in his grip, wriggling to get free. She was surprised by how strong he already was. “Let go of me! I don’t want to *be* here!” She shoved him and he fell backwards and landed on his behind. Then she turned once again to the door and unlatched it.

She had opened the door and was starting through it when he tackled her, grabbing her around her legs. She fell forward onto the hallway carpet and Oskar dragged her back inside. But she fought him like a wildcat, twisting, kicking, clawing, and gouging, and they rolled about on the floor in a furious tangle as Oskar tried to restrain her. One of their legs connected with the door and slammed it shut.

“Damn you, Eli! *Stop it!*” One of her hands raked across his cheek, peeling off three strips of skin in parallel grooves. “Owww! *Fuck!*”

With this pain Oskar’s anger finally boiled over, and he threw himself bodily upon her, pinning her arms with his legs. Just as quickly, she bucked him off; but instead of going for the door again, she leaped on him, seized his wrists, and pinned him to the floor.

For a second they glowered fiercely at each other, panting and out of breath, their features contorted with anger. Then she saw what she’d done to his face, and all of the anger and rage departed from her like a suddenly deflated balloon. She relinquished her grip on his wrists, sat up, and gently touched his cheek. And at her touch, the anger left him as well, leaving behind only grief—not for himself, and what he’d become, but for the unreachable depths of her despair.

A look of terrible sadness came over her as she felt his blood with her fingertips. “I’m sorry, Oskar. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

To her, Oskar suddenly looked like that little boy she’d first met: terribly fragile and uncertain of himself. “Eli . . .” His voice was weak and trembling. “You don’t really mean that . . . you hate life with *me*, do you?”

“Oh, *Oskar*. . . . No, *no*, don’t you *understand?* That’s why I did what I did last night. Instead of letting you go. Because I *love* you. And I just . . . I just couldn’t—you’re the only thing that has *ever mattered to me*.” And with this, her tears broke and she began to cry, her body wracked with sobs. She slowly collapsed down on top of him, and he held her that way in his arms. “Oskar, Oskar, *please* don’t hate me. I’m begging you. Please, *please* don’t.”

He took her head into his hands and looked into her red, tear-stained eyes. “Eli, I believe you that it was an accident, and I understand why you didn’t let me die. And I’m *glad*—because I *love you*. He turned his head to whisper in her ear. “*You’re everything to me.*”

Then they kissed; kissed in the darkness that had become their light.

Chapter 4

A sharp pounding on the door interrupted them. They stopped and turned their heads toward the noise, both knowing who it was. There was momentary silence. Then another series of knocks, louder this time--insistent. They looked at each other, and Oskar, scared at the hint of anger returning to her eyes, whispered, "let me talk to him."

He got up, wiped the blood off his face with the back of his hand, and had the fleeting realization when he touched his cheek that it had healed. The weird sensation of not being himself, of having had his world turned upside down, returned to him as he reached the door and peered through the peephole.

An extremely angry, middle-aged, overweight man in a blue terrycloth bathrobe was standing outside the door. Just as Oskar was taking in his corkscrewed hair and stubbly, haggard face, oddly distorted by the fish-eye lens, a seemingly huge, meaty fist came up, blocking his view and he knocked again, rattling the door in its frame.

"Yes? Who is it?" The trembling in his voice was not feigned.

"I'm from *upstairs!* What the hell is going *on* in there?"

"Uh . . . it's my mother. She's sick—you know . . . senile. Crazy. She's off her medication and my dad, um, just went out to get some more. We're, ah, trying to keep her calm and stuff, but sometimes she gets like this if we run out. We're . . . we're really sorry."

He had heard the sound of his own voice, and even he was not convinced by what he'd said. Fearful, he looked again. The man shifted on his feet and stared, stony-faced, at the peephole.

"Well, it's the middle of the night and we're trying to sleep! Your 'momma' was with it enough to call me a bastard, and dare me to come down here. So tell her to come out here so we can talk!"

Suddenly Oskar realized that Eli was pushing him aside. Before he could react, she opened the door and stood directly in the doorway. And as she spoke he had a perfect view of her profile.

He was amazed: there was no anger in her face whatsoever. In an instant, she had transformed herself into the perfect image of a sad, pathetic little girl, standing there in a washed-out nightgown. She looked respectfully up at the man with big, wet eyes; her mouth was slightly downturned and her lower lip trembled.

"Sir, we're really, *really* sorry. We'll do our best to keep her calm, I promise. My dad will be back soon, I think. She won't make another peep."

The man looked at her, suddenly confused. He had not expected to see this little waif of a girl behind the door, and her sorrowful expression completely disarmed him. Eli looked down meekly and rubbed her naked feet together.

“Well, I . . . well, you know, it’s very rude to have this sort of thing going on at this time of the night. I gotta go to work early. So, ah, you know . . . just keep it down.”

Eli looked up at him again and took a step out into the hallway; she was now less than two feet from him. She lowered her voice to a near whisper and nodded her head in understanding. “We’re trying to get her to go to sleep now, sir. This almost *never* happens. Please tell your wife we’re *very* sorry.”

Now his anger had faded completely, and he, too, was involuntarily nodding in tandem with Eli. “All right. No problem.” He slowly turned and walked away.

For a terrible moment, Oskar was afraid that Eli would leap upon him, but she didn’t. Instead, she just stepped back inside and shut the door.

He stared at her. “That was *amazing*. How’d you do that?”

She gave him a small, secretive smile. “You’ll see.”

†

As they cleaned up the mess in the bedroom, he began to talk about something that had been bothering him since he’d woken up. “Eli. About last night. When you were—you know . . . biting me.”

She put the box down and looked at him expectantly.

“Well, I- . . . well, there’s something I don’t understand. At first, it hurt really bad. But then, after a while, I didn’t want you to stop. I mean, I kinda *liked* it—which I know sounds crazy. Why *was* that?”

She put a smurf back in the box and came over to him. “Was it just ‘*like*?’”

“No. You’re right . . . it was stronger. *Not* just ‘like.’” He frowned as he tried to relate how he had felt; then he looked up at her with a puzzled expression. “It was more like . . . *love*. I mean, I’d—I think maybe I would feel the same way if you did it again right now. I don’t think I’d stop you.”

There was a pause as she studied him carefully; she seemed impressed by his statement. Then she said, “That’s because it *was* love, Oskar. I knew it by how you acted—once you stopped resisting. I’ve seen it before a few times, but only in older folks. But maybe that’s just because we knew each other before; loved each other before.

“And when I felt your love, Oskar, I loved you, *too*. Only . . . not like I feel when I say, ‘I love you.’”

He looked at her with a blank expression. “Umm . . . I don’t follow any of this.”

“Sit down, then. Because you need to understand it.” Together, they sat down on the bed, facing each other.

“Ever heard of the cycle of life, Oskar?”

“Yeah--sure. In school. It means that . . . umm-- things are born, they live for awhile, have babies, and then die. And then their babies grow up and do the same thing.”

Eli nodded. “Mmm hmm. And animals grow and live by feeding on other living things, right? It’s just how life works, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, you’re part of that cycle, too, Oskar. Only you’re used to eating, not being eaten . . . until last night. Let me ask you: have you ever hunted?”

“Mmm . . . well, sort of. Dad used to shoot elder duck.”

“Okay . . . that’s a start. Did you feel bad when the duck died?”

Oskar thought for a second. “Maybe a little. I guess, yeah.”

“Did you still eat it?”

“Of course.”

“Feel guilty?”

“Not really.”

“Why not? Your dad killed something. For the two of you to enjoy, right? ”

“Yeah, but--that’s different. It was an animal.”

“I know; a duck’s not a person. But everything has to die sooner or later, right?”

“Right . . .” Oskar wasn’t sure where Eli was going.

“Once you die, what happens to your body?”

“It . . . well, it breaks down. It . . . decomposes, I guess. Unless you get some kind of special coffin that seals you up. Or you’re cremated.”

“That’s right. It’s broken down and digested by all the little microbes and bacteria. And they use your body for their own energy, so they can reproduce and keep going on.”

Oskar hadn’t thought about this so deeply, but he slowly nodded. “Yeah . . . I guess so.”

“People can die for all sorts of reasons, can’t they? Old age, heart attacks, lightning, bee stings, you name it, right?”

“Uh huh.”

“Some of it’s pretty pointless, isn’t it? Getting run over by a car, for example.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Well, if you had a choice, wouldn’t you rather die a death that has meaning, rather than one that doesn’t?”

“I guess—”

“--all other things being equal, I mean,” she added.

“Yes.”

“Okay. Let me ask you this, then. Do you think God approves of predators?”

“Approves? Well . . . he made them, I suppose. All those lions and tigers and—”

“--and bears, and hyenas, and eagles, and wolves, and foxes, and alligators, and sharks, . . . and so on.”

“Yeah.” He nodded.

“And people, too. Right? I mean, aren’t you a predator?”

“Well, I never . . . I mean, I never went out and killed anything myself.”

“Okay, maybe so. But think about it. Someone--some person, somewhere along the line, had to, right? Like the drumsticks or hamburger you buy at the store, hmm? At some point, someone killed a chicken or a cow, right?”

“Uh huh.”

“So God must approve of all these predators running around, eating everything. Or at least, He knew that they would exist at some point after He started all of this . . . *life* in motion. Unless you want to say that . . . God doesn’t know everything.”

Oskar, growing impatient, shifted on the mattress and uncrossed his legs. “Umm, where is all of this going, Eli?”

“What I’m trying to tell you, Oskar, is something I’ve learned, just having been myself for the last two centuries: that predators serve a function in creation, just like trees and bees. And I know—because I’ve seen it myself—that sometimes, when a prey realizes that it’s going to die, and can get past the pain and fear, it . . . accepts its death. It may even . . . *love* the thing that’s killing it. Realizes that its death has a purpose, has *meaning* . . . even if it’s only to keep something else alive a little bit longer.”

Oskar straightened up and ran his hand through his hair. “Wow, Eli. That’s really . . . hmm, I’ll have to think about—but . . . what you say *does* kind of fit how I felt last night. Because after I stopped being scared, and knew that there was nothing I could do, I was kind of . . . *happy* that you were doing it. Knowing that my . . . blood, my *life* . . . would help you live. And even though I couldn’t understand why you’d attacked me, in the end I wanted you to finish. I didn’t want you to stop.” He looked at her quizzically.

“Yes. And when I knew that’s how you felt, I loved you too, Oskar. Not the part of me, the human part, who’d never want to hurt you. *That* was the part of me that fed you my *own* blood, that . . . ended up *saving* you. But while I was still—” she looked down, then slowly brought her face up to his again—“a *vampire*, I . . . loved you as my prey. Because I knew that you were prepared to die for me, so that I could live. Like a sacrifice. That you weren’t really mad at me anymore, for what I was doing. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah. But wait a minute—it’s not freely given, is it? You *take*. The people you kill don’t *want* to die. Especially not like *that*. And you—I mean, *we*—” he frowned, “we aren’t natural. Killing other people isn’t natural, Eli. It’s not part of some cosmic ‘scheme of creation.’ God says you shouldn’t kill people. And . . . that’s what I’m most afraid of. I don’t want to kill or hurt *anyone*.”

Eli sighed. “I know that, Oskar. But I didn’t *ask* to be what I am. And *you*,” she looked away, “didn’t ask for it, either.” But we’re still walking around the earth. We’re still part of what God created. And so, to the extent we’re able, we’ve got to obey His laws, just like everyone else.”

Oskar looked at her long and hard. “What do you mean? How can we possibly do that?”

She took his hand and squeezed it. “Remember the night you came back to my apartment? After you wanted to have a pact with me? And you asked me if I was a vampire. And I told you: that I drink blood to live; but I’m not *that*.”

“Yes. You told me that you kill because you *have* to. Because you want to live, just like everyone else.”

“Right. But there’s more to it than that, Oskar. *A lot* more. Just because I have this condition, doesn’t mean I have to be a selfish jerk. It doesn’t mean I must be deliberately cruel to people. It doesn’t mean that I can just wander around, creating more vampires whenever I want. You don’t see the lions do that, do you? They don’t go around maiming and slaughtering for no good reason. They take what they need, and they leave the rest alone. Well, that’s how I see things, too. I do what I need to survive. But no more.

And you have to understand this. Because if you don’t, and you act as though there are no rules, you’ll be . . . unhappy forever. You’ll be miserable, and soon enough you’ll just be some kind of animal. And I want you, to the extent you can, to *be* happy—not like *that*.”

Oskar looked directly at her. “I *will* always be happy . . . as long as I’m with you.”

“But you might *not* always be with me, Oskar. I might die tomorrow—you never know. I don’t want to think about it, but it could happen. So you have to realize that you’ve still got to be the best person you can be, even though you are what you are. And if you do that, even though people might hate you, and fear you, and try to kill you, you’ll still know, in your heart, that you’re a good person. And knowing that can bring you happiness, or at least, some kind of—acceptance. Even if I drop dead, or we somehow become separated.”

Oskar was quiet for awhile. Then he spoke. “But you just said that you hated your life. That you hated being you. So this hasn’t really worked for you, has it?”

Eli looked at him, then touched his freshly healed cheek. “I never said it was easy. But it’s been easier—since I fell in love with you.”

Chapter 5

5 JULY 1983

“Just try again.”

“It’s not working. This is stupid.”

“Just picture it in your mind, and it’ll happen.”

Oskar sighed. “Eli, we’ve been at this for half an hour. I’m no good at this. I can’t.”

“You don’t know what you can do and what you can’t.”

“Okay. I’ll try again.”

Oskar closed his eyes, leaned back on the couch, and tried to concentrate.

. . . *My teeth are fangs. Sharp, pointy teeth. Fangs, fangs, fangs . . .*

He groaned in frustration. “I don’t *get* it!”

Eli touched his forearm. “Oskar, just settle down. You’ll never be able to do it when you’re all upset like this. Here, just watch me for a second. Maybe that’ll help.”

“You already tried this,” he said dejectedly.

“I know, I know. But just try one more time. Here. Now watch. You need to learn to do this, Oskar. If you can’t, well”

Eli closed her eyes, opened her mouth halfway, and then tilted her head back. After a second or two, a set of sharp teeth lowered themselves into view behind her upper lip. She opened her mouth a little wider and her upper and lower set became clearly visible.

“There. Just like that. It’s that easy.”

Oskar looked at her face in disgust. “*Ugh*. I don’t want to see them, Eli. They’re *so*” He turned his face away, wrinkled his nose and shivered. “*Yuck*. Can you please—”

Eli rolled her eyes; then she closed her mouth, put her forehead down into her hands, and talked into her lap. “I never thought this was going to be so hard.” Then she looked up. “Maybe it would help if you watched yourself in the mirror. Come on.” He reluctantly followed her into the bathroom and they stood in front of the vanity.

Oskar looked at the mirror, then at her. “Gee—it might be easier to use the mirror if it wasn’t busted all to hell, *Eli*,” he said playfully. He poked her in the side.

She crossed her arms and frowned at him. “I was *angry*--I couldn’t help it. You were being mean.”

“*Me?* You were the meanie. You started all this, not *me*. I don’t go around biting people. *Especially* not my *best friend*.” His voice dripped with pretend sarcasm, and he was surprised to find that he was grinning. He had never thought he could find what she had done amusing.

Eli saw that he was teasing and shot back a grin. “Well, if you weren’t so darn *cute*, maybe I wouldn’t have. I couldn’t help myself. It was all that long hair. I *told* you you should cut it—but *no*, you wouldn’t listen. ‘I like it long’ was all you could say. *La dee da*.”

For a moment, they just looked at each other, smiling. Then Oskar stepped to one side of the sink where the mirror wasn’t so cracked, leaned forward, and looked at his face.

“Now please, give it a try.”

“This is gonna make me sick. I just know it.”

Eli stamped her foot. “*Ooo . . . you are so stubborn! You have to learn this!*”

Oskar raised his lips and studied his teeth as he responded. “But I don’t *want* to learn it. I told you, I don’t want to hurt anyone. Why do I have to?”

“Because . . . because, you’re going to get—aren’t you *already* hungry? It’s been three days!”

“Nope—not really.” Actually, Oskar was feeling quite hungry; he simply did not want to admit it to himself, nor especially to Eli. It would give her just the opening she wanted; the leverage to make him do what he didn’t *want* to do.

“Well, you’re going to be hungry soon, if you aren’t already.” She looked at him suspiciously. “And I’ve been there before, and trust me, it’s not pretty. I don’t want to see you suffer, Oskar, so *please*—try to cooperate!”

Then a thought occurred to Oskar. He knew it was unfair, but Eli was pressuring him, and he therefore felt justified in saying it. “I just really don’t want to go out and do this, Eli. Maybe *you* should get it *for* me. After all, you’re so good at it, right?”

Eli opened her mouth to reply, but then stopped. Her arms hung limply at her sides. Then she glowered at him and looked away angrily. Silence ensued as she appeared to be thinking it over. Then she simply said, “All right, Oskar.” Her little shoulders sagged, and she turned and walked out of the bathroom.

Oskar stood for a few moments in front of the mirror. He knew she was disappointed in him, but he didn’t care. Better that than the other.

He looked at the toilet, and thought how bizarre it was that he hadn’t needed to use it for almost half a week. No urge to pee, like he used to have every morning. None of the other, either. Because there was . . . nothing down there now. Just thinking about himself, all . . . hollow and empty, was repulsive. From now on, whenever he looked at the toilet, he was going to think of that terrible night when—

“Oskar, will you please come into the kitchen?”

He looked toward the doorway, puzzled. “What for?”

“Please just come in.”

He wandered into the kitchen. She was standing at the sink with her back turned to him. Without looking at him, she told him to sit down. He was puzzled, but did as she asked.

He heard a clinking sound as she dropped something into the sink. Then she turned and brought a small bowl over to the table and placed it before him.

A bowl of her blood.

Oskar inhaled sharply in surprise and scooted abruptly back from the table in his chair. His eyes grew wide and he stared at the bowl with alarm. A sensation immediately arose in the pit of his stomach: *hunger*. He closed his eyes and shook his head. *NO*. His chair squealed loudly on the linoleum, then toppled back onto the floor as he fled the room.

Eli slumped down into the other kitchen chair, put her head down, and began to cry. *My fault*, she thought through her tears. *My fault that we're having to do this—not his*. She looked up at the stupid little bowl sitting on the table. *What did you expect?—that he was just going to lap it up like a dog? Why are you doing this to him?*

Because he has to learn, or he'll die. That's why.

He wouldn't have to learn if you hadn't been so weak. He'd be fine now, and you'd be happy, playing some game with him. If only you—

Despair at her pathetic failure to control herself suddenly overcame her and she cried out loudly, unable to contain the dejection and anguish she felt. For what she'd done. She knew she had no right to cry, but she couldn't help it, and with her head down on the table she bawled like a baby into her arms.

She was still crying when she heard Oskar pick up his chair. She looked up through her tear-stained eyes and saw him sit down, completely composed, across from her.

Without looking at her, he looked down at the bowl. Slowly, hesitantly, he lowered his face to it until his mouth was less than an inch from the dark red fluid. Only then, with deadly earnest, did he look up at her through his long, blond hair.

“For you.”

He extended his tongue and lapped it slowly. Then lapped it faster. Then he picked up the bowl, craned back his head, and drained it. And when he lowered the bowl away from his bloody lips and looked at her again with unsmiling eyes, his freshly minted fangs were stark, nearly glowing, in his mouth.

“More.”

Eli spoke not a word as she stood and came around the table. His eyes never left her, and he breathed heavily through his mouth.

He turned in his chair and she stood before him. Raised her arm and offered him her bloody wrist.

He drank and drank. Eli closed her eyes, curled her toes, and the tears rolled down her cheeks.

†

17 JULY 1983

Eli and Oskar lay on the floor of their darkened apartment with the living room window uncovered, looking up at the full moon. Eli laid on her side; Oskar, on his back, with his head propped up against Eli's stomach.

"Oh Mr. Moon, Moon, lovely Mr. Moon, won't you please shine down on me"

Eli smiled. "You know that old song? I didn't know you knew that."

"Yeah . . . that's an oldie. My mom used to sing it to me."

Eli gazed thoughtfully at the pale white disk and smiled. "I love the moon." She ran her hands through Oskar's hair, then added, "and its light."

"It's almost as bright as day," Oskar remarked. "Or maybe it's just because of how I can see now."

Eli smiled. "Whenever I see the moonlight, I like to remember that it's reflected sunlight. Then I can imagine that the moon is my special mirror, showing me what I could never see during the day."

Oskar suddenly realized that he hadn't seen the sun for more than two weeks; and, upon realizing this, he felt a little sad. He missed the sunlight. But he liked what Eli had said, and he turned his head to look up at Eli's face. "Can it be my mirror, too?"

Eli laughed softly. "Of course. It's plenty big for both of us, I think."

They were silent for awhile; the sounds of the city life around them drifted in through the window. Then Oskar spoke. "Eli . . . I think I'm getting hungry again."

"And?"

"You know."

"Oskar, I am not a walking blood bank. I'm *tired* of this."

"And I told you, I don't want to do it. I just *don't*."

“Do you think it really matters, Oskar, whether you do it or not? It just makes it harder for me. I have to find twice as much as I usually would, just so I can take care of you. We aren’t avoiding anything this way.”

Oskar looked at her, surprised—he hadn’t thought of this. “You *have* been? Oh . . . I didn’t realize that.”

“What did you *think*, Oskar? Look at me—I’m *little*. Smaller than you. Do you think I can just let you drain me every few days without doing something like that? I’d shrivel up.”

Oskar sighed and turned around and onto his side to face her. “I’m sorry, Eli. I know I haven’t been very fair to you. It’s just . . . I can’t stand the thought of hurting someone. Of . . . inflicting pain on someone. Because I know how it felt when you . . . well, I know it’s gotta be painful.”

Eli pulled her legs up, laid her head down on her arm, and stroked Oskar’s face. “Oskar . . . it doesn’t *always* have to be painful.”

“What do you mean? You’re not saying that they’re just going to hand it over, are you? Let you put a needle in their arm?”

“No, not like that. It’s more complicated.”

“Well, explain it to me, then. Because I’m confused.”

“Let me ask you: back on that night that we were playing Mikado . . . you said that after you got over your pain and fear, you began to enjoy what I was doing, right?”

“Yes.”

“What do you think made the pain go away? Because that happened first—didn’t it?”

Oskar squinted his eyes, trying to think. “I . . . I don’t remember, exactly. It just—it seemed like it just, at some point, that what you were doing to my neck stopped hurting and became . . . well, it—I guess it felt good.”

“That’s right. It did.”

Oskar looked up at the ceiling for a moment, and then said wonderingly to himself, “That’s so *weird*.” Then he looked back at her, puzzled. “Okay . . . what are you talking about, Eli? What’s this all about?”

Eli’s tone grew serious. “There’s an erotic nature to what we do, Oskar.”

“*Erotic*.” He drew back a little and looked even more puzzled than before. “What do you mean?”

“Do you know what ‘erotic’ means?”

“Mmm . . . no, I guess I don’t. Sort of like . . . sex?”

“It means *desire*. And yes, there is a physical aspect to it. A bodily desire, you might say.”

“Someone tearing my throat open causes *desire*. I don’t *think* so, Eli. That was *way* too painful.”

“At first, yes. But it didn’t stay that way, did it?”

Oskar pursed his lips and thought. “No, I guess not.”

“Would you say that at some point, you . . . *desired* me, Oskar?”

Oskar looked at her for what seemed like a long time. He was clearly extremely uncomfortable with her question. Then he sighed, exhaled heavily, and said, “Yes. It’s *true*.” He rolled over onto his back, unable to look at her.

“Oskar.”

“Hmm.”

“Look at me.”

He turned his head slowly to look at her.

“It’s all right, Oskar—to admit that. It happens all the time. It’s almost—unavoidable. It doesn’t even matter if it’s a man or a woman.”

Oskar fidgeted on the floor, then rolled over to face away from her. “This is *so* weird, Eli. This is *not* making me want to go out and do this sort of thing. It’s . . . *ugh*.”

“Oskar, think of it as an anesthetic. You know what that is, don’t you?”

“Yeah. Doctors give it to you when you need surgery. So it doesn’t hurt, and you won’t remember.”

“That’s right. And what I’m talking about is a natural anesthetic. It makes it easier for you and your victim. And you need to understand that, because Oskar, I can’t keep doing this for you. You’re not making the effort to learn anything. Now just hold still and let me show you.”

Eli slid over so she was lying directly behind him, like two spoons in a drawer. She wrapped her arm around him and raised herself up so her head was over his neck. Then she brushed his hair aside to expose its tender curve.

Oskar flinched at her touch and grew tense. “Eli, that tickles. Come on. Please stop. There’s no way I’m going to do this to—”

“*Shhh!* You be quiet and relax. I’m not going to hurt you.”

Oskar sighed and tried to relax.

After a few seconds, when he really had become relaxed, she again placed her arm around him. This time she took his hand into hers. Then he began to feel her warm breath on his neck. It grew steadily warmer and more intense until it became a soft, warm spot just below his ear. He found himself growing even more relaxed, almost sleepy; if she had not been holding his hand, he would have lifted up his arm and run his hand through her hair. Then he was surprised to feel a gentle sucking sensation and realized that his blood was flowing from his neck and into her; but yet, there was no pain. He began to breath through his mouth without realizing it, and quickly became completely limp. He had no energy to do anything, not even wriggle his toes. All he could manage was to weakly squeeze her hand. And, as before, he did not want her to stop, and was disappointed when her heat withdrew, replaced by the cool air.

Slowly, his body returned to normal. He felt more awake and his breathing sped up. He rolled over to look at her in amazement, and as he did so, he touched his neck. There were only two tiny spots, nothing more, and hardly any blood.

“*Oh my God,*” was all he could say at first. Then, “how did you *do* that?”

“It’s just a power, Oskar. You have it now, too. All you have to do is be gentle, and it will happen. And the person won’t feel a thing . . . or a least, they’ll willingly tolerate what they *do* feel. Now you try it.”

Oskar was very reluctant at the thought of doing what Eli had just done to her. But then he remembered that he’d been biting her regularly for a few weeks now with much less gentleness that she had just exhibited. He began to feel sorry for her, for the pain that he had inflicted, because he hadn’t known how to do it earlier. Why hadn’t she told him?

As he had done, Eli rolled over to face away from him. He sidled up to her, pulled her hair out of the way, and brought his open mouth down on her neck.

Now it was Eli’s turn to flinch. “Wait!” She turned her head to look at him sternly. “You’re going too *fast!* You need to go *slower*-be *gentle*. *Jeesh.*” She shot him one more warning look, and then turned away again.

Oskar rolled his eyes at her, but then he did make a deliberate effort to slow down. As he lowered his face to her neck, he said softly, “do you want me to actually bite you?”

Eli whispered, “It’ll be okay if you’ll just be gentle. You’re such a *caveman*.”

Oskar tried to mimic what she had done. He put his arm around her and gently held her hand. She gave it a squeeze, and he squeezed back, smiling a little as he did it and knowing that she was probably smiling, too. At this moment, it dawned on him that perhaps this could be fun, could be . . . delightful. And this thought, for the first time, overcame the deeply rooted feeling of disgust about what he was about to do. He opened his mouth and breathed softly on her neck as he slowly lowered his lips to her. He was not surprised to realize that all by themselves, his teeth had become sharp. Then he gently transformed his breath into a kiss; his kiss into a bite; his bite into . . .

Her blood flowed into him.

He would never be able to tell her how much he had come to enjoy its flavor, its sweetness.

As he had been, she was completely relaxed and vulnerable; he could have done anything with her that he wished, and she would not have stopped him. Her damp grip on his hand loosened, her breathing became deep and regular, and she seemed to fall into a trance-like sleep.

She was beautiful, lying there in the soft moonlight. And as her blood flowed across his tongue it came to him like a lightning bolt:

My Eli. How much I love you.

In that instant, Oskar realized just how great Eli’s sacrifices for him had been. Offering herself for him, in so many ways, since the first time they’d met. Offering herself, her very *blood*, for him now, so that he might learn. Might learn, and therefore live. Her turning of him, which he knew in his heart she had *not* intended, suddenly seemed a very small failure in comparison. And with these thoughts he realized how selfishly he had been behaving since the night all of this had happened. And he resolved in his heart to be the best vampire he could be—for *her*.

Oskar reluctantly withdrew his fangs from Eli. She did not move; only made a soft, semi-purposeful noise that people make when they are drifting off to sleep. But her grip on his hand tightened, and she pulled his arm more closely around herself. He curled up around her and held her close; cherished her in his heart.

Chapter 6

19 JULY 1983

“Oww, Eli! It hurts! *It hurts!* It—it . . . oh—look at *that*.”

Eli and Oskar lay side by side on Oskar's mattress. Oskar was holding his hand up in front of him, watching as it transformed itself before their eyes into a claw.

"I know it hurts! But don't worry, Oskar—it won't feel like that forever! The more you do it, the less pain you'll feel."

"It felt like I had my hand in a light socket or something," Oskar replied as the tingling dissipated down his arm. His mouth gaped and he stared, wide-eyed, at his transformed hand.

Eli held her hand up to his, and within the space of a few seconds, her fingers melted like plastic held over an open flame, stretched out, and became long and thin.

"*Wow.* You're so *good* at it!"

Eli offered a wistful smile. "I've had a lot of practice, Oskar."

Oskar wriggled his fingers and turned his hand around to look at it from all sides. Then he brought his other claw up and looked at both of them, side by side. "Eli, this is so *freaky*. They feel so *weird*."

Eli took one of his claws into hers. "You need to remember to be careful, Oskar. They're sharp at the tips."

"Sure are. But there's not much feeling in the ends, is there?"

"No. But watch this."

"What?"

"Just watch my hand."

Oskar stared with anticipation at Eli's hand, clasped in his. At first he saw nothing, and was puzzled. Then he noticed that her skin was changing color. Eli was usually pale, but now he saw that her hand and wrist were becoming flushed. The color gradually shifted from a pale ivory to a pinkish hue, then slowly darkened into a grayish purple. He couldn't tear his eyes away from it; the contrast was all the more noticeable against the constant flesh tone of his own hand. Then he realized that the change was not limited to her hand and wrist, but included her arm, and—

He looked over at her face. His eyes grew wide and, startled, he flinched away from her. "Eli!"

She smiled, and for once he was not pleased to see it, surrounded by all of that dusky-gray skin. She looked monstrous. As soon as she saw his reaction, though, her smile faltered.

Oskar's heart thudded rapidly in his chest. He panicked, and for a second he felt like fleeing from her; running away and hiding in the bathroom. Then she touched him, and he was relieved that it was her ordinary hand on his forearm. Her color returned to its normal hue.

"Sorry, Oskar. Kinda forgot how that could look."

Oskar relaxed. "It's . . . it's okay. For a moment there you just looked *really* creepy."

"You can do it, too. Want to try?"

"Uh . . . not right now, no thanks."

"Want to try your feet?"

"Okay."

"Watch." Eli rolled back onto her shoulders and nimbly swung her legs up by her hips so that her toes were pointed at the ceiling. "Don't do this with your shoes on. I've forgot and done it a few times, and it *really* hurts." She chuckled.

After they had compared their transformed feet for awhile, Oskar asked, "Can you change other parts of your body, Eli? I mean, could I maybe—I don't know, grow a tail, or something?"

Eli laughed and shook her head. "Only *you*, Oskar, could dream up an idea like that. I don't really think—well, go ahead and *try* it. See what happens. Maybe—who knows?"

Oskar turned onto his side to face her, smiled at her excitedly, then said, "Okay, here goes!" He shut his eyes and concentrated.

Eli watched him, evidently fascinated, for several seconds. Soon he said, with his eyes still squeezed shut, "I think I feel something. Is anything happening?"

Eli got up and peeked over his side to look. "Oh, *Oskar!* I can't *believe* it! It's . . . it's . . ."

Oskar's eyes flew open. "What? *What?!* Is it *there?*"

"Yeah—it's right *here!*" She mischievously grabbed the waistband of his underwear and yanked it up.

"*Oww!* . . . Why you . . . ! I'll give you a wedgie you won't forget!" But Eli had already fled the room. "You'll have to catch me, first!"

Oskar stood up to give chase, but then discovered that it wasn't easy to adjust his underwear with claws. *Doggone her!* He laughed to himself. Then he ran into the living room and looked around, but did not see her. He went into the kitchen, but it also was empty.

"Where'd you go? Eli? Where are you?"

A lilting voice drifted in from the living room. "In *here*." And as he spun around and came back in, her voice floated down from the ceiling. "You should learn to look *harder*," she teased.

Eli was hovering immediately over the doorway leading to the back bedroom. He had walked directly underneath her when he'd come in.

He tried to jump up and grab her, but every time he lunged, she would flit away, always staying near the ceiling. "Gee, Oskar," she taunted. "You're *awfully* slow. Maybe you'll need to come up *here* to catch me."

Oskar stopped and looked at her. Eli stopped, too, watching him with anticipation.

"How do you do it?"

"Like everything else. You just think it, and it will happen."

Oskar started to close his eyes, but Eli said, "No. Focus with your eyes *open*. Closing your eyes is a bad habit."

He stood perfectly still, his arms relaxed at his sides, legs slightly spread apart. Then he looked down at his feet.

He began to leave the floor. Immediately he snapped his head up in shock to look at Eli, and the instant he did so, he fell down. "*Dang it!* I almost had it!"

"Don't look at *me*. Just focus on what you're doing. Later it will become second nature, trust me."

"Okay."

After several false starts and brief hops, Oskar was able to float slowly around the middle of the room. He kept pinwheeling his arms like a man on a tightrope without a pole, and each time he thought about what he was doing, he fell.

"You need to do it without thinking, Oskar. You didn't think about your hand every second that it was a claw, did you?"

"No, but this is *different*. I'm . . . I'm *flying*, not just changing part of my body."

“No it’s not, Oskar. It’s no different. If you can walk and chew gum at the same time, then you can do it. Keep trying.”

The smile on Oskar’s face grew broader with each passing minute that he hovered about. “This . . . is so . . . incredibly . . . *bizarre*, Eli I can’t *believe* I’m doing this!”

Eli watched Oskar, bemused. He looked like he was walking on air.

“Oskar, you’re not on the ground anymore. Think of yourself as a bird in the air, or a fish in the water. Something like that.” She left her corner of the room and gracefully circled him, turning her head to smile at him as she did. Then she came alongside him and took his hand. He hesitated for half a second, unsure of himself, and then allowed her to tug him along. He looked at her and smiled as they slowly began to circle around their tiny living room.

Soon, Oskar was not even thinking about how he was flying. His mind wandered, soaking up the strange new sensation of being freed from gravity as he drifted over and over past each of the four walls. Round and ‘round they went. He felt every movement of his body, and every change in hers; a slight pull here, a little slowing there. He found that he could alter his course with very small movements of his limbs, yet knew that it wasn’t just his arms and legs making the change.

“How fast can I go?”

She glanced at him and smiled. “I don’t know. It’s all up here, Oskar.” She tapped the side of her head with the forefinger of her free hand.

“What’s the fastest you’ve ever gone?”

“Don’t know. Never measured myself. Like a bullet, maybe? How fast is that?”

Oskar grinned. “I have *no* idea!”

“You’re a natural, Oskar. I’m amazed.”

“How long did it take *you* to learn?”

There was a pause and Eli’s hand left his. “Umm—about ten seconds, I guess.”

“*Wow!* You’re—” Then Oskar saw that Eli was no longer smiling. Their happy spell had inexplicably been broken. He stopped flying, landing on all fours on the couch, then turned and sat down. It was only then that he noticed a slight fatigue in his arms and legs and a tenseness in his neck. Eli came to rest in the middle of the floor and sat, cross-legged, facing him.

He stretched his neck from side to side. “It was bad, wasn’t it?”

Eli reflected for a moment, staring into space, before answering. She did not look at him as she talked. “Yes, it was. Terrifying.”

“What happened?”

She looked him in the eye. “He dropped me. From very high up. Told me to ‘fly away’—and that was it. I either had to fly, or . . . or else. So I guess you could say that I had learn quick or die. Well—maybe not actually *die*, just . . . have a very painful experience when I hit the ground.”

A disturbing thought suddenly occurred to Oskar that so far, had escaped him: that he was now related to the vampire that had made Eli. A blood connection between him and that awful creature that he knew only from what Eli had shown him in her memories. He felt a chill, and suddenly felt that he was ensnared in cold, dead hands from the distant past; ghastly white, reaching for him from a dark, moldering sepulchre.

Silence descended in the room, the perfect companion for the gloomy mood that had engulfed them.

He looked at the window, covered with an old, threadworn blanket to keep out the sun. “It’s no good, is it?”

“What’s no good?”

“This.” He held up his claw hand. “The feet. The fangs. The flying. It’s all . . . to help us do bad things. To kill people. Like we’re . . . evil angels. And evil angels are—what—devils, right? We’re *devils*.”

“*Oskar*. Come on—no, we’re *not* devils. It’s a *disease*. A disease that forces us to live off something that’s forbidden, that’s all.”

“Eli, diseases don’t enable you to fly around or change your shape. They make you sick and weak, not superstrong with fantastic powers. That’s . . . *magic*. *Black magic*.”

“I think it all depends on how you use your powers, Oskar. People are born with all different kinds of abilities. Some people are really smart; some are very strong. Some are very fast and agile; others are slow and clumsy, but could be very good with their hands. People choose how to use their abilities in different ways. Some choose to do good; others, evil. It’s no different for us. The vampire who made me hated the world and wanted only to spread his evil, his poison, to everything he could. I see things differently.”

“But Eli, what we can do goes *way* beyond ordinary human abilities like strength or intelligence. I mean, *come on*—name me the last person you saw who flew around like we just did.”

“But we’re not really all that powerful, Oskar. Not really—not compared to what people can do to each other nowadays. I could pick up a gun and cause much more harm in a few seconds than you or I could inflict. Or fly off in an airplane and bomb whole cities with the push of a button. So I still think it all depends on what you’re doing up here, with your mind.”

“Yes, but Eli . . . now I *am* the ‘gun.’ It’s . . . a *part* of me. And while I understand what you’re saying about trying to avoid as much evil—*death*—whatever you want to call it, as possible, I still know that at some point I’m going to be putting my teeth into someone I don’t know and . . . killing him—or her.”

Eli was quiet for a moment; then she crawled over to Oskar, put her arms on his thigh, and looked up at him. “Okay, Oskar. I’m going to make a commitment to you—because I love you, and I don’t ever want to see you suffer. I take back what I said earlier, about stopping what we were doing before. For the rest of my life, I’ll do everything I can to take care of you, so that you’ll never have to go out and hurt anyone. You’ll never need to grow fangs or claws, never have to run around in the dark and attack anyone. If that will make you happy, then that’s how it will be.”

He took her hands into his. “No, Eli. That wouldn’t be fair.”

“Yes it *would*, Oskar. You didn’t ask for this.”

“Well, neither did *you!*”

“True. But I *did* want to be with you.” She squeezed his hand. “That makes me responsible.”

Oskar made a dismissive gesture, then spoke in a tired, matter-of-fact way. “Oh come on. I wanted to be with you, *too*, Eli. I *knew* what you were. I didn’t expect what happened, but still . . . I understood that there were risks. So, in a way . . . I chose this.

“Look, you and I both know that what you’re saying just wouldn’t work. You’d get mad after awhile, maybe even hate me, for having to wait on me hand and foot. Besides, we really wouldn’t be together much, would we? I’d probably just get bored and lonely, sitting around here. I’d rather be *with* you—by your side, *wherever* you are. Even if that means we’re out, doing those things together. And while I know that’s going to be hard, it’s . . . what I want.” Then he offered her a small, secretive smile and blushed. “Even though I’ve sorta come to enjoy your—” he looked away—“flavor.”

Eli *tsked* him. “We never should have started that. Now you’re addicted.” She laughed softly. “You’re an *Eli* addict.” Then she looked at him with grave seriousness. “But you know I would give that to you anytime you ask.

“Now—let’s go.”

Oskar lay down behind Eli in the tub and embraced her. They murmured good night to each other; then Eli grew still and quickly fell asleep.

Oskar was exhausted, and the urge to sleep rushed in as soon as he closed his eyes. But he couldn't sleep.

He replayed the night's events in his mind. He'd never had a night like it before, and knew he would never forget it. Because he would never see the world in the same way again.

The whole night had been . . . he searched for a word to encapsulate it—*tactical*. Yes: a study in tactics. The closest thing to it in his experience had been playing army with his friend Johan, when he was younger. But running around with a plastic gun seemed very childish and a million miles removed from what they'd done tonight. Because tonight's work had been deadly serious, through and through.

They hadn't done anything to anyone. In fact, the whole point had been to *not* be seen by anyone. That's how Eli had explained it—to move about the city undetected. And she had shown him so many things that his head was spinning.

He had learned to use all of his senses, but mostly his eyes and ears. He had vision like he never could've believed, and his hearing?—*incredible*. The tiniest details, the smallest sounds, did not escape him for hundreds of yards. And *movement!* With all his excitement over flying, he had overlooked just how fast he could *run*. He had known she was fleet-footed from his former life. But now he realized that she had been going deliberately slow, probably just to give him a chance to keep up. Tonight he had never seen her run so fast, but not once had he fallen behind.

It had all been darkly exhilarating. There was nothing they couldn't conquer. Crawling up the sheer faces of buildings with their claws, leaping across rooftops; swinging from pipes and fire escapes; with him amazed not by his abilities, but because he hadn't even been *afraid*. And his energy had seemed bottomless, a font of strength that was continuously renewed. He had felt as though Eli and he were the masters of Stockholm.

The darkness had been their friend; the light, their enemy. She had taught him to see everything in terms of cover. He had evaluated the quality of shadows over and over; had learned to make judgments on the ability of individual patches of darkness to cloak them.

He realized very quickly that it wasn't only his eyes' ability to see in the dark that had changed. His perception, in the most literal sense—his ability to see and *understand* what he saw, had been keenly altered. The smallest things seemed to acquire some hidden meaning, some inner significance, that was tantalizingly close to his grasp. The way the wind blew through the leaves of a tree, for example. He had never noticed before that there was a pattern to the movement of the leaves; a rhythm that was synchronized with the

snapping of a flag atop an adjacent building, and with the fluttering of a dark lock of Eli's hair. It seemed as if nothing happened without a reason, or without some relationship to something else.

Everything seemed to capture his attention. He now found completely captivating things that he would have been blind to a month ago. He had watched, fascinated, at some leaves and pieces of trash in the corner of a building entrance that had blown around in an endless circle: lifting, swirling, lowering; their pathways restlessly expanding, then contracting. He suspected that he would have been staring at the little whirlwind still, had Eli not nudged him with a smile. "Hey . . . Oskar—you there?" He had looked at her with a blank expression. "Huh? Oh—sorry." She knew what was happening to him.

Most fascinating of all had been reading people. Perched on a rooftop overlooking the train station, they had spent the better part of an hour just observing folks come and go as Eli offered her comments and insights. He couldn't believe how much she picked up just by watching.

"See that man over there by the taxi stand?" she asked. "You can tell by how he's acting that he's waiting for someone. Watch how he looks around."

"Those two are married. See how they walk together?"

"That kid is lost, looking for his mother. She's on the other side of the plaza, talking to that police officer. See how worried she is? Watch how she moves her arms as she talks."

"That man is selling drugs or something. Watch his hands when that other guy gets close. *There*. Did you see the exchange?"

"The woman who just came out is drunk. The one right there with the pink top and jean jacket. Watch her move—she's trying to act like she's not, but watch her feet and you'll see it. See? She just staggered a little in spite of herself."

"That couple there are fighting over something. She's mad at him for some reason. See how they won't look at each other? And they're walking single file, even though they're moving together."

"That guy standing over by the phone booth is probably a cop, even though he's not wearing a uniform. Notice how he observes everything. He's watching everyone very carefully, even though he's pretending to use the phone."

"That old guy there would be good, if we were hunting tonight. He's got his face in a book as he walks down the street—oblivious to everything around him. Plus, you can tell he's out of shape. Look at his stomach."

Oskar chimed in, eager to participate. "That lady over there is kinda fat, too. How about her?"

Eli gave him a look. “She’s *pregnant*, Oskar.”

“Oh. How can you tell?”

“You just can. It’s like it hangs lower; that’s all.”

“So, would she be—”

“No, Oskar. Not pregnant women. Or little kids--or mothers.”

“Can you always tell if someone’s pregnant?”

“Usually I can, yeah.”

“What if she’s only a little pregnant?”

“You’re either pregnant or you’re not, Oskar. There’s no in between.”

“Yeah, but--”

“I can just tell. You’ll be able to, too. Don’t worry.”

“Well, how do you know if some lady is a mom?”

“She’s got kids with her. Simple.”

“What if the kids are at home or something?”

“You know what a wedding ring is, Oskar?”

“Sure.”

“Well look for that. If she’s got one, then there’s a good chance she’s got kids.”

“Oh yeah. Sorry.”

“But what if . . . she’s not married any more? Like I mean, my mom and dad split up when I was little, and my mom never wore her wedding ring. But she had me.”

Eli began to grow agitated. “Oskar, sometimes you just have to make judgments. I can’t explain it to you. You just learn.”

“Have you ever . . . made a bad call about someone? Like a woman who turned out to be . . .”

Eli stopped looking out at the street below them. A gust of wind caught her hair as she turned, sat slowly down with her back to the building edge they'd been hiding behind, and drew her legs up with her arms. She said nothing; just stared at the ground dejectedly.

Her reaction made Oskar regret his question. He squatted down beside her, thought about apologizing, but then decided to just remain silent. His question hung in the air for what seemed like quite awhile; then Eli said very quietly, almost to herself, "I don't know if I want to go on like this."

Her statement deeply frightened him. She had always been his source of strength; her firmly held views about who she was and what she did had formed a kind of bedrock to their relationship. He hadn't realized how deeply what she did affected her, and how emotionally fragile she was. Because he was learning from her, it had become easy to think of Eli as an older, mature person, but he had to remember that she was perpetually twelve.

She looked up at him and said, "Yes, Oskar, I *have*. Are you happy now? I admit it—I've made mistakes. You do your best, but sometimes things go wrong, and they don't turn out like you planned."

Thoughtlessly he blurted out, "like *me*?"

She looked away and the tears started. She sobbed loudly, stood up, and walked rapidly away from him.

"Wait, Eli, wait! I'm sorry!"

She didn't look back; just shook her head and put up a hand, waving him away. "Don't—*don't*. I . . . I *can't*."

She didn't want him to be near her, but she didn't go too far away, either. He understood why—because she still thought of him as her responsibility. She wouldn't leave him up here by himself, a fledgling. Even though he'd hurt her.

When it had started to rain, he had gone to her and told her he was sorry. She had crawled out from behind the electrical box, sullenly said "It's all right," and then they had headed home. After they had gotten back and dried off, he had thought that she would go off to sleep in the closet by herself, but the chill between them seemed to have thawed, and they had clambered into the tub together.

He squeezed Eli a little closer to himself, wishing that it would somehow banish the unease he felt about the whole night. But it didn't work. It just made him more aware of the fact that she wasn't breathing, and that her heart had slowed to almost nothing. She was cold, like a corpse—and he had no heat to warm her.

He loosened his hold on her and without understanding why, rose and got out of the tub. He quietly left the bathroom and as he moved through the living room toward the window,

he realized why he was reaching to lift the blanket and let in the dim rays of the morning sun.

They weren't people anymore, those shapes down there at the train station that he had seen so well. They were . . . objects. Things to be studied and . . . selected. He felt the pangs in his stomach, and knew what was coming. What would be required. He wished mightily that he could just eat some regular food. The crepes that his mom used to make; elder duck; the candy he used to buy . . . *anything*. Then everything would be easy. But that was now impossible.

He began to raise the corner of the ratty green fabric. A thin sliver of sickly gray light pierced the shadows. It was terrifying. A little further, he knew, and it would fall across his legs and burn him deeply. Did he want to raise it further? And what would Eli do if he suddenly yanked the blanket down and exposed himself fully to the sun?

He knew.

He dropped the blanket and stood there in the silence. He could never do that to her. *Never*. His love for her was too hard, too deep for that.

He felt incredibly tired and unhappy. If he didn't move, he would fall asleep on the spot. So he trudged back into the bathroom, crawled in behind her, and welcomed the oblivion of sleep.

Chapter 7

24 JULY 1983

John Christensen stretched and began to put away his pastels. It was becoming too dark and windy to do any more work on his picture, and he was getting hungry, so it was time to call it quits.

He paused for a moment, his eyes moving back and forth between his sketch and the darkening waters of Stråisjön Lake. He liked his work, so far. He thought he had done a good job of capturing the blues and greens of the water and the trees. But it needed some warmth. Maybe tomorrow morning when the light was better, he'd add something with some red or orange in the foreground—flowers, perhaps, or a bird.

He couldn't have picked a more beautiful spot, here in the midst of this primeval forest. And so close to Stockholm, too. It made him envious; to think that one could work downtown, but go to a place like this with just a short train ride. Amazing.

He was used to the beauty of nature, but Sweden, he had to admit, had the upper hand. All his life he had loved hiking and spending time in the country. And traveling around Europe over the last two weeks, he'd seen plenty of it. But this—it was definitely hard to beat.

He folded up his easel and carefully stowed the artwork. He'd spend tomorrow morning working on the picture some more, then pack up and take the trail back to the main park entrance. He'd be back in Stockholm in time for a late lunch, then plan some more for his tour through Denmark later in the week.

The apple and the sandwich he'd brought along tasted good as he sat in front of his little tent, watching the final rays of the sun disappear behind the western horizon. He drank some water out of his thermos and thought about how much he enjoyed having a simple meal out here in a place like this. Nothing fancy, just the basics. Well, he'd brought a little vodka to wash everything down. But what the hell, why not?—he had no particular schedule to keep, or anyone to see. He hadn't bothered to shave today, nor comb his hair, which stood up in short, unruly reddish-blond tufts. Who cared how he looked out here?

It was too bad that he hadn't been able to bring Lauren along on his trip through Europe. But naturally, Barbara had objected, pointing out that she had already signed Lauren up for an expensive summer day camp in Seattle; and of course, he didn't have the visitation rights to force the issue. Naturally, he had assumed Lauren would've enjoyed it, but looking back on it now, he wasn't so sure. She had never been crazy about camping—just like her mother—and lately, she'd been more interested in boys and shopping at the mall than in spending time with her old man.

Well, there was no point spoiling his evening with depressing thoughts about the implosion of his family life. All of that was water under the bridge. Tonight he had the beautiful forest wilderness, and Epictetus. Who could ask for more? He crawled into his tent, snapped on a battery-operated lantern, poured himself a little vodka, and clambered into his sleeping bag. Once he was inside, he retrieved his dog-eared copy of *Discourses* from his backpack and settled in.

Who could read Epictetus and not love him? A stoic philosopher from the First Century A.D. who had been born a slave somewhere up in Turkey, crippled for most of his life, and who owned nothing but an oil pot. A *clay* one, too boot, lest an iron one be stolen. His secret was understanding that there is only so much a man can control in this life; that everything, even one's body, can be taken away, leaving you with what? Only the ability to control how you will react to your circumstances. Understanding that actually gave a fellow enormous freedom—freedom from anxiety and worry. Yeah, maybe Bertrand had a point—that the mind really isn't all that inviolate; that even someone's thoughts can be manipulated with the right drugs, for example. But still, you had to admire a guy who could let someone break his leg and have so great a control over himself that all he said was, "Did I not tell you that you would break it?" Unbelievable.

Of course, he could never be like Epictetus. He abhorred pain, and as a child, the sight of blood had made him faint when he'd cut his finger in the kitchen. His older brother had never let him forget *that* incident. But still . . . he could wish.

He was trying to get through a particularly dense passage in Chapter 7, something about divining viscera, when he began to feel drowsy. His eyelids began to droop, his brain drifted into neutral, and soon he was reading the same sentence over and over. Then he heard a sound.

A child, crying somewhere in the dark.

He frowned and turned his head to the right—it sounded like it was coming from over that way. Then it stopped, and the only sound was the wind buffeting the side of his tent. He waited, straining to hear it again, now fully alert. *There.* But fainter? As if . . . it was moving away.

What the hell.

He rolled over, fumbled for his big, aluminum Kel-Lite—it looked like a police baton, and held untold numbers of “D” cells—and switched it on. Then he crawled out of his sleeping bag, popped his head out of his tent, and swung the light through the woods off in the direction he’d heard the sound. He saw nothing; just the tall, ancient trees, their branches swaying softly in the wind.

Then he heard it again—softer this time. Somewhere . . . he shined the light more to his left, but only saw more trees and underbrush. Could it be a bird, maybe, or an animal? He tried to imagine what sort of animal might make a sound like that, but drew a blank. It had to be human. Yes—someone’s kid, lost out here in the woods. He was only about four hundred meters from the trail, which ran quite close to the lake on this, its northeastern shore. So it could be that some child had gotten separated from her parents earlier in the day and was wandering around, lost and alone. But still, while there had been other folks out hiking earlier, he hadn’t seen or heard anyone since late afternoon. So this kid must be seriously lost, to be out here now.

Well, there was nothing to do but try to find her—or him, or whoever it was. He swore softly to himself as he ducked back inside the tent and pulled out his pants and the lantern. He turned up the light as bright as it would go and set the lantern down by the tent flap, then hopped in a semicircle as he struggled to pull on his khakis after three shots of vodka. Then he slipped into his boots without bothering to lace them, adjusted his trusty flashlight to its widest beam, and set off.

When he got to the edge of the little clearing he had chosen to pitch camp, he heard the crying again. He stopped and gave a holler in Swedish, which he spoke pretty well since he’d been raised in Germany. “Hello? Who’s out there—are you okay?” He paused, and then added, “Do you need help?”

His voice rang loudly in his ears as he stopped to listen. There was no reply, but the crying was still there, more plaintive, perhaps? Yep—a lost and lonely child, probably a girl—too scared to speak, but who maybe had heard his voice. He called again, telling her to stay where she was, and that he was coming to help her.

He began to move through the brush toward the sound. Cripes, the stuff was thick! He pushed his way past the brambles and climbed over fallen tree trunks. Every little branch and root seemed intent on impeding his progress, and occasionally his boots squelched down into the muck and the mud tried to suck them off his feet. The wind blew stronger, roaring through the leaves with an undulating groan, and thorns tore at his forearms. He shivered, and wished he'd thrown his jacket on over his T-shirt. Oh well—no time to worry about that now.

He had been trying to pay attention to any remarkable features of the terrain so he could find his way back, but wasn't having much luck in the dark. All the trees seemed to look the same; that big, overturned stump back there, maybe? He figured that in the worst case scenario, he could always head toward the lake and follow the shoreline back.

He paused to listen again. The crying was louder; he was definitely closer. He could now hear the child's softer sobs and sniffles. He had no clear sense of how far he'd come, but figured he couldn't be very far from his camp; less than a hundred meters, maybe.

Finally, in the beam of his flashlight he saw that the trees were thinning out into a small clearing, populated by younger, smaller trees. The rotting remains of what once must have been a mighty big tree lay across the gap. The darkness wasn't quite as thick in the clearing as it had been under the trees, enabling him to see, next to the dark, enormous trunk, a child laying on its side, clutching an ankle.

The child looked up as he approached, and—yes, it was a girl. A beautiful little girl with big, dark eyes set in a pale, round face framed with black hair. Her expression changed from sadness and pain to hopeful relief when she saw him. Then she rolled away from him and without saying anything, began to pull herself up by the tree trunk.

Something about the whole situation set off little alarm bells way down inside of him. He felt uneasy, but it was a very vague sort of uneasiness that readily gave way to the happiness he felt at having found her. He quickened his pace toward her and started to talk. "Hey, hey, what's going on? Why are you out here? Are you all right?"

She answered as she continued to get up, still facing away from him. Her voice sounded much lower and more boyish than he had expected from the thin, sad crying he'd heard. "I . . . I was with my parents and I got lost. I was trying to find them, and then it got dark. I got scared, started to run, then I . . . I fell and twisted my ankle. It hurts really bad, and I couldn't keep walking on it . . ."

At this point, he had almost reached her. From behind she looked very thin—she couldn't weigh very much—and he figured he'd help her up and then sit her down on the trunk so he could take a look at her ankle. So he put the flashlight down on a big branch jutting out from the fallen tree and said, "here, let me help you. Don't put any weight on it."

As he got her seated on the tree, he noticed for the first time that she'd lost her shoes. Her feet were muddy and sure enough, when he looked at her ankle, it did seem purple. She hissed through her teeth and pulled away as he tried to examine it.

"Honey, where are your shoes? . . . Well, it does look like you've twisted it pretty bad. I don't think you should walk on it." He smiled at her reassuringly. "But I can carry you . . . how would you like a piggy-back ride to my tent? Then we can try to find your folks." *I can manage this*, he thought. *Just have to go a little slower on the way back, that's all.*

She thanked him with a big smile. Her dark eyes seemed to twinkle unnaturally in the glow of his flashlight as he turned around. He stooped down and she climbed onto his back. As he suspected, she weighed almost nothing, and he noticed as he straightened up and reached for his light that she wasn't very warm, either. Poor kid, she was probably getting hypothermic out here in the woods. He'd have to get her into his sleeping bag as soon as they got back so she could warm up. She wrapped her arms over his shoulders and her thighs squeezed around his waist, and as he reached back to give a little boost to her rear end, he noticed that—

--her grip on him was tightening.

At first, he figured she was just a little nervous, maybe afraid that he might drop her. So, he began to offer assurances that she had nothing to fear. "Don't worry, don't worry, I won't let you fall. You can relax a—"

Jesus. She was still squeezing, still—what the *hell?* His mind shifted from trying to settle her down for the ride back, to getting her off of him. But this was an injured little girl, and he had to be gentle—he couldn't hurt her.

It dawned on him that his arms weren't completely free any more. Her grip on him had shifted down over his upper biceps, and now they were pinned firmly to his sides. All he could flex were his elbows, and that wasn't enough to get his hands on her. At the same time, her legs had wrapped more firmly around him, and they were amazingly strong, too. He staggered away from the dead tree, trying to draw a breath—*Christ*, what's she doing to my *ribs?*—and started to spin around, saying "Hey! Hey! Stop that! Please, it's all right—let go a little!"

But she didn't loosen up. She just kept squeezing, and now he had the terrible feeling of being unable to draw a breath. He couldn't expand his lungs, and with their stillness he suddenly felt his heart thudding loudly in protest. *I'm . . . I'm suffocating—dear God, she's squeezing me like a snake—must get her off, can't breathe, can't breathe, can't-*

Suddenly his legs felt weak, then gave way. Bending at the knees, he went down and then toppled forward, face-first, onto the ground. He wanted to scream, but couldn't because he had no air. Then everything went black.

†

He came to and found that he was lying on his side where he'd fallen. A dull pain had spread across his chest, and he realized that the little girl was still on his back with her limbs wrapped tightly around him. He was groggy and weak; had no strength to fight her.

Then he realized someone else was crouched next to him—a young, lanky boy wearing a navy blue shirt and jeans. His thin arms and face were just as white as the girl, and he had long, blond hair. He seemed scared.

The girl spoke, her mouth directly behind his ear. “Come on. It’s time—you need to do this.”

“But Eli, I—”

“*Sshh!* I told you not to say my name!”

“Oh yeah. Sorry. But I just . . . I can’t—they’re not *there*, dammit!”

Oddly, the boy pointed to his mouth, then stood up and backed away a little.

“Oskar—*oh*—shit!” John realized that the girl had just broken her own rule. Who *were* these kids? And what were they *doing* with him? A stupid kind of righteous indignation flared in him—to be held captive by a couple of children.

“The hell with it. Listen, Oskar, there’s only one way this is ever going to work. At some point, you have to stop thinking of them as people, and do what needs to be done.”

Once these chilling words settled into John’s consciousness, he scanned Oskar fearfully, looking for a knife or weapon. *Stop thinking of them as people? Do what needs to be done?*

Oskar groaned in frustration. “I know, Eli. But they *are* people, and I—”

John interrupted, speaking with a weak wheeze; it hurt to talk. “Yeah, kid—Oskar—I *am* a person. Don’t listen to her! Don’t do—“

One of the girl’s hands suddenly clamped firmly over his mouth, cutting him off. Only it wasn’t a hand; it was a

(claw)

with sharp fingertips that dug painfully into the side of his cheek.

“Shut up, you!” She (*it?*) hissed menacingly into his ear. Then with incredible strength, it jerked his head back sharply, exposing his neck.

The fear expanded like molten lead in his chest. *Oh Jesus oh dear God What is she What the hell is going on I'm going to die—*

The boy seemed to ignore what the girl had done and crouched once more by his side. He seemed very unsure of himself. Slowly, hesitantly, he began to talk.

“Sir . . . we're really sorry to do this, but you see, we need . . . well, we need blood to live. *Human* blood. Could we just maybe have a little of yours? If you promise not to tell anyone?”

Now the girl-thing behind him groaned in frustration. Then she squeezed him harder, and suddenly bit him savagely in the neck. A scream exploded from his chest, coming out as a muffled bellow from beneath whatever appendage was wrapped across his mouth. Just as quickly as her teeth—*my God they must be sharp!*—were in his neck, they were out again, and a part of him was torn away. Instantly he felt what must've been an enormous amount of blood burst from the wound. And then he saw—

The apprehension in the boy's face disappeared, and was replaced by—nothing. Blankness. His eyes changed; they seemed to grow bigger, and then the pupils—

No. John's rational mind suddenly declared defeat; *I'm gone*, it seemed to say. The boy's ghostly face grew larger as he knelt down even closer, and the last thing that John saw were his lips pull back to reveal large, white fangs.

They feasted.

†

Eli opened up the wound a little more and they both bent to the task, cheek to cheek, her on one side, him on the other. He could feel her jaw and tongue working, right next to him, as they hungrily gulped down the blood; the sounds they made were the very essence of unrestrained feeding. The man had long since stopped moving when they sensed the slackening flow, and without saying a word they worked harder to get what little was left.

At last there was no more. Oskar could tell that the thing inside him was satiated and happy. Its demands at last met, it cried out with pleasure; and as its host, he, too, felt contented with the abatement of its hunger.

Both of them pulled their mouths away from the dead man's neck at the same time. And as they looked up and into each other's eyes in the moonlight, Oskar felt a powerful love for Eli. He loved her because she had the strength of will to do what he could not: to kill. To kill swiftly and without hesitation; to provide for his most basic needs, and thereby ensure that he could live. All of the things that she had been telling him back at their apartment, about predators and the cycle of life, suddenly fell into place, made sense in a very real and concrete way as they crouched face to face over the cooling body.

Eli would never have thought of it, but Oskar suddenly realized that she was like the goddess Artemis that he had read about in school. Apollo's twin; a beautiful and powerful huntress; reigning over the twilight forest with a silver bow to take down stags, boars—even men and women. And he felt this realization so keenly that it swept away the anxiety, reluctance and remorse that he had felt just seconds before, as he had capitulated to participate in their feeding. At this moment, in this being he knew as Eli, morality had no meaning.

His heart surged in his chest as his love for her seemed to come alive within him. It was a love as raw, unrefined, and primordial as the forest around them. In that moment Eli seemed to be Beauty itself: her slender, muscular body; her face, now flush with color; her eyes—dark, sparkling, and mysterious; her jet-black hair, framing her beautiful features in tangled and careless locks blowing in the wind. Her blood-stained lips only added to her wild and unrestrained beauty, and coupled with his knowledge of her sexlessness and great strength, Oskar thought of her as otherworldly in the extreme.

He was suddenly in *awe* of her. She could tell from his blank gaze and half-open mouth that something was going on inside of him. Did she realize what it was? He felt an overpowering and compulsive urge to kiss her, and thereby manifest his singing heart.

It was almost an act of worship.

Their bloody lips met. He reveled in the taste of her mouth upon his. A floodgate opened inside his mind and a single thought poured out like a tidal wave, sweeping into her:

You are everything to me: my life is yours.

He embraced her and began pushing her backwards as they kissed. She could not remember him ever having behaved so forcefully, and she grasped that he was in the throes of some kind of intense yearning for her. She allowed him to lower her to the ground, and raised her hands to caress his face. But—

“Oskar . . . *Oskar* . . .”

She didn't want to, but as gently as she could, she pulled his head away, breaking their kiss. He made a soft noise, clearly frustrated, as he continued to run his hands through her hair. “Oskar, we need to—”

She rolled slightly and turned her attention to the body. “Wait, Oskar. *Wait.*”

“What? What's wrong?”

“Can't let this go, Oskar. *Never.*” She grasped the man's head firmly, then twisted it violently one full rotation. There was a revolting tearing, popping sound as the muscles, tendons and ligaments in the man's neck gave way.

Oskar watched with an expression of profound disgust. The diversion of their attention to this horrific task broke the spell over him. The burning in his heart fled, and once again he felt confused and uncertain. And as she turned back to him and gently took his hand, Eli was now just . . . Eli, a little kid; his best and only friend.

She looked at him with loving concern. “What was *that* all about, Oskar?”

He now felt embarrassed at his unrestrained outpouring of emotion, and blushed. He was at a loss for words. How could he explain how he had felt, how he had *seen* her? “I . . . I . . . well, for a minute there, you just seemed so—” He wanted to say “beautiful,” but was that the right word? “Terrifyingly beautiful”? The sense that he wanted to give himself to her, to worship that amoral and god-like thing he’d seen in her, briefly rose again like an echo, making him feel weak and full of desire at the same time. Then it vanished, leaving his mind to dwell on hard reality; leaving him in a place where night was night, and day was day.

He paused, swallowed, and looked at her. “I don’t know, Eli. I just . . . I don’t know about any of this. It’s all so—so hard for me to *deal* with. It’s like I don’t even really know who, or *what*, I am anymore.” He motioned to the man’s body as he continued. “I mean, look at what we just *did* to this guy. I saw the whole thing from the tree where you told me to hide.” He nodded his head toward the branch of a large tree at the edge of the clearing. “He was worried. He was . . . my God, Eli, he was trying to *help* you. And we just . . .” Again he paused, then looked back into her eyes. “Is there a right or *wrong* any more, Eli? With you? With this . . . *life*?”

“Come here.” Her words were soft and gentle. She drew him to her; held him closely in her arms. She sighed and spoke tenderly in his ear. “Oh, Oskar; *Oskar*. I never wanted this for you. Never wanted you to experience the things you’re going through right now. I know I asked you that one time if you wanted to be like me, but you were right to say no. I knew how bad it was when I asked you, but the selfish part of me just wanted to have you with me forever. To never lose you.”

She loosened her hug so that she could look at him face to face. “This is really, really hard to tell you, Oskar—because I know that I’m the one who’s responsible for what’s happened to you. But there’s only one way out of our situation. Only one way to avoid this.” She gestured at the body lying next to them. “Do you know what that is?”

His lip trembled and he looked down; then he nodded slowly.

“Yes.” Her voice began to waver as she continued. “That’s right—death is the only escape for us. There is no other way.” She looked away, stony-faced, and wiped her eyes. “And I’m . . . so *sorry*—so very, very *sorry*, that I’m talking to you about killing yourself when you’re . . .” she sobbed and began to cry in earnest—“barely 13 years old. So if you can’t bear to do this kind of thing, then maybe that’s what we ought to do right now. Because it’s not going to get any better.”

She looked away, sat down on the grass, put her face into her hands and continued to cry. And Oskar began to cry too, but alone; by himself.

After a little while he stopped crying and looked up at her, his eyes red and wet. He sniffed, wiped his nose, and said, “Are you *sure* there’s no other way, Eli? I mean, there’s this great big whole world out there, and it can’t find a place for the two of us?” She began to shake her head, but he continued. “People need blood every day, Eli. For surgeries, in emergency rooms—there must be gallons of it out there. The hospitals are probably full of it. Why can’t we—”

“It has to be *fresh*, Oskar. From a *living person*. Otherwise, it’ll just make you sick—trust me, I *know*. I’ve been through it before. I tried everything I could *think* of to avoid all of this. But there is no other way.”

“But what if he *had* just let us have a little? Would that have been so bad? Maybe we could’ve convinced him—”

She looked at him as if he’d just announced that the world was flat. “Oskar, come on. Do you realize the risks that we’d be taking if we did that all the time? Sure, they’d cooperate as long as they thought they’d die if they didn’t, but as soon as we let them go, what would happen? They’d run to the police and report us. They’d know what we looked like and everything. Do you really think there’s someone out there who’d just be happy to give us a few liters of blood every week or so? Even if it was just for money, no one could afford to lose that much blood and live.”

“Yes. Yes, I suppose you’re right. It’d be almost impossible to find someone that generous, that open-minded, and they’d need to give more than they could afford to lose. But maybe if we had like a little . . . like a little club of people to help us, that would be . . . maybe . . .” He pictured a circle of grown-ups in a basement somewhere sitting on chairs, their arms extended, as he and Eli went from one to the next, lapping at their arms. The image was ridiculous.

“Yeah, right. Come *on*, Oskar. Get *real*.”

“Well, what if we found a doctor somewhere to help us? Maybe there’s a blood doctor in Stockholm who could give us what we need, if we agreed to let him study us.”

“They wouldn’t let us in the front door, Oskar. What are you going to do—walk in and say, ‘Hi, I’m a vampire, I need to see doctor so-and-so for my blood problem?’ They’d think you were crazy. Or playing some kind of sick joke.”

“But couldn’t we just show them? Pop out our teeth? Show them our hands? Fly around? That would convince them.”

“Oskar, do you know what would happen once news about us got out? Have you thought about that? The police would become *very* interested, believe me. I’m sure there’s some

very intelligent men out there right now, Oskar, trying to track me down. No doctor is going to have the power to stop them from arresting me. Or us. Plus, there could be even worse things.”

“Worse than being arrested for murder? Like what?”

“Oskar—have you ever thought how many people might *want* to be like us?”

“Like *us*? To have to do this sort of thing? Who’d want that?”

Eli snorted. “Trust me, Oskar—some people would see this as a small price to pay for the ability to live forever. Or to fly and change shape. They’d take us away to some . . . some hospital or some government center, and lock us up forever so they could study us. Take away our blood and experiment with it. Inject it into other people to see what would happen. Tie us to a table and cut us open to see what’s so different about us. We’d be like Guinea pigs. And they’d never let us go, you can believe me on *that*.”

“So there’s really no way out, is what you’re saying.”

“That’s the way I see it.”

Oskar was quiet for a long time, listening to the wind blow and staring at the body of John Christensen. Then he said quietly, “I want to do something nice for someone. Maybe for this guy’s family, if he has one. Or if not, then someone else. Some little thing.

“And I want to go see this castle. The place where this guy lived who infected you. Because I want answers. I want to know . . . how this all started. So maybe then I’ll know what I am. And then I can figure out how to deal with all of this. Maybe—who knows. Maybe there’s some way to undo it. A secret way, hidden somewhere, waiting for us to find it.”

Eli was tempted to laugh, to ridicule him for his ideas. But then she remembered who had turned him into a vampire, and stopped. She owed him so much. Owed him *everything*. And if these were things that he wanted to do, then she wouldn’t disagree, even if she thought them foolish—and scary.

“All right, Oskar. Let’s take care of this guy’s body, then, and find his camp.”

Chapter 8

“Eli, look.” Oskar held open Christensen’s wallet and showed it to Eli. “He was a Canadian from Vancouver, British Columbia. And I think he had a daughter.”

Eli looked at the picture, scuffed and worn from years spent pressed in a wallet, and saw a smiling, brown-haired girl of about fourteen with braces.

Oskar lowered the wallet into his lap and stared at the corpse. “We picked someone’s dad.”

Eli stopped digging the grave with her claws and sat down next to him. Her throat tightened when she saw the sadness and remorse in his face. She struggled to keep the tears at bay; wanted to take his hand but couldn’t, because her hands were claws and were covered with dirt.

“I’m *sorry*, Oskar.”

“It’s all right. I know you didn’t mean it—what we had to do.”

“Oskar, listen. There’s almost no one out there who isn’t connected in some way to someone else. Who isn’t loved or cared for by someone, somewhere. And I know how you feel, because I felt the same way for a long, long time.

“I wish I had some way to pick out people who hated the world and everyone in it; or maybe a really old person or someone who would die in a few minutes anyway, from a heart attack or something. But the truth is, there’s no good way to do that. What we have to do is so difficult and dangerous that most of the time, I just have to take what I can catch. And I try to do it as quickly and as painlessly as possible. Tonight it was different, because I was trying to help you learn. Otherwise, that man never would have woken up like he did.”

She scooted closer to Oskar and put her claw on his leg. He resisted the urge to move away.

“I understand that you feel badly about what we did. I know that man didn’t deserve to die, and now we know that he had a family. I used to do the same thing you are doing now. I wanted to know all I could about the person I’d killed, so I could . . . mourn them; tell them, in some way, that I was sorry. I wanted to do something for them or their families, too—to make up for what I’d done.

“Then I realized one day that there was nothing I could ever do that would make up for what I’d done. No matter what I did, or how hard I tried, I could never bring that person back. And it was tearing me up inside, trying to feel sorry for them, feeling bad for what I was doing all the time. And so eventually, I just stopped, and sort of . . . shut down that part of me that wanted to cry all the time. Because it was too hard—just too hard. And that’s when I began to think that what I have to do is like lightning, or bee stings, or car accidents, or any of the other ways that people die every day. I’m just something that happens to people—the good, the bad . . . it doesn’t matter. It just *is*. Or maybe you could say, I just *am*.”

“You mean, *we just are*.”

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and nodded silently.

Oskar said nothing; just sat with her, staring into the woods. Eli could not tell whether he had accepted her words, or not. Then he rose, and began to help her dig.

†

25 JULY 1983

Epictetus' *Discourses*, an oil pastel sketch, and a wooden box of soft pastels rested on a table in the dim kitchen of a threadbare apartment in Stockholm. Outside the heavily draped window, the last remnant of a late afternoon shower tapered off, and the sunshine peeked through a thinning cloud layer that moved slowly to the west.

In the bathroom of the apartment, behind the closed door, under an old blanket, in the bottom of the tub, slept two children. They seemed lifeless; the child who looked like a girl lying behind the boy, holding him to her chest, her arm wrapped around him; neither of them breathing; their bodies still and cool, their hearts beating only four times a minute. The boy dreamed; the girl did not.

The boy, Oskar, dreamed that he and the girl, Eli, were running through a summer field covered with wildflowers. They ran in the sunshine toward a building that became the train station in Blackeberg. Eli said she wanted to go swimming, and that they needed to hurry before it got dark.

Then they were at the train station. They pushed through the glass doors just as the sun dipped below the horizon. They passed a newspaper stand; Oskar wanted to stop and buy some candy, but was afraid because a black, hairy gorilla was inside the kiosk, moving back and forth and peering out the windows at them. Eli seemed not to notice as he skirted wide around the kiosk.

They kept going and then they came to an escalator leading down into the ground. They entered the darkened tunnel and trotted down escalator. Oskar did not like the tunnel with the escalator either, but could not tell Eli how he felt. Eli wouldn't stop, and seemed determined to get to the pool. All he could do was keep up.

The escalator turned into old stone stairs, and the electric lights on the ceiling became torches hanging on the walls. When they reached the bottom, they passed through some big wooden doors banded with iron, and then they were at the pool. Oskar recognized the pool, and was even more afraid. It was where Mr. Avila had given him aquatic aerobic lessons; where Conny and his older brother had tried to drown him.

Eli stripped off her clothes, then turned and encouraged Oskar to do the same. But her eyes seemed very dark, almost without any whites, and when she smiled a friendly smile, Oskar saw her sharp teeth, and had to steel himself from running away. She told Oskar to come on--the water was warm!--and then she dove in.

Oskar felt afraid, but there was no sign of Conny or his older brother, and he didn't want to disappoint Eli. So he, too, removed his clothes and dove into the water. As he skimmed over the bottom he realized that it was warm, as Eli had said; perhaps too warm. He opened his eyes and tried to see Eli under the water, but it was dark, even with his eyes open, so he came up to look for her. He broke the surface, wiped his hair out of his eyes, and—

. . . he was swimming in a pool of dark red blood. The entire pool, from one end to the other—a vast ocean of it. And now the pool seemed much bigger, as if it had expanded while he had been under water; or as if he had suddenly grown much younger.

Oskar was terrified. The blood was everywhere; on his face and in his hair; running down his neck and shoulders. He began to kick his feet to stay afloat, searching frantically for Eli, but he could not see her anywhere.

Then he realized that the windows and pillars on either side of the room had become a forest. In the receding woodland darkness, barely visible, threatening shapes with big mouths and sharp teeth lumbered among the trees.

He looked away from the trees and again scanned the crimson surface. He began desperately calling Eli's name, but there was no answer. Then he saw that he was not alone. Innumerable pale, white shapes were drifting soundlessly about the pool. Backs, chests, buttocks, legs and arms floated up to become visible for a few seconds before slipping back beneath the gently undulating redness.

Then Oskar heard a noise coming from the opposite end of the pool—a loud rumbling sound. He looked and saw that where the diving boards had been before, there was now a tall, wooden guillotine. When his eyes fixated upon it, the shining blade, topped by a monstrous, black mouton, completed its descent through the lunette and thudded to a stop with a boom.

A round object with long, dark hair fell away from the guillotine and into the pool with a splash. Then a teeterboard was triggered, and a headless body rolled out from behind the guillotine. It thumped down onto a ramp and then it, too, splashed into the pool. The ripples moved across the thick, dark surface toward him.

A man-like shape in a dark robe was working the guillotine. He cranked a windlass and the blade rattled back toward the top. As it rose, Oskar saw that there was a line of people standing behind the guillotine, waiting in a narrow, torch-lit passageway like the one he and Eli had just descended. Men and women wearing no clothes stood silently in line: young, old; short, tall; fat and skinny. They shuffled slowly forward.

Then a man with blond hair laid down on the guillotine and placed his neck into the blood-stained lunette. As the dark figure locked the block over his neck, the man looked

up at Oskar. It was John Christensen. Terror was writ large across his face, but he did not try to escape.

The dark man put his hand on the *déclic*; then he turned his head and looked at Oskar with two dark eyes, set in a ghastly white face with red lips. He pulled the lever and then Oskar heard the rumble once again as the heavy blade rushed remorselessly down. He couldn't watch and tore his eyes away from the guillotine, frantically searching, searching for Eli, but still he could not see her. The thud and the splash that followed broke his paralysis, and terror completely overtook him. He began to swim frantically back the way he'd come. As he kicked and struggled, the decapitated bodies in the water brushed against his limbs; touching him; grabbing him

Oskar woke up abruptly in the tub. In his panic-stricken mind there was only one thought: to get the blood off. *Clean*—must get *clean*.

He turned on the faucet full bore, yanked up the shower handle, and began to rub himself in the cool water. He frantically rubbed his arms, chest, groin, legs, but most particularly, his hands. He wrung his hands together, over and over.

He hadn't removed the blanket from the tub, and once it became wet, it slid under his feet, causing him to slip and fall. When Eli opened the door to see what all the commotion was about, she found him moaning and crying in a ball, holding his elbow, as the water splashed down on his head.

“Oskar!” He didn't respond, just continued to cry. “Oskar! What's wrong?”

When there was no response, she grabbed a towel off the rack and shut off the water. He weakly took her outstretched hand and she helped him out of the tub. Then she put the towel around his trembling body, and together they sank to the floor by the toilet. She wrapped him closely in the towel, and he put his head in the crook of her shoulder. He shivered uncontrollably as she rubbed him briskly with the towel to dry him off.

When he continued to cry despite her questions, she carried him into the bedroom and sat down with him on the mattress. She kissed him repeatedly on the top of his wet head, and then she gave him her bunny. He took it gratefully and clutched it close to his chest as he continued to weep.

†

“. . . and then I woke up.”

Eli sat very quietly next to Oskar, thinking. Then she said, “You know I will never abandon you, Oskar. *Never*.”

He sniffled and wiped his nose. “I know, Eli. And I know it's just a dream—not real. I guess what happened last night bothered me more than I realized.”

“Maybe so. I think dreams can tell us things—show us things that we’re really worried about, maybe too worried to admit to ourselves when we’re awake. I think your dream tells me a lot about you.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re afraid—you’re afraid you’re losing your . . . that you’re not human any more. That because we need to kill to live, you’re no longer a real *person*. That you don’t care about anyone; that maybe, you’re just like an animal. Is that it?”

Oskar looked at the floor and nodded glumly.

“Well, if that’s true, then I think maybe your dream was a good thing.”

He looked up at her with a confused expression. “What do you mean? How can that be true?”

“Because in your dream, you fought it. You resisted; you didn’t give in. And that doesn’t surprise me, Oskar. Because I knew from the moment I met you that you were a very kind and thoughtful person. You have a strong streak of . . . of humanity, I guess. In fact, that’s one of the reasons that I fell in love with you—because you *did* care so much. And you cared about *me*, even though I’m just about the most messed up person in the whole world.

“Oskar, I would have been very surprised if you weren’t going through the things you are going through right now. Surprised, and maybe even disappointed, I think. I’ve never liked doing what I have to do, and I would have found it very strange if you had been happy to do it. Because it’s not fun. It’s not pleasant. It’s *awful*, in fact. I know that.

“But let me ask you something: do you think *I’m* a monster?”

He raised an eyebrow and answered her immediately. “No—of *course* not. You saved *me*, didn’t you? You cared about me, too.”

Eli reached over and touched his cheek. “That’s right; I did. And I still do—very, very much, Oskar. So, do you think I could’ve done that, if I was like that man in your dream?”

“No.”

“So what does that tell you about what it’s like to be me?”

He looked at her with a puzzled expression and spoke hesitantly. “That it’s possible . . . that . . . well, how old did you say you are, again?”

“About 220 years.”

“That maybe I can kill people and still be . . . *human*?”

She nodded slowly and then softly said, “Yes. It’s possible. Hard, but possible. Like I told you before, Oskar—you can still be a good person in your heart, even though you must do terrible things to survive. If you’re sorry for what you’ve done, and don’t . . . take pleasure in it; don’t revel in it.”

“Well, but I . . . I *did* revel in it, Eli; that’s the thing.” He looked up at her face, which was now only a few inches from his own. “When you opened his throat like that, and we were . . . eating—” he closed his eyes and turned his head away, “I enjoyed it, the taste of it, more than anything I’ve ever eaten before. I wanted it so *bad*, Eli!” He looked at her intently with apprehension. “And I knew it was wrong, but I had this terrible feeling of wanting to—take him, possess him; make him mine. Take his life. And then when I saw you afterwards, I had this really weird feeling, too. Like you were this . . . conquering goddess, or something. All powerful, all—”

“A what? A conquering *goddess*?” She suppressed a chuckle and started to give him a bemused look, but then saw how serious he was, and stopped.

“It’s crazy and it sounds stupid, I know it,” he admitted. “But you don’t understand how I felt. You were so . . . *beautiful* in that moment. Like you were able to do that to him without hesitation, without worrying about everything, like I was worrying. And there was something about that willpower that was so . . . *so*—” He shook his head, unable to explain further.

“Oskar.” She touched him; lifted his face to hers. “I feel sorry for what I have to do, too. Maybe in the moment, I do what I need to do. But I never feel good about it. I hope you understand that.”

“Yes. I know.”

Eli got up and went over to a small portable radio sitting in a corner. She turned it on and then went back to Oskar; took his hand and stood him up beside her.

“Can we dance for a little while, please?”

Oskar came out of his funk a little. “Yeah—of course. But I’m not very good, you know. I never learned a thing about dancing.”

“Me neither. But if you can hug me and walk at the same time, I think we’ll be good.”

His smile broadened. “I can do that, I think.”

They moved slowly in circles around the room with their arms around one another, their chins resting on each other's shoulders. The radio had been tuned to a classical station, and a piano melody by Saint-Saëns, *Le Carnaval des Animaux: Le Cygne*, filled the room. Eli spoke softly in his ear. "This reminds me of the first time you hugged me, Oskar. That was one of the most wonderful moments of my life. I'll never forget that."

"I wanted to. I was afraid of what you might do, but . . . it felt right."

"It was right."

†

27 JULY 1983

"What am I supposed to be feeling?"

Oskar sighed in frustration. "This is so *hard*. I was trying to get you to scratch an itch on your back."

Eli gave him a small smile. They sat, facing each other, on the floor.

"Oh. Well, try again. I'm trying to be receptive."

"Okay."

Oskar looked at Eli. He tried to truly *see* her; to take in every aspect of her, every detail. He knew, from what she had explained to him, that the ability to suggest things to her without talking was tied to his newly strengthened powers of perception. It was not just seeing, but *understanding*, the person in front of him; much like he now saw and understood patterns and connections in nonliving things that he had never seen before. See and understand; see and understand

He carefully studied her face and noticed that some of her hair was hanging down in front and touching her eyebrow. He concentrated on it and thought, *my hair is tickling my forehead*.

Eli reached up and flicked her hair back. Then she smiled again, more broadly this time. "Was that it?"

"Uh huh." He could not suppress a triumphant grin at this, his first success, after over an hour of effort.

Eli grinned back and clapped her hands excitedly. "Yeah! See—I *told* you you could do it! Pretty soon it'll be *easy*."

“That was really *cool!*” Oskar had not felt so happy for more than a week. “I just don’t see how you can do it so quickly, Eli. It’s almost ‘off the cuff’ for you.”

“Practice, practice, practice, Oskar. That’s all there is to it.”

He continued to practice with Eli, and gradually had her doing all kinds of things. Scratching herself; licking her lips; touching her nose. They did it face to face, and then with her turned away. Soon he found he could do it from across the room—as long as he could see her.

He also found that he could make Eli think things. He would think a thought, and then she would say the thought that had entered her mind. The color green; the moon; his smile.

Eventually he discovered that he could not make her follow complex commands, like “add 35 and 46” or “go clean the bathtub and then comb your hair.” He could convey the idea of “35” and “bathtub,” but couldn’t make her do things involving steps. Nor could he make her do self-destructive things, like “kill yourself.”

At one point, his suggestions stopped working; she seemed opaque. She told him that she was deliberately blocking him, and explained that some people just block naturally. Most of the time it would happen when someone was concentrating very hard on something, like a task they were performing. He wouldn’t be able to break into the thoughts of such a person. Other people, though, seemed to be more aware of their own thoughts, and could tell if something unusual was coming in from outside. She had never met someone who had realized it was *her* who was doing the manipulating, but these people would sense the intrusion, and block just the same.

When he was growing weary of the game, he began to get playful and carefree in his projections. They were sitting on either end of the couch, facing each other, with their legs overlapping in the middle.

Love me.

Eli’s eyes grew slightly wider, and she pulled her head back almost imperceptibly as his thought seemingly hit her. Without saying a word, she slowly got up and crawled over on top of him. Solemnly she took his head into her hands, and lowered her face to his. “Your wish, sir, is my command.” Then she kissed him tenderly; and when their kiss broke, she teasingly whispered in his ear, “Actually, smarty pants, that didn’t work. I just *wanted* to kiss you.” They laughed together; then Oskar replied, “You’re so *bad*—rotten to the core.”

“You love me *because* I’m rotten. Now—let’s wrestle!”

When dawn approached, they lay down together on a comforter in the closet. Oskar rested his head on Eli’s chest, and put his arm across her stomach.

“Eli, I have a question about something.”

“Yes?”

“The hibernation thing—the big sleeps you talked about. What if they happen to us at different times?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I . . . I don’t like the idea of being awake without you. I don’t want you to go to sleep for a couple of months and leave me by myself. I’m afraid I’ll get really lonely.”

Eli placed her hand over his forearm and gave him a squeeze and pulled him a little closer. “Hmm. I’m not sure what to do about that, Oskar. I’ve never had to worry about it before.”

“Can you tell when it’s going to happen?”

“Yes—usually. I just start to feel all run down, no matter if I’m full or not. I sleep longer and longer, until finally . . . I’m gone. Out, for a long time. Months.”

“Well, if that happens, maybe I could make myself sleep longer. So I could . . . I don’t know, get in sych with you.”

“We’ll have to try that, if you don’t want to be alone. I don’t know if it’ll work, but we’ll try. Okay?”

Oskar seemed satisfied and relieved. He hugged her tighter. “Okay.”

†

As usual, Eli fell asleep before he did. He pulled away from her a little, then propped himself up on one elbow and simply looked at her. He still thought it amazing that he could see her so well in the dark. He felt closer to her than ever after the night they’d just spent. He knew that somehow, the union between them had deepened; felt that he was becoming more and more like her.

He watched her for a long time, drinking in her features. He thought about the first time he had ever laid eyes on her, when she had caught him playing with his knife and had said that they couldn’t be friends. She had seemed so strange, then . . . and how wrong she’d been.

At what point had he fallen in love with her? Could he say that it was the night that they had worked the Rubik’s Cube together, or shared the Morse Code? The excitement of

having someone take an interest in him, and of responding to his interest in *her*, had surely been there.

Or was it the night that she had eaten the candy to please him, and he had gotten up the courage to take her into his arms? Had, for the first time, actually felt her *close* to him—it had been magical; the biggest thing he'd ever experienced.

Or had it been the night she had cuddled with him in his bed and agreed to go steady? That he had felt her arms around him, holding *him*, and realized that she could actually be *his* . . . even now, it gave him a warm shiver just to think of it.

And then, of course, their first kiss—he still could not find words to describe what that had been like. Could he ever?—he did not think so. And then she had pulled him up from the water, had saved his life at the pool. He had looked into her beautiful eyes . . . and knew, for perhaps the first time, what love really meant.

All of the emotions that he had experienced at those moments had, over time, seemed to merge into one, powerful feeling for Eli in the center of his being. And it didn't matter that Eli was really a boy, or had been a boy at one time; that, to Oskar, was like pointing out that Eli had a belly button, or had a freckle on her arm.

He bent and kissed her lightly on the cheek. Eli, Eli . . . 'love' isn't a strong enough word—do you know that?

She remained asleep, but turned her head slightly away from him. Nocturne in F Major by Tchaikovsky was playing quietly on the radio that they'd left on in the living room, but he did not recognize it as such; merely thought it sounded like a lullaby. He relaxed to its soft and mellifluous tones, and felt the urge to kiss her again. He trailed kisses gently across her cheek and down to her neck. Eli made an unintelligible noise and her eyelids fluttered; then her mouth opened slightly and she took a breath.

This tiny response shifted the focus of Oskar's thoughts. For some reason, instead of merely wanting to kiss her, he discovered that he wanted to . . .

(you know I would give that to you anytime you ask.)

He opened his mouth and breathed softly on her neck. Eli did not stir. Slowly, slowly, he brought his lips closer to the pale skin; and the closer he was, the more he wanted. Wanted what she had; wanted to experience what she was. He kissed its smoothness, then gently, gently bit through. Then tasted the warmth.

Eli inhaled sharply, turned her head slightly toward him and arched her neck. An arm fluttered limply up and over his back; then he felt her hand on his shoulder blade. It seemed to squeeze gently.

The thing inside him stirred at the unexpected stimulus, and urged him to take more. He affixed his mouth more firmly onto the wound and drew harder, savoring the taste. And when he did so, he felt Eli stir and realized that he had at last awoken her. He became afraid, fearful that she would become angry and push him away for his intrusion.

Instead, she held him. Then she turned her head, he felt the heat of her mouth just below his clavicle, and—

. . . she sunk her teeth into his flesh.

There was no pain. He realized that she had pierced a large vessel there; he felt himself flowing freely into her. The flow was such that Eli began to gulp softly to keep up, and for a moment, he felt dizzy and lightheaded. Her grip on him tightened, and the intensity of the experience made Oskar pull even harder at her neck, opening up the wound to increase the amount of blood he was taking from her.

She laid her hand upon the side of his head and touched his ear. The touch transmitted a thought which he instantly grasped: *slow down*. He moderated the action of his lips to take less, and then felt her do the same.

They lay trembling together in the dark, drawing from each other. They realized that their hearts were beating in tandem. Time ceased to exist as a mystical circuit opened and John Christensen's blood, now theirs, passed through their mouths, into their bodies, and was returned moments later.

They became lost in each other.

Chapter 9

Eli lay in the darkness, drawing Oskar's blood from his right subclavian vein. She had been surprised to find herself suddenly awake and being bitten, but she had known immediately that it was him, and what he was doing was neither painful nor unwelcome. Without thinking, she had reciprocated; had followed an impulse, driven purely by emotion, to love him in return. What they were now doing was a new experience: in more than two hundred years, she had never done it before.

With closed eyes she saw nothing, but all of her other senses were about him. This beautiful boy, the one she had chosen to love, and who had chosen to love her in return. The feeling of him, taller than her, but thin, in her arms. His smell. The sound of their mouths as they partook of each another; the sound of his blood in her head. And most of all, the delicious taste that flowed through her mouth. There was no one's that she enjoyed more; no one's that gave her so much pleasure. Because it was *his—Oskar's—*and because it was now freely given, not forbidden; a gift laid at her feet. And she was not merely taking, for they were sharing. As his blood flowed into her, she felt hers flowing into him in a rhythmic, surging pulse; a beautiful, sweetly constant ebb and flow.

Then something happened. The pulse merged with the darkness, and the darkness became—

(a tunnel)

. . . Yes—a dark, underground river, and she was moving within it. The sound of the flowing blood became the sound of rushing water, roaring toward an opening ahead, dimly visible in the dark—a hole, a *(waterfall?)*

and with eager apprehension, she realized that she had discovered a secret door—a door she had never known before, could never have dreamed existed; as if she had been living in the same house all her life and had discovered it on a wall that had heretofore been blank and featureless, yet when viewed at just the right time of day, in just the right light, and at just the right angle, became visible. Visible, and thereby capable of being opened.

A secret door that could only be opened with that one, right person. Could only be opened with love.

She was rushing toward it now in the roaring river, the scary, turbulent darkness carrying her ever more rapidly forward—faster and faster, nearing the edge, the black hole expanding and mysterious, and the mystery was

(Oskar)

. . . and then in a thundering, deafening, terrifying second she went

(over the edge!!)

Silence.

“Hi, Eli.”

“Oskar?”

“Yeah—it’s me.” He was standing beside her, holding her hand.

She looked around; couldn’t understand where she was, and was frightened. “Where are we?”

He gave her a happy, secretive smile and squeezed her hand. “You’ll see. Don’t be afraid.”

They were in the center of a dimly lit network of hallways. Eli turned slowly and counted: one, two, three, four, . . . seven hallways, each with vaulted ceilings; some of them had stairs that went up, some with stairs that went down, and some that stretched off into a limitless distance, as far as her eye could see. The light was uniform; it did not vary, and had no

particular source. And along all of the hallways there were doors. She looked down one hall and began to count. One, two, three, four . . . seven doors. And then there was an arch with a break—an intersecting hallway? Yes. Followed by another set of seven doors. Then another break. And so on, apparently forever.

Each door looked different.

Oskar squeezed her hand. She sensed his excitement, his desire to show her. “Come on!”

She wanted to protest, to say wait, but didn’t. She trusted him. And with his gentle tug they went together down a hall to their left, toward a door that was five doors down on the right. The door had no inscription, but as they approached it the idea of

(birthday party)

formed in her mind. And then Oskar opened the door, they stepped through it, and—

She was seated at a dining room table in Oskar’s apartment, a party hat in her hair. There was a chocolate birthday cake in the middle of the table. To her left was Oskar—a little younger than she remembered, his face a little rounder; not quite as defined. Across from her sat a boy she didn’t know. Oskar’s mom was standing a short distance from the table with a camera. She wore a plum-colored turtleneck and had an apron around her waist.

“. . . happy birthday, dear *Oskar* . . . happy birthday to you!”

The cake was lit with eleven red candles. Oskar’s mom and the boy shouted, “Make a wish!” Eli did too, but a little late.

Oskar appeared to concentrate, then stole a glance at Eli and grinned. His long, blond hair was just as she remembered. He took a deep breath, the camera flashed, and he blew out all the candles. Eli began to clap with the others, happy to be with Oskar on this, his eleventh birthday.

She glanced to her left, through the doorway and into the kitchen, and saw a calendar on the wall: May, 1980. A little less than two years before she’d ever met him.

Then she understood where she was.

Oskar’s mom began to cut the cake. “Thank you, Johan, for coming. And you too, Eli.” She placed a piece of cake in front of her and smiled. “Johan, would you care for some milk, or would you rather have ice cream?”

“Ice cream, please.”

“And you, Eli dear?”

She heard herself saying “milk” without even thinking about it.

Then she realized that it was the afternoon. The sun was shining in through the window to her right, illuminating the room, washing over the table, over her . . . but there was no pain. It was just ordinary sunlight, on an ordinary afternoon, in Blackeberg.

Oskar smiled again at Eli. “Wait ‘til you try the cake. Mom makes the best birthday cake ever.”

A glass of milk was placed before her, and without hesitating she picked it up and drank. It was cold and delicious. She removed a piece of cake with her fork and placed it into her mouth. It tasted like the mildly sweet cakes her mother had sometimes made when she was just a child, some two centuries ago. She could not taste the chocolate.

After the cake, Oskar opened his presents. A board game and new boots from his mom. A record album and a woodworking set from his dad. And a brace of die-cast metal corvettes from Johan.

Eli felt badly that she didn’t have a gift for him. But Oskar, seeming to sense her distress, put the cars down on table and said, “Don’t worry, Eli. You’ve already given me the best present anyone could ever give.”

They talked for awhile. Talked with Johan; talked about Oskar’s school, and about their plans for the summer. Johan and his family were planning a weekend trip to Copenhagen. Oskar would be spending a week at his dad’s, once school was out. The upcoming summer was like an open highway, full of endless possibilities. Eventually, Johan’s mother came and took him home.

During all of this time, Eli could not help but look at Oskar’s mom. She kept seeing little traces of Oskar’s face in hers; or little traces of him in hers, as it were. Watching her, and seeing the little things that she did that reflected her deep love of Oskar, made Eli miss her own mom. And when Oskar announced that they had to leave, Eli was disappointed. She wanted to stay.

Oskar’s mom did not seem upset that they were going. She told him to be safe, stay in the courtyard, and not to be gone too long. Then as they were about to step out of the apartment she took Eli’s hand and said, “Thank you for coming, Eli. And thanks for being such a good friend to Oskar. For looking out for him. Please come back any time.”

Eli stammered out a hasty “Thank you for having me,” felt guilty that she couldn’t think of something more to say, and then went through the door with Oskar. And then—

Her teeth left Oskar—the circle was broken. She felt extremely tired, almost unable to move. She relaxed and her head fell back, limply, onto the comforter. Oskar’s lips left her neck and then he, too, collapsed by her side, holding her softly. She turned and clung to him in the darkness, trying to understand what she had just experienced.

†

“Oskar.”

“Mmm.”

Her voice, nervous and child-like, in his ear. “*Oskar*.”

He replied in a sleepy voice that was so lacking in energy, it was almost a whisper. “Yes, Eli.”

“What did you—what did we just do? What was that all about?”

He opened his eyes a little; ran his hand sluggishly down her arm. “. . . Sorry. I just wanted to kiss you—while you were sleeping. Thinking about . . . how much I love you. And then I got a little carried away, I guess.” He swallowed, closed his eyes again, and turned his head back into the comforter. “Was glad you didn’t mind.”

Eli smiled a little and kissed him lightly on the cheek. “Of *course* I didn’t mind. But I mean *after* that. After I . . . kissed *you*, silly.”

“I don’t remember. . . . felt nice when you did that, but then I got really sleepy. I fell asleep. So . . . I don’t know what you mean.”

“You mean you didn’t even—don’t you know what *happened*?”

Oskar woke up a bit more at the tone of Eli’s voice; turned his head to look at her. “No. Eli, what’re you talking about?”

“After we started doing that, I went somewhere with you. We were together. You were really happy, and . . . and you took me to your birthday party. When you turned eleven. And your mom was there, and a friend—Johan, I think . . . and you got some presents and we had cake.”

Oskar frowned. “That’s right. I think Johan *did* come to my birthday that year. Dad couldn’t make it, though. But how did you know that? I never told you about that, did I?”

Eli looked directly into his eyes and gently squeezed his hand. “No. No, Oskar, you haven’t.”

“So how did you—what do you mean, you were *there*? Sorta like a ghost, or something? Just watching?”

“No. It seemed very real. I was eating the cake and drinking a glass of milk in the sunshine, for heaven’s sake. And talking to your mom as if she knew me. When I’ve never even met her.”

“Well, maybe it was just a dream.”

“Hmm. Maybe.” Eli thought about it further. Then she said, “But Oskar, did Johan give you some toy cars for a birthday present?”

Oskar paused. “Yeah, he did.”

“Then it wasn’t just a dream. Because *I saw that.*”

They looked at each other. Then Oskar spoke. “So, you were in my memories.”

“Yes. Do *you* remember the party?”

He looked away from her and stared at the ceiling. “Yeah, not real well, now, but— . . . like I said, Johan was there, and . . .”

“And?”

He looked at her with wonder. “And so were *you*. You were sad that you didn’t have a present for me. But how can that *be?*”

“It must’ve been the blood—when we shared it. Something about that did it.” She ran her hands through his fine, soft hair as she continued. “And when it happened, Oskar, it was scary. But also . . . the most *beautiful* thing. It was—*wonderful*. Because I was with you, and I wasn’t—well, I was *normal*. Just *me*.”

Oskar smiled and hugged her. “Well, Eli, I don’t know how it happened, but I’m happy that now you’re at my birthday party!” Then he lowered his voice to a whisper. “Maybe we’ll have to try it again sometime, and see what happens.”

Before drifting off to sleep again, Oskar tried to remember his birthday party without Eli. He couldn’t—even though he knew that it was impossible. She had been there, and that was that.

†

29 JULY 1983

Detective Kurt Magnusson, age 59, put his phone back in its cradle. He’d just finished speaking with the medical examiner, Dr. Persson, about the preliminary autopsy findings. He had asked Persson to call him with the results as soon as the autopsy was concluded.

They had easily identified the body with the driver's license in the man's wallet, which had been lying next to the man in a shallow grave. John Christensen—white male, former resident of Vancouver, British Columbia; age 49; 190 centimeters tall, 90 kilos. According to Persson, he had been dead approximately five days.

Cause of death: massive exsanguination from a large wound in the neck which had severed the carotid artery. Dr. Persson thought it was a bite wound, although he doubted that this would hold up in court due to the severe trauma to the skin, subcutaneous tissue, fascia, and all of the supporting structures and vessels in the neck as a result of torsion applied to the head, which had been turned 360 degrees, severing the spinal cord.

Persson had also found fractures of the sternum and the third, fourth, and fifth ribs bilaterally, with bruising of the surrounding muscle wall. The pattern was unusual and suggested a constriction injury, not blunt trauma. "It's called a 'bear hug' fracture," he had explained. "You know—big boyfriend squeezes his little girlfriend a bit too hard and breaks her ribs. Never seen it on a man, though, especially one this big, and it's almost never fatal."

Magnusson shook his head. Three hundred and sixty degrees—in thirty-five years of police work, he had never seen anything like it. And having spent the last twenty in Homicide, he'd seen his fair share.

He rubbed his temples with one hand as he stared at his penciled notes, made at the scene. Who could have cranked a man's head around like that? He had seen necks broken, but never like this.

He picked up the resin cast sitting on his desk next to the already substantial case file and turned it over. A child's footprint; age range 10 to 12 years according to the tables. Because of the rain, it was the only footprint they had been able to recover. But its depth did not match the weight of the average 11-year-old. A rail-thin preadolescent, then? But no kid like that would have had the strength to inflict that kind of damage to a grown man who weighed 200 pounds and was in good shape like Christensen. No way. So another person—a *big* person—must have been involved.

But where were *his* tracks, then? Of course, there could have been more tracks that were no longer recognizable by the time the body had been discovered. But then, why would the heavier person's tracks become obscured, but a lighter one remain?

Had Christensen threatened the assailant's child in some way? Precipitated a fight? But he had no defensive wounds, and they had found no weapons at the scene. So he had been surprised and incapacitated. How?

A *bite*. Now that was *damn* strange.

He leaned back in his old leather chair and studied a diagram of the scene. The chair's springs creaked softly as he removed his rimless glasses and polished them with his tie,

which still hung from a tidy knot over his white shirt despite a 14-hour work day. His feet were tired from having stood around at the crime scene for most of the day, overseeing the investigation and making sure none of the uniformed men messed things up.

It was Friday night, and he knew he would be working over the weekend. Hell, he'd be lucky to see Flora at all, what with all the pressure that was being put on the Stockholm Police Department to find a suspect. The Chief had called him around three o'clock, a few hours after the family had been notified, to tell him that the Canadian Embassy had contacted them, asking for an update as soon as possible. A big weight, hanging over his head. Well, it wasn't the first time.

He sighed. If he missed Gabe's baptism on Sunday, Flora would never forgive him.

A grown man, camping by himself in Tyresta. Last seen alive by some hikers in the afternoon, doing a sketch. His campsite was not disturbed, so for some reason he had gone out into the dark woods with his flashlight. Why? To investigate something, probably. Something he thought was important, given how scratched his arms had been from the bushes. Then, squeezed in a bear hug by some big fella, bitten and suffered massive blood loss, then had his head nearly twisted off. A child's footprint. And whatever money had been in his wallet had been taken. Sure seemed like a bizarre way to rob someone.

He ran his hand through his thinning, gray hair and wished that his lower back would stop aching. Flora was right: he needed to go on a diet. That would help. He opened his desk drawer, pulled out an aspirin bottle, and swallowed three of them with a swig of cold coffee.

Neck bitten. Head twisted. A child. A mental image formed in his mind: a corpse being cut out of the ice; a photo of a child's bloodstained, white shirt.

He turned his head and glanced out through his half-open door. "Martin."

Lieutenant Lundgren's voice, sounding just as tired as Magnusson felt, drifted in from the adjacent office. "Yeah, Kurt. What is it?"

"Who's that cop over in Vällingby who worked those homicides in Blackeberg last year?"

"Which ones? You mean the—"

"That drunk they found in the lake, and the other one in that apartment."

"Oh yeah. The pistol champ . . . Staffan Rydberg, I think."

"They never solved those cases, did they?"

"Nope."

“Dial him up and let’s get those files. I want to see ’em. And start another pot of coffee, will you?”

He glanced at his watch—8:15 p.m. He picked up the phone to call Flora and let her know that he wouldn’t be home anytime soon.

†

1 AUGUST 1983

“Because I think it’s dangerous to have them, that’s why.” Eli sat at the kitchen table, across from Oskar. They had been talking for the last five minutes about what to do with John Christensen’s belongings.

“I don’t want to *keep* them, Eli. I just want to give them to someone who can use them. It would make me feel better.” Oskar picked up Epictetus’ *Discourses* and flipped through the pages; then quietly remarked, “Look, it’s written in English *and* Greek.”

When Eli replied, her tone was firm. “Put the book down, Oskar. You’re getting your fingerprints all over it.”

Oskar looked up at Eli and paused. He started to speak, but then stopped. The corner of his mouth twitched a little; then he slowly put the book back on the table.

“Oskar, *please*. I know you mean well. I understand how you feel about that guy—I really do. But we need to be careful. We really shouldn’t have his stuff in our apartment. I don’t know why I told you it was okay to bring them home.”

“Well, who says you’re in charge of everything? I can bring them back if I want to—and I did. I mean, look at the picture he was making. What would’ve happened to it if we’d just left it out there?”

Eli heard the resentment in Oskar’s voice, and tried to control her temper. “It would’ve been just fine inside the tent. Eventually, someone would’ve found it. The police would probably have it now, and sooner or later, it would’ve been returned to his family. Now we’re stuck with it.”

“So what’re you’re saying? That we should just dump all of it into the river?”

“I think that would be best.”

There was a pause. Oskar frowned at her; finally he said, “*You* go do it, then. I don’t *want* to. I just don’t think it’s right.”

Eli gave him an exasperated look. Finally she said, “Okay, fine. I *will*.” She stood abruptly and angrily scooped the items off the table, then stalked out of the kitchen. After

a few minutes, Oskar heard a thump, and then he saw her leave the apartment with a box under her arm. The door slammed shut behind her.

Oskar sighed unhappily and stared at the now-empty table. Then he leaned over to the kitchen window, lifted a corner of the cardboard, and peeked out, trying to see her leave. He had a half-hearted notion of going after her, but when he realized that he would not be able to see her, he gave up the idea. He didn't really want to be with her right now anyway. She was being crabby.

At last he got up, said "This is crap" to himself, and wandered back into the living room. He was irritated because he knew she was probably right, but he didn't want to admit it. Why did she have to be so cold-hearted about everything? The guy's sketch had been nice—somebody might've wanted it. Same with the box of pastels.

With Eli gone, Oskar quickly grew bored inside the apartment. There was nothing to do. Couldn't they at least get a TV, for God's sake? Finally he found the Rubik's cube, plopped down on the couch, and started working on it. He tried to think about how much fun they'd had with it, but couldn't; he was too upset. For awhile he waited for Eli to return, but when she didn't, he got up and went out.

†

Eli crossed the courtyard of their apartment and passed into the trees that lined a small park adjacent to their complex. It was a dark, moonless night. She chose a spot between two big old oaks, and when she was certain that she was not being watched, she rose rapidly up into the air. The buildings quickly grew smaller, and she headed east toward the nearest river, Edsviken, a few kilometers away.

She was frustrated and upset with Oskar. Why did he have to be so stubborn? Didn't he have any common sense?

But if it had been such a bad idea, why had she agreed to take them in the first place? They had seen the flickering light from the dying batteries of the man's lonely little lantern, and had decided to poke around his tent. Oskar had discovered the sketch and had announced how much he liked it, then discovered the box of pastels and the book.

She knew why she hadn't argued with him—because Oskar felt guilty; wanted to do something nice for the man's family, or *someone*; and had gotten the notion of finding a home for Christensen's stuff. And she hadn't tried to dissuade him because she didn't want to hurt him; didn't want to . . . destroy his compassion. She just couldn't bear the thought of doing that to him, especially after what they had done.

It all boiled down to the fact that Oskar was sweet and good-natured; he had a tender heart. Wasn't that, after all, one of the reasons she'd come to love him? His heart had been big enough to make a home even for the likes of her. And now, because of her, he had been

forced to do awful things, and he was struggling to find some way to compensate. Their attack had obviously effected him; his horrible dream had been a testament to that.

She hadn't told him about her feelings as he had related his nightmare. She had kept her thoughts to herself, because she had been trying to comfort him; trying to reassure him that everything would be okay. But his dream had made her feel terrible inside. That maybe some part of him was afraid she would abandon him, would not be there when he needed her most. That she had led him to a place of extreme bloodshed and cruelty; a place where he would be forced to kill countless numbers of people, all lined up in a queue.

But wasn't that *true*? And all those things she'd told him about the cycle of life, about trying to hold onto some core of goodness despite years, decades, *centuries* of killing—did she still believe it, in her heart of hearts?

As she silently landed on a tiny island in the middle of the river, she was suddenly filled with self-loathing. Why did she always have to do these things? Why did she have to harden her heart and be so . . . inhumane? And what was so wrong with Oskar's idea, after all? Was it *really* all that risky to try to give this stuff to someone? Just drop it off somewhere?

She approached the water's edge and looked out across the muddy river. It was very quiet, and no one was around. She pulled the little green book out of the box and flipped through the pages. The print was tiny and indecipherable to her, but the underlining, highlighting, and the stars and notes on the margins were not. They told their own story about the person who had owned the book. They told her that the person had found things on these pages that had been very important to his life; had found some kind of wisdom here.

She gritted her teeth, closed her eyes, and tossed the book out into the river. It made a desolate little splash. Then she pulled the box of pastels out. It was unquestionably lovely, just as Oskar had said. She held it in one arm and released the clasps with her other hand; lifted the lid and marveled at the spectacular array of colors. She thought about how much fun it would be to sit down in a field somewhere, on a bright, sunny day

(like the day Oskar turned eleven)

and just draw something with Oskar, without a care in the world.

Then her vision blurred, she sobbed loudly, and she hurled the set into the water. The pastel sticks, suddenly released from their neat and orderly tray, followed the box into the water, making small patters on the surface like a handful of dirty pebbles.

Now she was left with the hardest thing. She bent down and retrieved the pastel sketch that the man had made. The woodland scene, with its deep green pines and azure sky, had been rendered with loving care. She stared at it for a long time, wiping her eyes as the tears ran down her cheeks.

She knew he had been a good man. Good, just like Oskar, and trying to help her, just as Oskar had. And she had killed him—just like she was killing Oskar. And now, here she was with something that he had made. Something that Oskar had found beautiful. Destroying his picture would be like . . . like . . .

. . .

I can't. I just can't.

Carefully she rolled it up and tucked it under one arm. She sniffed, wiped her nose, and then kicked the cardboard box into the river. Then she wiped her eyes angrily, and ascended into the night sky.

What's the fastest you've ever gone? Don't know. . . . like a bullet, maybe?

Yes: now she *felt* like a bullet—so she would fly like one. Fly so fast that she would disappear; disappear inside herself so that no one would ever have to see her again.

Somehow, it felt good to focus her anger. She reached Stråisjön Lake in less than a minute.

She had no difficulty finding the campsite. But to her surprise and disappointment, the tent had been taken down. It was gone. Now there was no place to leave the picture.

Eli hovered thirty meters above the deserted little clearing, staring at the yellow police tape flapping forlornly in the wind. Then she turned and headed home.

They would just have to keep the picture.

Chapter 10

Oskar looked around for Eli, but didn't see her anywhere. So he wandered down to a little play area beyond the next apartment building. It was around 9:30 and the August air had dropped down into the 60's, but he wore no jacket. He picked out a swing that was about the right height for him, sat down, and began to swing.

It felt good just to swing; it took his mind off things, and made him feel like he was just a kid again. He was careful not to swing so hard that he'd jerk the chain at the top of the arc. After awhile he leaned backwards so that he was looking behind himself, upside down. He was happy that he could still feel slightly nauseous as he swung back and forth in this way, and he wondered why doing this always made him laugh. He considered flying off at the top of the arc, but realized it would be a bad idea.

Soon he grew tired of being all alone on the swings, so he decided to go down to Tensta Centrum and check out some of the shops. He only had to go southeast for four or five

blocks to get to the downtown area. He strolled down the main boulevard, gazing into the store windows, his fight with Eli long forgotten.

Out of habit, he stopped at a kiosk and looked in at all of the food and candy. He thought about how he used to steal Dajms, Japps and Bountys, then go home and eat them with a Coke. Bountys had been his favorite, but the thought of eating one now made him feel kind of sick.

At least he didn't feel very hungry. Without his stomach distracting him, he had a chance to simply relax and wander around. He went a little further down, then saw a record store on the opposite side of the street. "Radar Love" by Golden Earring was playing inside, and the thumping music escaped out onto the street. He thought it would be fun to see if they had his favorite Vikings album, so he picked up his pace and crossed over to the other side.

He approached the door and was about to open it when a feeling of forboding overtook him: he couldn't go in. He had been thinking about so many ordinary things that he had almost forgotten what he was. So he stepped back, trying to be nonchalant, as if something in the front window had just caught his attention. A few customers came and went as he pretended to study the flyers for some local bands stuck to the glass and thought about what to do. Finally, he just decided to knock.

At first, nothing happened, so he knocked again, more loudly this time. He was about ready to head down the street when a young girl in her early 20's with a red bandana in her hair and a button with a tiny picture of the ABBA band cracked open the door and looked at him with a puzzled expression.

"What?"

Oskar tried to look like a young, ignorant kid. It wasn't hard. "Can I come in?"

She looked confused for a few more seconds, but then gave him a bright smile, as if to say, *What are you—some kind of goof?*—and said, "of course you can."

He gave her a smile in return, said thanks, and went on in.

Easy as pie.

He winced a little at the music as he entered the store—it sure was loud. He went down one of the aisles to the pop/rock section, and began to flip through the records. Soon he found the album, with the band members in their shiny suits in the skeletal hull of a Viking ship. Pleased with himself, he pulled the album out. Now if he could only find someplace to buy a portable record player than played 33s. Maybe there was a pawn shop nearby.

He thought about finding an album for Eli, but realized that he had no idea what her musical tastes might be. It occurred to him, for the first time, that given how old she was,

she might enjoy a vast range of music, and he really didn't know where to begin. Classical? Folk? Rock? He decided it would be best to come back with her, so he wouldn't buy something that she didn't like.

He began to flip through the albums, looking at the cover art. "Gloria" by Laura Branigan began playing, and he started bopping a bit to the music as he stood in front of the rack, fascinated by all of the different designs, logos and artwork. He casually flipped his way backwards to the "T" section. The records were arranged alphabetically, and he soon found an album that was out of place. He frowned slightly, pulled it out, and then moved it a few albums back to where it belonged. Then he kept flipping.

Without really realizing what he was doing, he continued the same process, steadily working backward through the alphabet, pulling out albums and reordering them correctly. When he reached a new letter divider, he felt a kind of inner satisfaction that he had brought order to a whole section. He started working faster, his actions becoming more machinelike as he moved steadily down the aisle. He tuned into the rhythm of each new song that was being played as he worked, and completely lost track of time.

When he reached the end of the aisle, he paused and looked up. He was now in the "E" section. He looked down the aisle and saw his Vikings album four or five meters up the aisle where he'd left it. He frowned and realized that he had probably just spent at least fifteen minutes messing around with the albums. None of the other customers had noticed, it seemed, but when he glanced at the clerk he saw that she was standing behind the register, chewing bubblegum and watching him. He blushed and went to collect his album.

Oskar came to the register and the girl asked him whether he'd found everything he needed. Then she added, in a teasing voice, "You're very good at that. Maybe you'll have to come work for us." He blushed again and smiled self-consciously, then mumbled something about how much he liked looking at albums.

As he dug into his pocket for some Kronor he smelled her perfume. It was different from the stuff his mom used to wear—sweeter, somehow; not as subtle. Beneath the perfume he smelled soap and a trace of sweat. A faint odor of incense drifted in from the back room.

He studied her face as she put the price into the register. She had brown eyes and a small nose that turned up slightly at the end, and acne scars on her cheeks. Her hair was pulled back in her bandana, and his eyes traced her hairline from her forehead back past her ear and down her neck. A small, purple butterfly was tattooed on her neck behind her ear that he hadn't noticed before; it seemed to move as she chewed her gum.

He pulled his gaze back and took her in all at once: the thin face; the ABBA button with the band members in their blue and purple outfits; the tie-dyed T-shirt that was pulled tightly across her smallish breasts, not quite long enough to cover her belly button; the sequined jeans.

Smile.

A smile broke across her face as she put the album in a bag. She didn't even look at him; didn't seem to notice that he had put the thought into her head.

Oskar smiled, too, but then his eyes were drawn once more to her butterfly, and as he focused on it, a thought entered, unbidden, into his mind: what would it be like to kill her and drink her blood? There was no moral connotation nor emotional response to the thought; he remained calm as he continued to stare at her. It was no different from wondering whether he would be able to find a pawn shop before all the stores closed.

We need blood to live. Could we have a little of yours?

An image of Eli like a viper, her sharp teeth snatching away the patch of skin and tissue; the blood bursting forth, its quantity shocking, freed to slacken their thirst. Their heads rapidly dropping down; the wound disappearing beneath their feasting mouths as the man's legs jerked.

He trembled, his body suddenly a live wire. He thought he saw a pulse beneath the tattoo. What he wanted—so close, yet so far away. Why did it have to be so hard?

He found himself licking his lips as he took the bag from her and at last felt ashamed and scared of himself. The tension left him. He firmly banished the thought, said thanks, and left. He was greatly relieved to feel the cool night air on his face.

†

When he got back to their apartment, he found Eli sitting on the floor of the living room, playing with her cards. She was wearing a freshly washed pair of pajamas, and her hair was still a little damp from the shower she had just taken.

She had moved their low, rectangular coffee table over against the wall, and had, at last, taken out all of her toys and treasures and arrayed them upon it. The forest picture was taped to the wall, prominently displayed immediately above the egg, which she had placed squarely in the middle.

He saw the picture, and gave her a puzzled but happy grin as he put his record player and album down. "Hey! You decided to keep it! But how come?"

She paused and looked up at him with a small, restrained smile. "I don't know. I just decided that maybe it wouldn't be so bad, after all. And I really didn't want to upset you, I guess."

"Did you get rid of the rest of—"

“Yes--it’s gone. Sorry.” Her smile faded. Then she looked down at the floor and said softly, “Oskar . . . am I killing you?”

Oskar didn’t know what to say. “Killing me? What do you mean?”

She looked up at him, her eyes shiny. Then she quickly looked away, turning her attention to what he’d brought. “Never mind. What do you have there?”

Oskar hesitated, wondering about the abrupt change of subject. Then he offered her an uncertain smile. “I got another copy of my Vikings album. You remember—the one we listened to that day you came over when my mom was away? And then I found this record player at a pawn shop downtown.” His tone became concerned as he looked down at his new purchase. “I hope it works.”

“Did a little shopping, mmm?”

“Yes. It was fun. We’ll have to go back to the record shop together some time. I was going to get you an album, too, but I had no idea what kind of music you like.”

“I liked that one song you played for me. Is it on there?”

Oskar smiled. “Yeah, but let me get it set up first.” He plugged it in, unfastened some snaps and pulled the speakers free from one end of the brown and tan box; then strung them out a short distance from the player. Then he removed the lid, exposing a plastic turntable and stylus. After ensuring that the right side of his LP was up, he threaded it onto the spindle, turned it on, and manually moved the stylus over to the third track.

There was a scratchy sound as the needle found its groove, and then the song began, now familiar to both of them. Somehow, it seemed different— more special, more private—now that they were listening to it together in their own apartment. When they had first listened to it, they had not known each other as well as they did now; they had been hesitant and uncertain about themselves and their relationship. But now . . .

Unconsciously they turned to face each other as they sat on the floor, the knees of their crossed legs nearly touching. Oskar reached over and adjusted the volume.

Why are you smiling, the boy asks then when they meet by chance at the gate . . .

I'm thinking of the one who will be mine, says the girl with eyes so blue

The one that I love so.

Eli slipped her hands into Oskar’s.

. . . down to the lake, where they draw in the sand they quietly say to each

other:

You my friend, it is you I want

La - lala - lalala . . .

“That’s why I like it, Oskar,” Eli murmured as she looked into Oskar’s eyes. “It says everything that I feel. About you.”

Oskar squeezed her hands. “I’m sorry, Eli. That I acted that way. It was my fault.”

“*Shhh*. No, it wasn’t—but that’s enough talk. *Please*.” Eli took Oskar’s head into her hands.

As her lips touched his, the memory came to Oskar, brought back by the song and Eli’s fresh, soapy smell: the towel dropping to the floor to reveal . . . nothing. Just a smoothness between the legs.

Elias.

Yes—Elias. He had almost forgotten that Eli had been a boy. *Was* a boy.

He closed his eyes to the soft, moist warmth, drinking in the love that Elias was offering, the beauty of its boundlessness. The love Elias felt for him had no strings attached. Oskar didn’t need to be someone else for him. It was total; it enfolded all of his bad and all of his good. It was amazing; it filled a hole in the center of Oskar’s being. It was—

. . . perfect.

And as Oskar’s heart leapt in his chest and he kissed Elias back, he felt a transcendent joy that his love, too, was unconditional. He did not think of it as such, but he experienced it as such. Eli, Elias . . . it was just a name—a name for this *person* that he loved. This person.

†

Later, they listened to the songs on the album’s other side as Eli continued with her card game, and Oskar unlocked the egg and tried to reassemble it.

“Eli.”

“Yes?”

He spoke without looking at her as he continued to fit the pieces together. “Would you rather I call you ‘Eli,’ or ‘Elias?’”

“What do you like better?”

“Well, I guess I’ve gotten used to thinking of you as a girl—even though I know that’s not really true. But I wasn’t sure if maybe . . . if maybe that might bother you. I mean—deep down inside.”

“It doesn’t upset me, Oskar—not at all. I’ve . . . well, I’ve sort of grown used to thinking of myself as a girl, actually. Even though I’m really not—physically, I mean. I’m not actually a boy or a girl anymore. And sometimes it bothers me, but not too often. I try not to think about it.”

“Does it bother you that you’ll always be the same? That you’ll never grow up?”

Eli thought for a moment; then said, “It used to bother me a lot more when I was younger. I mean, when I . . . hadn’t been what I am now for very long. And sometimes I’d see someone I used to know, but they’d be older. Sometimes, a lot older. And then I would think about how I hadn’t really changed. But it doesn’t really bother me as much any more, because— . . . well, because I guess I just don’t know that many people. So I don’t have too many folks to compare myself to. But still, sometimes when I wake up, I . . . why are you asking me this, Oskar?”

Oskar put down the egg pieces and turned toward her. Then he looked down at his lap. “Well this is kinda hard to talk about, Eli. I don’t really know if—but I guess, if I can’t tell you this, then there’s no one in the whole world I could tell. So—”

“You know you can tell me anything, Oskar. I mean, as long as you’re comfortable.”

“Okay.” Oskar sighed. “Well . . . yesterday I was taking a shower, and I just . . . I was, you know, looking at myself, and I just realized that I haven’t—well, I just got to thinking about how people make babies, I mean . . . actually, I thought about how my mom and dad had *me*. And as I was getting out the tub I saw myself in the mirror, and it really hit me how I . . . how I haven’t changed at all since all of this happened. And how, from what you’ve told me, that I’m . . . I’m never going to change. Never going to grow up, and look like my dad. I’m never gonna—”

“. . . have children.”

Oskar looked at her. “Yeah.”

Eli’s eyes met his; then she looked down. “You’re right, Oskar. As far as I know, that’s not going to happen for you. And I wish there was something I could do about it, because I’ve thought about it a lot myself, like I said. But I’m, I mean, we—we’re stuck the way we are. We aren’t going to change, we’re not going to grow up. At least not physically.”

Oskar nodded glumly.

Then Eli's tone lightened a little. "But you know what? You can grow in other ways. Maybe in ways that are more important than your body."

"What do you mean, like—"

"Mentally. Up here." She tapped her temple. "You have a chance to learn all kinds of things. Some are things that no people know about; others are just—well, it sort of builds up in your mind. You kind of . . . learn how to live in the world. How to exist, I guess."

"And whenever I get upset about my body—about how I always look the same—I think about how much I've learned over the time I've been alive. About how much I've come to understand the things around me, the meaning of things. And that has really helped me . . . helped me not to get really, really mad about myself."

Oskar's countenance brightened a little. "I guess that's a good way to look at it. And I *do* feel smarter, somehow, since you bit me. Although sometimes I'm not sure if it's really helping me." He smiled sheepishly. "Like tonight at the record shop. I went down the aisle and organized all of these records. I think the girl working there must've thought I was crazy."

Eli laughed. "Got a little carried away, hmm? Lose track of time?"

Oskar's cheeks turned red as he looked up at her. "Uh huh."

Eli giggled. "Well don't worry, Oskar. Sometimes that happens to the best of us. And it's certainly happened to *me*."

"Thanks; I feel better." Then he looked at the table and picked up an old brown shoe; turned it over in his hand. The leather was stiff and collapsed. "Is this your shoe?"

Eli turned her eyes to it briefly. "Mmm hmm. From a long time ago."

"How long ago?"

Eli's eyes looked up briefly as she thought about it. "Oh, about 75 years ago, I guess. More or less." She gave him a knowing smile.

Oskar smirked. "More or less." Then he said, "I'd love to see the house you grew up in. See how things were back then. Does it still exist?"

"No, it's gone now. There's a road where it used to be."

"Oh." Oskar was disappointed.

"But I know a place we can go that's kinda like it. If you want."

“Really? Where?”

Eli smiled mysteriously, then stood. “Do you really want to see?”

“Yes.”

“Then let me get something else on. Something dark. Then we’ll go.”

Oskar gave her a happy smile. “Great!”

†

2 AUGUST 1983

At 2:30 in the morning they flew southeast over the sleeping western suburbs toward Stockholm. A thin fog had crept into the area, and much of the ground below them lay shrouded in mist.

At first Eli was in the lead, but soon Oskar came abreast of her and firmly took her by the hand. The wind whipped the hair across their faces as they stole glances at each other, and they flew in tandem for awhile, soon clinging to each other only by their fingertips.

Then Oskar quickly pulled ahead, looked back, and laid down the gauntlet by giving Eli an evil grin. Eli’s eyes narrowed and she smiled back, then sped up and gave him a smug look as she passed him, beginning a happy game to see who could go the fastest. Faster and faster they skimmed across the sky, just beneath a broken layer of clouds.

Soon it became clear that neither of them could win a contest of speed, and as if by mutual consent they slowed. Eli asked Oskar how he liked flying, to which Oskar replied that he loved it, and would do it all night long if he could.

Then Eli began to make a slow spiral around him, crossing over below him, up around the opposite side, then moving above him before descending back again to his side before repeating the process. Oskar experienced a feeling of vertigo as his eyes traced her mesmerizing path about him, and unable to contain himself, he began to laugh. Then he, too, joined in. Soon their spinning paths made a double helix that wavered and wandered through the darkness, leaving a trail of laughter behind.

Eventually they grew tired of being dizzy and leveled out. Oskar was not used to flying, let alone navigating by air at night, but he easily recognized downtown Stockholm. He spotted the prominent iron spire of the Riddarholmen Church in Gamla Stan, where the kings were buried, and thought how amazing it was to see it by air. Off to his left was the slightly less imposing steeple of Clara Church, and the tower of the City Hall on the Riddarfjärden loomed out of the fog. Eli began to descend a little, and as they crossed Skeppsholmen, Oskar realized their destination: Djurgården, an island immediately east of the downtown

area. Eli headed straight for the tall white tower sticking up in the middle of the Gröna Lund amusement park, and before Oskar realized it, they had alighted on its top.

The glare of the green neon lighting the top of the tower was immediately below them, and the big green flags flapped above their heads on their metal poles. Well below them, the roller coasters and other rides were still lit up, though silent now because the park was closed for the night.

Oskar gazed down over the edge and around in awe. “*Whoa*, Eli. It’s *so* cool up here.”

Eli gave Oskar a huge smile. “Isn’t it? I’ve been here once or twice before, and I’ve never been disappointed by the view.”

“I guess no one can see us up here,” he offered.

“Don’t think so. It’d be pretty hard, I think. ’Cause we’re so high up.”

They crawled around the windy top in silence for a short time; then Oskar gave Eli a puzzled look and asked her if this is where she had wanted to take him.

“No. We need to go that way a little further.” She pointed to the east. “Into Skansen.”

Then it hit Oskar: Skansen—of course! He’d taken a field trip there in Sixth Grade. Where else would they be able to find an 18th Century house?

They launched themselves away from the tower, and were soon circling above the open-air museum. Eli scanned the woods and paths below them, then spotted a cluster of buildings, and they dropped through the fog to the ground.

They landed in a courtyard of sorts, a rough square bound by the low, wooden structures that surrounded them: old-fashioned log buildings, cross-tied at the corners. Although there was no one around, they quickly ran over to the overhang of the house to their left, and stood in the shadows for a moment as they got their bearings.

Oskar jumped a bit when a cow mooed loudly from a building to their right. Eli smiled at him reassuringly and then wrinkled her nose. “Cowshed—can’t you tell from the smell?” Oskar squeezed her hand nervously, and his nose twitched. Then he gave her an embarrassed grin. “Oh yeah . . . *whew*.” Then he added, “Bring back any memories?”

Eli continued to smile, but her voice was serious. “Actually, it does.”

Oskar looked around the barnyard and noticed a long pole with a rope on it, sticking out from behind the end of the building where they were. “What’s that?”

“You use it draw water out of the well, there. Come’re and I’ll show you.”

Together they jumped down off the rough-hewn porch and went over to the small well. Eli removed the cover and dropped the bucket down in until both of them heard a faint splash. Then together they pulled the rope until the bucket, now half full of water, re-emerged. Eli smiled and then, holding the bucket on either side, hoisted it up and poured some into her mouth. Oskar watched her throat move and then heard her sigh as she lowered it down. The water had splashed down her neck and soaked her shirt.

“Ah, it’s so cold,” she pronounced. “Do you want some?”

“Sure.” Oskar took the bucket from her and drank. It was very chilly, as Eli had said, but flat. “Doesn’t taste very good.”

“I don’t care how it tastes. I just *want* some.” She took the bucket back and drank again. “Do you want some more?”

“No thanks.”

“kay.” She poured the water back into the well and replaced the wooden cover.

Oskar looked around. “Where do you want to go?”

“Let’s check the stable.”

“Where is it?”

“There. Attached to the house.”

They walked back across the barnyard toward the largest house, the one with a small porch jutting out. Immediately to the right of the porch and its door was a larger opening. Inside they found the stable, just as Eli had said, and in the stable a handful of sheep peered out at them.

Looking at the sheep, Oskar immediately felt the timeless urge of the four-year old inside him: to pet them. So he climbed over the rail and stepped into the pen as the sheep bleated nervously. Eli joined him. The sheep were quite tame, and soon they were squatting on either side of a lamb, running their hands through its soft woolly coat and touching its head and face. It seemed to enjoy the attention, and licked Oskar’s forearm.

“It’s the salt in your skin,” Eli remarked. “They like it.”

Oskar smiled happily. “Did you have sheep when you were little?”

“Yes. Sheep, goats, chickens and a few cows. Ever had goat’s milk, Oskar?”

“Goat’s milk? No.”

“Then I guess you’ve never milked a goat, either.”

Oskar chuckled. “Got *that* right.”

“It’s not that hard. Just takes a little practice, like everything else. Come on—let’s go in the house.”

They encountered a padlock on the door, but Eli said something about not having come all this way for nothing, and broke the latch. Then they pushed open the wooden door and stepped across a well-worn threshold into the house.

The main room in which they found themselves had a large, stone fireplace on the back wall, equipped with a cooking pot and iron utensils. The walls and floor were unfinished. A big, old-fashioned drop-leaf table sat in the middle of the room with a few simply designed, unfinished wood chairs around it. To their left there was a long, rough-looking wooden bench. In the far corner to their left, not too far from the fireplace, sat a spinning wheel and a cradle. In the right-hand corner a hand-painted corner cupboard hung on the wall. The room smelled of old wood and smoke.

Oskar looked around, fascinated by how old and plain everything seemed. He tried to imagine what life had been like in this house two hundred years ago, his mind conjuring up images of people dressed in old-fashioned clothes like he’d seen on his field trip. Then he tried to imagine Eli, dressed like a young boy in the same kind of clothes, sitting at the table with his family. He found it very difficult, because he was so used to Eli living in an apartment with him, and dressed in modern clothes. Then it struck him how strange it was, to be standing with—no, to be *in love* with—a living person who had actually been *around* back then. The entire situation suddenly felt very strange and disjointed, as if, perhaps, he had just slipped back in time and was now living long ago with Eli here, in this place.

He turned to look at Eli. She walked slowly around the room with a small smile, her head tilted slightly to the side, her hands touching and gliding over every surface that she passed.

“So, is this how it looked? More or less?”

“Well, this house is actually a lot nicer than ours was,” she replied. “I remember a bench, like that, but our table wasn’t nearly as good as this one.” And we did have a spinning wheel, but it didn’t look quite the same as this.”

“And the cradle?”

“Mmm hmm . . . I can still remember that. Except ours wasn’t painted green.”

Oskar studied the spinning wheel. “How’s it work?”

Eli came over and stood beside him. She pointed to a pedal on the floor. “You pump the pedal with your foot and it turns the wheel. You get the wool ready and thread it onto the bobbin there, then use the wheel to turn it into thread.”

“Did you ever do it?”

“Helped my mom with the wool and watched, mostly.”

“Did you have a lot of chores?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Didn’t really think about it like that at the time, though. Life was pretty simple, Oskar. We went to school, helped take care of the farm animals and helped Dad with the crops. We complained about stuff and played around when we could, just like kids do nowadays, I suppose. But Mom probably did more work than anyone else, when it came down to it.”

“What’d you do for fun?”

Eli looked at Oskar and smiled broadly. “Run around and get into trouble—what do you think? And sometimes Papa played a fiddle. *That* was always fun.”

Oskar wandered through the doorway leading into the adjacent room. “Looks like a bedroom in here.”

Together they went in. Oskar pointed to a ladder leading up to a hole in the ceiling by the wall. “Where’s that go?”

“Kids’ bedrooms are up there,” Eli replied. Then she sat down on the double bed and withdrew something from her pocket.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a comb.”

It did not look like any comb Oskar had seen before. He was used to combs being long and rectangular, with lots of small teeth, but what Eli had seemed more square, and it had only a few long, thicker teeth. She held it in her lap and looked at it quietly.

Oskar sat beside her. “Can I see?”

She handed it to him. It was old and yellowed, with a lacy pattern carved into its top that was now broken on one corner. “What’s it made of?”

“I think it’s whalebone . . . or maybe from a reindeer’s antler. I’m not real sure.”

“Where’d you find it? In there?” He nodded his head toward the other room.

“It was my mother’s.”

They sat on the bed in silence. Then Oskar heard a soft sound: Eli had begun to cry. It started as a hitching in her chest, then became a gentle sobbing as her head bowed down. Then she leaned against him, her head against his chest. He placed the comb back into her hands, then put his arms around her. With eyes closed, she continued to weep.

Her hands began to knead the old, hard comb, her thumbs rubbing the ancient, ivory-colored surface. After awhile, she began to speak softly, her voice thin and muffled in the crook of Oskar’s arm, its pitch high, thin and full of suffering. “Momma . . . Momma—I miss you. I miss you *so much*.” The incessant kneading stopped; then her slender arms crept around Oskar’s waist and she clung to him. “Why? Why were you taken from me? How I wish . . . I wish so much that I could see you again. Just once, that I could . . .” She talked further, but all Oskar could make out was “your face.”

Her words tapered off into further crying, and Oskar did the only thing he could: he held her and let her cry; rocked her gently and told her that it would be okay. When her crying finally diminished, he gently took the comb from her hands and ran it through her hair, as he imagined her mother might have done, his own face now wet with tears. And as he sat there with Eli, he realized that he was crying not only for her, but for himself; he missed his own mom, too. Then he laid the comb aside, put his arms around her from behind, and pulled her back with him onto the bed, holding her close to his chest. Eventually Eli turned and burrowed into him, and they lay quietly together in the dark.

†

“Eli.”

“Hmm.”

“Do you mind if I ask you . . . what happened to your mom?”

“I don’t know what happened, Oskar. After he let me go, I went back to my home, but my family was gone. And, being what I was, I couldn’t talk to anyone I’d known before. You know . . . some of the friends I’d had.”

“So your house was just empty?”

“Yes.”

“All your stuff was—”

“That’s right—except the comb. I found that outside in the yard.”

Oskar hugged Eli a little tighter and stroked her hair as he stared up at the ceiling. “I don’t think I could’ve handled that. I mean, to have my mom and dad just disappear like that without a trace. I don’t know what I would’ve done.” He paused, then added, “What did you do?”

“I was scared, mostly. Really scared, all the time. Confused. I didn’t really know what to do. I sort of became an animal, you might say. I didn’t want to be around people because either they would hurt me, or I would hurt them, and I didn’t feel safe staying in the town where I’d grown up. I didn’t want to hurt anyone. So I . . . I went out into the woods. Deep into the woods. Because I understood by then that the cold wouldn’t bother me. That was the one thing that helped me. And I found a cave, and I lived in that for awhile. I knew what I’d been told, but still, I tried to live off animal blood. Rabbits, squirrels, deer—things like that. I was defiant; I didn’t want to believe it. But I realized after awhile that he had been telling me the truth, because animal blood just made me sick. And I got weaker. And that’s when . . . all the bad things started.”

“Bad things?”

“When I really understood that I didn’t have any options. That to live, I was going to have to--”

“I know what you mean—don’t say it. Please.” He rubbed her shoulders, then kissed the top of her head. His voice dropped, became softer. “Oh, Eli . . . you must’ve been really lonely.”

“Huh.” She didn’t need to say more.

“What was it like, really? I mean, all those years that you’ve . . . I don’t--”

“I can’t explain it to you, Oskar. I guess I’ve always felt . . . left behind. Like . . . suppose you went to a party for your friend. Maybe a birthday party? And then, say you fell asleep during the party, took a nap. And when you woke up, all of your friends were gone and a bunch of people you didn’t know were there, having some other party. And they didn’t like you being there, and you didn’t like them. But you couldn’t leave and go back to wherever all your friends had gone. You couldn’t go back to them because everyone you knew was dead.”

“That’s horrible. A nightmare.”

“Yes. Except for me, it was real. I didn’t have anyone—I was a leftover. No mother, no father . . . no family at all. I had . . . *outlived* them. Outlived everybody I’d known when I was just a person . . . a *normal* person, I mean. And to think that some people actually believe that immortality would be a great thing.” She laughed disgustingly. “How stupid people are.”

“And so I just . . . shut down. I just stopped thinking—I didn’t want to think about anything. Didn’t want to know anyone. Didn’t want to care about anything. Didn’t want to *be* anything. And after awhile I didn’t even think about what I was doing—with the killing, I mean. But then, something amazing happened.”

“What?”

“You.”

“Oh, Eli—don’t be silly. There’s nothing—”

“I’m not being silly.” Eli suddenly sat up to look him in the eyes. “You, Oskar, you are . . . the most amazing person to me.” Tenderly she touched his face.

“No, *you* are. That’s how I feel about you. But Eli, surely you’ve had friends before I came along. I mean, I remember what you told me the day you came over to my apartment—about how you hadn’t had a normal friendship with anyone for two hundred years. But still, that old guy who was with you—you stayed with him for awhile, didn’t you? And you weren’t living in a cave anymore.”

“That was after I found out that I had to go to sleep for months and months. And when I woke up, I’d be really weak. I’d need help. So that forced me to find people who would be willing to help me. But they were never like you, Oskar. They weren’t like what I have with you.”

Oskar was quiet for a moment, thinking. Then he said, “Eli . . . would you like to meet my mom? I mean, if we’re going to need help like that after we sleep, maybe . . . I don’t know. Maybe she could adopt you. And we could stay with her.”

Eli was not sure how to respond. Finally she said, “I don’t think she’d like me very much, Oskar. After all, I’m the one who took you away from her. She’d probably be really mad at me.”

“You didn’t take me away—I *left*. And . . . well, she might be mad at first, but maybe she’d get over it.”

“Why would she get over it?”

“Well, she’d *have* to get over it and accept us the way we are, wouldn’t she? She have to realize that I’m . . . different now. You know—that I’m not the little boy anymore that she—”

Oskar heard, and then grasped, his own words. He stopped suddenly, his face an open mask of confused and conflicted thoughts. Eli got up and faced away from him on the edge of the bed. He heard her sniff and realized that she was on the verge of tears, so he touched her back. “Eli . . . please don’t. I know you didn’t mean it.”

She straightened and then looked up at the ceiling, her hands clasped in her lap. “It’s all right, Oskar. It’s just—well, I spend a lot of time thinking about how much you’ve given up to be with me.” She turned to look at him. “And sometimes I think about the man you might’ve been, if I hadn’t been so weak. So I’m sure that if she came to understand what’s happened to you, it would hurt her terribly. She might actually be better off, not knowing.”

Oskar hadn’t thought of it this way; he had not gotten beyond thinking that his mom would be happy just to see him again. But he began to understand what Eli was saying. How would Mom react, if she really knew what he’d become? And what would she think of Eli, for making him that way? Could she ever forgive her, as he had forgiven her? Could she maybe be the mother to Eli that Eli had lost, so long ago? He wasn’t sure.

“Oskar, we’ll have to think some more about your mom. I like the idea of having a mom—that was part of what I liked so much about your birthday party . . . the one that I was in. And I know you probably miss her. But I’m not sure how she’d react, and we need to be careful now. We can’t take chances.”

A wolf began to howl somewhere not too far away.

Startled, Oskar abruptly sat up and looked in the direction of the sound, his eyes wide. Eli, too, turned her head toward it, her head tilted slightly as she listened intently. Unlike Oskar, she was very calm.

A second wolf joined in, the pitch of its cry lower than the first, but undulating up, and then down, before being joined by a third that was the highest of all.

Oskar grabbed Eli’s forearm. “Listen to them, Eli! They sound like they’re right outside the door.”

Eli glanced at him and smiled. “It’s just your ears, Oskar. They’re a lot sharper than they used to be, remember? They’re over in that area on the eastern side of the park. Didn’t you see them on your field trip?”

“No—we ran out of time.”

“Do you want to go see them?”

Oskar appeared uneasy at the thought. “At night? Aren’t they dangerous?”

Eli gave him a quizzical look. “Not as dangerous as *you*.”

“But how will they . . . will they act like cats do? Toward us?”

“No—not at all.”

“How do you know?”

“I told you I lived in the woods for awhile.”

“Well, then—”

“Why don’t we just go, and you can see for yourself. I would like to see them. Since we’ve been spending some time tonight learning about my past.”

Oskar hesitated for a few seconds more, then agreed. But as they got up to leave the rustic little house, Eli offered a warning.

“Just one thing, Oskar. You can’t show any fear in front of them. They’ll sense it. And it would be bad if one of them got aggressive, and we had to kill it.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t go, then.”

“Oskar, I think you’ll find them beautiful. And you really have no reason to be afraid. You have to start remembering what you can do. You could handle any of them, even all of them, very easily. And we can always fly if we need to. Don’t worry.”

†

They flew due east a short distance, following the sound. They approached a heavily wooded trail that ran north and south, but as they drew near the howling ceased, and when they landed they were greeted only by silence. Behind a fence the ground dipped down and then sloped upwards, broken by a small stream that ran toward and then parallel to the fence. The rugged ground was strewn with rocks and boulders, and the trees beyond were shrouded in mist.

They peered into the woods and saw nothing. Then Eli looked at Oskar and said, “Come on—let’s go over the fence now.”

Oskar hesitated. “Umm . . . you go first. I’ll watch.”

Eli looked at him a moment longer and thought about offering a few more words of encouragement. Then she simply said ‘all right,’ and quickly climbed over, jumped down, and landed, feather-light, on the opposite side. She stood perfectly still with her arms at her sides, three or four meters from the fenceline.

At first, Oskar saw nothing; even with his excellent vision, it was hard to see much of anything beyond her in the fog. Then he saw Eli turn her head slightly, and at almost the same time, a ghostly gray shape moved rapidly between two pines off to their left. Oskar scanned harder, straining to see.

There was a faint rustle, the soft padding of feet, and then he saw two low, dark shapes emerging from the screen of some undergrowth near the stream. Then he realized that at least six wolf-like forms were moving in the woods toward Eli. They were spread out, and he was unable to see all of them at the same time, so he swung his head back and forth to watch them as they came closer out of the mist.

Then he heard a deep, low growl; and at this, he became afraid for Eli despite his knowledge of what she was. Seeing the big, grayish-black shapes slink toward her small, slender silhouette sent a shiver of fear down him from his head to his toes. It touched down somewhere deep inside him and provoked a powerful, primordial urge to flee. He wanted to yell at Eli to get out, but didn't dare.

Suddenly a young, powerful wolf, the one that had been growling, advanced full into view and began to trot rapidly toward Eli. Its flanks were reddish-brown and its ears were laid back; its amber-colored eyes glittered. It opened its mouth in a snarl, its canines very white in contrast to the reddish-pink of its gums, and broke into a run.

Oskar could no longer restrain himself. *"Eli!"*

But as the wolf loped past a big pine, another wolf, snarling viciously, exploded out from its lowest branches and leapt upon the other, striking it like a bullet and knocking it down. The new wolf was bigger and older, and its coat was lighter than the other's.

They fought one another savagely for several seconds, twisting and turning around each other, their jaws snapping furiously. Soon, though, the older wolf achieved the advantage, and pinned the upstart to the ground. The young wolf began to whine as it lay on its back, holding its forepaws in front of itself. After a few moments, it regained its feet, and slunk back into the bushes.

Oskar watched, nearly paralyzed with fear, as the big old wolf turned its attention to Eli, staring at her with black and gold eyes. The top of its head was a dark, steely gray, and it was gray down its back. Its paws, sides, and snout were a creamy white. It lowered its head as it advanced and held its tail straight out, making itself look even bigger. As it closed the distance to her, the others renewed their advance as well.

Oskar watched Eli closely, waiting for her to react. He hoped against hope that she would fly up and rejoin him on the other side of the fence, or at least grow some claws and teeth, but she did neither. From what Oskar could tell, all she seemed to be doing was looking at the big wolf as it came closer.

Then something strange happened. When the wolf drew very near to Eli, it laid its ears back and lowered its head even further, baring its teeth in an apparent grimace. Then it lowered the whole front half of its body and its tail, never breaking eye contact with her. To Oskar, it almost seemed like an act of supplication, and the idea of Eli as Artemis suddenly returned to him. What did the wolf see in her?

Eli dropped to her knees and knelt directly in front of the wolf; now she seemed even smaller and more vulnerable. Then she did something that, to Oskar, was completely unexpected: she put her arms around its strong, shaggy shoulders and hugged it. To Oskar's surprise, the wolf began to whine softly, and Eli made low, murmuring noises, as if, perhaps, speaking to it. Slowly, it sat down on its haunches and rolled onto its side; then Eli embraced it completely, laying down between its front legs and pressing herself to its chest; resting her head on the thick fur around its neck, one hand stroking its coat.

One by one, the other wolves came and sat around the pair, some on their hind legs and some lying down; even the one who had fought earlier.

Oskar realized that for the moment, he was on his own. Eli had her back to him and was quietly holding the wolf in a peaceful embrace; her attention was no longer on him, and she showed no sign of getting up anytime soon. He could tell that Eli was happy; that in some mysterious way, she was enjoying an experience that was akin to what she felt when she was with him. Seeing how they had encircled her, Oskar could only conclude that the wolves somehow understood what she was. Like him, they had accepted her; and like him, their acceptance was unconditional.

I went out into the woods. I became an animal.

Did wolves become Eli's companions when, wretched and alone, she was thrust out into the world so long ago? Had she hunted with them, or for them? Did she share a cave with them? Lie curled up with them, finding solace in the warmth and comfort they offered? Seeing her small body clinging so closely to the great, shaggy beast, Oskar imagined that it must have been so.

He was no longer afraid, but was not sure what to do. Then one of the wolves, this one charcoal black from nose to tail, approached the fence and sat in front of him. Its odor was different from Eli's Alpha male, and he realized that it was a female; perhaps the other's mate. It was beautiful; its coat thick and rich, its markings much more subtle than he had first realized—dark brown highlights over its eyes, jet black ears, and white around its mouth. It watched him intently. He looked into its eyes, trying to understand.

Who are you, Oskar?

What are you, Oskar?

The wolf was for him; he was for it. Was he finally ready to embrace the life that his love for Eli had created?

In one, quick motion he flew straight up over the fence and dropped to the ground next to the black wolf, landing crouched on all fours. When he landed the animal sprang backwards, away from him, her back arched, her forelegs splayed down and out. Then she straightened, relaxed, and approached him cautiously. She carried a deep, dense wild smell that saturated Oskar's nostrils. He remained on all fours, his head at the same level

as the wolf's. Then she came up and licked his face. Oskar smiled; and when two other wolves came over and began to nuzzle him, started to laugh.

Chapter 11

2 AUGUST 1983

Kurt and Martin each took a file after they came in over the fax machine: Joakim Bengtsson, a 51-year-old male found dead in Mälaren Lake near Blackeberg; and the 59-year-old unidentified male who had been found dead in a Blackeberg apartment, 75 Ibsengatan. Both of them immediately noted the similarities of the wounds found on the bodies.

“The pathology report in the Bengtsson case says that the man was bitten in the neck by a child,” Kurt noted. “And his head was twisted in a fashion similar to Christensen’s. Here’s the photograph I remembered in the papers of the kid’s shirt that they found tucked inside the man’s clothing. See the bloodstains?” He slid the grainy facsimile across the desk toward Martin. “How about the other guy?”

Martin nodded. “Same deal. Cause of death was exsanguination from a bite wound on the neck—except in his case, there was a lot of tearing of the skin, subcutaneous tissue, and the sternocleidomastoid muscle. In fact . . . the autopsy said there was actually avulsion of the external jugular—the vein had been partially torn free. All of the trauma made a precise measurement of the bite impossible. And . . . yep, the neck was definitely twisted.”

“What about the chest?”

“Ribs were fractured—like Christensen’s.” He looked up and his brown eyes met Kurt’s baby blues. “How about Bengtsson’s?”

“They were bruised in his case. Same pattern, though.” He frowned, then asked, “any blood analysis on the John Doe?”

“Testing of a heart sample showed trace alcohol, but the tox screen was negative for drugs. Liver biopsy showed chronic alcohol use. And the guy didn’t have any drugs on him.”

Kurt read further down the report. “Says here that this Joakim fellow was last seen alive on October 24, 1982, about two weeks before his body was found frozen in the ice by some schoolkids. No question that he had been killed elsewhere and dumped—the body had been tied up with rope and weighted down with stones. But where he was killed was never determined. When was John Doe found?”

“November 9.”

“Not long after. Whose apartment was he in? And where in the apartment was the body found?”

“Well, let’s see . . . he was found lying on the floor of the bathroom, face up. Blood stains matching the victim were found on the walls and the doorjamb, confirming that there had been a struggle.

“Now, who had been renting the apartment . . .” Martin flipped through some more pages. “That’s not really known. The guy who signed the lease in October used a fictitious name, and listed himself as the sole occupant. The rental agent who was interviewed said he was middle-aged, but did not remember his face, nor recall there being a child. But he was shown a photograph of the John Doe and did not think it was him.”

Kurt frowned. “So Doe was in someone else’s apartment. Was the door forced?”

“No.”

“So Doe knew the tenant.”

“Yeah. Unless the door was left unlocked.”

“That would seem unlikely if our tenant liked his privacy so much that he used a phony name on the lease.”

“True.”

“Did they find Doe’s prints anywhere?”

“Hang on a sec. Okay—just on a knife that was recovered from the bathroom, and a partial on a kitchen drawer handle. It was an ordinary paring knife, so it’s a fair assumption that he must’ve taken it from the drawer, because those were the only places where his prints were found.”

“Hmm . . . maybe he knew the tenant and didn’t like him very much. And that doesn’t suggest he’d been there too often—so maybe he didn’t know him very well. Did they run his prints for a match?”

Martin scanned further. “Yes—nothing. No criminal history, which helps explain why they couldn’t identify him.”

“Did anyone report a missing person later in November?”

“If they did, it’s not in these reports.”

“Well, make a note. We need to check on that. We gotta figure out who this John Doe was. We’ll have to call Rydberg back about that, and if the Vällingby people didn’t do it, we’ll need to. What other prints did they find in the apartment?”

“Several, including some partials, and at least five children and three adults. Hard to tell how long they’d been there, though. You know—it was a rental, and low-end at that.”

“I want all of those. We didn’t get any prints from our scene except the decedent’s, but just in case there’s another attack. Especially the kids’ prints. Do we have an inventory of what was found in the apartment? Photographs?”

“Yeah. Here.” Martin pushed the papers across the desk to Kurt, who scanned down them and grunted. “No drugs recovered from the premises. And no money. Some hair from the bathroom. But these pictures are crap . . . we need to see the originals. When you call Rydberg back, set up a time this week to meet him so we can see the original files. Oh, and where is the list of unsolved murders over the past year that I asked for?”

“I talked to Hallberg and he promised to have it to us tomorrow.”

Kurt scowled. “I wanted that yesterday, dammit.” He shook his head in disgust, then turned his attention back to the Bengtsson file and raised his eyebrows. “Huh. Now *that’s* sloppy.”

“What?”

“Doesn’t look like they ever interviewed the people who showed up for Bengtsson’s funeral.”

“Assuming he *had* a funeral.”

“Well, yeah. Assuming.”

“I know . . . make another note.” Martin dutifully jotted it down, then looked up at Kurt and smiled. Kurt smiled grimly in return. “Martin, we have at least one, and probably two, seriously sick murderers on the loose here—that much is clear. The Canadians are breathing down our necks for a suspect. We can’t leave any stones unturned. Right?”

Martin sighed, ran a hand through his short blond hair, and nodded silently in agreement.

Kurt leaned back on his chair across from Martin, lit a cigarette, and put his feet up on his desk. “So what do you think, genius? We’ve got a modus operandi going here for sure.” Kurt tapped the cast footprint on his desk. “And we know a child was involved in at least two of the three cases, and maybe all three. It seems clear that some big, truly strong fellow—maybe our missing tenant, who’d I say is our lead suspect at this point—is restraining our victims so the kid can chomp on their throats. But what on earth *for?* And what’s all the neck twisting about?”

Martin slowly shook his head. “I just can’t see a motive. Unless there’s some relationship among all three of these guys we don’t know about.”

“Right—maybe drug-related; something like that. Although Christensen’s seems more random, and we have no priors for any of them.”

“And no drugs,” Martin added.

Kurt nodded in frustration, then took off his glasses and cleared an annoying smudge from one lens. “Did they quantify the blood loss on our John Doe?”

Martin looked back on the report. “Well, there wasn’t much left in the body, but there was evidently an awful lot of it sprayed around the room. Exactly how much isn’t really clear.”

“And there’s no way to tell the amount of blood loss on Bengtsson.”

“Nope. He’d been dead in the water too long.”

Kurt took a deep drag on his cigarette and held it, savoring the smoke before letting it go. Then he drummed his fingers on his desk. “You know, Martin, if you wanted to make someone bleed to death, why not just cut their throat with a knife? Using your mouth is *awfully* damn personal. You’ve gotta be a little crazy to be doing that sort of thing.”

“Uh huh. That’s an understatement, I think.”

“Crazy enough to make you want to *drink* some of that blood?”

Martin raised an eyebrow. “Oh come on, boss. You’d have to be serious deranged to be thinking *that* shit.”

“I don’t know. Stranger things have been reported . . . and all this vampire crap out there. You hear about it in the media sometimes—young teens who really think they need blood to live. Somehow they convince themselves . . . get stuck in these little cults and become deluded. Maybe our kid here was indoctrinated to believe it. Or even forced to do it.”

“I suppose it’s possible, but”

“Let’s do a little digging and find out more about that. Because I’m not seeing much else here to go on for a motive. These’re all much too strange to be an ordinary, run-of-the mill killings.”

“Okay, I’ll ask Hallberg to check it out. See if any of these cults are known to exist in Stockholm. Want some more coffee?”

“Yeah. Definitely. And when you talk to Hallberg, tell him I don’t want any foot-dragging.”

Martin nodded in agreement, then filled both their cups with what was left from the pot he’d brewed over two hours ago. “So how was the baptism?”

“It had to be postponed. Gabe got sick.”

“Oh. Sorry to hear. Nothing serious, I hope.”

“No, I don’t think so. Brit took him to the doctor’s because he was running a fever and throwing up. That’s all I heard from Flora.”

“Guess it sorta worked out well for you, though, huh? With all of this to do, I mean.”

Kurt frowned. “Yeah. I guess you could say that.”

“So what are you going to tell the chief?”

Kurt blew a cloud of smoke up at the ceiling and sighed heavily. “Yeah . . . what *am* I going to tell him?” He paused. “I’ll tell you, Martin, what I’m going to tell him: everything that we think right now, that’s what—even this bullshit vampire angle. But I’m also gonna tell him that the only thing we can tell the Canadians is that we think there’s a connection with two other unsolved murders around Stockholm. No details. Because if we do still have suspects in this area, and they’re following themselves the papers, I don’t want them to know what we know. That’s it.”

He stubbed out his cigarette, swung his feet down off the desk and pushed his coffee away. “You know what, Martin? I think I’ve had enough for one night. What do you say we call it quits?”

Martin waited for a second to see if Kurt was just testing him, or maybe trying to be funny, but when he saw him stand up and start to pull on his blue jacket, he realized Kurt was serious—he really *was* going home, and it wasn’t even eleven. So he replied that yes, he probably could use a few extra hours of sleep; organized the pile of papers on the desk; and gathered up his gear.

Kurt waited for him at the door, then shut off the light as they stepped out into the hall. “So how do you like your new BMW? Well, I mean, your new, used BMW.”

“Oh, it’s *great*. It runs real smooth, and it’s easy to handle. I’m glad I went with the direct drive. And Kim loves riding on it.”

“You still seeing her—that pretty young thing? I thought she dumped you.”

“Nope. Well, she did for awhile—but then she came crawling back. I guess she must’ve realized how good she had it with me.”

Kurt snorted. “She probably just fell for the uniform.”

3 AUGUST 1983

Maria Fridell adjusted a stocking on her leg and then told “Nick” that he could let her out at the next light. He began to protest. “But it’s starting to rain. Are you sure I can’t take you back to your flat?”

“I’m sure,” she replied with a tone of deliberate lightness. As if she would ever let him, or any of them, for that matter, know where she lived. “I’ll be fine. Really.”

“Okay.” He steered with one hand for a moment as he reached under his seat and retrieved a small umbrella. “But at least take this.”

“It’s okay—I don’t need it.” She wanted to get out of the car—it suddenly seemed much too warm. His heater had finally kicked in.

“Please. I insist.” He thrust it at her.

“All right.” She took it from him, wishing she hadn’t. “Thanks.”

“Mmm.” He nodded wordlessly as he pulled his Renault 17 to the curb. The wipers swished back and forth as she started to open the door.

He put a hand on her thigh before she could leave. “Thanks again. You were great.” He leaned over to kiss her, but she said thanks back and got out before he could. As the little red car pulled away into the night, she thought, *never*. Never for a moment would I let you kiss me. Anything else, fine—but not that.

Her perineum ached as she walked as quickly as she could toward her apartment. She was dying to get out of her high heels, shed her uniform, and get into the shower. Then she’d call Rafael and pay him. The folded wad of Kronor bills tucked into her bra felt good; made her feel secure.

In her relief to get away from Nick and his cozy little coupe, she had forgotten the umbrella. She tucked her handbag under one arm, unsnapped the strap, and pushed the button on the handle. It sprung open, but not fully; the spines on one side were bent, so it opened more or less halfway. She shook it, and it opened a little further. That’ll do, she thought, as she continued up the street.

She sighed to herself. Nick had been like so many other married guys she’d encountered; wanted to be thrilled by his “dirty little whore.” Wanted to experiment, do some things he said he could never ask his wife to do, yet wanted Maria to be in charge. And she had given him what he wanted without complaining, trying not to be brusque and businesslike. Pretending as though she cared about him, as though his climax was special.

He’d actually been a fairly easy trick. He had his own condoms and had put it on himself without being asked. His sexual requests had been rather mundane, in her experience.

And after he'd done his thing, he hadn't been ready for more. He just wanted her to lie with him, and had even agreed to pay her extra for the favor, considering that she could've gone back out and found another customer before the night got too late.

The rain came down harder, and the cheap, flimsy umbrella began to feel as though it might buckle soon under the gusts of cold wind. She turned a corner and was happy to see the dark, familiar outline of her apartment building up ahead, down at the bottom of the hill.

She approached a small patch of grass lying between the sidewalk and the wall of the aging, five-story building that had been her home for the last four months, her heels clicking sharply on the wet concrete. The grass had not been cut recently and had grown tall, and there were a couple of untidy bushes and an ugly, slate-gray electrical box sprayed with graffiti in the middle of the little patch.

As Maria drew near, she frowned. Someone was lying in the grass next to the box, trying to stay out of the wind. When she was within a few meters of the figure, she realized it was a young boy. He couldn't have been more than eleven or twelve, and he wore a thin, gray T-shirt and some old brown jeans. As he turned his head to look at her, she realized that on his feet he wore only flip-flops—in rainy, 50-degree weather.

He coughed and looked at her forlornly as she came abreast of him. His long, blond hair lay completely flat upon his head, utterly soaked. Then, as she feared he might, he spoke to her. "Excuse me."

Maria stopped and adjusted the angle of the umbrella to shield as much of herself as she could from the driving rain. She realized that under the dirty smudges, the boy's face was remarkably handsome—beautiful, in fact.

"Yes?"

"Sorry, but . . . can you help me?"

Here we go, she thought. Don't get involved.

"Uh . . . well, I . . . I need to get home, really. It's very late. What is it that—"

The boy coughed again, louder this time. "Oh, I—well, you see—"

"What—money? Is that what you need? A little money to get home?"

"Well, um, I need to call my mom. She said I was going to be staying at her friend's today, right here in this building, but there was no one home in the apartment she told me to go to. She was supposed to pick me up awhile ago, but she never came back. So I've just been waiting, and uh . . . but now I'm gettin' kinda cold."

Maria looked at him with a mixture of surprise and suspicion. His mother *dumped* him? Maybe she was on drugs . . . addicted to something? Couldn't take care of him anymore? His story sounded like a lie—after all, what kind of a mother would have been that careless, or even tricked her own son like that, but he sure *looked* unwanted . . .

He needs to get inside out of the rain.

Now she couldn't believe that she had been thinking of ignoring him, of just walking past. What kind of person *was* she? His mom was probably a lot like hers, from the sound of it. "Oh! Sure, kid—you can use my phone."

He brightened a little with something that seemed like relief, and got up out of the grass. He was wringing wet, and once he was next to her she immediately handed him the umbrella. "Here, take this." He shivered and took it gratefully.

They went around the corner and up to the building entrance. She unlocked the door with her key and stepped inside, holding the door open for him. As he collapsed the umbrella, he asked if he could come in. So polite, she thought. He looked like a little dog, abandoned and lost, and his politeness just added to his charm. What kind of a mother . . .

He shivered again, more violently, as they entered the lobby, and she tried to make him feel better. "Well, at least you're out of the rain! Let's get you inside and get you a towel." They went past the mailboxes and the big cement flowerpots with the fake trees and up a short flight of stairs, then turned left and went down the hall to her door. Once unlocked, she pushed it open and stood, turned sideways in the doorway, holding the door for him. Again he paused at the threshold and looked at her. "Are you sure this is all right—that I can come in? I won't take long, I promise."

"Of *course*—don't be silly. Get in here before you catch your death from a cold, um—what's your name?"

"Johnny."

"Well, come on, Johnny. You're a mess—let's get you cleaned up, what do you say?"

"Thanks." He dropped his head and stepped into her living room.

Maria kicked off her heels and threw her jacket onto the arm of her couch. "Wait right there and let me get you a towel." She disappeared from view for a moment, then returned with a pink terrycloth towel. It had started to come apart at end, but it was big and fluffy, and she handed it to him. "Here. Why don't you sit down on the couch for a minute and get dried off? Then you can try your mom. The phone's on the end table, there. I'll be right back."

Oskar was extremely nervous and uncomfortable. How much longer should he keep up the charade?

He had had a long talk with Eli earlier that evening about this—about him going out on his own to hunt. It had been more than a week since either of them had eaten, and they were both very hungry. He'd told her that he wanted to try it by himself, that he thought he was ready. She didn't seem so sure; had argued that they ought to go together. And although part of him wanted to agree with her, and felt comforted by the thought of Eli being at his side, another part of him wanted to do it on his own. Something about their trip to Skansen had changed him, and he felt ready.

Eli, too, had secretly felt conflicted. The idea of him going out on his own made her nervous and uncomfortable, but she had been afraid that if she insisted on going together, he would think she didn't have confidence in him. So finally, she had relented.

They both had keys, so they'd split up in the courtyard. He had no idea where she had gone, or where she now was.

He dried himself off with the towel. Could he really go through with this? Was he ready? His hunger told him that he was. It was the only thing inside him that felt driven and purposeful. The rest of him would have been more than happy to run out of here right now.

He looked around the tiny apartment. There wasn't much to look at, but what was there bespoke of a caring, feminine order; of someone who was doing the best with what she had. Naturally, the walls were whitewashed, but the drapes for the patio door to his left, behind a matching chair and the end table, had a reddish-brown pattern that was pleasing to the eye. A ceramic pitcher, the kind you might see on a shelf in any second-hand store, rested on the coffee table in front of him, topped with a bright bouquet of yellow and violet flowers.

Next to the flowers were a few photographs. In a tarnished brass frame was an old, black and white picture that showed a little blond girl wearing a sun hat—undoubtedly, a younger version of the woman he was with right now—standing next to an old, dour-looking man on a pier somewhere. He held a fishing rod, and she held the fish they had just caught with a big smile on her face.

Another, this one in color, showed her sitting arm in arm in the back of a small powerboat with some lady friend, both of them wearing swimsuits and sunglasses. They were holding beers and smiling broadly, the deep blue lake glittering behind them in the sun.

The third scared him the most; it showed a baby lying on a pillow, under a blanket. The baby's hands peeked up from behind the blanket on either side of the head, which was topped with a small white hat like the kind they provide for newborns at the hospital. It was hard to tell what the baby was thinking; it looked at the camera with an uncertain expression, as if to say, why are you taking my picture?

On the opposite wall, to the left of the hallway that led to the bedroom, there was a stereo/TV stand. A small TV sat in the middle, immediately above a tape deck. A colorful collection of bottles was arranged in a nook to the right of the TV, and to the left were a bunch of tapes. A pink and gray backpack, its top unzipped, sat on the floor, leaning against the stand.

He glanced into the cramped, well-kept kitchen to his right that opened directly into the living room, and then back to the baby picture as he heard some soft noises from her bedroom. *I should just leave right now.* Instead, he just sat there, resting his bottom considerately on the towel so that he wouldn't soak her couch.

He was scared. Not scared of her, but of what he was doing. He suddenly understood, utterly and completely, what Eli had told him: that after she'd been let go, she had been scared all the time, afraid to go near people because either she would hurt them or vice-versa. By deception he had managed to get into this woman's apartment. Now he was thinking about destroying her to satisfy his own urges. Before, Eli had done it for him. Now, he was going to do it. The act, the consequences—it would all be on him.

Forever.

He suddenly became aware of his own breathing—how rapid it was. His heart, too, had sped up, he could tell. He tried hard to maintain a veneer of outward calm as she came back into the room.

She had changed out of the short brown skirt and shimmery top she'd been wearing into a pair of gray sweatpants and a navy blue sweatshirt with a sports logo. "Well, you look better! Are you still cold in those wet things? Here, let me find you a blanket."

Before she turned around to go back to her bedroom, he realized for the first time how pretty she was. She had let her hair down; it was the same color as his, and it now hung freely to her shoulders. She had pale, fair skin and green eyes, and could easily have passed as his older sister.

He thanked her. From her bedroom she asked him whether he'd called his mom yet. No, he replied, but he would do it right now.

She came back in with a quilted blanket and gave it to him. The wind gusted against the patio door, spitting rain against the glass. "Are you sure you got the right apartment number of your mother's friend? Maybe there's just been a misunderstanding. Oh—do you want some hot tea?"

"Pretty sure, yeah. And thanks for offering the tea, but I'm okay, really."

She put a kettle on the stove and lit a burner. "You sure? You must be cold."

“No thank you.”

He picked up the phone and was getting ready to dial a number when the room went dark.

“Oh, shit,” she said. “The power went out.”

He paused, phone receiver in his hand, his eyes drawn to the only source of light—the blue flame on the stove beneath the kettle.

“Must be the storm,” he offered.

“Hang on—I think I have flashlight or something around here somewhere.”

“Okay.”

He pulled the blanket around himself and sat in the darkness, watching her as she rummaged around in a cabinet in the kitchen. The thought occurred to him that he could easily have helped her locate the light, but of course he didn’t dare. Even though he wasn’t cold, the wet clothing felt uncomfortable on his skin, and somehow the blanket made him feel better. Her kindness to him brought out the kindness in himself and a desire to be helpful. “Where should I put this towel?”

There was a burst of new light in the kitchen as she snapped on a small plastic flashlight; with it, she kept looking for something else in her cupboards. “Oh, that? Just leave it there on the floor. I’ll take care of it.”

The low sound of water beginning to boil filled the otherwise quiet apartment. “Oh, here they are.” She went into the bedroom and then returned to the living room with a large, white Christmas candle and a pack of matches, which she put on the coffee table in front of Oskar and lit. “There, that’s better. Does the phone still work?”

Oskar listened into the phone and heard the dial tone. “Uh huh.” He dialed the number he had planned, the one that he knew would not be answered, and tried to look unhappy as it rang and rang. “There’s no answer.”

“Oh. Well, is there anyone else in your family you can call? Your dad, or maybe an aunt or an uncle?”

“No. I don’t even know where my dad lives, and I don’t have the phone number for my grandma.” A nervously ludicrous thought came to him: I can call my Aunt Eli! Have her come get me out of this fix!

She stood beside him with her flashlight aimed at the floor, looking at him. The unanswered phone call had changed things, and when she spoke it was with forced cheeriness. “Well, don’t worry—we’ll try again in a few minutes, huh?”

“Yeah. I’m sure she’ll be home soon.” Oskar looked away as he replied and hung up the phone.

“Are you sure you don’t want something to eat? You must be hungry if you’ve been waiting around outside all this time.”

“No, that’s okay. I’m fine.”

She looked at him uncertainly for a few seconds more before she went back into the kitchen to prepare her tea.

When she came back with her mug, she sat in the chair near the couch, drawing up her legs to her chest and holding them with one arm as she sipped the tea. They exchanged pleasantries in the flickering candlelight, and she asked him some questions—how old he was, where he was from, and how long he’d lived in Stockholm. He answered all of her questions truthfully. Then he asked her if the baby in the picture was hers, and learned that he was. His name was David; he was now three, and lived with his father.

After a second phone call, he apologized and suggested that maybe he should just take a bus back to Blackeberg. But it was still raining, and was now a little past one o’clock in the morning. Maria would have none of this idea. “I have classes tomorrow, but they don’t start until 8:30. I’ll call my friend Marta first thing. She has a car, and we’ll have plenty of time to get you back to your home.” She looked at Oskar with grave concern. “I think I should meet your mom.”

When she’d finished her tea, she asked him if he needed to use the bathroom. When he said no, she suggested that he lie down on the couch and try to get some sleep. Then she excused herself and went to the bathroom.

He knew the best thing he could do now would be to leave. Just get out. But she knew what he looked like, and knew where he was from. What if she got so worried that she called the police? They were still looking for him, probably; it hadn’t even been a year since the incident at the pool. It would be bad if he were reported.

The hunger gnawed at him, insistent and demanding. He hated it; wished it would go away and just leave him alone. But it didn’t. So, with no clear plan for what he was going to do, he did as she said: he shucked his wet shirt and pants, laid down in his damp underwear and pulled the blanket up to his neck. He listened to her take a shower by flashlight, and studied the candleflame as it wavered gently back and forth, swaying slightly with the drafts from the patio door.

After a few minutes, she came out of the bathroom wearing a terrycloth bathrobe, her hair wrapped in a towel.

“Are you asleep yet?” He pretended to be drowsy, and gave her a softly slurred ‘no.’ Then she saw his clothes on the floor. “Oh—stupid of me. Let me hang these up in the

bathroom, so they'll be dry in the morning. Do you want some sweatpants or something to wear?"

"No, I'm pretty warm under this blanket, thanks."

She paused by the couch, holding his his wet clothes to her chest. Then she bent down, lowering her face to his. She had a pleasant, soft smell like lillies. "Don't worry, Johnny. You'll be fine here. We'll take care of all of this in the morning." She ruffled his hair. "For now, try to get some sleep. If you need anything, just ask. I'm in the bedroom. And you can leave the candle burning as long as you like. It'll burn all night with no problem."

A wave of confusion passed through him at the genuine gratitude that he felt. He reached out with one hand and squeezed the slender wrist that held the flashlight. "Thank you so much, ma'am. For everything." He started to cry, and his tears were real.

"Oh you poor thing. *Please* don't worry. And call me Maria, okay?"

"Thanks, Maria."

"Good night."

"Good night."

She turned and walked quietly back the short hall to her bedroom. Then he heard the door softly close.

Oskar closed his eyes and listened to the rain on the window for a long time. Other than the occasional sound of other tenants, the room was now silent.

He heard Eli's voice in his head: *you have to stop thinking of them as people, and do what needs to be done.* Could he? If so, the time was now.

If only Maria hadn't been so kind to him, hadn't reminded him so much of his mother, things would be easier. Why couldn't she be mean and vicious? Yell at him, slap him or something? Then his anger could do the work. He knew it was down there, somewhere inside of him; deep-seated and brooding, waiting for the opportunity to spring out and get even. Settle the scores with everyone who'd ever wronged him; punish all the evil, nasty people out there who made life miserable for him and kids like him. But this girl wasn't like that. He didn't know what she did to make money, but she was a student at a college or university somewhere nearby. She was trying to make something of herself. She had brought him home to her apartment, and had gone out of her way to make him feel comfortable. How could he hurt her?

But what would he tell Eli when he got home? He'd either have to find someone else in the brief time that remained before dawn, or tell her everything. And if he did tell her,

what would she think? She was very patient, but even patient people had their limits. He knew she'd be disappointed.

There is no other way.

Was there?

He looked at his wristwatch: 2:05 a.m. The sun would be up in 2-1/2 hours.

Like a robot he pulled the blanket off his thin body, swung his feet to the floor and stood up. Bent down and blew out the candle. Walked slowly down the hall to her bedroom door. Listened; heard nothing but the wind and the rain. Put his hand on the handle, pushed down. Felt the door give way and swing soundlessly open to his left.

Maria was asleep under her covers, alone in her double bed. She lay on her side in a fetal position with her back to the door. On the opposite side of the room, directly across from Oskar, was her tiny closet, stuffed with clothes. Next to the closet was another patio door that led to a small balcony, now covered with drapes.

Without a sound Oskar's feet left the floor and he floated like a wraith over to her sleeping form. The closer he got, the bigger the fear that was growing in his chest, so that by the time he was next to her he was almost completely terrified that she would suddenly awake and confront him. He settled softly onto the bedspread behind her, listening intently for her breathing to change. But it did not.

He again smelled her beautiful, fresh clean smell. Admired her soft, golden hair spread out on her pillow. Studied the skin beneath her ear. The thing inside him rushed forward like a wolf to the end of its chain, barely restrained. The enamel on his teeth bulged, then changed. *Take it.*

He swallowed and suddenly felt nauseous. *I should at least ask her first. She deserves as much.*

Eli's face, her mouth smeared with blood, looking at him like he was crazy. *Get real, Oskar.*

He extended his hand to touch Maria's shoulder and wake her; hesitated.

It could mean my death to wake her up. And Eli's.

It's your life, Oskar—not Eli's. Do you still believe in right and wrong?

There was a heavy thud from a transformer somewhere down the street, and suddenly the overhead light came on. Oskar, as incredibly tense and nervous as he was, was so startled by the instantaneous, blinding transformation from darkness to light that he jerked his arm back from Maria, lost his balance, and fell backwards onto the floor with a thump.

There was a rustle of covers from the bed and as Oskar scrambled to right himself, he glimpsed the back of Maria's head and upper back rise up. "What—what's going on? Oh—the lights."

For a split second, Oskar thought about just staying frozen where he was, hoping that she would simply lie back down and go to sleep. But when she just stayed upright, and slowly turned her head toward his side of the room, he knew—knew that she was going to get out of bed and turn off the light at the wall switch. And realizing that he was about to get caught, his will broke.

Get out.

He rolled onto all fours and loped as fast as he could toward the bedroom door. "Johny?" He knew from the sound of her voice that she had spotted him.

"Johny?" Sharper this time, yet concerned—not accusing. "Are you all right? What's the matter?"

He rushed to the front door and began to fumble with the locks. But there were at least four of them, and as he started to open the second from the top, a chain lock, he realized that all he had on was his underwear. *Shit!* He half-turned, the thought of going outside in nothing but his skivvies compelling the thought of his pants hanging in the bathroom, and saw that Maria was coming toward him wearing nothing but black panties.

Somehow, the unexpected shock of seeing of her naked, athletic figure in full view—not a little kid's body, like Eli's, but a mature, adult woman—ratcheted his panic up from an already extreme level to something beyond his control. Seeing her body was so totally unexpected and made him feel so out of place that it was just too much. No longer did he care about his pants—he just had to get out. In the back of his mind, he realized what a *total* fuck-up this whole night had been—the shit had hit the proverbial fan.

"Johny? Why were you in my bedroom? Are you scared? Where are you going?—it's the middle of the night!"

He started to mumble semi-coherently as he fiddled with the last lock, which seemed to have acquired a will of its own to prevent him from leaving. "I . . . I was scared, I guess—the storm, it . . . I didn't want to be alone— I need to leave, I have to go *home* . . ."

Her hand touched his shoulder, and with its soft warmth, the nervous energy seemed to dissipate and drain out of him as if by magic.

"Johny, please wait. You can't go outside like that—you'll freeze to death. *Please.*" She pulled him gently away from the door. His right hand was on the knob, prepared to turn it, but with her pull his fingers slipped away, and he dropped his arm to his side. He turned to look at her, and could not help staring at her breasts, which he noted, in a bizarre and

abstract way, were larger than his mother's, from the few times in his short life that he'd seen hers.

The awkwardness of the situation—she in her panties, he in his underwear, an arm's distance from one another—did not seem to concern her. She led him over to the couch and sat him down on the blanket. “Johnny, just relax—calm down. There's no reason for you to go anywhere. You're safe here, and we'll get you back to your mom in just a few hours.”

He looked up at her. Any will to take her life had completely left him—he was defeated. The thought brought him a feeling of enormous relief, but also filled him with unhappiness. His needs could not be postponed indefinitely. But he simply could not satisfy them with her—no way.

Maria was turning to go get her bathrobe when they were both startled by a loud banging on the door. Oskar jerked his head around to the sound, as did she, and before either of them could do anything, the knob twisted and someone pushed the unlocked door open.

An angry man strode into the foyer. Without looking behind him, he kicked the door shut with the booted heel of his left foot. “Okay, bitch! Where's my money?”

Maria stood up straight, covered her breasts with her crossed arms, and involuntarily stepped backwards, wobbling as she bumped the back of her calves on the coffee table behind her.

“Rafael! Wh—why are you here?”

He advanced rapidly into the room toward Maria, completely dismissive of Oskar's presence, a wave of cool night air from the outside hallway preceding him. He was short and stocky, but not fat, and he wore black jeans and a black leather jacket. “You heard me—I want my money. You were supposed to bring it—remember?”

Oskar sat, paralyzed, on the couch, staring at this strange and dangerous-looking man. He had black hair cut very short, a moustache, and goatee. Oskar guessed he was Spanish, based on his skin color and accent, but he really wasn't sure. Something was tattooed on the back of his hand, but Oskar couldn't read it—not that he wanted to.

Maria maneuvered away from the coffee table and turned, still facing Rafael, so that her back was toward the hallway leading to the bedroom. “Oh! Shit—I forgot! I . . . I got sidetracked, I—hang on, I'll get it!” She turned and rushed into her bedroom, leaving Oskar alone with Rafael, who stood in the middle of the room, glowering after her into the bedroom.

“You *forgot*. What the fuck, bitch? That's bullshit—you *never* forget to pay *me*.” His leather jacket creaked as he turned to look at Oskar. “Who's this little shit? Get the fuck outta here, punk.” He nodded toward the door.

“Uh . . . okay.” Oskar felt confused and uncertain about what to do. Only a few moments before, he had been dying to get out. Now, this bad looking dude was here with Maria, who had been so kind to him. The passive little kid inside him thought it best just to slink out while the going was good. But another part of him wanted . . .

Slowly he got up and started to move toward the door. For some stupid reason, he began to wonder whether he should take her blanket with him. Then Maria spoke from the bedroom. “No—don’t make him leave! Please. I’ll give you your money, just—”

“Don’t tell me what to do, Maria,” he replied in a low, dangerous voice. Once again he looked toward Oskar. “I told you to get the fuck *out*, boy. You don’t wanna *be* here right now.”

The thought of what terrible things Rafael might do to Maria once he left galvanized Oskar’s will. He heard Eli’s voice in his head: *you have to start remembering what you can do.*

He dropped the blanket. “No.”

Rafael had turned his head once again to the bedroom. He looked back at Oskar and frowned, as if he couldn’t believe what he’d just heard. “*What* did you say?”

“No. I won’t go.”

In an instant, Rafael half-turned and his right foot snapped out and kicked Oskar squarely in the balls. The explosion of pain caused him to double over and he fell onto the couch, clutching himself and writhing in agony. Rafael loomed over him and now used his leg to thrust the coffee table out of the way. The pictures flopped down and the pitcher tipped over and rolled onto the floor, spilling water and flowers. “You’ll do what the *fuck* I tell you, you little *shit*.” He grabbed Oskar’s right arm, yanked him upright, and punched him squarely between the eyes, then let go. Oskar felt an amazing quantity of pain as his nose flattened under the blow; then temporary blackness as he fell back down onto the couch.

Oskar felt himself at the bottom of a dark well full of pain. His eyes were closed and he cradled his wounded balls with one hand and held the other over his broken nose, feeling the wetness as the bloodstain spread across his face. He heard Maria’s voice, now loud and shrill. “You leave him *alone!*” Then there was a breaking sound and he heard Rafael cry out. “*Owww!*”

Oskar opened his eyes halfway in time to see Rafael turn away from him and hit Maria across the face with his open hand. She went sprawling into the kitchenette. He advanced upon her, his boots crunching on the remnants of a bottle she’d broken on top of his head. “I’ll teach you to hit me, bitch!” His hand dropped to his waist, tugged at something under the lower edge of his jacket, and then he was holding a knife.

Oskar, now fearful for Maria's life, tried to pull himself up out of his pain; tried to focus. He closed his eyes and concentrated. *I don't feel any pain. I'm healed.*

Maria rolled to a sitting position, her back against the dishwasher. She saw the knife in his hand and stiffened in terror. "Please—no. *No.* Take the money—*all* of it." She held the wad of bills out to him with a trembling hand. "He's harmless—just a kid who needed to call his mom, that's all. Just take it and leave."

"I'll take it," he replied as he plucked it from her fingers and stuffed it into his jeans. "But that don't make up for what you just did to me." He gestured at her with his knife, then half-nodded back toward the couch. "I guess he can watch. Hell—maybe he'll learn a thing or two." He grinned, unzipped his pants, and withdrew his penis. "Now get over here and—"

Maria's eyes widened in surprise as Rafael was suddenly seized from behind. Oskar didn't just use his arms, but his whole body, as if he had decided that Maria's pimp should behave like a good daddy, and give him a piggy-back ride. His legs wrapped around Rafael's waist, and his right arm pinned Rafael's knife arm to his side. He planted his hand firmly over Rafael's mouth and nose, and he wrapped his left arm across his chest, squeezing tightly.

Rafael's eyes registered shock and surprise. He tried to raise up his arms to throw the boy off, but he couldn't get any purchase, so he began to swing wildly around the room, bucking his body to rid himself of this unexpected attacker. An urgent, muffled "mmm, mmm" came from under Oskar's hand as Rafael shook his head violently from side to side. Soon, though, he ran out of air and fell silent. He continued to struggle, deliberately backing into the TV/bookcase and dragging Oskar along its length, trying to scrape him off. The protruding metal shelf brackets dug in, peeling the skin from Oskar's back, but doggedly he hung on, never relaxing his grip. When this didn't work, Rafael fell to the floor and rolled. The bookcase tottered and then fell with a resounding crash, spilling bottles, books, cassette tapes and stereo equipment down onto them.

Still Rafael struggled. He got his legs underneath himself and began to flop like a fish toward the front door, his knife long forgotten. Then his movements slowed, and he collapsed. Oskar remained on top of him, his hand still firmly clamped over Rafael's face, cutting off all flow of oxygen to his spasming lungs. He stayed this way for what seemed, to Maria, like a long time.

Maria had stood up during the struggle. She didn't know what to do, or how to intervene. She couldn't believe that every effort on Rafael's part to shuck the young, fragile-looking boy off had failed, and that he still triumphantly clung, back striped with blood like war paint, to Rafael's fallen body. Then as she spoke his name, thinking to tell him it would be a good idea to let go, she saw something that utterly terrified her.

Oskar loosened his hold on the still form. His mouth opened wide to reveal two large incisors, and without hesitation he sunk his teeth deeply into Rafael's neck with a wet popping sound that Maria thought akin to crushing a plum in one's hand.

She gasped and recoiled in horror. Rafael didn't move—didn't make a sound. And that was why the only noise in the now still, demolished apartment was an intermittent growl and a gulping sound from Oskar's throat as he greedily sucked the warm, fresh blood down his gullet, completely heedless of Maria's presence.

†

Oskar closed his eyes as he worked his jaws on Rafael's short, thick neck, savoring the taste and pulling as much blood into himself as rapidly as he could. He hadn't realized just how starved he had felt until he began to take it in. At last, the hunger was over, and he felt enormous relief.

For a brief instant after feeling Rafael slacken and go limp in his hands, he had thought about trying to keep his secret and not feeding in front of Maria. But his hunger, his anger at Rafael, and the nearness of the warm, defenseless body were simply too much, and in a heartbeat he had let go to the thing that now reigned inside him. The dark wolf had slipped its leash, and was now in charge—at least temporarily.

With the slackening flow came the resumption of control and a return to his senses. He gradually became aware of the revolting sounds he was making. Yet he still bore down harder with his mouth, biting deeper in an effort to drain every drop that he could from the man.

When at last there was nothing further, he let go and sat up to look at Maria. The kind, gentle person who had said good night to him a little while ago was now aghast, her eyes wide open and full of horror. She had backed up into the corner of the kitchen as far away from him as she could, and stood, flattened and rigid, against the cabinets.

Still straddling Rafael's body, Oskar looked into Maria's eyes and saw her revulsion and disgust. Recognizing it, he felt deeply ashamed for what he had just done—of being out of control, like an animal, in front of her. His embarrassment was like that of a masturbating teenager who realizes at the moment of orgasm that he is being watched by a parent; of being caught in a situation that permanently alters the way the observed and the observer think of each other.

There was a pause as the two of them stared at each other. Oskar wiped the blood from his lips with the back of his hand. Then he sniffed and started to cry. He cried because Maria's open recognition of his monstrous nature made him understand, in a way he had not before realized while with Eli, that he *was* monstrous—and that he would remain a repulsive monster for the rest of his life, no matter what he did; no matter how hard he tried to avoid it. He lowered his head, covered his face, and sobbed bitterly.

Maria stared at Oskar, her mouth hanging open in shock. When he had stopped biting Rafael and looked up at her with his bloody mouth, she had expected him to attack her next, but she relaxed when he began to cry, and realized that her life was not in danger.

Then, as Oskar bent over crying, she again saw the bloody, horizontal gouges running across his back. Moved with pity, she pulled a dishtowel out of a drawer, soaked it with warm water, and took it over to him.

She crouched down at his side and hesitantly touched his shoulder. “Here—let me help you.” He continued to cry, but she opened up the dishtowel and spread it over his wounds, pressing it lightly against him.

“Does that help?”

His crying slackened. After a time he stopped and looked at her. His teeth were normal, his eyes were wet and shiny, and his face was an open book of amazement. “Are . . . aren’t you going to run away?”

She gave him a faltering smile as she held the dishcloth in place. “Should I—Johny? Or is that not your real name?”

He arched his back a little as he turned to face her, then looked down in resignation. “No, it’s not. I’m really Oskar.” He looked at Rafael for a moment, picked something up, and then handed her the folded wad of Kronor. “This is yours.”

She hesitated for a second and then took it. “Thanks.”

“You can take the towel off now.”

She gave him a confused look. “If I do, then we need to find something else to put on your back. Because you’re bleeding pretty badly, and—”

“I’m okay. Really.” He reached back and pulled it from his back. Maria’s stared, dumbfounded, at the smooth, intact skin under the towel. Where the gouges had been, there were now only pinkish-colored scars.

Then it really hit her: that this innocuous-looking boy, who appeared so pitiful and forlorn when she had first met him, had actually been in charge of events. The way he had grabbed Rafael and taken him down; the way he had killed him so quickly. And now this. The boy was full of a hidden power. Far from being helpless, *he* was the one who had actually been in control the entire night. She shuddered as a cold finger of fear ran down her spine.

Oskar crawled off Rafael and fetched his knife from where it lay under the stereo. Then he crawled back over to the body and said, “You may want to look away if you don’t want to see this.”

Maria looked at him with a puzzled expression, but when she saw that he was placing the tip of the knife at the back of Rafael’s neck, she paled, swallowed, and then turned away. Grimacing, Oskar plunged knife deeply into Rafael’s cervical spine between two vertebrae,

then twisted the blade sharply in the wound and pulled it from side to side. There was a soft, slippery popping sound, and a mixture of blood and cerebrospinal fluid oozed out and ran down either side of the neck. Then he pulled the knife out. “Sorry. You can look now.”

Oskar searched through Rafael’s pockets. He found some money and then emptied the man’s wallet. “So why was he so mad at you?”

“Because I was supposed to pay him tonight.”

He looked at her with concern. “Was I the one who sidetracked you?”

She responded softly, without anger. “Uh huh.”

“Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay.”

“Why did you have to pay him?”

“He’s my pimp.”

“What do you mean?”

She gave him a funny look. “I’m a hooker.”

“What’s that?”

She smiled at his display of innocence and suppressed a small chuckle. “You know . . . a prostitute. People pay me to have sex.”

Frank realization spread across Oskar’s young face. “Ohh—I get it. Sorry—I’ve never met a hooker before.”

Her smile grew. “No need to apologize. I’ve never met a *vampire* before, either.”

Both of them suddenly laughed. He noticed for the first time that she had dimples. Then he said, “I’m not *really* a vampire, actually. I’m still . . . Oskar. *Inside*.” He tapped the middle of his thin, bare chest, then gestured at the body. “This is all just a big mistake, actually—what happened to me. An accident.”

Maria touched him and said, “Well, thanks for helping me. *Oskar*.”

“You’re welcome.” Oskar suddenly realized that he was no longer embarrassed to see Maria’s exposed breasts. Somehow, things between them were different now; she was just a person—maybe, a friend. He got up and stood the bookcase back up against the wall.

“Sorry your room got all messed up.” He began to pick up her tapes and put them back on the shelf. Maria put on her bathrobe and then began to help.

“So that thing about your mother. That was all . . . made up, right?”

Oskar put the TV down on the shelf and turned to face her; looked down at his feet. “Yeah.”

Her tone grew more serious. “So you came in here because . . . you were going to kill me, right? Like him.”

He couldn’t bring himself to look her in the eyes. Reluctantly he said, “Yes. But I—”

“Is that why you were in my room? When the lights came on?”

“Yeah.” He waited for her to yell or start screaming at him. Instead she asked, not unkindly, “Why’d you change your mind?”

His mouth twitched and he slowly looked up into her eyes. “Well, um . . . you were too nice to hurt—I just couldn’t. You reminded me of my mom. You see, I haven’t been like this very long, and I guess I’m not very good at it. It’s horrible—like a disease. It makes you do things you don’t wanna do. So I’m probably going to end up starving to death, I think. Even though I feel like I’m ready, I’m not, really.”

For a second Maria felt the urge to ask Oskar to say that everything was a joke; that it was all made up. Then maybe she could return to some semblance of normalcy, and shed the feeling that she had just slipped off the edge of the real world. But she had seen too much to ask such a question. Then as his words sunk in, it dawned on her that even though he was . . . whatever he was, he was still, somehow, just a young, inexperienced kid, and she struggled to grasp how this could be true.

She brushed her hair back out of her face and looked around at the room and the body. “So . . . um—what do we do now? Are you gonna, you know, kill me because . . .”

“I just told you—I couldn’t hurt you.”

“Well, I—”

“I’ll take care of him.” Oskar nodded at the body. “But you have to promise you’ll never tell anyone about me. Because we could really get in trouble if you did that.”

“I won’t.”

He looked her in the eyes. “Swear it.”

She slowly raised her hand. “I swear I won’t tell.”

He looked relieved. Then he turned toward the patio window and said to himself, “How am I going to explain this to her?”

“Who?”

He hesitated. “I really don’t think I should tell you much more.” He thought for a moment. “Will someone come looking for this guy?”

She sat down. “His brother works with him. So probably—yeah.” She looked around the room with fear and crossed her arms. “Oh my God . . . what am I going to do? Maybe I should just break my lease and leave. Or should I stay and act like I don’t know anything? Or maybe—”

“You can come with me if you want. But then they’d be suspicious, wouldn’t they? Or . . . I know—you could stay here and I could come back and check on you. Make sure you’re okay.” He thought a little further. “But if his brother came during the day, I wouldn’t be much use. I couldn’t help you then.”

“Um . . . well, no one would suspect me of anything. I could just tell Miguel that Rafael came and then left, and didn’t say where he was going.”

“Do you think he’d be suspicious?”

“Mmm, probably not at first.”

“Okay. Well then, we could come back and check on you. Make sure you’re okay. Maybe tonight?”

“Okay. Thanks.”

He came over to her chair, bent down, held her forearm and looked at her earnestly. “Please don’t tell the police about me . . . *please*. No matter what.”

She put her hand over his and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “I promise I won’t, Oskar. Don’t worry.”

He looked at his watch. “I’ve gotta get out of here. It’ll be dawn soon.”

“Oh—let me get your clothes.”

After he dressed, he put the knife into his pocket, divided the money he’d taken from Rafael, and handed her half. “Here—you take this.” Then he grabbed Rafael’s body and dragged it to the patio door. “Can you open that?”

She pulled back the drapes and slid it open. The rain came hissing in, spraying lightly on the carpet. “What are you going to do with him?” She watched in amazement as he hoisted Rafael’s body and held it over his shoulder; thought that maybe he intended to dump it into the bushes below.

“Take him someplace where he’ll never be found. Don’t worry.” He staggered out onto the patio, and launched himself into the night. Maria stood for a long time on the patio, looking up in amazement at the dark sky where he’d gone.

Chapter 12

Eli had showered and was drying the bottom of the tub with a towel when he got back to their apartment on Skäftingebacken. He had beaten the sunrise by fifteen minutes.

“I was starting to worry about you,” she said warmly as he stood in the bathroom doorway and began to strip off his sopping-wet clothes. She offered him a towel as he pulled off his shirt, then leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

He deliberately beat her to the punch for the evening’s report. “So, how did things go tonight?”

“Mmm . . . okay. I found someone--a drunk. Over near Vällingby. It was easy, and he didn’t suffer much, I think.” She sat down on the toilet as he threw his pants up over the bathroom door.

“Did you just take a little, or”

“No. All of it. It happened outside, and I was too hungry to try something else.” She looked down at her naked feet. “How about you? Did everything go all right?”

“Well . . . not exactly. Things got kinda complicated.”

She looked up and gave him a worried look. “Oh?”

“Yeah.”

On his way back from the Mälaren River where he’d dumped Rafael’s body, he had thought about how he was going to explain everything. He had tried to figure out a way to tell the story so that she wouldn’t think he’d just chickened out when it came to Maria, but in the end he couldn’t think of a convincing way to stretch things that would make any sense. So he just told her the whole story from start to finish, watching her face carefully as he talked. At times he had read concern, confusion, and even suppressed amusement.

She was silent for awhile after he finished. Then she got up, threw a blanket into the tub, and laid down on it. “Come on. It’s time for bed.” She looked up at him expectantly.

He gave her a puzzled look, then switched off the light and climbed in behind her. “Aren’t you going to say anything?”

She sighed. “It’s all right, Oskar. It’s not the greatest situation, but we’ll just have to deal with it.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“Not really. I was afraid maybe you weren’t ready yet, but I wanted to give you the chance. I told you before, not everything turns out perfectly.”

He swallowed and clasped her to himself. “Well, the thing is, Eli . . . I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready to hurt someone like this lady. I just—with that guy, it was easy, because he was bad and was going to hurt her. But with her, by the time I was ready to do it, I knew her too well. And I—”

“Oskar, it’s all right.” She turned her head and kissed him. “I’m never going to tell you what to do about this sort of thing. It’s not my place—I have no right. It’s . . . it’s bad enough that I’m responsible for what you are. We’ll just . . . we’ll have to be more careful who we pick, that’s all.”

An enormous feeling of relief swept through him, and he was silent for awhile, grateful for her understanding. He kissed the back of her head and said thanks. She murmured her assent and wriggled closer to him. Then he began to feel drowsy, and with his eyes closed, spoke softly into her ear. “So what do we do about Maria?”

“You made a promise—we’ll have to keep it. But then I think we should move.”

Before he could reply, his mind disengaged, and Oskar fell asleep.

4 AUGUST 1983

Maria had not even tried to go back to bed. She had cleaned up the rest of her apartment, made sure all the doors were locked, blinded all the windows, and turned on all the lights. Then she had sat down on the couch, stared at the drapes covering the patio door, and thought about everything that had happened.

She had met a vampire. Just saying it to herself felt ludicrous. If it hadn’t been for the cracked glass over her framed picture of David, she felt as though it might have all been a bizarre dream.

Oskar. A boy who didn’t think of himself as a vampire; who wished he wasn’t. She couldn’t keep her mind off him, or all of the incredible things that had happened in such a short time.

Like how she had been talked into letting him into her apartment; something she'd never done for any stranger. You couldn't be too careful these days, especially when you were a single woman, living alone. But she had done it without a second thought. Why? Was it because he had looked so sad, but . . . yes, *beautiful*—at the same time? She was uncomfortable thinking about a 12-year-old boy this way, but somehow it seemed true.

And after he'd killed Rafael and they had warmed to one another, she had touched his back. His skin . . . how it had changed like that, healed so quickly; and it had been so pale, soft, and smooth—like the skin of a newborn. Her mind kept returning, over and over, to these details.

And then to learn that this boy Oskar was with someone else; someone he was worried about, whom he'd referred to as "her." A *girl* vampire, then? There were *two* of them? And they were coming back tonight, to make sure she was safe, to protect her from Miguel. It all seemed unreal. A *child* was coming to protect her. He had seemed so sincere, but what if he had just been . . . toying with her? What if he had just tricked her so he could come back when he was hungry again? So both of them could . . .

She shuddered. She couldn't believe that. He had been in her room before Rafael came, but had run away, had tried to leave in a panic. Was it just because the lights had come back on, that he had stopped? The thought of him doing to her what he'd done to Rafael paralyzed her with fear. And to think she'd actually tried to keep him from leaving! But he *did* seem sincere when he'd confessed his intentions.

She drifted off into an uneasy sleep, then woke up with a start. She barely had enough time to get dressed and make it to her first class, and she passed the day in a distracted daze, not really listening to the lectures, her notes haphazard and disorganized. She deliberately kept away from the few people she knew during her classes, afraid that if she were drawn into conversation, she wouldn't be able to keep her mouth closed. It was very hard because she felt an incredibly strong urge to tell someone about everything—after all, it was the most momentous thing that had ever happened to her.

At times she thought of the people she might be able to tell; someone who might actually believe her. Maybe Marta, her best friend. But the fact that she would have to explain Rafael's slaying in her apartment, and her involvement in that, as well as the promise she'd made to Oskar, kept her from doing anything.

When she got back in the afternoon, the light on her answering machine was blinking. With trepidation she pressed the flashing red button. As she feared, it was Rafael's younger, tougher brother. She'd heard from one of the other girls that Miguel had been charged with murder in Salamanca, but had somehow beaten the rap. And she'd heard other things, too; that he was involved in a lot more than prostitution. Drugs, guns . . .

Usually, his speech was smooth and darkly sensuous; now it just sounded worried. "Hey Maria, this is Miguel. Have you seen Rafael? He hasn't called, and I've been looking for him all morning. Call me, will you?"

Hesitantly, she dialed his number and waited for him to pick up. Did he know that Rafael had come to see her?

“Yeah.”

“Miguel?”

“Maria—hey. Hey, listen—you seen Rafael? He’s missing. Stella hasn’t seen him all day.”

She tried to sound surprised. “Missing? What do you mean? I saw him last night.”

“When did you see him?”

“It was late.” Best to stick as close to the truth as possible. “He, um, he came to my apartment because I forgot to pay him.”

“What do you mean, you forgot to pay him?”

She adopted a self-embarrassed tone. “I ran into this little boy on the street on the way home, looking for his mom. I took him inside so he could make a call. And I just forgot, that’s all.”

He laughed cynically. “What—you going soft in the head, Maria? So he came and you paid him?”

“Yeah.”

“And then what’d he do?”

“He left.”

“What time?”

“It was after 2 a.m., I think.”

“Say where he was going?”

“No.” For effect, she added: “Does he ever?”

There was a pause; a pause that drew out sufficiently long that she felt compelled to fill it. “Are you sure he hasn’t been picked up for something?”

“No, he’s been clean lately. And he hasn’t called.”

“Well I don’t know, Miguel. I paid him and he left.”

Miguel grunted. “Shit. Well, if it was after 2 then you were the last one to see him. Are you working tonight?”

“I . . . I can’t, Miguel. Not tonight.”

“Well call me when you’re ready. You got my number.”

She agreed and hung up. Her hands trembled, but she felt a glimmer of hope. Maybe she could see her way clear of this. But what would she tell Oskar and his friend?

†

Kurt parked his car, got out, and headed toward the stairwell that led to the apartment where John Doe had been killed—75 Ibsengatan. Staffan Rydberg stood in the bright, crisp sunshine, waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs in a freshly pressed uniform.

“Good afternoon, I’m Detective Magnusson.” He thrust out a hand. “Officer Rydberg?”

The man transferred a large yellow envelope from his right hand to his left and then shook Kurt’s hand forcefully. “Good afternoon, detective. Yes, I’m Staffan—Vällingby Police. How are you?”

“Oh, not bad, not bad. Please, call me Kurt. So this is it, huh?” He looked up the stairwell, trying to see the door to the apartment.

“Yes. And here are the photographs you requested.” He handed the envelope to Kurt.

They talked further as they began to ascend the stairs together. “Thanks for taking the time to meet me here. I had planned to just get the photos, but your idea to come here was good. I’m surprised you were able to get ahold of the landlord on such short notice.”

“Not a problem. I got to know him a bit during the first investigation. And he said that the tenant who lives here now works in Stockholm during the day, so the timing worked out fine. So I understand you’re working on that thing in Tyresta?”

Kurt nodded, then related some of the details about Christensen’s death and explained how the trauma was similar to what had happened to Joakim Bengtsson and the John Doe. Staffan agreed that they seemed remarkably similar. Then he produced the landlord’s key and unlocked the door.

The door creaked as they pushed it open and stepped into the foyer. “So the tenant used a false I.D. and the rental agent couldn’t remember what he looked like, right?”

“That’s right. Just remembered him being a white, middle-aged man.”

“And none of the neighbors knew anything?”

“Nope. The guy was apparently pretty reclusive.”

“And lived alone?”

“As far as we know.”

Kurt snapped on the hall light. “The bathroom is--”

“. . . over there.” Staffan motioned to their left, and together they went down the short hallway to the door. Staffan reached in and switched on the light. Then Kurt stepped in and Staffan explained how Doe’s body had been found lying on the floor.

Kurt grunted. “Where was the knife recovered?”

“Under the sink, opposite the toilet.”

Kurt took the photographs out and began to look through them, occasionally glancing up and around the tiny room. Then he looked at Staffan.

“There’s really no question that a child was involved in our case, and in the Bengtsson case. Because they had similar injuries to their chest wall and ribs, we’ve been thinking that both of them, and probably your John Doe here, were killed by two people: a ten or eleven-year-old, and a big man who restrained them while the child inflicted the fatal neck injuries. Plus, we figure whoever is twisting the necks of these guys must have a lot of upper body strength. A ten-year-old would not have the ability to restrain a big fellow like your Doe here, and certainly not Christensen, let alone break their necks like that. You agree?”

“That would make sense.”

“And there’s no doubt in your mind that Doe was killed in the bathroom, right?”

“All the blood was here. And you can see in one of the photos that he grabbed the doorjamb during the assault. There was blood on the jamb and a splatter pattern outside the bathroom.”

“So this big fellow, maybe your mystery tenant, grabs Doe from behind while somebody, perhaps a child, is literally tearing open his throat.”

“Well, we’re assuming that those things are going on at the same time, but yes.”

Kurt nodded. “Right. But how the hell could all of that happened in this little tiny room?” He scratched his head as he looked slowly around the bathroom. “I mean, the assailant would’ve had to have been standing in the tub, right? There’s almost no other space, is there?”

Staffan raised an eyebrow; he hadn't thought of that before. "Yeah, seems logical."

"So Doe comes into the bathroom with his knife for some reason, and is surprised by a guy built like a sumo wrestler, hiding in the tub behind a shower curtain? Who grabs him from behind?"

Staffan nodded.

"Well where's the fucking shower curtain?"

Staffan blinked and began to feel uncomfortable. "There wasn't any. But maybe the tenant took it with him when he cleared out."

"Staffan, there's not even any *rod* in the photos." Kurt handed them to him. "How many people take the damn shower curtain *rod* when they leave?"

"I can't think of anyone."

"So how on God's earth could this guy have surprised your John Doe? Unless he wandered into here with his knife while it was so dark that he couldn't see anything."

"That seems unlikely."

"It sure does. Something doesn't make sense here, but I'll be damned if I can figure it out."

†

Eli awoke before Oskar. She could tell he was still sound asleep from the soft rumbling from his chest that vibrated through her back.

She smiled to herself. How strange--that she had lived for so long, yet had never realized that she made such a sound until after she had turned Oskar. A mysterious fact about herself, only now revealed. But she supposed it was like snoring . . . the people who snored never heard themselves, did they?

They were bemused by their "purring," and had discussed it on more than one occasion. Her sounds reminded him of a kitten. His reminded her of a tomcat that had taken up residence with her family when she had lived near Norrköping, a big mouser they'd named Jeppe Rättdödare. Jeppe used to climb into Eli's bed at night and sleep on her pillow; sometimes right on top of her head. He had made the same kind of rumble that Oskar was making right now. Eli loved it.

Oskar. She clasped his hand to her chest, happy just to hold it, but worried. She had known something like last night would happen. Maybe not so soon, but eventually. She

hadn't been the least bit surprised when he'd told her about Maria. And although what he had done was dangerous, she was not truly disappointed in him. Because Oskar was . . . well, Oskar was *Oskar*.

When she had first met him, he had been struggling to preserve an inner goodness. Not that he was a saint—no, that wasn't the point. He'd told her that he liked to steal things, that he lied to his mom, that he ate too much candy, and that he liked to read dark, violent books. And sometimes he could be thoughtless and cruel, even to her.

But truth be told, what Oskar did was a reaction to the things going on around him, not because he really enjoyed being bad. She figured that if he had gotten along better with his mother, had a more caring father, and hadn't always been picked on at school, he probably would not have had so many bad habits. He would have been more like the Oskar who opened himself up to her, the boy who had chosen to love her so completely, so unconditionally. From how he had acted toward her, she knew that behind those walls he threw up to protect himself from the world, he was a naturally kind, intelligent person who was caught up in bad circumstances; who was trapped in a life that was killing him, day by day. He had been struggling to find a way out of that life, seeking some pathway to an understanding of himself that allowed him to keep his basic core of humanity.

That had been her story, too. And that, she now realized, was what had brought them together. It was at the heart of what they shared; it was what bound them together. It had taken her a long time to understand this.

For these reasons, she could not become too upset with Oskar for what had happened. Through no fault of his own—unless falling in love was a fault—he had become like her. She was the one responsible for that. He had forgiven her for her mistake, which was amazing in and of itself. And after a slow start, he was making an effort to do what was necessary to survive.

But she understood intuitively that she couldn't push him too hard. If she did, she would upset his inner equilibrium and perhaps turn him into the kind of person who could never have fallen in love with her in the first place. And she simply could not do that to him—could not bear to destroy that part of him that he was still struggling to preserve. For in truth, the fight to reclaim a life was what *she* was doing, too, and his love for her had gone further than anything else in more than 200 years to make her feel like a real *person* again. So she knew she was just going to have to deal with it. Dealing with it was the price she had to pay for his love. She accepted this.

What did this mean, though, for their survival? If they hunted together all of the time, then she could make the hard choices. If he were more or less along for the ride, would it be easier for him to simply accept her choices? What if they tried that for awhile, and even then he balked at doing what was necessary? What if he began to demand that they feed only on people he thought somehow deserved to die? Could they really find that many “bad” people, and live off them alone? She doubted it, and the thought worried her

terribly. It would greatly limit their choices, and would eventually force them to do things that would increase the risk of being caught.

She shifted uneasily in the tub and thought about getting up, then decided to stay a little longer and enjoy Oskar's embrace. So he had spared this Maria's life; and not only that, had revealed himself to her in a way that the woman could not possibly ignore or explain away. This, Eli understood, made her *very* dangerous. Because someone who truly understood what they were would be strongly tempted to tell someone else. The urge to share such knowledge might be almost irresistible . . . unless it was counterbalanced by dire consequences.

So the question was: how trustworthy *was* she?

She had told Oskar that she was a prostitute. Apparently, from the sound of it, she was a student by day and a hooker by night. Eli had met a few prostitutes in her time, and understood some things about them. What worried her most was that prostitutes were generally vulnerable, downtrodden people. They usually were not in control of their circumstances; in fact, the opposite was true. That meant that if the right kind of coercion were applied, Maria would probably tell on them in a heartbeat to save herself or the life of someone she loved, like her son. For Oskar's sake, Eli hoped this wasn't true; that maybe, Maria was another kind of person—but she doubted it.

So she wanted to meet this prostitute, this Maria. Oskar's promise to her gave Eli the perfect opportunity for such a meeting. And when she saw Maria tonight, she would take her measure, and decide just how far she could be trusted. And if she did not measure up, well . . . Eli would cross that bridge when she came to it. But no matter what she had to do, she would protect Oskar. And even if the worst thing came to pass, it might end up being best for Oskar—because, Eli had come to realize, maybe too much love could kill someone just as easily as too much hate. Maybe a lesson from the school of hard knocks, even if it seemed bitter at the time, would help him in the long run if he could forgive her, if it didn't drive him away. She wasn't sure.

But . . . could she really *kill* Maria? Oskar had told her that she had a little boy. What had Eli told him? *No pregnant women, little kids, or mothers.* Those were her own words. Did they *mean* anything? And what if Maria proved herself trustworthy? If she . . . accepted them, maybe offered to help? She could make their life easier in many ways. But oh, this was *so* dangerous . . .

Eli twisted restlessly in the tub. She no longer wanted to think about Maria. She was tired. Tired of having to make choices like this; of forever having to decide who should live and who should die. Tired of being the bad guy.

It suddenly struck her how strange it was: a year ago, she had been dead inside and the choices were easy. Now, Oskar's love had brought her to life, and the choices were hard. Why couldn't anything be simple and easy? Why did her life with Oskar always have to be so complicated and scary? She wanted to just crawl off into a hole somewhere with Oskar

and be alone. Away from everyone; away from the world. To a place where no choices were necessary, somewhere where they could just live and be happy—like the night they had shared each other and she had gone to his birthday party. But even though it had seemed real, that place didn't really exist. That would be escaping into the past, into nothing but memories. The only *real* place that existed without worry and fear was death, and she feared that almost as much as she feared losing Oskar.

But what had Oskar said when they were digging that man's grave? That he wanted answers, wanted to know how their curse had started, so perhaps they could find a way to undo it. He wanted to look for something secret, something that would change things. She had felt tempted to scoff at the notion, but . . . was there something hidden that could save them, something she had overlooked? She wanted to believe it, but the thought of going back to Norrköping to investigate whatever remained of the vampire lord's castle frightened her deeply. So many bad things had happened to her there . . . could she be strong for Oskar?



Maria poured the instant rice out of the slim, small box into the saucepan. The leftover half breast of chicken sat wrapped in plastic on the counter, waiting for her to put it in the microwave and then slice up to put over her rice. None of it looked appealing; she just wasn't that hungry.

Her afternoon had been filled with worry; she felt like a target, a sitting duck. Who would come first—Miguel or Oskar? And who would be the most dangerous?

Earlier, after her phone call with Miguel, Maria had thought about going over to Marta's. She could tell her that she just wanted to visit for awhile, and thereby duck the whole thing. She had actually called Marta, but when she got her answering machine, she'd hung up without leaving a message. In the middle of her call Maria had realized that going to Marta's would only postpone things, and could potentially endanger her life, too.

She was filling a measuring cup with water from the kitchen faucet when she heard the sound that she'd been thinking about all day: a soft rapping on the sliding glass door of her patio. It was almost 9:30 p.m.

The blue plastic cup trembled in her hand as she shut off the faucet and poured the water into the sink. Why was she so scared? She knew who it had to be: her preteen vampire-savior. Only someone who could fly could knock on a door that was fifteen feet above the ground.

She left her saucepan on the stove and went to the patio door; pulled the drapes back. There Oskar stood, and behind him, another child whom she could not see as well in the shadows. The pitter-patter of her heart steadied once she saw the calm, expectant smile on Oskar's upturned face. How could she have doubted his intentions?

“May I come in?”

She suddenly understood—he hadn’t been being polite the first time. They needed an invitation, just like in those old vampire movies. If she didn’t invite them in, they couldn’t hurt her.

She looked from Oskar to the one behind him, Oskar’s friend, whom she saw more clearly now. She was shorter than Oskar; a slender, prepubescent girl with dark hair and dark eyes. Their eyes met, but the girl’s round, pale face gave away only nonchalant expectancy, nothing more. Her expression was completely neutral; Maria could detect neither hostility nor friendliness. But she met Maria’s eyes with a steady, untroubled gaze that was very much that of an adult, not a child.

She had to think quickly. She considered just talking with them through the patio door, but she was afraid this would make her seem distrustful to Oskar, and damage whatever sort of bond she had formed with him, so she rejected the idea. She reached for the door handle, flipped the lock switch, and began to slid it open. Then an idea came to her.

The door was open about ten centimeters when she paused. “I’ll let you in if you promise not to hurt me.”

Oskar raised his eyebrows, clearly surprised. The girl said nothing, but Maria saw the reaction in her face—a flash of consternation. She had not been expecting this.

She suddenly remembered the oath that Oskar had extracted from her about promising not to tell anyone about him. It had seemed sort of childish to Maria at the time, but he had obviously respected the concept. So she added, “You have to swear you won’t hurt me.” Oskar turned and looked over his shoulder at Eli with an open expression, clearly wondering whether there was any issue.

Eli was frustrated and impressed at the same time. The woman had been smart enough to understand the need for an invitation, and had not carelessly discarded her one, true protection. Then she had cleverly offered a conditional invitation. If they accepted the invitation with no intention of honoring the condition, they would be unable to enter without bleeding. And likewise, if Eli swore in good faith now but changed her intention while inside, she would bleed as well. Of course, they could run around to the front door, where Oskar had already been invited, but if they did so, the message would be obvious: Oskar’s friend cannot be trusted. If only they hadn’t been so worried about being seen inside the apartment building . . .

Eli couldn’t blame Maria for demanding a promise; after all, she had seen what Oskar did to Rafael. She felt a grudging respect for her—whatever else she was, she wasn’t stupid. Eli would have to accept her terms to have any meaningful conversation with Maria, and right now, a meaningful conversation was what she wanted. So she looked Maria in the eye and said, “I swear I will not hurt you.” Then she nudged Oskar. He jumped a little, clearly

uncertain about what was going on. Then he turned back to the door and said, “Oh yeah—sure. I swear too—I won’t hurt you. Come on, Maria, what’s all this about?”

Maria rolled the door back, and the two of them stepped inside.

†

Miguel downshifted his Porsche 911 into third, pulled around a truck, and thrust his hand out to Stella. “Give me some of that, will you?”

Stella took another swig, then handed the bottle of Explorer to him. He drank deeply, then belched. “Fuck. This is bullshit—I’ve got such a headache. When I get my hands on Rafael, I’ll kill him.” The streetlights glinted off the deeply polished maroon exterior of his most prized possession as he gunned it to scoot around the truck, continuing their westward journey on E18.

Stella took the final drag off her HB and flicked it out her window, then immediately took another from the inside pocket of her jacket and began to talk from the side of her mouth as she lit up. “Shut the fuck up, Miguel—you’re such a *pussy*. I took most of the calls today, not you.” Her short, red hair blew around her head in a tangled mess which Miguel found very sexy, and he glanced over at her, taking it all in: the heavy gloss over her full, sensuous lips; lots of eyeshadow; a thick, cord-like gold chain from Rafael that was so long, it disappeared into her cleavage; legs wrapped up in tight, designer jeans that seemed to go on forever. Hell, she wasn’t even wearing a shirt under her jacket—just a black, lacy bra. How was *that* for self-confidence? And she had not an ounce of fat except where it was best put to use, so she could afford to be confident. Miguel put the vodka between his thighs and reluctantly turned his attention back to the road. The things he’d do to her, if only she wasn’t Rafael’s bitch . . .

Ordinarily he would not have tolerated her mouth, but right now he was too distracted about where the hell his brother had gone to make anything of it. Rafael could be irresponsible sometimes, but business was business. He’d never just up and disappeared like this before.

The whole day had been one long pain in the ass, spent mostly on the phone trying to track him down. And she was right, he had shoved a lot of the calls from tonight’s customers off on her. Big deal. So she’d missed a day of shopping downtown like usual, blowing all of Rafael’s money on expensive clothes and shoes, like those fucking heels she was wearing now. How do women *walk* in those things, he wondered? But they did make her legs look great, he had to admit.

She blew a lungful of smoke out the window and looked at him. “So Maria decided to have a quickie with some street kid and forgot to give Rafa his cut, huh?” She laughed harshly. “That sounds like her.”

Miguel chuckled at the images her comment brought to mind. “Yeah. Well, I don’t know if the kid actually got lucky—she said he needed to call his mommy—but who knows with that broad? She’d put out for just about anything.”

“Even for *you*,” she jabbed. Before he could respond, she asked, “You’re sure she’s the last one who saw him? Otherwise, we’re wasting our time going over there.”

There was a pause as Miguel debated making a retort to Stella’s insult. Finally he just replied sullenly, “Yeah, I’m sure.”

“When you talked to her this afternoon, did you ask her see if Rafa’s car was parked anywhere nearby?”

Miguel hesitated; he hadn’t thought about this. “No.”

“Why not?” Her voice was full of mocking condescension. “You’re so fucking stupid, *Miguelito*.”

He glared at her, the anger boiling up to the surface. He thought about the H&K P7 snuggled up against his tailbone, and about how good it would feel to pull it out right now and drill a round right into that bitchy face of hers. Maybe into her eye, or in the middle of her forehead. Just seeing the shocked expression before her brains blew out the back of her head would almost make cleaning up the leather upholstery worth it.

“Shut up, Stella,” he growled. “We’ll look for his car when we get there.”

†

Verner Hallberg and Martin Lundgren trotted up the steps of the Stockholm Police Station on Kungsholmen and went through the big double doors, heading for Kurt’s office.

“. . . yeah,” Martin replied. “I don’t think the chief was too happy to hear what Kurt had to say.”

“Well who could blame him? You have to admit, it *does* sound bizarre.”

“I know. But the *facts* are bizarre, Verner.”

“You’re right about that. And when you fellas hear what I’ve found out, you’re going to think they’re even stranger.”

Martin was secretly upset that Verner had taken so long to get the information Kurt wanted. He didn’t like anything that put Magnusson in a foul mood, especially not when the heat was on to try and solve a murder.

He glanced at the older man and saw him puffing a little to keep up with Martin's brisk stride. Well, old Vern was slowing down a little; he was only a year or two from retirement. He'd been bald for years, and had tried to compensate for his shining pate by growing a big, bushy mustache that he didn't do a very good job of keeping trimmed. He'd put on a little weight, too. Maybe he just didn't care anymore.

Martin and Hallberg passed through Martin's office, and then Martin pushed Magnusson's door open and stuck his head inside. "Kurt, you got a minute?"

Kurt barely looked up from the papers on his desk. He had the overhead fluorescents off and was reading from his desk lamp, which cast a warm, mellow glow in the center of Kurt's sturdy old desk and lit up the soft, fatherly features of his downturned face. Kurt waved with one hand. "Yep, come on in."

Martin sat down in one of the matching mahogany office chairs opposite Kurt's desk. Hallberg put a couple of files on top of a tottering stack of papers on one corner of the desk and then sat down as well.

Kurt put his pencil down and looked up at Verner. "Watcha got for me, Vern?"

"Kurt, there were 15 homicides last year in the Stockholm area. Nine were solved, and six were not. Three of those six were known to involve children."

Kurt looked at him, then past him, with a puzzled expression; then he rubbed his chin. "Oh yeah . . . those bathhouse slayings." He shot a look at Lundgren. "*Jesus*, Martin, why the hell didn't we *remember* those?"

Martin looked at him, his mouth half-open. Well, it wasn't the first time he'd been caught flat-footed. "I dunno, boss," he replied sheepishly. "I just didn't make the connection, I guess."

"Yeah—me neither. *Shit*." Kurt disgustedly picked up the top folder and began reviewing its contents. "Well give us the details, will you, Vern?"

"The murders happened on November 12, 1982. Jimmy Forsberg, his younger—"

"Hang on. November 12th? That was . . . shit, Martin, that was only three days after the John Doe got killed." Kurt reached for a cigarette; he needed one right now.

Martin nodded in agreement. Then Verner continued.

"Anyway, the victims were Jim Forsberg, his brother Conny, and Martin Ahlstedt, a friend of Conny's. All of them were killed at the side of the pool in less than a minute by—get this—a flying black-haired angel with teeth.' This 'angel' tore the heads off two of the kids, and broke the other one's back. Then it pulled a boy named Oskar Eriksson out of the pool and the two of them disappeared. They haven't been seen since."

The incredible story Hallberg had just related hung in the air, defying any of them to make sense of it.

There was a click from Kurt's lighter as he lit up. He drew deeply, then exhaled at the ceiling. "The *teeth*, Martin—for Chrissakes." He slapped the top of his desk with the palm of his hand. "I really should resign right now, to have forgotten *that* detail."

"Come on, Kurt," Martin remonstrated. "We've been working on a lot of crap since that all went down. Cut us a little break, will you?"

Kurt looked down once again at the paper. "This is just a summary. Who carried the ball on the investigation?"

"A constable named Gunnar Holmberg. And I've already called him to schedule a meeting with you tomorrow morning."

"Excellent. Were any of the victims bitten?"

"The M.E. thinks that the arm of the oldest kid—Jimmy—was bitten clean off at the elbow. They found it at the bottom of the pool."

Kurt shook his head . . . it was so hard to believe. "How big was this Oskar?"

"Ah, he's not your bear hugger, Kurt. Skinny kid, apparently a real wimp at school."

"How many witnesses were there?"

"Just one—another schoolkid. Scared out of his wits."

"I may want to talk to him personally, depending on how thorough the reports are."

Martin shook his head. "*Flying*. That kid *had* to be on drugs."

"Apparently not," Hallberg offered. "He gave them a urine sample and it was clean."

Kurt grunted. "Did they get a composite sketch of this flying angel?"

"No. The kid didn't see the face well enough."

Kurt grabbed the other folder and opened it. "Did you find anything out about vampire cults?"

"Very little," Hallberg replied. "There are no reports of any such cults in or around Stockholm. But as you'll see, I did find one thing: in 1932, a prostitute was found

murdered in her apartment in the Atlas area near Sankt Eriksplan. Someone crushed her skull and drank her blood. The murder was never solved.”

Kurt studied Hallberg’s notes for a moment, then looked up at them. “Well, I don’t know who killed the girl over in Atlas, but whoever he was, he’d probably be in his ’70s by now, and the one we’re dealing with makes him look like a piker.

“Gentlemen, we’ve got six homicides in less than a year: five of them in or near Blackeberg, and this most recent one less than 20 kilometers away in Tyresta. I believe the flying angel, whatever he, she, or it turns out to be, is our prime suspect in Christensen’s death, and that this person is working with an accomplice, although I am less certain about that than I was a few days ago, now that I’ve seen the inside of the apartment where the John Doe was found. Speaking of which, Martin, did you find out the name of the funeral home for Bengtsson, and give them a call? And check the missing person reports like I asked?”

“Yes. Vasastans handled Bengtsson’s services; I called them and as it turns out, a couple of guys split the cost of the burial: Morgan Sundquist and Lacke Sorensson. Now here’s the missing person reports from last November and December.” He handed some sheets across the desk. “Look at the fifth one.”

Kurt’s eyes scanned down the documents; then he raised his eyebrows. “I’ll be goddamned. Lacke Sorensson, reported by Larry Wiese and Morgan Sundquist as missing on Friday, November 12.” He looked up at Martin. “You, sir, have just redeemed yourself.”

Martin smiled.

†

Oskar wandered in, looked around the living room/kitchenette for a few seconds, and then sat down on the couch. The girl immediately sat down in the chair closest to the patio door. Maria noticed that she was wearing a thin, pink sweater that had a hole in the top, near the seam at one shoulder, and black sweatpants, knotted with a shoelace.

Maria began to slide the patio door closed when the girl looked back over her shoulder at her with her big eyes and spoke up. “You can leave that open, please. If you could just pull the drapes?” Maria hesitated for a second, but then complied. Then she sat down on the couch. Oskar pulled his legs up, indian-style, and half turned so he could look at Maria and Eli at the same time. “Umm, Maria, this is my friend, Eli. Eli, this is Maria.”

They exchanged polite ‘hellos,’ and for the first time Maria got a good, clear look at Eli’s face. She immediately understood how Oskar might have fallen for her. Eli was the most beautiful child she had ever seen. Her face was perfectly proportioned; her skin, delicate and flawless. Maria knew just by looking at it that if she were to touch it, it would feel velvety-soft, like Oskar’s. Her nose was well-proportioned, neither too big nor too small,

and her eyes, now looking at Maria so intently, were a mysterious mixture of brown and hazel.

“Do the two of you have last names?”

Eli answered. “We have each other, so we don’t need last names.”

Oskar looked at Eli and grinned. “Yeah, she’s always just been ‘Eli’ to me, pretty much.” Then he looked back at Maria, eager to get down to business. “Maria, did you hear from Miguel? Do you think he knows what’s going on?”

“He called and I spoke with him this afternoon. I told him that I saw Rafael last night when he came over here, looking for his money that I’d forgotten to pay him because of what happened with you.”

“What did he say? Was he suspicious?”

“Miguel is *always* suspicious, Oskar, and a little hard to read. I don’t know him very well, but he may be kind of unpredictable. But no, he did not seem overly suspicious, although he does know that I’m the last one who saw Rafael alive.”

Eli spoke. “What does he look like?”

“He’s in his late 30’s, sort of medium height, I guess. Not tall; not skinny or fat. He looks a lot like Rafael, Oskar, if you can remember. Black hair, brown eyes. He keeps his hair cut real short, and it’s curly. And he has sort of a ‘fu manchu’ moustache—if you know what I mean.”

Oskar looked perplexed. “Fu Manchu?”

Maria smiled for the first time during their meeting, then motioned with her fingers on her face. “You know—it goes down either side of his mouth and then makes a little beard.”

Eli looked at Oskar and also gave him a small smile before looking back to Maria. “Did he threaten you?”

“No.”

“Did he say he was coming here?”

“No.”

“Do you think he will?”

“It’s hard to say with him. But he might.”

Eli thought for a minute, and then said, “How did Rafael get here?”

Maria froze, looked uncertain. “I—I don’t know. But he probably drove.”

“So his car is probably parked nearby?”

Now Maria looked scared. “Yes. *Shit!*” She stood up and began to pace around the room. “If Miguel finds his car, he’ll know that Rafael never left. And then he’ll—”

Oskar piped up. “Do you know what kind of car he drove?”

“Some little black car, it’s Japanese, a, a, Datsun Z-something. With two doors.”

Eli stood up. “I think we should go find his car, if we can.”

“Shit. Okay—yes. But what if we see Miguel on the street, or—”

Eli stood directly in front of Maria and took her hands into hers. Maria immediately calmed to her touch; then looked down into Eli’s upturned face. “Oskar and I will take care of Miguel; don’t worry about him. But we need to know that we don’t need to worry about you.”

“Worry about me?”

“Yes. How many people have you told about us already?”

“N—no one! I promised Oskar I wouldn’t!”

Eli continued to hold Maria’s hands; squeezed them lightly. She stared directly into Maria’s eyes. Oskar stopped breathing and stared apprehensively at the two of them. “How many people have you *thought about* telling?”

Maria faltered. “I . . . well, I thought about telling one person, but I didn’t.”

Oskar looked on, now clearly troubled. There was a pause. Eli shifted her hold on Maria’s hands to her wrists; applied pressure. “Maria, sit down.”

Maria’s face had gone slack, and as Oskar watched, she slowly sank to her knees, her eyes once again locked on Eli’s. When her bottom finally came to rest on her heels, Eli put her hands on Maria’s shoulders and looked down at her. Her voice was steady and even. “Maria, do you understand what we are?”

“Yes.” Her voice trembled with fear. “I think so. I mean, I saw what Oskar did.”

“Then you understand that we have needs. Needs that don’t sit very well with ordinary people.”

Maria appeared even more frightened; her eyes were huge and pleading. “Yes. You aren’t going to kill me, are you? Please don’t. You *swore*.”

“I don’t want to kill or even hurt anyone, Maria, including you. But Oskar and I are outcasts. We don’t fit in, and all we have is each other. So we do what we need to, to survive. Because we want to live, too. Just like you.”

“I promised Oskar I wouldn’t tell. And I haven’t.”

“But it’s only been a day, and you haven’t been able to think of anything else but Oskar, have you?”

Maria clearly did not want to answer the question, but finally she said, “Yes—you’re right. But it’s so strange, it’s just—he came in here, turned my life upside down like this, he killed Rafael right here in my living room, I—”

“Maria—”

“. . . look, I—”

“*Maria—*”

“. . . I didn’t *ask* for this.” She looked up into Eli’s face angrily, no longer frightened; glanced at Oskar. “He—Oskar, you told her, right?” She looked back at Eli. “He, he tricked me into thinking that his mom had abandoned him, left him on the street. I said he could come in and use my phone. I was trying to *help* him, for God’s sake. And all along, he was going to *kill* me. *Jesus*.”

Eli released Maria; then she, too, sank to her knees so that they were eye to eye. “Maria, I’m sorry that things happened that way; Oskar’s kind of new at this. But now that you know about us, you won’t be able to put us out of your mind, will you? Because we’re so different. And Oskar has told you a lot about us, hasn’t he?”

“Yes. Yes, he did, but—I’ll try as hard as I can to forget I ever met you. Honestly, I will, I *promise* I’ll never tell anyone. I don’t know what else I can say.”

Oskar got off the couch, came over and sat next to the two of them. “This is all *my* fault. For getting Maria involved. *Please*, Eli . . . let’s just help her with this Miguel guy, and then move like you said. Maria’s good—she won’t tell on us. Will you, Maria?” He looked back and forth from Eli’s face to Maria’s, his face pleading.

Maria looked at Oskar, then back to Eli. She sighed, then put her face in her hands before looking back up at Oskar. “This is so . . . Oskar, Eli is right. I came very close to telling a friend about you today.” She looked from Oskar to Eli. “Because you’re just so . . . the two of you are just so—*different* from anything I’ve ever experienced.” She took Oskar’s

hand into hers; caressed the back of it with her fingers. “You said that this is some sort of disease that the two of you have. And you came in here, planning to kill me, but you didn’t because I was nice to you. So I know there must be good in you, even if you are a vampire. And if you love Eli, here, then I know—” she looked at Eli—“that there must be good in her, too. And that’s really why I haven’t been able to get you out of my mind, even though you’re so scary. Because it seems like you are a nice person who is sort of . . . stuck. You told me that what happened to you was an accident.”

Oskar spoke softly. “Well, we can’t afford to have any more enemies, Maria. We could really use some help, actually.”

There was a pause. Eli held her breath—Maria’s answer would determine whether she lived or died.

“I could help you.”

Oskar looked up at her. “Really? You would?”

Hesitantly, Maria replied. “Y-yes. I don’t know how, but”

“But what about your husband and your son? David?”

Maria looked down. “I . . . I lied to you about that, Oskar. Well, I told you I’m a prostitute, so you know I’m not married. But about David . . . he’s not alive anymore.”

“Oh—sorry.” Oskar squeezed Maria’s hand. “What happened to him?”

Eli spoke. “*Oskar*”

“It’s okay.” Maria let go of Oskar and then sat cross-legged on the floor. Oskar and Eli sat down as well, the three of them forming a small circle.

“Four years ago I was an alcoholic and addicted to cocaine. I got pregnant with a man I didn’t know too well. I didn’t mean to, but it happened. And I had David. And when he was born . . .” she sniffed and looked away, “. . . he was very premature. And he was born with all kinds of problems. And when he was three days old, he had a really long seizure, one that they couldn’t stop with medicine. And he died.”

There was a long silence as Maria began to weep. Then Eli spoke. “I’m very, very sorry, Maria.”

“Yeah,” Oskar added. “I’m sorry, too. And I’m sorry if I upset you. I didn’t mean to.”

She wiped her eyes and her nose, and then offered Oskar a little smile. “It’s okay, Oskar. It’s just something that I have to live with, every day.” She looked at David’s picture on her table. “And I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to forgive myself for what I did. That was

pretty much . . . rock bottom for me; for my life. I've been trying to pick up the pieces ever since."

She looked at Oskar and Eli. "And I know I'm not perfect. I'm still doing things that are wrong. But at least after David died, I stopped the crack and the booze. I guess it took something like that to break my addictions. But I haven't touched a drop, or done any of that, ever since."

"So, you two. What could I possibly do to help you? I don't have any money. I don't have a car; what I own is what you see right here."

Eli and Oskar looked at each other. Oskar started to speak, but Eli squeezed his hand and shushed him.

"Here's the thing, Maria. We need to move soon. We're going to Norrköping to try and find a way to get rid of our disease. We'll need a place to stay, and that's hard because we're kids. We need a grown-up to sign a lease for an apartment. Would you be willing to do that? You don't need to stay with us or pay anything."

Oskar looked at Eli, wide-eyed. She hadn't told him about these plans. But he was impressed that she had remembered what he'd said in Tyresta. She hadn't forgotten. A happy thrill coursed through him—a little ray of hope that Eli was going to pitch in and try to find a way out of their dilemma. He felt the urge to kiss her, but didn't think it would be a good idea in front of Maria.

Maria didn't take long to answer. "Well that doesn't sound too hard. Do I have to use my own name?"

"No."

"Okay. When will we go?"

"This weekend?"

"Okay."

Eli stood up, took Oskar's hand, and pulled him up. "Good. It's settled. Now, let's go look for that car."

†

The speedometer hovered at 143 kph as Stella took the bottle back from Miguel, brushing his crotch with her fingers as she did so. As he glanced down and over at her to see what was brewing, they passed the Ursviksvägan exit. She looked at him, smiled seductively, and then took a swig. "Maybe you should slow down, Miguel. You just missed our exit."

Surprised, he quickly glanced out the windshield, then at his side view mirror, and finally craned his neck around to catch a glimpse of the rapidly receding sign. “Ah, fuck that,” he said, suppressing his frustration. “I’ll go to 279 and take that down to Bällstavägen. It’s faster that way.”

“Oh, *Miguel* . . . sometimes slower is *better*, know what I mean?” She shifted in her seat and stretched her legs as best she could. “Christ, this car is little—there’s no leg room. And it’s too hot. *God*.” She ran her window down and pulled off her jacket. Then she thrust her head out of the car and laughed into the wind. “Ah, this is better!”

He glanced over and down at her bra. He didn’t have to look very hard. They were there, all right; barely concealed by all that lace. *Shit, man . . . maybe Raf’s gone for good. Maybe that wouldn’t be so bad, after all.*

He looked back to the road and realized he was very close to running into the back of a moving van. His eyes widened and he quickly applied the brakes. The big Bembros worked very well—perhaps too well. Stella, who was not wearing her belt, was thrown forward, nearly hitting her head on the small window on the front of the door. The bottle of Explorer, which she’d been holding loosely between her legs, tipped forward, sloshing vodka down her jeans and onto the floor.

“*Jesus, Miguel! Watch your driving, you idiot!*”

He felt the urge to bellow at her at the top of his lungs, but didn’t. Instead, as his speed slipped down to 120, he swerved abruptly over to pass the van, throwing her against the door. She grunted as the wind was knocked out of her, and as she bounced back he grabbed her left breast and gave it a healthy squeeze. He grinned. “Sorry, Stella. Just got a little *distracted*.”

She righted the vodka, looked at him defiantly, and then threw the bottle out the window. “You *prick*. You keep your hands *off* me, or you’ll lose them. I *promise*.”

He looked over and gave her a malicious smile. “What’s the matter, Stella? Is the party over? I thought it had just begun.” Then all humor vanished from his face and he looked dead serious. “I’ll put my hands wherever I want—and Rafael won’t say a word. *I promise*.” He dragged over and took the exit, heading south on 279.

†

“Just a minute, Eli,” Oskar said as they began to leave Maria’s apartment. Maria and Eli turned to look at him as he paused, just inside the doorway. He looked Eli in the eye and said, “you can come in.” Eli said ‘oh yeah,’ and stepped back inside. Oskar looked at Maria and said, “Don’t worry; it’s just in case we run into Miguel and need to come back in here fast.” Maria looked at the two of them and said hesitantly, “do I need to do it, too?”

“Nope,” Oskar replied cheerfully. “One’s enough.” And before Maria could say anything more, they both stepped out into the hall and Oskar shut the door behind them. As the metal door thudded firmly closed, Maria realized, not for the first time that night, that her life was firmly in their hands. She trotted nervously after them toward the lobby, a third wheel to a pair of children.

They slowed when they reached the corner where the hallway intersected the lobby entrance, and Eli peered around to check for Miguel. The only person in the lobby was an elderly gentleman with a tweed cap perched jauntily on his head who tottered slowly toward them using a cane. He gave them a friendly ‘good evening’ as they passed him and came to the front door. There they paused, and Eli turned to Maria.

“Tell us more about what this car looks like.”

Maria tried to think. “Well like I said, it’s a black coupe—you know, a two-door. Like a little sports car. With silver wheels and stripes.”

“What color are the stripes?”

“Silver. No—gold, not silver. Gold.”

“Okay. We need to do the door thing again before we leave. And I think we should stick together—it’ll be safer that way. Maria, do you know what kind of car Miguel drives?”

“A Porsche. I think it’s called a Carrera.”

“I know what those look like,” Oskar said excitedly. “They’re really cool—and fast.”

“A ‘Carrera.’ I don’t know what that means, Oskar,” Eli replied. “And ‘fast’ doesn’t help me, either.”

Maria broke in gently. “It’s a sports car, too, Eli. It’s sort of a dark red color, like wine. Maroon.”

Once again Oskar and Eli repeated the invitation ritual, this time at the front door to the apartment building. Eli had just stepped inside when a young couple swung through the doors after her. “Hello! Excuse us,” they said as they brushed past.

Eli turned and spoke quietly but earnestly to Oskar. “Oskar, it looks like there’s a lot of people around here, so we need to be careful. No flying or anything crazy like that unless we absolutely have to, okay? Plus, we need to remember that we have to protect Maria, and she can’t do the things we can do. Remember, if we decide to run fast, she won’t be able to keep up. So just try to act normal, okay?”

Oskar nodded enthusiastically. “Okay. Got it.”

“Good.”

Eli turned to Maria. “Maria, you know this neighborhood better than we do, and you’ve seen these cars before. So can you take the lead? And if anyone asks, we’re your kids, okay?”

Maria tried to smile, despite her nervousness. “Okay—I’ll pretend I’m your mom. Looking at Oskar, no one would think twice, I think.”

They stepped out onto the sidewalk and looked up and down Tallgatan, scanning for Rafael’s car. The cool night air felt good on Maria’s face; it enlivened her senses, and helped her focus. She wondered why she hadn’t thought to look for Rafael’s car earlier, when it had still been light, but she knew why—because she had been in a daze the whole day. She had felt out of phase, as if she were living in a dreamworld. Rafael’s unbelievable death the night before; Oskar’s strangeness; her fear of Miguel; and just within the last hour, her fear of Eli—it was all too much. Even now events were moving too fast for her. She was behind the power curve, and was struggling to keep abreast of everything. If she had gone to Marta’s, would any of this be happening? She kept looking at Oskar, hoping she had been right to put her confidence in him. Somehow, she knew that he was now the key to her continued existence, and the thought frightened her in the extreme.

Oskar pointed to their right to a group of cars at the end of the block, clustered under a street light on the opposite side. “There’s a black car down there, but I can’t tell if it’s got two doors or four.”

Together they moved at a brisk clip down the street toward the cars. As they drew near, though, they realized that Oskar’s car was a sedan, so they kept going until they reached the corner, turned right, and headed northwest on Vintergatan. This time they saw nothing resembling Rafael’s car, but there was some traffic going past, and a few pedestrians as well.

Maria was not the only one who was nervous. Eli, too, felt very uncomfortable walking down the middle of the sidewalk, in full view of passersby and of the motorists trundling past. The shadows and dark places that they passed kept distracting her from looking for Rafael’s car. She wanted to take Oskar by the hand and run away into the darkness; flee into the blackness of the night that had always been her refuge. She wanted to abandon this troublesome woman, and leave her to her fate with Miguel. After all, she owed Maria nothing. But Maria could tell Miguel about them just as easily as she could tell her friend. Perhaps moreso, if Miguel did grow suspicious about Rafael’s recent disappearance and began to ask a lot of questions. Not that Miguel would be likely to believe such an outlandish story, but still . . .

An inner voice kept telling her that the safest, smartest thing to do would be to take Maria down as soon as there were no people around to see anything; just drag her behind a big bush and break her neck, swiftly and silently. She would not even feed on her; just kill her, and leave the body. But could she persuade Oskar afterwards that killing Maria had been the safest option for the two of them? After all, Maria had agreed to help them, and

signing a lease for them was no small thing. If only she knew Maria better; if only there was more time to spend with her, and find out just how trustworthy she was. The time in Maria's apartment had simply not been long enough for Eli to get a good read on who she was; on how far she would stick out her neck to help them. And now, here they were: running around out in the open, exposed for the whole world to see, to protect this woman they barely even knew. Eli didn't like it—not one bit.

Soon they reached the corner of Vintergatan and Råstensgatan. Maria intended to turn right and head up Råstensgatan, in order to circle the block before beginning a search of the side streets. A quick glance showed only a few cars parked along Råstensgatan, but before turning the corner, Eli announced that she could see something that might be Rafael's car further up on Vintergatan. Unfortunately, the cars were parked perpendicular to their line of sight, making them hard to see. Deciding to check it out, they crossed Råstensgatan toward the car, and Eli moved ahead to see better.

Oskar could tell how nervous Maria was from the way she was acting. She kept looking around everywhere, and practically jumped at each passing car. So he trotted up next to her, took her hand into his, and squeezed it gently. "Don't worry, Maria—Eli and I will be with you, in case there's any trouble." He looked solemnly up at her face. She felt a little better, and offered him a weak smile. "Thanks, Oskar."

Up ahead they heard Eli's excited voice. "I think this might be it!" Quickly, they caught up to her. Sure enough, she was approaching a small, black, two-door sports car. But as she began to circle it she said, "Wait a minute—I'm not sure . . . there's no stripes, and it says . . ." she looked up at them, "—it says 'Opel' on the back." Finally able to see the tiny car, Maria knew immediately that it wasn't Rafael's. They stared at it in frustration for a few moments, and then headed back toward Råstensgatan.

†

Miguel slowed the Porsche and turned left off Landsvägen onto Ekensbergsvägen, then crossed the bridge over the train tracks that served the Sundbyberg commuter rail station. The flat-six made a raucous, mechanical growl as they sped up past some office buildings and business parks, then burbled down as he approached the intersection with Grängsgatan, a major thoroughfare that would lead them into Sundbyberg's downtown area. He stopped behind a few cars at the intersection and put on his left turn signal.

Now that they were off the highway and close to their destination, the tension between them had dissipated. He felt calm and relaxed when he turned onto Grängsgatan and asked her if she remembered Maria's street address.

Stella savored the smoke in her lungs for a few seconds before exhaling. She had put her jacket back on and rolled up her window. "She lives down at the corner of Götgatan and Tallgatan. It's just a couple of blocks up, but you can't turn onto Tallgatan from here. You'll have to go up to the traffic circle and then come back down Götgatan."

“Fucking traffic engineers,” he muttered. “My mother could design a better road system. All these one-way streets, cut-offs, traffic circles—*shit*.”

†

Maria, Oskar and Eli turned the corner from Råstensgatan to Götgatan. They were now headed back toward Maria’s apartment building. Cars were parked all along both sides of Götgatan as they headed down the hill. Maria and Oskar both had a feeling of déjà vu as they approached the place of their initial encounter the night before.

Maria and Oskar spotted Rafael’s car at the same time. It was down at the far end of the block, at the corner of Götgatan and Tallgatan. Maria felt the terror rise up through her gorge. It had been parked just around the corner of her front door the whole time. If they had simply turned left instead of right when they’d first come out, they would have spotted it immediately. She began to run toward it, hoping against hope that if she could get a closer look, maybe it wouldn’t be his; that perhaps her eyes were deceiving her. But of course, the idea was ridiculous; there was no mistaking its glossy black exterior, or the gold stripes just above the rocker panels, or the brown and tan interior. She knew the inside of the car quite well, because Rafael had screwed her in it a year-and-a-half ago.

Oskar came up beside her, with Eli right behind. “This is it, right?” He looked at her, then at Eli. “Well . . . now what?” Eli was about ready to say that it would be a good idea to go back to Maria’s apartment when a small, maroon sports car entered her field of vision from the left.

†

“See anything?” Miguel asked.

“Not yet—slow down, will you? We’re almost there.”

He eased off the gas and continued to scan the street ahead. Christ—why did all of the apartment buildings in Stockholm have to look the same? The same old patterns, over and over—it was almost as if someone were deliberately trying to drive everyone who lived here insane. It was as if—

Stella’s excited voice interrupted his thoughts. “Hey! I see his car! It’s parked right outside Maria’s apartment!”

“Huh? Where?” He looked to his right. Sure enough, there it was. And—

“Hey . . . there’s Maria, too.”

Miguel slowed further and eased the Porsche over to stop alongside Rafael’s car. *What the hell*, he thought. *He’s been here with Maria the whole day? What . . . are they screwing each other or something? And why wouldn’t they tell him—*

He looked over at Stella, who was starting to open her door before he had even stopped the car. *Oh, shit.*

Oskar watched, wide-eyed, as an angry, red-haired woman jumped out of the Carrera and started to come around the rear of Rafael's car toward them. Who was *this?* He looked over at Maria—just in time to see her break and run.

The woman began to shout at them. “Maria, you *bitch!* Where is he? Where is that *bastard?!*” Oskar had never heard a woman sound so angry . . . she was *scary*. Without thinking, he, too, turned and ran after Maria.

Eli stood on the sidewalk for a few seconds, just watching. The driver of the car, whom she was certain was Miguel, got out and was standing by his door, chuckling for some reason as he watched the action. Then she focused her attention back to the red-haired woman—whoever *she* was—who was yelling at the top of her lungs. The woman was making too much noise; she would attract attention.

Eli's patience finally boiled over, and she felt a flash of red-hot anger. It was the same anger that she'd felt the night after she had turned Oskar, when he had told her to be quiet because the neighbors would hear; an anger at the whole world, at *people*. People like these: this noisy, obnoxious woman; Miguel, who was clearly some sort of slimeball; and at Maria, for getting them involved in this crazy, stupid mess. To hell with it—she didn't *care* who might be watching. She trembled with rage, let go, and allowed herself to be consumed by its flame. In the blurred half-second while she changed she saw Miguel getting back in his car—intending to park it?, and the woman running toward her, intent on pursuing Maria for God-knew-what, oblivious to her presence.

She launched herself at the red-haired woman, seized her forearm, and yanked her bodily up into the air as fast as she could. Stella abruptly stopped yelling, speechless and in shock, her body dangling below Eli as they rose like a shot fired from a cannon. And before she had a chance to say or do anything, Eli flung the woman with all her strength up into the cool night sky. They were already well over seventy-five meters in the air, and Eli's throw hurled the woman even higher for a few seconds before she descended in a graceful arc toward some high-rises to the northeast. There was a faint thud as the woman struck the eighth story of one of the tall buildings, bounced off its unyielding, concrete elevation, and plunged into the trees around its base.

Eli hovered, one hundred meters above Götgatan, angrily staring at the place where Stella's body had gone. There was a dark splotch where her body had struck the wall. She glanced down to see the traffic moving up and down the street as usual, seeming for all the world like just another summer night in suburban Stockholm. Then she turned and descended soundlessly to the rooftop of Maria's building.

Miguel was standing on the sidewalk beside his Porsche, which he had parked illegally in front of Rafael's car. Eli watched as he looked around, called the woman's name a couple

of times, and then walked rapidly toward the front of the building. He hadn't seen what had happened.

Eli moved as quietly as a cat around the roof to the front to see if Oskar and Maria were still outside, but they weren't. Miguel approached the entrance, and when a woman opened the door and left the building, he slipped inside. Eli thought about following him in, but then ran across the roof to the back side of the building. She quickly looked around and saw no one in the small, grassy plaza there. She liked it better back here because there were no streetlights, and she quickly descended a downspout, leapt onto Maria's patio, and went inside.

She found Oskar and Maria huddled in the hallway. They were as quiet as clams and were staring at the front door, obviously waiting for Stella to arrive. They were surprised to see Eli come into the living room behind them.

Oskar looked at her with his mouth open. "Eli! Where's that woman?"

"*Shh!* She's gone—don't worry. But Miguel is coming," Eli whispered. "You take Maria out through the patio door and down to that plaza behind the building. Find a place to hide and wait for me."

"What are you going to do?"

"Take care of *Miguel*. Now go on—*hurry*."

Oskar didn't like the look in Eli's eyes; there was something hard and dreadful in them. But there was no time to argue. "Okay. But be careful—*please*."

He gave Eli a kiss, and then he and Maria went out onto the living room patio. Oskar told her to grab onto his back; then he jumped up, and the two of them disappeared into the trees below. Eli shut the door behind them and pulled the drapes. Then she turned off the lights and unlocked the front door.

†

Miguel went down the hallway and approached Maria's apartment. He was beginning to feel a little confused. He had expected to see Stella yelling at Maria through a locked door, or to hear some shouting from inside the apartment as she confronted Rafael and let him have it for his infidelity. But there was nothing—not a sound.

He figured the door would be locked, so he pounded on it with his fist. "Maria? Stella? Rafael? Open the goddamn door." Then he tried the door, and to his surprise, the handle turned and the door popped open. And behind the door was . . . darkness.

For a second, he was certain that somehow he had the wrong apartment. He glanced at the door to be sure. Yes—it was the right number. He frowned. What the hell was going on? He heard no sound at all.

He flicked on the wall switch, and a little lamp sitting on a side table to his right came on. There was nobody in the room. Once again he called out their names, but there was no answer. Where the *fuck* had everyone *gone*?

A very unfamiliar sensation crept coldly up his spine. He had only felt this way two times in his life; both occasions had been drug deals that went bad, and people had been killed. Scary, scary shit; but he had survived. Quietly he shut the door behind him, reached back and pulled his H&K from its holster. The feel of its compact, heavy weight in his hand was comforting. He squeezed the handle to cock it, then moved around the corner to look into the kitchen.

There was nothing. But both doors—one to the bedroom, the other to a bathroom—were closed.

He stepped over to the bedroom door. Slowly he pushed down the handle with his left hand, then quickly swung the door open, reached inside, and flicked on the light. Empty. Only a bed, neatly made, and an open glass door to the bedroom patio, half concealed behind some drapes which swayed gently in the breeze. Wordlessly he shook his head.

None of this makes sense. It's obvious there's no one here—I should just leave. But he didn't. One more room in this tiny apartment to check; then he'd leave. He turned around and moved to the bathroom door, the one that opened onto the bedroom.

He opened it, once again with his left hand. It swung inward with a creak to reveal a toilet and a shower, nothing more. He groped around the doorjamb for a light switch, but found none. Well, he could see well enough with the bedroom light. He raised his gun, stepped into the bathroom, and yanked the shower curtain back. Nothing.

The bedroom light suddenly went out, plunging him into shadow. Instantly he spun around.

A girl was standing, buck-naked, at the foot of the bed in the spectral light from the patio window, watching him.

The gun wavered in his hand; then he released its grip and lowered it. “Who—who are you? Where’s Rafael? Stella and Maria?”

She didn't answer; only moved slowly, steadily across the bedroom toward him, the ghostly gray light shimmering on her shoulders and on her dark, dark hair. He swallowed, and as she drew near, he realized just how huge and black her eyes were. She was sad . . . so sad. He could lose himself there, in those mesmerizing, lovely eyes. She came to him with outstretched arms; a thin, little girl who needed comforting; needed love.

“Hello, Miguel. I’ve been waiting for you.” Gently and with tender care she took the gun from his hand as she embraced him and stood on tiptoe to softly kiss his cheek. Even as he tried to understand how she could know his name he did not resist, did not care when his beloved weapon thumped softly to the carpet. And if he had been twenty years younger, before his life of corruption and debauchery, he might have listened to that tiny voice in the back of his head that told him to run, to flee for his life, to get away from this strange and somehow terrifying little girl. But he wasn’t; and so instead he gave in to himself and pulled the lithe, naked body to his; knowing that what he was doing was insane and terribly wrong, but not caring.

His hands moved as if by themselves over the soft, pale skin, and then they were lying on the bed together and she was on top of him, her hands touching, caressing; and then she kissed him on the lips, her mouth open, and he kissed her back; and then her lips slid from his and descended down, down to his neck, where they kissed again. And he loved it, loved everything about it, especially the wrongness of it all. And so when the tiny prick of pain came he barely registered it, barely noticed; and when his life slipped away a few moments later, he did not complain.

Chapter 13

Oskar watched the balconies of Maria’s apartment from behind a large willow bush with Maria, looking for any sign of Eli. He grew nervous when some lights came on briefly and then went off, but he continued to wait as Eli had directed.

Maria cast worried glances at him as they crouched together. She was terrified that she would suddenly hear gunshots, or hear Eli scream. She knew, or at least had heard, how bad Miguel could be, and Eli seemed terribly small and fragile. And what on earth had happened to Stella? One minute she had been chasing them, and the next she had disappeared. Maria couldn’t understand any of it. She wanted to ask Oskar what he thought was going on, but he seemed just as ignorant as she.

Somewhere off to the east, the sound of sirens arose, grew louder, and then faded. Then Eli appeared at the balcony of Maria’s bedroom, looked out briefly, and disappeared back inside. Oskar glanced at Maria. “Come on.”

They entered the apartment building from the front like normal. Nothing seemed amiss, and as the hour was now growing late, they saw no other tenants.

When they entered they found Eli sitting on the couch in the dark. Her hands were clasped in her lap, and she stared at the darkened TV set. As Maria locked the door behind them, Oskar came over to her and asked her if she was okay and about what had happened to Miguel. She said nothing at first; just continued to stare despondently into space as if she hadn’t heard him. An when she finally looked up, he could see the deep unhappiness in her eyes. She nodded toward the bedroom. “He’s in there.”

Oskar frowned, then went to the bedroom door as Maria switched on the lights. He opened the door to see Miguel lying sprawled on his back on the bed with his arms out to his sides. Except for the twisted and torn flesh circumscribing his neck, he looked for all in the world like a drunk who had fallen asleep after having one too many.

Maria came up behind Oskar, gasped and clapped a hand to her mouth. Gingerly, she stepped into the room and stared at the body with fascinated horror. Oskar took some keys and a wallet from Miguel's pockets, and Maria retrieved the pistol from the floor. They took the items into the living room and put them on the coffee table.

When they had all sat down Eli spoke, her face distant and troubled. "We need to leave here tonight. Maria, you're coming with us. Pack what you need for a few days and leave the rest—we'll come back for it. Can you drive?"

Maria allowed as it had been awhile since she'd driven a stick shift, but she'd do her best. Then she realized what Eli had said, and felt her world shift unexpectedly under her feet. What did Eli mean, they'd come back for the rest of her stuff later? Did she expect her to go with them and not come back? But Eli continued before she could interject.

"Good—then we can take Miguel's car over to our apartment and gather our things. Oskar, can you take the pistol and Miguel out to the Mälaren River and dump him, then go to our apartment and start packing? We'll meet you there in a little bit."

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There was deep silence in the Porsche as Maria headed north on 279. She and Eli were both lost in their private thoughts. At last, Maria could no longer stand the tension. She glanced over at Eli and said, "You're going to kill me, aren't you? Now that we're out of my apartment and Oskar's not around."

Eli looked over at her. "I should. It would be the smart thing to do. Because I don't know if I can trust you, Maria."

"I . . . I don't know how to make you trust me, Eli. I promised you I would help you and Oskar, like you asked. What else do you want me to do? Keep repeating that I won't tell anyone about you?"

"You could do that, but you don't really know what you might do. Because right now the only reason you wouldn't tell on us is because you're afraid of us. But you might be afraid of other things even more. So even if you believe what you're saying right now, under the right circumstances you might tell on us."

"I don't know what you mean." She glanced at Eli and their eyes met.

Eli's voice grew hard. "How about being questioned by the police, for starters? Being told that you will go to jail unless you cooperate? Or even be thrown in prison for a long time, unless you agreed to help them find us?"

Maria looked away, swallowed and suddenly felt queasy. What *would* she do if they picked her up and started asking questions? She might face criminal charges right now, just for what had happened in the last 24 hours. Aiding and abetting two . . . shit, maybe *three* murders. Harboring fugitives. And if cooperating with the police meant that she could go back to her normal life, continue her education, would she tell?

"I—I'd try not to tell as long as I could."

Eli said nothing and the silence stretched out. Then Maria spoke again. "So—are you going to kill me?"

Eli stared dejectedly out the passenger door window as the highway lights drifted past. "I don't know. Oskar likes you."

The knot in Maria's stomach loosened a little. "So why did you say that we would come back for my stuff later? That wasn't what you said before, when we talked about signing a lease."

"What are you studying at the university?"

Maria was surprised by the abrupt change in topic. "Social work. I want to be a social worker. But, to answer my question--"

"Why?"

Maria sighed. "Because a very kind person who was a social worker helped me get back on my feet after David died. And so I decided that I'd like to help people, too."

"Oskar and I are people."

There was a pause. "Yes, but--"

Eli looked sharply at her. "There *is* no 'but,' Maria. We *are* people."

"I already said I'd help you by signing a lease, if that's what you need."

Eli touched the top of Maria's hand. "We need more than that, Maria. You can't begin to understand how much help we need."

"What do you mean? It seems to me like you can take care of yourself."

"Why do you say that?"

“Well, I saw what happened to Miguel. And I don’t know what happened to Stella, but I’m sure you had something to do with it. I know Oskar is strong, and you must be too, if he’s like you.”

“You didn’t see what happened to Miguel.”

“Well, I . . . I mean, I know you killed him.”

“Do you think I enjoyed it?”

“I—I guess I don’t know, really.”

“That’s right, you don’t. You don’t know anything about what it’s like to be me. So I’ll tell you: I let him touch me. Run his hands all over my body. Put his tongue inside my mouth.

“I let him do all those things so that he would die without a fight. Without that gun going off inside your apartment; so your neighbors wouldn’t call the police.” Her face grew stony as she stared at Maria, and her voice trembled and took on an even harder edge. “And it was *disgusting*—to have the tongue of a person I don’t even know inside my *mouth*. But I did it because it was necessary; because I love Oskar more than *anything*. And because I will *do* anything to protect him, to make sure he’ll never get hurt. Would *you* have done that for Oskar—let Miguel put his hands on you? Or the other?”

Maria was speechless. For over two years she had been letting total strangers touch her, and much more, . . . for money. But never kissing—she drew the line there. The thought of this 12-year-old girl doing what she had just described with Miguel was shocking beyond belief. And that she did it because she loved *Oskar* . . . her heart suddenly felt as if it would break. She felt like a piece of trash sitting beside a brilliant gem. How much pain was wrapped up inside this little child?

She took her foot off the gas, pulled the car over onto the shoulder, and stopped. The tears welled up in her eyes and she turned to look at Eli. “Oh my God, Eli. I’m so sorry, so sorry. That should never have happened to you.”

Hesitantly she extended her arms toward Eli, wanting to hug her, but Eli did not accept her embrace. Instead she said, “Why do you feel sorry for *me*? After all, *Miguel’s* the one who died—not me. *I’m* the monster, right? I’m not human, so my feelings don’t matter, do they?”

“You—oh, *Eli*. I don’t know how to answer you. *No*—you’re wrong. Now listen. Miguel—Miguel was a bad man. For as long as I’d known him, he’d been involved in all sorts of illegal things. He and his brother, both. Prostitution, selling drugs, smuggling guns, I think . . . it went on and on.”

“But you worked for them, didn’t you? So how can you say they were so bad?”

Maria was surprised to feel herself blushing. “I . . . look, Eli, I do what I have to do to get by. My father left my mom when I was two years old. She had to raise my sister and me by herself, but she really wasn’t all that interested, truth be told. She was more interested in herself, and her so-called ‘acting’ career, than in us . . . we were baggage. We had to fend for ourselves. And then, when I was 16, I ran away from home. I couldn’t take it any more—couldn’t take all her crap. I hadn’t finished primary school and I didn’t really have any skills to work, so I started hooking three months later. One thing led to another, and then I got pregnant.

“So yes—I admit it. Working the streets is wrong. But I make a lot more money doing tricks than I’d ever make selling retail, or serving food somewhere. And I’ve been using my money to try to get an education. So maybe I *can* make something of myself.”

“So you’ll do whatever it takes to survive, is that it? Nothing matters, as long as you can take care of yourself?”

“I—” Maria stopped. She understood the implications of what she’d just said.

“It’s all right, Maria. At least I know who you are. And actually, you’re not much different from me . . . at least, before I met Oskar.”

“Just how old *are* you, Eli?”

“The more I tell you about myself, Maria, the more dangerous you are to me. Are you sure you want to know?”

Maria took a mental deep breath. “Eli—yes, I *do*. How can I really help you unless I know you? I mean, I can sign a lease and all, but beyond that . . . if you really want me to help you in other ways, I have to feel like we’re friends.”

“Okay. I’m twelve. But I’ve been twelve for over two hundred years.”

Maria shook her head. She stared at Eli, repeating her words very slowly, as if doing so would make them comprehensible, but they weren’t. “*Twelve . . . for two hundred years. I . . .*”

“You should probably start driving again. There’s a lot we need to do before sunrise.”

Woodenly, Maria checked her rear-view, depressed the clutch, put the car in gear, and accelerated back onto the highway. She could not wrap her mind around what Eli had just said. The E18 exit loomed ahead and at Eli’s direction, she took it and headed west.

“So how did you become a vampire? I mean, who turned you into one?”

“We’re not *vampires*, Maria. And how I became this way is a long story that we don’t have time to talk about right now. I’ll tell you later, maybe.”

“But Oskar . . . you said he’s new at this. And he told me that what happened to him was a mistake. So did you turn him into one?”

Eli sighed. “Yes I did. And it was an accident.”

“Do you want to tell me how it happened?”

“You saw Oskar bite Rafael, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then you know what happens. Or maybe you don’t.” She turned her head and stared at Maria. “What you don’t understand is . . . how good your blood tastes. And once it starts to flow, it’s hard for us to stop.”

†

“Oskar—you’re amazing!”

He put the last suitcase down by their front door, happy to see Eli and Maria come in. “Eli!” He gave her a kiss and a hug, pleased to see that she seemed out of her funk. “And hello, Maria.”

Eli couldn’t believe he had everything packed already. He grinned sheepishly. “Well, I can’t say how *carefully* I packed it all, but everything’s in there.” He motioned to the luggage that sat next to the door. “Oh—everything except . . .” he turned and went into the kitchen, then came back out with two small bouquets of wild daisies in some paper cups. “Here. These are for you two.” He handed one to Eli and one to Maria. “I found them on my way back from the river, and I thought they were pretty. And it’s been kind of a rough night, so . . . well, anyways.”

Both of them thanked Oskar and then took a moment to smell their flowers. Maria tried to remember the last time a child had given her flowers; or even a man who hadn’t paid her to have sex. She couldn’t.

She looked around the little apartment, then at the small pile of luggage. A steamer trunk, two suitcases, and a portable record player; nothing more. She was surprised by how few belongings they had.

Oskar spoke up. “Eli, it’s almost four in the morning. Do you really think it’s a good idea to try to go all the way to Norrköping tonight? I left my old mattress in the bedroom for Maria.”

Eli appeared to be debating what to do. Finally she said, “I guess you’re right. It’d probably be better to stay here until tomorrow night, and then get a fresh start.” She turned to Maria. “Maria, you can stay here and use Oskar’s mattress? I’m sure you’re very tired, seeing as you’ve been up all night.”

Maria went to the bedroom door and looked in. “Okay. But then where will you two sleep?” *Don’t they have coffins?*

Oskar smiled. “Oh, we usually sleep in the tub. It makes us feel safe.”

†

In their tub, Oskar whispered to Eli. “Why are you so wiggly?”

“I’m worried, Oskar. Worried and scared.”

“About those guys? Rafael and Miguel? Or . . .”

“About Maria.”

“Did you two talk in the car?”

“Yes.”

“What’d she say? Does she want to come live with us? Or just help us with a lease, or—”

“I’m not sure, Oskar. I think she wants to help out, but I’m not sure how much she’s committed. She’s afraid of me, I think. I just don’t know how much I can trust her. I’ve never had a situation like this before, and going to sleep with her in our apartment makes me nervous.”

“Well, you told her to come with us. Why’d you do that if you didn’t want her here?”

“Because I . . . I don’t know, I just felt that it would be better to have her near to us, rather than far away. Now I’m not sure it was the right thing to do.”

“I think she’s okay, Eli. I don’t think she’ll do anything.”

“Well, she likes you, Oskar. I know that. Probably better than me.”

“I think you need to stop worrying and try to trust her more. She was nice to me, even after I told her what I’d planned to do while she was asleep. Maybe if you trust her more, she’ll like you more.”

“Maybe. I guess we’ll see.”

“Well, I’m getting sleepy, Eli.” There was a pause as Oskar began to drift off. Then he spoke again, his voice soft and slurred.

“What happened . . . with that Miguel guy? Why were you so sad?”

“Nothing, Oskar. It’s all right; I’m fine now. Go to sleep.”

“Mmm . . . okay.”

In Oskar’s arms Eli waited; waited for his purring to begin, the sound he made that she had come to love so much. It wasn’t long in coming, and it comforted her. But still, she tried to stay awake as long as she could. She forced herself to continue breathing and keep her eyes open, trying to listen for the smallest sound from Maria. But she heard nothing; and soon, despite all of her efforts, she, too, drifted away.

†

8:00 a.m. Maria awoke from a deep, dreamless sleep, wondering where she was. Then she remembered: Oskar and Eli’s apartment in Tensta.

She sat up and looked around the vacant bedroom. The only things in it were the mattress, the backpack stuffed with her clothes, and the flowers from Oskar.

She laid back down on her back and stared at the ceiling. She focused on a cobweb hanging from a broken overhead light. *What am I doing here?*, she wondered. Her life had suddenly been derailed. Where was she headed?

Oskar and Eli. Meeting them was the strangest thing that had ever happened to her. She wasn’t sure she could handle just *how* strange it all was.

What if she just left now? Broke the trust they’d placed in her, take the Porsche, and return to her place in Sundbyberg? She would have to move right away; maybe stay with Marta. If she did that, she’d probably have to explain everything to Marta or make up some convoluted lie, and she didn’t like that idea. Or maybe she could just find a new apartment, and move all of her stuff today. Marta would find out she’d moved soon enough, and would wonder why she’d decided to move half-way through her lease, but still . . . it might work.

She had no doubt that if she left them, Eli would come after her; in fact, she couldn’t imagine that Eli would have any greater priority than tracking her down. Would she find her? Even if she changed schools and moved away from Stockholm? Eli had been surviving for two hundred years; God only knew what connections she’d made over that time. And if she *did* find her . . . Maria shuddered.

What if she left and went straight to the police right now? Reported the deaths of Rafael and Miguel, explained the whole thing from top to bottom. Every detail. Then brought

them back here before it got dark so they could take the two of them into custody. What would the police think of such a tale? If *she* were a police officer, would *she* believe it? She tried to imagine herself, telling them that a couple of kids had killed two thugs like Rafael and Miguel. They'd think she had flipped her lid. And there was really no physical proof, either. Except maybe the cars. And Miguel's wallet, although she wasn't even sure Eli had kept *that*.

She turned restlessly on her side and stared at the daisies Oskar had picked for her. Why would she want to report them, anyway? Did she really *want* to leave?

She remembered Oskar standing there in his underwear, a little boy frightened beyond measure, fumbling with the locks on her door as he tried to flee her apartment. A few seconds earlier, he had abandoned his plan to kill her as she lay sleeping in her bed. Why?—for no other reason than that she had been kind to him.

And then he had protected her from Rafael, not knowing that she had had sex with Rafael before, and had been prepared to have it with him again, if it had been necessary; if it would have gotten him out of her apartment. But she wouldn't have done it with Oskar there, watching. In fact, just before Oskar had attacked, she had been planning to tell Rafael that they should at least go back to the bedroom.

The poor, sweet kid. He had been doing what he thought was right: protecting her honor, her dignity--not realizing that she had none.

And then, how he had started to cry after he'd killed Rafael. That had been the most unbelievable part of the whole thing; the part that had touched her most deeply. He had been ashamed of what he'd done to Rafael. He didn't want to be what he was. It was . . . *incredible*.

And then there was Eli. She was afraid of Eli, but she respected her, too. Her commitment to Oskar was humbling; Maria had never met a person so deeply devoted to someone. And obviously Oskar loved Eli deeply, too. In a way, she was almost jealous of them, for she herself had neither loved, nor been loved, like that. Maria was beginning to sense, too, that there was an innocent, child-like quality to their love. She wasn't sure how that could be, with them needing to find blood to live, like they did; but nevertheless, it seemed to be there.

In her mind she heard Eli stridently declaring that she and Oskar *were* people. Clearly, *Oskar* was; he'd been made a vampire, or whatever it was that they thought themselves to be, by accident. But what about Eli? To be perpetually 12 for two centuries . . . what did that mean?

Maria tried to think back to how life had been when she had been that age; how *she* had been at 12. How scary and insecure the world had seemed. No father, and an alcoholic mother who viewed her daughters as an impediment to her quest to marry the wealthiest and most successful man she could find before she got too old and lost her good looks, so

that they could pull themselves out of their pitiful circumstances and she could at last make it big in acting.

She remembered hiding in a closet, hugging her sister Lena and trying to stop her from crying, as their mother came home drunk once again; yelling and screaming down in the living room about how horrible her life was with no husband and her worthless, good-for-nothing daughters. To be trapped at that terrifying age, *forever*. She couldn't imagine it.

And who could have *done* that to Eli? Someone must have bitten her, infected her, just as she had bitten Oskar. Way back in . . . what—the 1780's, for God's sake. But who would do that to a little girl like Eli? And why?

She recalled the soft touch of Eli's hand when she'd told her how much help they needed, and how she'd related her experience with Miguel. Clearly, she also did not enjoy doing what she did.

But how could she help them? This was what she didn't understand. She certainly wasn't going to help them find people to kill—no way was she doing that. She'd rather have Eli kill her than do that.

They had said they wanted to go to Norrköping to try and find a way to undo themselves. What the hell was in Norrköping? She didn't have a clue. But if that's where they wanted to go, then . . . she'd help get there, find them a place. Maybe then they could talk about whether she'd remain with them or not.

She realized that she had to pee. They'd told her that they didn't mind if she used the bathroom, even though they were in there, so . . .

She got up, stretched, and went into the hall. The apartment was quiet, and rather dim since they had put blankets over all of the windows. Apparently they didn't like light—or at least, didn't like sunlight. She looked into the kitchen at the blanket hanging over the window there, and at the little bit of light that came in around the edges. So strange, to think that it was all true—that they really *were* vampires. It was almost easier to think that they were just mentally ill and *believed* that they were, and that she'd just imagined seeing Oskar fly; that every extraordinary thing she'd seen them do had just been her fantasies. But of course, that wasn't true. She herself had taken a little flight on Oskar's back when they'd dropped down into the square behind her building. She shook her head.

The urge to go compelled her to the bathroom; she opened the door and peeked inside. It was too dark to see anything, and she didn't want to turn on the bathroom light lest it somehow awaken them; so she turned on the hall light instead. Then she went into the bathroom, leaving the door open. The tub was covered with a blanket.

As she sat down to urinate she realized that a strange noise was coming from under the blanket draped over the tub. Where they were. A soft, low rumbling sound that was unlike any sound she had ever heard before. As she peed, she stared intently at the

blanket over the tub, fascinated by the sound. She finished her business, pulled up her pants, and quietly lowered the toilet lid.

She started to leave the room, but then stopped. She turned back, drawn as if by a magnet. Slowly, haltingly, she reached down and lifted up one corner of the blanket and pulled it back; then stared at what she saw in the half-light from the hallway.

They lay half in darkness, half in light; clinging to one another in the tight confines of their little tub. Oskar lay behind Eli with his arms wrapped around her, holding her close to his heart. Eli had her arms crossed in front of her, over Oskar's hands. When Maria bent down for a better look, she realized that the rumbling was coming from their chests.

They looked completely at peace, contented in each other's arms. Oskar's face was partially hidden in the black hair on the back of Eli's head, his blond locks contrasting sharply with hers. Eli's face looked even more doll-like in sleep than it did when she was awake. Her delicate lashes lay against the pale, ivory-smooth skin, a tinge of pink shading her eyelids. As Maria stared at them in wonder, she appreciated how still they were, and realized that they weren't breathing.

They didn't look like monsters. They looked like two lost and lonely children who had nothing in the world except each other. Which was, she realized, precisely what they were.

Slowly she sank back down onto the toilet, put her head into her hands, and silently began to weep.

I can't leave them.

†

9:30 a.m.

Kurt and Martin shut the doors of an unmarked Volvo sedan. Martin started the car, pulled out of the police lot, and headed toward Blackeberg.

Kurt held up the day's copy of the *Svenska Dagbladet*. "Did you see this morning's paper about this business over in Sundbyberg last night?"

"Nope. But I saw a little bit of it on TV while I had breakfast. What's the paper say?"

"A woman named Estella Fransson fell eight stories from an apartment building on Gråmsgatan. Only, she didn't really fall *from* the apartment building. According to this, she hit the *side* of the apartment first."

"Yeah. The SVT guy said there was some speculation about whether she might've fallen from an airplane or something."

“Well that’s possible, only the paper says no one reported seeing or hearing an airplane flying overhead at the time. Did you see the picture of where she hit the side of the building?” Kurt folded the paper and held it up for Martin.

Martin glanced over at the gruesome black and white for a second. “Yup. Goddamnest thing I’ve ever seen. And that photograph really doesn’t do it justice—you should’ve seen it in color. Do they have much information about the woman?”

Kurt skimmed down the article. “No, not much. Apparently she was a prostitute. She’d been arrested a few times for little shit, and pled to a possession charge a few years ago.”

“I’m surprised they were able to identify her. I feel sorry those forensic guys. Getting an I.D. card out of that mess.”

“It’s all part of the job, Martin.” There was a pause before he continued. “You know, she probably looked like that guy we saw a few years ago—you remember? The one who was taking a piss behind the loading dock when that roll-off truck put down that big trash dumpster? Squashed him like a bug.”

“Yup—I’ll never forget that case.” Martin chuckled. “What a way to go out—taking a piss behind a loading dock.”

Kurt raised an eyebrow, then gave Martin a bemused grin. “I wonder if this gal had a pilot’s license?”

He shot Kurt a look of mock seriousness. “You know, sometimes I find your sense of humor disturbing.”

“Well, it just occurred to me, that’s all. We have flying vampires, and now flying prostitutes. If this keeps up, they really *should* be licensed. Then maybe she wouldn’t have flown into the wall like that.”

Martin shook his head and laughed as he turned onto Drottningholmsvägen and headed west. They drove in silence for a bit before he spoke again. “You know, Kurt, I could really use another cup of coffee. My ass sure is dragging this morning.”

“Mine too. Let’s stop somewhere before we get to Blackeberg and grab a cup. I hope this Holmberg has some useful information. Because we need to come up with something soon.”

†

At mid-morning, Maria returned to her apartment from the Student Registrar’s Office. She had completed a form to confirm her withdrawal from her classes due to a family emergency: her sister had just been diagnosed with cancer, and had no one else to help her.

She felt better now that she had made up her mind to help Oskar and Eli. She had never liked feeling wishy-washy about anything, and had always found it preferable to make a decision, even if it ultimately turned out wrong. And although she had many concerns and fears, and did not know where all of this would end up, she felt in her heart that she had made the right choice. For the first time in many years, she felt genuinely happy.

She had seen no reason to go directly back to Oskar and Eli's apartment; there was nothing useful she could do there all day while they slept. So she returned to her own place, took a shower, and prepared a quick breakfast. Then she stood in her living room with her cream cheese bagel on a plate, took a bite, and turned on her TV, intending to eat it quickly before doing some packing.

After a commercial, the news came on. When the top story began, she learned what had happened to Stella. She saw a video feed of where Stella had struck the side of the apartment building; saw more video of a stretcher being loaded into an ambulance in a parking lot fronting the building. The shape under the sheet looked . . . disassembled.

Maria recognized the apartment, and realized she could walk two blocks and see the aftermath herself--live and in person. Assuming they hadn't washed it all away yet.

She swallowed the bite of bagel that she had stopped chewing, fighting the gagging sensation that made her want to spit it out. Then with a trembling hand she put her plate down and collapsed, weak-kneed, into her chair while she continued to stare at the TV.

What had Eli done? In that brief period between when Maria had turned and ran, and when Eli had entered her apartment through the door that was now right behind her? What had she . . .

There was only one explanation.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

Maria struggled against the nausea that rose from the pit of her stomach to strangle her esophagus, but it was hopeless. She bolted to her bathroom, threw up the toilet lid, and puked. She easily recognized the bits of bagel as they floated in the pinkish cloud of fluid that spread out across the bowl. Then she retched again, this time bringing up the deeper, more acidic material from the bottom of her stomach. She hung trembling and weak over the bowl, her happiness having departed with her breakfast, wondering what in God's name she had gotten herself into.

†

"That's what the report says, because that's what the boy reported. I can't make sense of it, either, but his statement was consistent with the bloodstains. You can look at the photos

yourself . . . no one's been able to make heads or tails of it. And of course, the media had a field day with it."

Gunnar Holmberg pushed the photo file across the table toward Magnusson and Lieutenant Lundgren. Kurt thought he sounded defensive, but who could blame him with this kind of stuff?

Martin spoke up. "When was this Andreas Siskov last questioned about the murders?"

"Oh, it's been awhile. Not since back at the time, I guess. Why?"

"Well, we were thinking we might want to speak with him ourselves."

"You won't be able to."

Kurt looked up from the photographs, puzzled. "Why's that?"

"He committed suicide four months ago. Jumped in front of a train at the Blackeberg Metro Station."

Even Kurt looked shocked. "Holy *shit*."

"Yeah—pretty tragic. Parents were devastated, as you might imagine."

An ominous silence descended among them as Kurt and Martin, clearly troubled, slowly turned their attention back to Gunnar's files. Finally Kurt stopped reading, closed the file, and looked at Gunnar with a level gaze.

"I tell you what, Constable, I've been investigating murders for over 30 years, and I've never seen a file like this one. I suppose you've heard about the death in Tyresta that we're investigating."

"Yeah . . . the Canadian guy who was attacked. I feel for you. Got any suspects yet?"

"If we did, we wouldn't be talking to you about this," Martin replied. "But we know that someone bit him in the neck and twisted his head around like a corkscrew. And that the same thing happened last October to a fella named Joakim Bengtsson, and a couple of weeks later to one Lacke Sorensson. We recovered a child's footprint at the Tyresta crime scene, and a kid's shirt was found on Bengtsson's body. So we have every reason to believe a child was involved—maybe the same child 'angel' that did in these three boys."

Gunnar suddenly sat up. "You know what? Another person was bitten like that last fall, too—"The Ritual Killer."

Kurt was flabbergasted. "*What?* I thought he fell out of his hospital window."

“He did. But he was bitten on the neck first.”

Kurt turned to Martin. “Did *you* know that?”

“Nope.”

“*Jesus*. Tell me more, Gunnar. What do they know about the bite? Did they see who did it? Anything?”

“I was involved in his apprehension at the Vällingby Pool the night he tried to exsanguinate his second victim; I didn’t investigate his death. But you really ought to review his file. I heard they found a bite wound, but I don’t know whether there were any witnesses.”

Kurt gave Martin a disgusted look. “Do you ever get the feeling that your own police department is actively trying to keep you from doing your job? I mean . . . this is just fucking *ridiculous*.” He picked up the phone and dialed.

“Karla—it’s me, Kurt.”

“I’m fine. Look, is Hallberg around?”

“Well, when he gets back, tell him to pull the file on ‘The Ritual Killer.’”

“Yeah . . . it *might* be. We’ll see. So tell him to pull it and take a look for any information about a bite wound the guy suffered before he fell. Yeah. And I want to know about any witness statements. Got it?”

“Good. I’ll talk to you later.”

He hung up, then looked at Gunnar again. “So tell me about Oskar Eriksson.”

†

Maria shuffled weakly out of the bathroom and looked anxiously around her apartment. Two people had died within fifteen feet of her. Now that the police knew about Stella, would they make the connection to Rafael? And then to Miguel? How long would it be before they came here?

She was thoroughly unnerved by what had happened to Stella. Yeah, she’d been kind of a bitch, but . . . had she deserved *that*? To be flung against the side of a building like a ball, or a piece of trash

Her hands trembled and she suddenly realized how badly she wanted a drink. If there had been any liquor in the apartment, she would’ve poured herself double shot; it would have made everything feel better. She closed her eyes. It wasn’t even lunchtime yet, and the craving was there. The memories of her life four years ago came back to her; day after day

of coffee, booze and cigarette breakfasts. Getting up and getting drunk to make last night's hangover go away.

She entered her bedroom, crawled onto the bed, and studied the coverlet very carefully, looking for any trace of Miguel's demise. Sure enough, she saw a single tiny, brown droplet near the center of the bedspread. She stripped the cover off the bed, and was relieved to see that it had not soaked through to the blanket beneath. She wadded up the coverlet beneath her arm and then went into her living room. She put it on the coffee table, then got down on all fours to check the place where Oskar had bitten Rafael.

She combed her fingers carefully through the carpet, scrutinizing the nylon fibers. As she did, her inner voice asked her how in the world she had gone in less than two days from being a reasonably normal person—well, a reasonably normal prostitute, anyhow—to someone who was now worried about erasing any evidence of murder so that she would not be arrested and imprisoned for the rest of her life.

Some other person is doing this, she thought. Some other Maria, in some parallel universe, whose life path had diverged sharply from her own. The *real* Maria—the freshly reinvented woman who was putting as much distance between herself and her past as possible, was sitting in a Psychology class right now, taking notes. What she was doing didn't feel *real*. *Murder . . . vampires . . .*

She saw no stains on the carpet. She pulled a kitchen trash bag out of her pantry and was beginning to stuff the coverlet inside it when the phone rang. She paused and stared at it.

It rang three times and then there was a click. A robotic male voice requested the caller to leave a message. Marta's happy, perky voice followed.

"Maria? Hey girl! Pick up if you're there."

Maria moved to the counter; placed her hand on the phone and debated whether to lift the handset. What would she tell Marta she'd been up to? Getting the bloodstains out of her apartment? She suppressed a hysterical laugh. In a brief few seconds she recalled Eli's face in the car last night, looking intently at her. Could she be trusted not to tell? She pulled her hand back as if the phone had become a poisonous snake.

"Okay, guess you must be at class. Hey listen, I was wondering if you'd like to get together tonight. I want to do some shopping downtown—I need to pick up a new skirt for work. Give me a call when you get home, okay? See you soon."

There was a beep, a mechanical sound signaling the end of an opportunity to reconnect with the real world, with her old life. Maria stood stupidly at the phone for several seconds, her mind a blank. She suddenly felt . . . very *alone*.

Goodbye, Marta.

She left her apartment, intending to throw the bag into a trash can on the street somewhere before returning to Oskar and Eli's place. She would worry about packing her stuff later. And what to do about her lease.

She stepped outside and looked to the left, wondering if she could see the high-rise just shown on the news. She couldn't, but it didn't matter because her attention was immediately drawn to the flashing lights of a tow truck idling at the corner. She took a few steps toward the street to get a better view of what was going on, and saw—

. . . they were towing away Rafael's ZX—and behind and to the side of Rafael's car was a police car. Two uniformed officers were standing by the front of it, watching the tow truck driver winch Rafael's wheels up onto the tilted bed of the truck. They were talking, but she couldn't hear them over the rumbling diesel and the electric whine of the winch motor. One of them had a metal clipboard and was making notes.

Adrenaline shot through her and she barely controlled the urge to spin on her heels and flee. Instead she slowly stepped backwards until she was out of their line of sight, turned, and walked as rapidly as possible, without flat-out running, down Tallgatan toward Miguel's Porsche, parked around the corner on Vintergatan. When she reached it she realized she still had the bloodstained coverlet in the bag under her arm. *Fuck it.* She unlocked the car and got in.

Her mind raced as she started the little car and backed out onto the street. *Gotta get outta here, outta here, outta here . . .* She gave it too much gas and popped the clutch too fast, and the car lunged forward, its rear tires chirping. *Shit!* She let up on the gas as she shifted up into the higher gears. *Slow down and take it easy, Maria,* she told herself. *If you get pulled over driving this car . . .*

She made a deliberate effort to relax as she turned right onto Sturegatan; took a big, deep breath and let it out slowly. Then she turned on the air conditioning and felt better.

As she headed back to 279 North, her thoughts returned to what might happen if she were stopped. As she continued to think about it, her apprehension slowly grew. *Miguel's car, Miguel's car . . .* her eyes began to rove around the interior. God only knew what he had stashed away in here.

It dawned on her as she passed the Solvalla horse racing track that it would not be a good idea to drive the Porsche all the way to Tensta. If the police began looking for Miguel as well as Rafael, it stood to reason that they'd be out looking for his car. Even if they were going to Norrköping soon, would it really be a good idea to lead the police anywhere near Oskar and Eli's apartment? Besides, the car would be of no use in getting to Norrköping. There was hardly any space inside for the three of them and the luggage, especially the steamer trunk. So she made up her mind to park the car somewhere near the Rinkeby Metro Station, and take the train out to Tensta.

Within a few minutes, she got off 279 and drove into Rinkeby. The Porsche's engine was loud, and she felt incredibly conspicuous driving it. She found a big apartment complex with a generous parking lot a few blocks away from the Metro station and pulled in. She picked a space under a tree at the corner farthest from the building, stopped, and turned off the car.

Before leaving it, Maria thought she would look through the car for anything useful. She dug through the glovebox and the pockets on the doors, but found nothing. In fact, these storage spaces were conspicuously clean and empty. She was about ready to get out and look in the trunk up front when she noticed that there were little map pockets on either side of the footwells. When she reached in the one on the driver's side, she felt something metal and withdrew a small, nickel-plated revolver.

Instantly, she held the pistol down close to her lap and glanced out the windows to see if anyone was watching her, but there wasn't. Outside the tight confines of the car, it was just an ordinary, sunny day in Rinkeby.

She looked at the deadly-looking little gun; turned it over in her lap. It had wooden grips, and "Made in U.S.A." was stamped above the trigger. "S&W 38" was stamped on the incredibly short barrel. She pushed a button on the side and the cylinder flipped out. It was fully loaded. She pushed it back and it clicked shut.

She pointed the gun toward the passenger-side footwell and slowly squeezed the trigger. The hammer on the back began to rise, but she stopped once she understood that if she continued, it would probably go off. Other than the one she'd seen the day before, she had never held a real-life gun, and she stared at it, fascinated by the concentration of power in her hand.

For a long time, she debated whether to leave the gun in the car or take it with her. Finally she slipped it into her purse.

The Porsche's trunk was completely empty. She made sure the car was locked, then headed toward the Metro, chucking the bag with the coverlet into a trash can as she went.

†

Polismyndigheten i Stockholms Län

CRIME REPORT - Case No. 1983-00572

Confidential - For Authorized Use Only

CRIME(S)/INCIDENT: MURDER

VICTIM NAME (LAST, FIRST, MIDDLE): CHRISTENSEN, JOHN R.

RACE/ETHNICITY: W SEX: M D.O.B.: 21.03.34 AGE: 49

VICTIM ADDRESS: 2398 Keith Road, Vancouver, B.C.

OFFENSE DATE - FOUND:

HOUR: 1743 D-WK: THU MO. 07 DATE: 28 YR: 83

OFFENSE DATE - LAST KNOWN SECURE:

HOUR: 1530 D-WK: SUN MO. 07 DATE: 24 YR: 83

PERSON(S) REPORTING CRIME: Alfredson, John A.; Lindqvist, Thomas

LOCATION OF CRIME: 482 m. SSE from Trail Marker 082, Stråisjön Lake, Tyresta National Park

PREMISE TYPE: n/a

WEAPON/TOOLS: None

HOW ATTACKED OR COMMITTED (M.O.): SUBJECT RESTRAINED AND BITTEN IN RIGHT SIDE OF NECK, SEVERING CAROTID ARTERY

WEATHER: clear, 14.5 C.

#OF SUSPECTS: 1 CAN SUSPECTS BE IDENTIFIED: Y/N See Below

WAS EVIDENCE FOUND: Yes

NAME/ADDRESS OF WITNESS(ES): n/a

VEHICLE INFO: n/a

LAB TECHNICIAN CALLED: Sgt. Judit Lunde

REPORTING OFFICER NARRATIVE: Officers were contacted at 1815 on 7/28 by Tyresta National Park officials who had been notified by two hikers re/discovery of body. Body recovered from shallow grave in clearing approx. 85 m. from campsite. Positive identification obtained from photo I.D. found in wallet recovered next to victim. Victim's family notified 7/28 at 2130 hrs. Victim last seen alive approx. 1530 hrs on 7/24 at campsite. Personal effects recovered from campsite: see attached inventory (Supp. 00572-01). Absence of cash in wallet suggests perpetrator absconded with same following victim's death.

Summary of autopsy findings: Ht. 190 cm, Wt. 90 kg. Date/time of death est. 7/23 @ 2300. Cause of death: massive exsanguination due to neck wound severing carotid artery. Wound believed to be bite wound, although finding unclear due to severe trauma to spinal column and supporting structures as a result of torsion applied to head, which had been rotated 360 deg. Secondary injuries: incomplete fractures of sternum and third, fourth, and fifth ribs bilaterally and bruising of surrounding muscle wall suggestive of constriction injury. Injuries suggest victim may have been restrained and/or immobilized prior to infliction of death wound.

Footprint recovered at crime scene 1.7 m. from body (see diagram; photos) matches child age 10 to 12 yrs; however, depth of print indicates child's weight as only 20 - 30 kg (10th percentile for age). No other physical evidence related to perpetrator recovered from scene. No eyewitnesses to crime have been identified.

Victim legally separated at time of death; survived by mother, age 72, and daughter, age 15 yrs. Victim has no known criminal history. Phone interview of former spouse (McCullough, Barbara) 7/29: victim on solo backpack tour through Europe that began in Warsaw, Poland on 7/17. Victim was expected to return to Vancouver via Berlin, Germany on 7/27.

Victim's death is believed to be related to deaths of Joakim Bengtsson; Lacke Sorensson; Virginia Lind; Conny Forsberg; James Forsberg; Martin Ahlstedt; and an unidentified white male known as "The Ritual Killer" (TRK). Victim's death may also be related to death of Verdner Jensen, suspected to have been murdered by TRK in Vällingby on 10/21/82.

Joakim Bengtsson (Case No. 1982-01302)

The body of Joakim Bengtsson (age 51) was recovered from Mälaren Lake near Blackeberg on 11/5/82. Bengtsson was last seen alive on 10/24/82 at approx. 2150 hrs by Gösta Bohman, and at 2145 hrs by Morgan Sundquist, and Larry Wiese. Autopsy findings demonstrated human bite wound on left side of neck immediately below jaw line and massive trauma to neck in pattern identical to torsion injury sustained by victim. Bite pattern analysis indicates Bengtsson's assailant was child, age 9 to 11. Bengtsson's body bound in rope and weighted with stones at time of discovery. White, child-sized shirt with blood stains on front was retrieved from inside of Bengtsson's own shirt (see photographs in #01302). Cause of death believed to be blood loss from bite wound which tore jugular vein, although disposition of body following death precludes confirmation. Bengtsson also sustained constriction injuries to chest in pattern identical to victim's.

Eyewitness Bohman (Björnsongatan 56, #302, Blackeberg) identified following interview of M. Sundquist on 8/8/83 and interviewed by Lt. M. Lundgren same date. Bohman stated he was standing on balcony of apt. at approx. 2150 hrs and observed Bengtsson entering footpath under Björnsongatan when he was assaulted by single assailant described as a "kid." Lack of sufficient lighting precluded further identification and Bohman unable to confirm whether assailant was wearing shirt recovered with Bengtsson's body. Bengtsson observed to be grappling with assailant before being overpowered; duration of struggle

estimated to be less than 1 minute. Assailant fled scene shortly thereafter. Reliability of Bohman as informant: fair to poor (Bohman is reclusive and suspected alcoholic); reluctant to report attack due to fear of police. See attached interview notes for further details (Supp. #01302-02).

Interview of Sundquist on 8/8: friend of Bengtsson, Sorensson, and Lind for approx. 8 years (Supp. #01302-03). Last saw Bengtsson alive on 10/24/82 at 2145 hrs at the Mandarin House restaurant on Holbergsgatan; Bengtsson and Sorensson departed restaurant together. Sundquist confirmed that Bohman reported attack to Sundquist, Sorensson, Wiese and Lind on evening of 10/25. Bohman then led same individuals to scene, where blood was found under fresh snow. This information was not reported to police on 10/25 and remained unknown to authorities until 8/8. Photographs of underpass have been obtained (Supp. #01302-03), but no physical evidence could be identified at this time.

Virginia Lind

Sundquist reported that on evening of 11/6/82, he witnessed assault on Virginia Lind (age 50) in Blackebergsplan by female child. Sundquist came on scene immediately following attack and did not observe assailant. Sorensson arrived at scene shortly before Sundquist and observed assailant, described to Sundquist as female child age 11 or 12, slender build with black hair and wearing pink sweater. Sorensson kicked assailant in side and off of Lind. Sorensson told Sundquist that he believed child was the same individual who had attacked Bengtsson. Sorensson did not relate this information to investigating officer A. Sandvik.

Lind sustained bite wound to right neck and was examined, treated, and discharged to home from Danderyd Hospital at 1230 hours 11/7. No precise measurement of wound was made by hospital staff. Lind interviewed at hospital 0930 hrs on 11/7 by A. Sandvik but unable to describe assailant to investigating officer.

At 1745 hrs on 11/8, Lind, accompanied by Sorensson, was readmitted to Danderyd in hysterical condition after suffering multiple "cat bites" in Bohman's apt. Lind's condition required physical restraint, and she was admitted for observation and intravenous antibiotic administration. Lind received supportive care and was thought to be improving; however, at 0730 hrs on 11/9, she spontaneously burst into flames after a nurse's aide (Hedman, Liam) raised blinds of her hospital room, admitting sunlight. Spontaneous combustion with resulting death was observed by Hedman and Sorensson. Medical records related to Lind's admissions of 11/7 and 11/8 are attached hereto (Supp. 00572-01).

Lind was employed by ICA Store on Arvid Mornes Road in Blackeberg at the time of her death. Store manager (Hegstrom, Lennart) and surviving family member (daughter, Kronberg, Lena) were interviewed, but had no information relating to above-described events. Lind had no known criminal history. A search of her apt. (with consent from L. Kronberg) was negative for drugs or any physical evidence that could be related to assault on Lind or subsequent death.

Lacke Sorensson (Case No. 1982-01375)

Sorensson (age 59) was last seen alive on 11/9/82 by Wiese and Sundquist, who took Sorensson from Danderyd to Wiese's apt. in Blackeberg before Sorensson could be interviewed by police re/Lind's death. Wiese was interviewed on 8/7/83 and stated that Sorensson was in a state of shock over Lind's death (Supp. #01375-01). Both Wiese and Sundquist confirm that Sorensson and Lind had an on-again, off-again "relationship" but had never married. Sorensson drank heavily and became intoxicated at Wiese's apt., told Wiese and Sundquist that he was convinced that Lind had been attacked by a "vampire," and said that he was "going to kill it." He left Wiese's apt. at approx. 1500.

Sorensson was found dead in a Blackeberg apt., 75 Ibsengatan. The cause of death was exsanguination from a severe bite wound on neck with avulsion of external jugular vein. Precise measurement of bite wound to determine match with Bengtsson was not possible. Sorensson also sustained a twisting injury to neck and fractured ribs. Liver biopsy of Sorensson showed chronic alcohol use.

Sorensson's body was found supine in bathroom of apt. Blood stain patterns on bathroom walls and door/doorjamb from blood matching only Sorensson establish that death struggle occurred in bathroom; no other bloodstains found in apt. A paring knife bearing Sorensson's fingerprints was recovered on bathroom floor and on drawer of a cabinet with cooking utensils in kitchen. Bathroom door open but noted to be locked at time body was discovered.

Partial or complete fingerprints of nine persons (excluding Sorensson) were recovered from 75 Ibsengatan (4 adults and 5 children). Prints matching TRK were confirmed by L.F.S. on 8/8/83 (see attached analysis); no other positive matches were made.

Rental agent of apt. (Jonsson, Erik) stated to reporting officer on 8/8/83 that lessee may have been TRK, although complete certainty was not possible due to passage of time and facial self-disfigurement of TRK. Fictitious name was provided on lease and no other family members noted on same. Sundquist and Weise unable to positively identify TRK.

Sorensson had no known criminal history and left no next-of-kin. A search of Sorensson's apt. was negative for drugs or any physical evidence that could be related to his death.

"The Ritual Killer" (Case No. 1982-01353)

Case file on TRK was reviewed for pertinent details.

TRK (age est. 45 yrs) was apprehended on 10/29/82 at 2125 hrs in a private changing cabin at the Vällingby Pool following attempted murder of Mattias Eriksen (age 13). TRK rendered Eriksen unconscious with a portable canister of halothane (Fluothane), an inhaled general anaesthetic. Eriksen was then bound and hung upside down before he awoke from anesthetic and was rescued by other patrons of pool. A large knife, 5-liter

plastic container, funnel, flashlight, and a black bag were recovered at scene with TRK's fingerprints. TRK was wearing a plastic rain poncho and disfigured his face with concentrated acid immediately before his apprehension.

TRK is strongly suspected in the 10/21/82 murder of Verdner Jensen in Vällingby due to similarities in modus operandi with attempted murder of Eriksen 8 days later. Jensen's body was also found hung upside down. A funnel stained with blood and a large plastic jug with 1.2 liters of Jensen's blood was found under body. It is believed that TRK was interrupted in process of draining Jensen's body of blood.

TRK was last observed alive and under security at Danderyd Hospital in hospital bed at approx. 2230 hrs on 11/7/82 and was found dead 2.5 m. from front steps of hospital at 2252 hrs, having fallen from window of hospital room. Open window and detached tracheostomy tube found in room. Autopsy determined that decedent sustained bite wound to left side of neck and had only 40% of normal circulating blood volume. Spinal column of TRK broken (severance of spinal cord and multiple fractures of C3 - C4 vertebrae), most probably caused by impact of head with metal lobby awning during fall.

Witness Maud Carlberg, hospital lobby receptionist, interviewed 11/7; reported encounter with white female child, age 11 or 12, approx. 5 to 7 min. prior to decedent falling from hospital window. Child described as being of slender build, approx. 1.6 m. tall with shoulder-length black hair, round face and brown eyes, wearing turquoise-colored sweater and gray pants. Witness specifically recalled that child was wearing no winter coat or shoes. Child requested information re/whereabouts of her "father" who was "sick" and had been brought in by police. However, child refused witness' offer to call secure floor for escort and departed lobby. Witness followed child out lobby doors due to concern for being barefoot in snow, but was unable to locate child.

Lobby floor dusted for footprints of child within 45 min. of TRK fall from hospital window. Partial print of left foot obtained and is similar to print of right foot recovered from Christensen death scene, but not conclusive (see comparison photos).

Conny Forsberg/James Forsberg/Martin Ahlstedt (Case Nos. 1982-01378, 1982-01379, 1982-01380)

Case files on these deaths were reviewed for pertinent details. Conny Forsberg (age 12), James Forsberg (age 17) and Martin Ahlstedt (age 12) were killed at Blackeberg Pool on 11/12/82 at approx. 2013 hrs. Eyewitness Andreas Siskov (age 12; deceased) described seeing a "black-haired angel with teeth" that broke through a plate-glass window, and attacked and killed all three victims in less than one minute. The assailant decapitated the Forsberg brothers ("ripped their heads off"), and severed right arm of James Forsberg immediately distal to elbow. The assailant was also observed to drag Ahlstedt across surface of pool before depositing him at edge of pool and was described as "flying" at this time; this account was at least partially corroborated by bloodstain analysis, although latter was subsequently challenged by a 3-member panel of L.F.S. In any event, the physical

description of the assailant closely resembles female child described by Carlberg and Sorensson/Sundquist.

The assailant left Blackeberg Pool after pulling Oskar Eriksson (age 12) from pool. Interviews of Siskov and others indicate that J. Forsberg was attempting to drown Eriksson in retaliation for an injury inflicted by Eriksson to left ear of C. Forsberg some days earlier. Eriksson was noted to be blue and nearly unconscious at time that he was removed from water.

Eriksson has no arrest record or criminal history. He reportedly has not contacted his parents since his abduction and his current whereabouts are unknown.

No person interviewed, including Eriksson's mother (Nilsson, Yvonne) admitted to knowledge of a relationship between Eriksson and assailant. Nilsson admitted, however, that she permitted Eriksson to play unsupervised in apt. complex after school and in evenings. It should also be noted that 75 Ibsengatan, the apt. wherein Sorensson's body was recovered and which was rented by TRK, was immediately adjacent to apt. then occupied by Y. Nilsson and Eriksson (73 Ibsengatan). In fact, the bedroom occupied by Eriksson shared a common wall with a bedroom in 75 Ibsengatan.

Conclusion

The undersigned investigator strongly suspects that the female child described by Carlberg and Sorensson/Sundquist is the prime suspect in the death of John Christensen, and is also responsible for the death of Bengtsson, Sorensson, Ahlstedt and the Forsberg brothers. Analysis of the Bengtsson, Sorensson, and Christensen cases indicates a pattern of immobilization by constriction of sufficient force to fracture the bones of the chest, and biting attacks to the throats of victims of sufficient severity to cause the victim to suffer massive blood loss and rapid death.

The undersigned investigator is also of the belief that the suspect resided with TRK at 75 Ibsengatan for a period of time in October-November 1982; that TRK's motive for the death of V. Jensen and attempted murder of M. Eriksen was the procurement of blood for the suspect; and that, although the means are unclear, the suspect murdered TRK so as to prevent disclosure of information re/suspect to authorities.

Finally, it is believed that the suspect possesses extraordinary strength, may possess the ability to "fly," and may believe herself to be, or may in fact be, a "vampire." Support for this conclusion rests upon: (i) the above-mentioned pattern of death at night by bite wounds causing exsanguination; (ii) decapitation and torsion injuries inflicted to multiple victims solely by physical exertion; and (iii) death of V. Lind, who is believed to have been bitten by the assailant and subsequently consumed by fire when exposed to sunlight. Irrespective of whether this conclusion is correct, however, the suspect should be considered extremely dangerous. It is recommended that an artist's sketch of the suspect based on the Carlberg description, together with a photograph of O. Eriksson, be immediately circulated and posted to aid in detection and apprehension of suspect.

OFFICER'S NAME/I.D.: /s/ Magnusson, Kurt
DATE/TIME SUBMITTED: 8/9/83 17:30 hrs
CASE STATUS: Further Inv.

†

9 AUGUST 1983 - 6 p.m.

Flora was preparing salads for dinner when the phone rang. She wiped her hands on her apron and started to reach for the phone before Kurt called from the living room.

"I'll get it." He had been unusually quiet since he came home from work, and Flora could hear the tension in his voice. She glanced at him as he came into the kitchen and picked up the receiver. He looked haggard and unhappy. She kept tearing up the lettuce and pretended that she wasn't listening.

"Magnusson."

"Hello, Chief."

"Yeah. I figured you'd be calling."

He shifted on his feet as he stood next to the counter and appeared to be looking out the window. "I tried to call you around one, but you weren't available. I left a message, but I didn't hear back, and I knew how urgent this investigation is. So I went ahead and filed it."

Kurt shook his head. "I can't do that."

There was a pause.

"I have no basis to amend it unless there's new evidence."

He frowned. "My conclusion is based on twenty years of experience in homicide investigation. I understand that there are weaknesses in the evidence, but that's the only theory I could come up with that made sense of all the evidence, Chief."

"Oh--Persson told you that? Well, he told me that he believes the wound *is* a bite."

Kurt turned away from the window and crossed one arm across his chest. "No, I can't prove that it was consumed. But I can prove that The Ritual Killer's was."

Flora looked at him out of the corner of her eye. She had heard a lot during her marriage to Kurt, but never anything like *this*.

"True, but only if you exclude the Jensen slaying."

Kurt bent over the counter and leaned on it with his free hand. “I think we *can* connect them. Sorrensen identified the girl and died in The Ritual Killer’s apartment three days later. The Ritual Killer has gotta be Jensen’s murderer. Blood procurement is the only theory that anyone has come up with for why he did that to him and later tried to do the same thing to Eriksen.”

Now Flora could see the flushed anger in his face. “I’ve been your top homicide inspector for the last fifteen years, Chief. With all due respect, don’t call my work *crap*.”

“I agree the age and weight on that footprint don’t match up. But that doesn’t mean that—”

“I don’t think the rain was a factor.”

“Well, I disagree. I have an eyewitness who saw a child overpower Bengtsson, and he was sure as hell no wimp.”

“I know he didn’t report it at the time . . . he said he was afraid of the police. But he told the others—”

“Yeah, I know they didn’t either. But still, you’ve got the receptionist’s statement. She got a good look at this girl and five minutes later, The Ritual Killer was dead. And what she saw matches what Siskov said he saw.”

She could tell he was beginning to lose his temper. “The prosecutors will find a hearsay exception for it.”

“I *won’t* take it out. I’m very afraid that there’s an extremely dangerous person at large here, Chief. And I—”

“Okay, I’m off. What should I tell Lundgren?”

“That’s not right. He was following my lead.”

“Fine. *You* tell him.”

“I don’t care if you’re disappointed or not. Are you at least going to put up flyers?”

“That’s no good reason not to make some effort to protect the public.”

“I’m not trying to tell you your business.”

“So the whole report is shit, then, is that what you’re saying? You’re not going to do *anything*?”

“Keep investigating, then. Just don’t come back to me when the next guy has his fucking head twisted off.”

Kurt slammed the phone down in its cradle, then looked at her. “Sorry. I’m officially off the Christensen case.”

She didn’t know what to say to him, and for a few seconds there was silence in the kitchen. Then he said, “I need a breath of fresh air. Go ahead and eat. I’ll be back in a little bit.”

10 AUGUST 1983 - 4:30 a.m.

Eli helped Maria take the last of her textbooks out of a cardboard box and stack them in a pile next to the wall of their new living room, looking with interest at some of the titles: Sociology; Introduction to Psychology; European Civilization; Statistical Methodology. It was a rainy, early morning, and dawn would soon arrive.

Maria smiled as she watched Eli; then she sat down on the couch, exhausted. She was not used to staying up all night, let alone packing and driving for hours on end through the dark and the rain.

The previous Saturday she had, using an assumed name, subleased a one-bedroom apartment in Hageby, Norrköping from a young attorney who lived in the same building. Then, over the night just passed, they had brought the kids’ stuff and her household belongings to Norrköping with a van that Maria had rented.

When they had gotten back to Sundbyberg to clear out her things, the light on her phone had once again been flashing. Maria pushed the play button with much trepidation, afraid of who would begin to speak while Oskar and Eli watched. One of Miguel’s drug-dealing cronies? Or worse, the crisp, hard voice of a Stockholm police officer, stating that she was wanted for questioning? How would Eli react if it *was* the police?

But to her relief, it was only Marta, sounding quite concerned that Maria hadn’t returned her call from last week or gotten in touch over the weekend. They had talked about whether it would be best to ignore Marta’s message, or call her back; eventually, they had decided to call back and tell Marta the same story she had told the University. Maria had been relieved when she had only gotten the answering machine, and was able to leave a message without speaking directly with Marta. She didn’t want to answer any questions.

Because her apartment had come furnished, they had not needed to move the couch, bed, or other large pieces of furniture. After the last of her things were in the van, Eli had, to Maria’s surprise, produced a large amount of cash to pay the balance due on her old lease. They had put the money, Maria’s key, and a note explaining her unfortunate circumstances into an envelope and put it into the rental agent’s dropbox.

Much to her relief, dealing with Mr. Samuelson, her new landlord—Liam, as he insisted she call him—had turned out to be the easiest part of her solitary Saturday task of finding a new

place to live. Having come to his apartment to meet him, he had invited her in for a cup of coffee, and had been altogether pleasant, easygoing and courteous. His apartment, a little place on the third floor of the same building on Formaregatan that Maria wanted to see, was very neat and orderly; along one wall, where most people would have put a TV, he had a large bookcase that was crammed with lawbooks, and a small desk with an electric typewriter.

In their brief conversation at his kitchen table, she learned that he was unmarried and had graduated from law school in Uppsala only a few years ago. He was obviously very bright, and his appearance and mannerisms were oddly endearing. He had a thick crop of brown hair that kept flopping down over his forehead, a disarming smile, and expressive hands that moved constantly when he talked. Perched in apparent perpetuity on the end of his nose were a pair of horn-rimmed glasses that seemed destined to slip down despite his continuous efforts to push them up. Because of this, he tended to look over the top of his glasses, making him appear older than he really was.

To her surprise, he had only asked her a few questions as he showed her the rental. She told him that she was new in town from the Stockholm area, and was going to try to get a job with the county social services agency. She said that she would be living alone, although once in awhile her sister's son and step-daughter might be staying with her for a few weeks at a time. He seemed very accepting of her story, and did not even ask to see any identification before she signed the lease and gave him the security deposit and first month's rent.

Then he had asked about her need for furnishings. Learning that she had no furniture, he had offered to let her use an old couch, chairs, and a bedframe he had in the basement that some former tenants had left behind. Together they had moved the items up from the storage area and into her new space. Once everything was arranged to her satisfaction, he had given her the key and told her to please call him if she needed anything else. And that had been that.

Before returning to Tensta, she had gone out and purchased some heavy drapes with some of the money Eli had given her. The apartment had come with miniblinds that did a fair job of blocking out the light, but the drapes were even better, and certainly more pleasing to her eye than the old blankets and cardboard that the kids had been using.

Oskar and Eli seemed very happy with the new place. The building was of more recent vintage than their old flat in Tensta; the appliances had recently been replaced, and the walls and cabinetry were fresh and clean. They particularly liked the new tub, which had sliding plexiglas doors that seemed to turn the space into their private sleeping cabin.

Once the children had settled into their tub, Maria bedded down with some blankets and a pillow, surrounded by cardboard boxes. Her fascinated attention was drawn to the amazing puzzle egg that Oskar had pulled out and sat incongruously on top of his record player. Maria had never seen it until he had unpacked it.

She reached out and stroked its complex surface, which she was fairly sure was made of pure platinum, and thought about the trip in the van with the children. In her mind the conversation had overshadowed all of the recent events. It was so old and mysterious, this egg; just like Eli—only Eli was probably older still. And Maria had begun to understand something of the darkness and the horror locked up inside this beautiful, calm, self-contained yet often vulnerable little girl. *Incredible . . .*

“So what, exactly, are you two looking for in Norrköping?”

The clumsy black wipers thumped noisily back and forth to the monotonous hum of the engine for what seemed like a very long time, swishing the raindrops to the edges of the big windshield. Maria glanced over at them; saw their uneasy faces illuminated in the faint green glow from the dashboard instruments.

Oskar ventured an answer first. “Well, something happened to Eli there a long time ago—something bad. And I—I told Eli that I wanted to go back there, to see if maybe we could find something that would help us to just be normal again.”

“I’m not sure I understand that.”

Eli spoke. “I was born in Östergötland. A long time ago. And a man there turned me into what I am now. He lived in a castle. And Oskar and I want to go back and see if we can find his castle; maybe find something that he left behind that will tell us more about who he was, and how he became a vampire. We’re hoping that maybe if we do that, it could help us change ourselves back to normal.”

Somehow, Maria did not get the feeling that Eli was convinced that they would have any luck with their plan. “Do you remember where this castle is?”

“I . . . I think so. We’ll have to see—it’s been such a long time.” Oskar glanced uneasily at Eli, who shifted in her seat, then turned to look out the passenger window.

“How did this man get ahold of you? Did something happen to your parents?”

“He tricked my mother into bringing me to his castle with a lot of other moms and their kids. He said it was a game. Then he rolled some dice and chose me. And that’s—that’s just about all I want to say about it right now. Because I can’t . . . it’s hard for me to—I just don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay.” Privately, Maria thought that their whole plan sounded shaky. She had uprooted herself, turned her life upside down for this? What useful thing could they possibly find after two hundred years? But she didn’t want to say anything. They seemed fragile enough as it was, clinging to their little thread of hope; expressions of cynicism and doubt would not help anything.

“Is the castle still standing? If it is, I’m sure it will be easy to find. It would have to be some kind of local landmark, or maybe even a tourist attraction.”

Eli answered without looking away from the window. “I don’t know if it is or not. I’ve never been back to it since I was set free.”

A cold finger ran down Maria’s spine. ‘Set free’? My God—what had happened to her? Frightening, medieval images came to her mind; a man resembling Bela Lugosi or Christopher Lee, chaining Eli to the wall of a dungeon somewhere. It was so hard to believe; almost ludicrous. How could it have happened? She glanced over at Eli, not for the first time wondering if the child just had a mental illness, and that all of this was some weird fantasy. She wanted to probe further, but didn’t want to upset her or Oskar.

“Well, I’ll do whatever I can to help you two find this place, wherever it is.” She adjusted the speed of the wipers as the rain subsided. “Maybe the library there will have some information. We’ll have to see.”

Maria had slept for what seemed to her like only a few hours when she was awoken by a sound coming from the bathroom. She had been lying on her side facing the egg, and when she heard the soft thump she rolled over to face the doorway leading to the back hall.

There was a soft scraping sound, followed by a tiny creaking noise. The bathroom door had been opened. She glanced at her watch; it was 7:18 a.m. She frowned. Didn’t they both have to sleep during the day?

She sat up a little; spoke quietly in the shadowy apartment. “Oskar? Eli?”

Eli’s head suddenly came into view in the bedroom doorway at floor level. She was crawling. She paused and looked into the bedroom, seemingly straight at Maria. Her eyes were open, but Maria wasn’t sure whether Eli really saw her; there was no recognition, and her face was slack.

“Mama?”

She repeated her call; softly, not shouting. Then she turned and began to crawl into the bedroom. Maria realized as she came in that she was wearing no clothes.

“Eli? What’s wrong, honey?”

Eli did not respond; she just kept moving. She turned a little further and bumped into a box; paused, then navigated around it. “Mama?”

Maria stood up. *She’s sleepwalking. Or sleepcrawling—or . . .*

She wasn't sure what to do. Weren't they supposed to be stone-cold dead during the day? She quickly glanced at the window and was relieved that there was virtually no daylight coming through; it must still be cloudy and dark outside, because she could hear the rain's faint patter on the glass.

"Mama?"

She wondered whether she should wake Eli up. At some point a long time ago, she had been told that you should not wake up people who were sleepwalking, but she didn't know why. Just that something bad might happen. So . . .

Eli slowly crawled around the edges of the room. She moved past a few more boxes and headed toward Maria's makeshift bed. Maria squatted down in front of her.

"Eli, it's all right. Come here."

She looked up at the sound of Maria's voice. "Mama?"

Slowly she continued to crawl toward her. As she came near, Maria hesitantly attempted to embrace her. "Eli, Eli . . . it's okay. Come here." Eli accepted Maria's embrace. And when they lay down together on the blanket, Maria saw.

Saw that Eli had nothing between her legs.

Fear leapt like lightning through her chest. She had never seen anything like it. She wanted to disengage herself from Eli; get as far away from her—him?—it?—as possible. But she couldn't, because now Eli was clinging to her like an infant. So hesitantly, stiffly, she embraced the child.

Eli laid her head against Maria's chest. When Maria looked down, she saw that Eli had put her thumb into her mouth and was sucking it gently. She uttered one more muffled, somehow satisfied "mama," and then closed her eyes and was silent. The fingers of one hand found a patch of Maria's cotton nightgown and pulled it close to her face, rubbing it between them.

Maria thought about how cool Eli seemed. Carefully, without disturbing her, she pulled the blanket up over them, adjusted her pillow, and tried to relax.

Guess I'm just going to have to sleep a little longer. She closed her eyes, stroked Eli's hair, and thought about how strange all of this was. This child . . . was she really a child?

†

Maria saw it as she was leaving a grocery store in Hageby Centrum, a big banner headline on the day's copy of the *Expressen*: **TOP COP SAYS VAMPIRE ON LOOSE.** And subtitled below that, right above a picture of Oskar and the detective: *Stockholm*

Detective Believes Vampire Responsible for Multiple Murders. She had almost dropped her bag of groceries. Instead, she had bought a copy and rushed home to read it.

Maria sat in stunned silence in the darkened living room, unable to move. The story, based on parts of a confidential report leaked yesterday evening to the *Expressen*, was unbelievable. Or at least, would have seemed unbelievable to just about everyone in the whole world, except her. Those murders at the pool last year in Blackeberg . . . now she understood why Oskar and Eli were together. Eli had killed those three kids to save Oskar, and the two of them had then fled together. Then Eli must've accidentally bitten him.

She trembled as she thought about the trail of bodies that, according to the article, and been left behind by the "bloodthirsty creature": at least *six people* slaughtered, the most recent one barely more than two weeks ago. Had Oskar helped kill that camper, too? The description of how most of them had been killed made perfect sense to her, given what Oskar had done to Rafael. Grabbed from behind and squeezed like a rat in the coils of a snake, then bitten. It all fit.

Most disturbing to her was the tie-in to "The Ritual Killer." A man living with Eli who, at some point, had begun getting blood for her. Going out and killing young boys to drain them of blood for food; it sounded like something straight out of a pulp fiction novel. But here she was, sitting not eight meters away from them. Eight meters from what was probably the greatest mass murderer in history, if this was just the tip of the iceberg.

Would she become the next ritual killer? Persuaded, cajoled, pressured, threatened to go out and murder for them?

She got up off the couch, went to her purse on the kitchen counter, and retrieved the handgun; walked down the hall to the bathroom, entered, and quietly slid the shower door open.

Eli had fallen asleep in her arms after her sleepwalking. Maria had carried her back into the bathroom, and gently laid her down in front of Oskar not two hours ago. Now the two of them were once again together.

Two hundred years. How many people had died, looking at those angelic features? *Must be thousands*, she thought. *And now Oskar, too. Eli's apprentice.*

Would it kill them? If she used it? Or did she need . . . a stake?

She thought about all the suffering Eli must have experienced; about all the suffering she had brought into the world. Wouldn't she be better off dead? Wouldn't the *whole world* be better off, if both of them were dead?

Yet the love between them was the most beautiful thing Maria had ever seen in her life. And they wanted to get rid of their vampirism; were trying to find a way out, however childish and ill-conceived their plan seemed. They didn't want to be what they were.

She suddenly felt the weight of the world bearing down on her: an enormous, ponderous mass of humanity balanced upon her, as if one of those Egyptian pyramids had been flipped upside down and set on the top of her head. She was in a unique position, at a pivotal moment. No one else knew what she knew, and no one else was in a position to do anything about it. She could stop all the bloodshed right now—just by pulling a trigger.

If you had any sense of decency, you'd do it. Regardless of how beautiful they are. They're death, plain and simple. She had seen the look in Oskar's eyes, just before he had buried his teeth into Rafael's neck: they had not been human. *The eyes of a rabid dog.*

She raised the pistol and aimed it at the center of Eli's chest. One bullet would probably pass completely through her and kill both of them. A complete amateur, she jerkily thumbed the hammer back. Now all she had to do was squeeze.

Mama . . . Mama. A naked child, curled in her arms, sucking her thumb.

Oskar looking up at her in earnest as he gave her some freshly plucked daisies. *These are for you.*

. . .

Tears sprung from her eyes and spilled down her cheeks, making it hard for her to see. The gun wobbled as her arm trembled. Angrily she wiped her eyes with her free hand; and with this simple action, her will dissolved.

Fuck it. Someone else is going to have to kill them. I can't—I won't. I'd rather kill myself first, than do that. They're innocent. Somehow, they're innocent.

She carefully lowered the hammer and backed out of the room; turned and walked like a marionette into the bedroom and collapsed, weeping, onto her blanket.

But she knew that however innocent they were, their need for blood was like a rising tide, slowly coming in to destroy their will to avoid doing evil, as surely as the ocean washed away a child's sandcastle on a beach. It was unavoidable, inevitable. How often did they need to eat, anyway? It had been almost a week since Rafael and Miguel had died . . .

She looked down at her own forearm, at the spot, the inside of the elbow, where the nurses always drew their blood samples. Would they take hers, if she offered? Would she get infected if they did? She didn't know how it worked, but if it could be done safely, she would do it.

If it would help stave off the murder and bloodshed awhile, she'd do it.

†

A knock at Kurt's door. Standing on the stoop in the fading afternoon sunlight by the trellis full of honeysuckle was Lt. Lundgren. His bronze-colored BMW gleamed in the driveway.

Kurt pulled open the door a crack and looked out. "Martin?"

He was dressed in civilian clothes. His face was full of worry; he looked like he'd aged quite a bit since Kurt had last seen him.

"Hi, boss."

Kurt opened the door wide. "Come in, come in."

"Are you sure it's okay? I'm not interrupting dinner, am I?"

"No, no. Flora's not even here right now. She's gone to see Britta and Gabe. He's in the hospital."

Martin raised his eyebrows in surprise as he stepped through the door. "Oh? He's sick again?"

Kurt shut the door behind Martin, then went to the refrigerator. "Yeah, I'm afraid so. He hasn't been eating. Been crying a lot, too, and sorta sleepy. So Brit and Jon took him to the hospital, and they admitted him for the night. They just called, so Flora's gone over to be with them."

"You didn't go?"

"No, I . . . I just don't feel like going out right now."

"Well, I can understand *that*."

"Sit down. You want a beer?"

"Sure; that'd be great."

They sat on opposite sides of Kurt's kitchen table and sipped their beers.

"This is the first time you've been put on administrative leave, isn't it, Martin?"

"Yep. I couldn't believe it."

"You talk to the Internal Affairs guy? Koch?"

“Yeah. He called me about an hour after I got the call from Norby. You?”

“Uh huh.”

“What did you tell him?”

“What’d I tell him? I told him what I knew: nothing.”

Martin grunted. “That’s what I told him, too. But I don’t think he believed me.”

“Guys like Koch aren’t paid to believe what they’re told, Martin. You know that.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right. I’m just not used to being questioned like that, I guess. I mean, challenged on every little thing. As if I’m some kind of criminal.”

“Don’t worry about it. They know you and I would have to be total idiots to leak that report.”

“I overheard some guys in the rank and file talking after roll call. They think you had something to do with it.”

“Mmm—doesn’t surprise me. I knew when I signed that report that I’d become a pariah.”

“Is anyone in your corner?”

“Oh . . . yeah, a few. Hallberg actually called, if you can believe it. Said they had no right to put me on leave like this. I told him not to worry, that I’ll be back after the seven days. And, let’s see . . . Petersson called. Of course, I’ve known him for years, so . . .”

“But none of the new guys.”

“Nope.”

“Someone wants your job, Kurt. You know that’s what this is about.”

Kurt nodded slowly. “Yup, I think so.” He shrugged. “And maybe they’ll get it.”

Martin shook his head. “No. No, they won’t. You’ve solved too many murders over the years, Kurt. Everyone knows you’re the best.”

“Uh huh. Until now, that is.”

Martin took a long pull on his bottle, then folded his napkin in two and sopped up the water ring before it ruined the table’s finish. “Did we really need to put that in the report, Kurt? The Canadians announced that the Stockholm P.D. is incompetent.”

“Let me tell you, Martin. That was the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my whole career. That one sentence. And I knew when I wrote it what the ramifications would be. But you know what? The facts are what they are—they dictate the result. You and I both know that you can’t solve a murder by ignoring or distorting the facts. When they point to the improbable explanation, you gotta follow them there—wherever they might lead you. You know that old saw: ‘When you’ve eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth?’ It may be Sherlock Holmes, but there’s truth in that statement.”

Martin nodded. “Yes, of course you’re right. But still . . . we could have just listed the facts and let them draw their own conclusions.”

“Martin. You and I both know that no human being can pull a head off or twist it like that. It’s unheard of in the annals of medical science, and in criminology as well. And that thing with Lind burning up. Now these are *facts*, and there is no natural explanation for them. And if that’s true, then that leaves only the supernatural. Now, I’m not the kind of fellow to believe in ghosts, or anything like that. But when these things are laid before my eyes like this, then . . .” He lifted his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose; wished mightily that his lower back pain would go away. Christ, he felt tired.

“It’s too bad those folks in Blackeberg hadn’t been more forthcoming.”

“Yeah. I don’t know what they were thinking, not to report that. Especially after they found that blood. Stupid.”

Kurt looked directly at Martin. “Do *you* believe it, Martin?”

Martin sat back in his chair and sighed. “I don’t know. I agree with you that as crazy as it sounds, it seems like the only rational explanation. And I’m not the kind of guy who believes in this sort of thing, either. You know—nothing weird has ever happened to *me*. But you know what? More people than you might think *do* believe in ghosts and the supernatural. In fact, my own mother is convinced that she saw her sister’s ghost on the day she died in a plane crash. This was . . . more than twenty years ago; I was eleven at the time, I guess. Aunt Ella was flying from London to Stockholm to spend Easter with us, and her plane crashed en route. And my mom swears that she saw Ella come into the kitchen at the exact moment of the crash, as we learned later. She said that Ella told her not to worry—that she didn’t suffer. So while I’ve never seen a ghost, I tend to keep an open mind, I guess you could say.”

Kurt nodded. “That’s quite a story. Anyone else see her?”

“Nope—just mom. She said it was the scariest thing that’d ever happened to her. But yet, it proved to be a source of comfort, too. Just knowing that her sister was at peace.”

There was a lull in their conversation as both of them polished off their beers. Then Martin belched and said, “So, what are you going to do?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean, Kurt. About catching this girl, or thing. Or whatever it is.”

“What more *can* I do, Martin? We need something new. A break in the evidence, maybe an eyewitness who will come forward and say that they’ve seen her recently. Or maybe we could set a trap for her.”

“A trap? What do you mean?”

“Well, if we’re right, then she feeds at night, on solitary people. So we get a volunteer to be the bait, and we do a stakeout.”

“Hmm. Do you think we’d have trouble finding a volunteer?”

Kurt pondered the question for a moment. “No, I don’t think so. In fact, I think we’d have quite a show of hands right here in our own department.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, if we’re right, then whoever volunteered and helped capture or kill her would be a hero. And if we’re wrong, then it would be the perfect opportunity to demonstrate my incompetence. You know--help bring down the old man who’s past his prime.”

“Could get killed, too.”

“Yup. I’d say that’s a real risk in this case. Killed real quick.”

“Do you think she really *can* fly, boss?”

Kurt chuckled. “Well, if we believe she’s a vampire, why not go whole hog? It would explain how she got up to ‘The Ritual Killer’ and took care of him.”

“Do you think she killed that woman over in Sudbyberg last week?”

Kurt was quiet for awhile. “It’s possible.”

“I don’t know if a stakeout would work, Kurt. She seems pretty far-ranging.”

“Well, optimally we’d have several running simultaneously at different parts of the city.”

“We’d need to persuade the Chief to do that. Which is damn unlikely at this point.”

“I agree. And of course, you or I can’t do anything.”

Martin offered a small grin. “Officially.”

Kurt smiled back. “Yeah—officially.”

10 AUGUST 1983 - 8:55 p.m.

I’m awake. I’m . . . where am I? Oh, yes—Norrköping. Our new apartment. And Oskar . . . isn’t here. He must already be awake.

Why do I feel so tired?

Eli climbed out of the tub and turned on the bathroom light. A fluorescent bulb behind a plastic lens above the vanity mirror flickered to life. She looked at herself.

Pale; so pale. She leaned over the sink, tilted her head slightly and combed her fingers through her hair; found the streaks of grayish-white that were emerging from the roots at the top of her head. She sniffed herself. *Don’t smell so good. Shower tonight . . . for Oskar.* She smiled, but only a little.

It was starting again. How many times over her life had she stood the same spot, looked at her hair in the same way, and saw the same thing? Saw the same thing, and felt the same thing in the pit of her stomach. The feeling that would grow and grow, that would make her shrivel up and turn white. It got big, and made her little; kept making her little until she went out and . . . took care of it. And then it would let her live a little longer. And Oskar? He probably felt the same way. So tonight, they would hunt—had to.

She came into the living room and found Maria and Oskar studying a map laid out on the floor. Both of them looked up, pleased to see her. Oskar seemed his usual, happy self, and Maria? Maria gave her a warm smile that caught Eli a little off guard. She had become used to seeing fear and anxiety in her eyes; now the fear had gone, but the worry remained. What had changed?

Oskar motioned to her excitedly. “Eli, come look at this! Maria bought us a map of Östergötland, and some books from the library, too. Maybe we can start looking tonight!”

Eli came over and sat down between them. The map was spread out on the floor, and she could see that the two of them had been circling some places on it with a red pen.

“What are those?”

“Castles. We’re marking them on the map so we can figure out where to go.”

Maria spoke up. “Hold on, Oskar. I know you’re eager to start all of this, but something important happened today that both of you need to know.” She reached behind herself

and put a plastic shopping bag into her lap; pulled out some plastic bottles, and placed them down on the map.

Eli frowned. “What’re those?”

“Hair dye. Eli, you’re going to be a blond like me before we do anything tonight. And Oskar, you’re going to have brown hair when we’re done.”

Oskar looked at her, confused. “What? Why?”

Maria pulled a folded newspaper down off the chair. “I wasn’t sure whether to let you two see this, but I figured it’s better for you to know what’s going on. Now that you’re both out of the bathroom, I’m going to go get cleaned up. Read it, and then let’s talk.”

She was in the bathroom brushing her teeth when she heard their voices come muffled through the door. Oskar’s was high-pitched and clearly upset; Eli’s was lower, but rapid and full of emotion.

“. . . my God, Eli, they know *everything*”

. . .

“That guy under the ice, and your dad—well, I mean, he wasn’t really, but—”

“Oskar, don’t worry, we can still”

. . .

. . . “How did they, how could they find *out* so much? Now we’ll *never* be able to”

“. . . can go away. *Far* away, and they’ll never”

“But I don’t *want* to go to”

“. . . I don’t know. But maybe”

Maria stood with her ear to the door and heard Oskar begin to cry. Then she heard Eli, too.

Enough. I have to talk to them. She opened the door and returned to the living room in her bathrobe.

They were huddled together in the middle of the floor, hugging each other and crying. The newspaper article lay open next to them, showing Oskar’s picture and the police

officer's face. Maria glanced at it and felt a hot surge of loathing at the article and the people who had written it. *The bastards. They're just children!*

She crouched down next to them and pulled both of them to her. "Shhh, *shhh*, you two! Settle down . . . settle *down*. Everything's going to be all right."

She hugged them and kissed the tops of their heads, and as she continued to murmur her reassurances both of them loosened their embrace on each other and extended their arms around her as well. Slowly but surely, their crying tapered off; first Eli's, then Oskar's. Finally they broke their embrace, sniffing and wiping their noses. Maria's eyes were wet with tears, too. She offered Oskar a fuzzy sleeve and he wiped his nose on it gratefully. "Sorry."

"It's okay, Oskar. My bathrobe is your bathrobe."

"Now listen, you two. We need to talk--right now. About all of this." She gestured at the *Expressen*.

"I've been listening to the radio all day today since I saw the paper this morning. The policeman who headed up the investigation has been taken off the case and placed on administrative leave. That means he's been temporarily fired."

Oskar's eyes widened. "What? Why would they do that?" He looked knowingly at the newspaper. I mean, he's *right*." He shot a glance at Eli, who nodded a little and gave Maria a puzzled look.

"Well, I think they suspect he might have leaked a copy of his report to the newspaper. But there's more to it than that. The head of the Swedish Police Service held a press conference earlier this afternoon. He said that this report was not yet final, and the conclusions expressed in it did not represent the official views of the police on these murders--especially the part about a vampire being at large. They're going to get someone else to finish the investigation. So it looks as though they're backing away from their own report, and they might very well fire this detective for good."

Oskar gave Eli a confused look. "I don't understand."

Eli spoke. "It's simple, Oskar. They don't want to believe we exist. It's too hard for them to believe something like that."

"You're right, Eli," Maria replied. "But here's the thing: regardless of what the government tries to do to wiggle out of their report, it's had an effect on the people. There's been nothing else in the news today except this story. People are scared, and they're going to stay scared for awhile, until things die down. But if you two keep going back out like you have been, things aren't going to die down."

“We can’t help it, Maria,” Eli said. “We can’t go much longer without blood. *Fresh* blood. It’s . . . unavoidable.”

“I know you can’t. Which leads me to another thing I have to tell you.” She got up, brought her purse over, and sat down again. Then she looked both of them in the eye, and prepared to do the hardest thing she’d ever done in her life.

“I’m going to be completely honest with you about what’s been going on with me over the last few days, especially since I read this story today. Because just as I expect you to be truthful with me, you deserve to know the truth, too.”

She pulled the nickel-plated .38 out of her purse, flipped open the cylinder, and ejected the cartridges out onto the map of Norrköping. They spilled into a little pile beside the hair dye, clinking metallically together before rolling a little ways in different directions. Then she handed the gun to Eli, who stared at her with huge, still eyes.

“I almost used this on you last night. After I read this.”

Oskar abruptly scooted backwards from her in horror until he bumped against the couch, where he froze, stiff-limbed. Eli didn’t move, but her lips became a thin, hard line, and her eyes seemed to grow even darker. Her body trembled almost imperceptibly and became very tense. Maria could tell that she was very close to pouncing on her, and the fear rose in her throat, palpable and alive.

“But I didn’t; I can’t. I won’t—it isn’t right. So that’s why I’m giving you the gun for now. Maybe sometime you can decide whether it’s a good idea for me to have it. But for now, I want you two to know that I’m never going to hurt either of you.”

Oskar visibly relaxed. Eli extended a hand and scooped up the rounds, then put them and the gun in a pile between herself and Oskar. Then she looked at Maria and said stonily, “Go on. We’re listening.”

“Eli . . . Oskar . . . you can’t go on killing people like this. They’re going to catch up to you, sooner or later. In fact, I think they’re much farther along in doing that than either of you realized.”

Eli spoke. “They’ll never catch us. We’ll move, go far away. It’ll work; it always has.”

“Maybe you’re right, Eli. But I think this news article changes things. Because the *Expressen* is a national paper—just about everyone in Sweden can buy it. Now, I haven’t been alive a long time—I’m only 21—but I’ve never read something like *this*, or read about it in the history books before I dropped out of school. So you tell me: has this ever happened about you before, Eli? This kind of exposure?”

Eli hesitated; she did not want to answer. “No, but—”

“Do you have any *idea* how smart this guy is, this detective? You read the article, didn’t you? About how many crimes he’s solved? He’s the best they have—and if he really wrote that report, he must have guts, too. You two don’t have any idea what you’re up against. It’s time to try something else.”

Eli could no longer contain herself. She laughed harshly, then began to speak in a raised voice that was nearly a shout. “I’ve listened to *enough* of this! There *IS* nothing different, don’t you *understand*? I’ve been alive *ten times* longer than you, and I’ll *still* be living after you’ve turned to *dust*! I *knew* it was a mistake to come here with you, that you’d, you’d try to talk us into doing something stupid like this! Like turning ourselves in!

“And *this!*” She seized the gun with both hands and twisted it violently. The cylinder, which had remained out of the frame, broke off, and she flung both parts into the kitchen. “How *dare* you point a gun at us while we’re sleeping and defenseless!” She stood up and looked to Oskar for support, but he only gawked at her. Then she looked back at Maria. “I should kill you right *now*, is what I should do! I knew all along that you couldn’t be trusted!”

Oskar piped up, his voice thin and reedy. “But Eli, she just gave you the gun! She said—”

Maria cut him off; she felt strangely calm, not afraid. “It’s all right, Oskar.” She looked directly at Eli. “Go ahead, then. Kill me, if you think that’s the right thing to do. I know you don’t want to be back here in Norrköping. You showed me that while you were sleeping last night.”

Eli stopped ranting and looked at her suspiciously. Oskar looked at Eli, confused. Then both of them spoke simultaneously. “What do you mean?”

Maria turned to Oskar. “Oskar, can I talk privately with Eli for a few minutes? Do you mind?”

There was a pause. “I . . . no. Of course not.” Eli began to speak, to tell Oskar not to go, but then closed her mouth. Oskar stood up, gave Eli one more puzzled look, and then said, “I’ll . . . I’ll be in the bedroom, when you’re ready.”

Maria looked up at him from her position on the floor. “And Oskar . . . try not to listen too hard. I know you have super hearing.”

Oskar blushed and managed a small smile. “Okay, I guess.”

After the door to the bedroom closed, Maria got up from the floor and went to the couch. “Eli, please sit down with me.”

Still visibly angry, Eli sat beside Maria, staring at the wall.

“Eli, I’m sorry about the gun. But it’s hard to read about so many people dying like that and not get upset when you’re living in the same apartment with the ones who are responsible.”

“Then go away. We won’t miss you.”

“Eli, if I wanted to abandon you, I would’ve done it before you woke up. Don’t you understand that I want to help you?”

“What you have in mind is no help, as far as I’m concerned. We’ll end up getting killed.”

“I never said I thought you should turn yourselves in.”

Eli turned to look at her; she suddenly wanted to see Maria’s face. “You said we need to stop killing. So what are you talking about?”

“Wouldn’t you like to stop killing, if you could?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I knew you felt that way—that’s why I can’t hurt either of you. Because I know you don’t want to be how you are. I know you’re trapped in a horrible situation.”

“You’ll never understand what it’s like. *Never.*”

“Maybe not, Eli. But you aren’t the only person in the world who’s suffered. And you told me yourself that you need help—I think you said that I couldn’t *begin* to understand how much help you need.”

“Yes, I did. But—”

“Then why are you rejecting me when I’m trying to help you and Oskar?”

“Because I don’t understand how you want to help.”

Maria thrust her arm out in front of Eli’s face and pulled the bathrobe sleeve up until it was bunched around her bicep, exposing the crook of her elbow. “Take it. Both of you.”

Eli drew back a little and scrutinized Maria more carefully. As she did so Maria saw her nostrils flare and the tip of her tongue peek out to touch the inside of her upper lip.

“You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Yes I do. I want to feed you two tonight. Because I know you’re hungry, and it’s much too dangerous for you to go out. Not after what I heard on the radio today.”

“It’s dangerous. You’ll be weak. You could easily get infected, unless it’s done right. And we don’t have what’s necessary for—”

“I bought some stuff from the Pharmacy today when I got the hair dye. I wasn’t sure what to get, but I hope it’ll work. And I got lots of fresh food for myself at the grocery.”

Eli looked at her a long time. “You’re serious about this, aren’t you?”

Maria nodded.

“You don’t have enough. You won’t be able to keep up.”

“At least let me try.” She looked longingly at Eli. “*Please*. I don’t want you two to get killed, Eli. Really, I don’t. I care about you too much.”

“What did you mean about me saying something in my sleep?”

“Eli, if I tell you what happened, do you promise not to get upset?”

Eli looked at her suspiciously. “Why would I promise that when I don’t even know what you’re going to say? No, I won’t.”

“Okay. Well, I’ll tell you anyway. You were crawling around the apartment last night, calling for your mother.”

Eli’s eyes flashed. “That’s a *lie!* When we’re asleep, we’re asleep! That’s impossible!”

“Eli, why would I tell you that I pointed a gun at you, but lie about that?”

Eli’s eyes welled up with tears. “You’re *lying!* I *know* it! You—”

Maria reached out and gently put her hand on Eli’s forearm. “It’s true, Eli. Tell me what happened here. Why are you so afraid?”

Eli violently shook off Maria’s hand. “Don’t *touch* me! I don’t want to talk about it! I can’t go through that again! I can’t—” But she did not finish her sentence because her tears took command, cutting off her ability to speak. She began to cry in earnest; and sobbing, she lowered her face into her hands.

Oskar’s gentle voice came softly from the bedroom. “Eli? Are you okay? Maria?” He peeked around the corner and looked at the two of them. Maria motioned him to come in, and he quickly came and sat down next to Eli. He put his arms around her and he comforted her as she cried on his shoulder. He glanced at Maria several times, trying to understand what was wrong. “Eli . . . Eli, what is it? Why are you crying?”

After a long time, Eli finally spoke through her tears, her voice high and full of tension. “Because I’m *afraid!* I’m really, really *afraid*, Oskar. I’m sorry! So sorry. I’ve tried to be strong, to be brave for you, but I’ve been having dreams--bad dreams. About Him. About what happened. And I know what you want, and it’s what *I* want, too, but . . . it’s hard. Just to be back here. So *hard*.”

Oskar looked into her eyes. “Why didn’t you *tell* me? I would’ve understood.”

Eli sniffed and looked forlornly down at her lap. “Because then you would’ve said we shouldn’t come here. And I didn’t want you to feel that way, because I know how important it . . . because I’m responsible. For what happened to you. And I didn’t want you to think that I’m not behind you on this.”

“Oh, *Eli*. I know how much you love me. Don’t you know that? And I love you, too. Nothing you can say or do is ever going to change that.”

Slowly she looked up at him. “I know you love me, Oskar. I just didn’t want to disappoint you.”

He took her hands into his and squeezed them gently. “We can go somewhere else, if you want. Gothenburg, Malmö—wherever you want. I don’t care . . . as long as we’re together.”

“No, Oskar. We’re here. And we’re going to go through with this. No matter what.”

Oskar looked at Maria. “So are you guys going to tell me what’s going on?”

Maria glanced at Eli, who looked back at her and nodded slightly.

“Oskar, I think Eli’s been having bad dreams. And last night, while you were asleep, she crawled out of the tub and came into the bedroom. I think she was sleepwalking—she wasn’t really awake. And she—” Maria again looked into Eli’s eyes—“she wanted her mom.”

Oskar was quiet for a second or two; he swallowed and looked at Eli. “Oh. Well . . . I know how much Eli misses her mom. I miss mine, too.” He looked at Maria. “So what happened? What’d you do?”

Maria smiled, reached over and touched Eli’s knee. “I did what any good mother would do: I took her into my arms and rocked her back to sleep.”

†

She sat on the couch, trying hard to conceal a grimace as her blood flowed freely in a heavy, dark rivulet from a big vein in her cold, captive arm.

She heard them breathing rapidly from their hungry mouths; felt their tongues lapping greedily at the flow a few centimeters below the cut.

She looked at their upturned faces, and was glad that their eyes were closed. Closed, so that she would not have to see the evil in them.

Later, as the sun began to rise, she lay on the bed with both of them curled up next to her; one on each side. She caressed their small, narrow shoulders. She relished the feel of their heads gently rising and falling with each breath that she took, and their small hands, clasped together across her chest, just below her breasts. She knew that they drew comfort from the sound of her breathing and her heart beating in her chest. For the first time in her life, Maria felt fulfilled.

My children. How I love you.

Chapter 14

11 AUGUST 1983 – 8:13 p.m. Danderyd

The minister spoke the words to the steady beep of the cardiorespiratory monitor and poured the water onto the infant's forehead. It trickled down his temple until it was caught on a folded pad of clean, white cloth. "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Kurt stood off to the side of Gabe's bed, watching as Jon and Britt thanked the minister for coming to help and offer his support. He thought it ironic that he had been able to attend Gabe's baptism after all. He should've been happy about that, but of course, no one had expected it to happen in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.

Bacterial meningitis. That's what the lumbar puncture had shown late yesterday evening. Somehow, bacteria—they weren't yet sure exactly what kind—had found its way into his nervous system and had infected the covering of his brain. Now he was getting intravenous antibiotics to try and save his life. Flora had related what the doctor had told Britta: that his illness was fatal 30 percent of the time.

He looked at the little bundle of tissue that was Gabe. Instead of the brightly colored footie jammies that Britta favored, he was half-naked in a diaper that seemed too large for him and covered with tubes, wires, white gauze and bandages. His little mouth, which usually could be persuaded to smile with some gentle bouncing on Kurt's knee, was now covered by tape that secured a tube inserted down his windpipe. His first grandchild, barely a month old, and here he was, sedated and attached to a mechanical ventilator. Fighting to live.

He suddenly marveled at their pathetic circumstances. It seemed hard to believe that in the latter half of the 20th Century, infections still claimed lives in places like Stockholm, which offered some of the finest medical care in the world. Yet here they were, huddled

around a little baby who was probably dying, praying for him and making sure he was baptized before it was too late.

Life, it seemed, was still terribly fragile, even in the modern age. He understood, perhaps moreso than most people, that death lingered around every corner, ready to claim the unwary, despite all of the efforts to deny it, delay it, and defeat it. It seemed as though the older he got, the more keenly he felt the proximity of death; grasped its nearness to everyday life. Nobody lived forever.

Or so he had thought.

He excused himself from his family, telling them that he wanted to go down to the cafeteria and get a cup of coffee.

As he waited for the elevator, he reflected on the call he'd received from Dr. Larson, the deputy chief medical examiner, a half hour after Martin had left. Larson had done the autopsy on the Fransson girl who'd died over in Sundbyberg. He was an old friend of Kurt's who had begun his career as a forensic pathologist in 1968, five years after Kurt had moved up to Homicide. They'd worked together on many cases over the years.

"Hi, Kurt."

"Hey, Joel." Kurt tried to remember whether Larson owed him any labs on his open cases, but couldn't think of a thing. "What's going on?"

"I wanted to let you know that I think they made a big mistake, taking you off the Christensen case. And then putting you on leave—that wasn't right."

"Mmm. Well, I appreciate that, Joel. I know I stuck my neck out—"

Joel chuckled. "way out—"

Irritated but maintaining his composure, Kurt continued. "... yeah—way out—but the facts are what they are, you know?"

"That they are. I wish I could've assisted on the Christensen post. But I wanted you to know that a lot of people down here in the basement feel the same way I do about what's going on."

"Thanks."

"But hey, Kurt, I wanted to let you know something else. This is strictly on the QT, but I figured if anyone should know this, it should be you."

Kurt's ears pricked up. "What's that?"

“I did the post on that woman in Sundbyberg. You know—the skydiver?”

Kurt chuckled. “Yeah. Fransson.”

“Right.”

“And?”

“She was injured before she hit that apartment wall, Kurt.”

There was a pause. “How’d you determine that?”

“Her right wrist—most of the bones in it were crushed. Couldn’t have been caused by impact—wrong pattern.”

“Crushed? How?”

“Don’t know, but the damage went all the way around. Scaphoid, triquetrum—even the ends of the radius and ulna were fractured. And her right shoulder was dislocated too, although I can’t say for sure that it wasn’t from the impacts.”

“How about timing?”

“Had to have been within 15 to 20 minutes of death, because there wasn’t enough time for any hematoma to develop, or even any swelling. I mean, we’re talking minutes before.”

“Could it have happened immediately before she died?”

“Yes.”

“Well, thanks for letting me know that, Joel.”

“But hey, Kurt . . . I mean, what do you think?”

“About . . . ?”

“You know. About your theory. You think this might be related?”

Kurt closed his eyes and imagined a small girl with black hair grabbing a grown woman by the wrist, hoisting her up into the air, then—what? Flinging her?

His instincts told him clamp down. Gotta be careful what I say.

“Don’t know, Joel. Don’t know.”

There was disappointed silence at the other end of the line. He knew he should say more; Larson had disclosed confidential information to him, and now wanted something in return. Not playing the game risked damaging his friendship with Larson, but there was too much at stake right now. Finally, to move the conversation forward he said, "Who's investigating that—Hagen?"

"Yeah."

"What'd you tell him?"

"Same thing I just told you."

"What'd he make of it?"

"Nothing. I put it in my report, and I haven't heard squat."

"Well, I'd be curious to know if anything comes of it."

"No problem, Kurt. I'll let you know if I hear more." Kurt knew he wouldn't.

"Thanks, Joel."

"You bet. See you soon, right?"

"Right."

He stepped outside and stood on the sidewalk by the taxi stand with his coffee. With a practiced hand, he put a cigarette in his mouth and lit up. He was glad that Flora had remained in Gabe's room with Brit so she wouldn't give him any of that silent disapproval crap that she was so good at. After all, every man was entitled to at least one vice.

It was a beautiful evening. The sun had already disappeared behind the hospital towers at his back, and with its departure the air had grown cooler. The moon wasn't out yet, but soon would be, he supposed.

Somewhere out there was something he didn't understand. Something that had the shape of a little girl, but yet had supernatural strength and abilities. Something that was extremely dangerous and had to be caught.

His restless mind worked over the details of his investigation like a sewing needle moving relentlessly through fabric, trying to understand and make sense of everything.

Assume he was right and she really was a vampire. Assume she needs human blood to live. Why would she rely on a human helper to get blood for her? Wouldn't it be easier for her to get it by herself, if she was so strong? Was it to reduce the risk of detection? To

avoid a pattern of victims, all bitten in the neck? Or to serve as a scapegoat in case things went south? Maybe all of those reasons.

The helper kills the first kid on October 21, but for whatever reason, leaves his jug behind. Probably interrupted by the girls who found the body; got scared and ran away. Then three days later, Bengtsson gets nailed at the underpass. This time, the vampire herself goes out. Fed up with the helper? Was the helper injured? Not clear.

He thought he had the killing method figured out. There hadn't been any second person, according to Bohman; just the kid. This thing looks like a little girl, according to the hospital receptionist. Who would be afraid of a little girl? So somehow, she tricks Bengtsson into getting close to her, then grabs him. Once she's got him in her arms, it's all over; she's squeezing the shit out of him, and there's no escape. Then she bites him, and then . . .

Why twist the neck? That was the part he couldn't figure out. To make sure he was dead? He'd *have* to be dead if she'd sucked out all the blood. The only thing that twisting the head would add would be to break the spinal cord--twist it right in two. And both of the later two guys who'd been squeezed had been similarly treated.

She'd fed on TRK—he was the only one they could really prove *did* have his blood drained via a bite--but didn't twist his neck. Why? Of course, his neck had broken anyway when he hit that awning. *Jesus*. The thing wants to make sure that something doesn't happen, something involving the spinal cord, maybe the brain. But what?

He'd already figured that the thing needed to eat about once every two weeks, judging from the period of time between Bengtsson's death and the attack on Lind. So Lind gets attacked on November 6. But the attack is interrupted by Sorensson, who kicks the kid off his girlfriend. Lind is wounded, but not killed. Three days later, she goes up in flames when the poor, unsuspecting nurse yanks up the blinds.

He paused.

She was bitten, but didn't die until exposed to the sun.

Lind had been *infected*. The only difference was

The image of Gabe, lying in his bed upstairs, came to him--infected with meningitis.

Her neck--it hadn't been broken.

He felt a surge of adrenaline. Suddenly he didn't want his cigarette anymore. He took one last drag and flipped it into the cigarette tray on top of the trash can. Then he swallowed the rest of his coffee.

The thing had broken their necks to keep them from turning into vampires. The infection traveled through the nervous system.

†

Later, Kurt lay in his bed, his mind still restless. Flora rested beside him in the darkness.

It didn't want to make new vampires. Why not?

Maybe it didn't want competition? Or was it just because it realized that making more was a bad thing?

He thought it ridiculous that the logical analysis of evidence had brought him to wondering about a question like this. *I'm crawling into the mind of a vampire. I ought to be committed.* If the Chief knew what he was thinking, he really *would* be fired, he supposed.

He grinned to himself. *So, maybe it was altruistic?*

She's altruistic?

It.

She.

Her--a girl.

Dammit. Was it an 'it' or a 'she'?

He looked over at Flora, wondering if she was still awake. He wanted to talk to someone who didn't think like himself, like a cop. He thought of himself as a very left-brained kind of guy. Flora was a woman; he'd come to understand, after almost 40 years of marriage, that she thought about things differently than he did. She was very intuitive, and tended to see things through the prism of personal relationships. She was usually very insightful about other people and their motivations. Sometimes in past cases, she had been very helpful in seeing the facts in a new and useful light.

He gently nudged her. "Are you still awake?"

Her voice, sleepy and a little irritated. "I am now." A pause; then wearily: "What?"

"I need to talk to you--about my case. Do you mind?"

A grumpy sigh, followed by a creak as she turned over in their bed to face him. "What time is it? Don't tell me you're still obsessing about this vampire thing."

He rolled his heavy, tired body onto his side to face her in the dark; found her hand with his. “Yeah, I am.”

An even bigger sigh, but accompanied by a gentle squeeze that told him that she was willing to bear with him, even after an exhausting, stressful day keeping vigil at the hospital. “Kurt, you know that no one is ever going to believe that a vampire is running around. I still can’t understand why you did that. You’re going to lose your job, if you’re not careful.”

“I don’t care what people believe, Flora. I know what the evidence is, and I’m going to follow the evidence until I catch this thing, or they can me. One or the other.”

Flora was not surprised by his response; this had been Kurt’s attitude throughout his career. “Well, what do you want to talk about?”

“I’m trying to understand this thing—this creature. If I can understand it, then I have a better chance of stopping it.”

“I thought it was supposed to be a girl.”

“Yeah, that’s right. That’s what two or three witnesses have said.”

“Then why are you calling her an ‘it’?”

“Well, I . . . I suppose I’m just having a hard time imagining a vampire being a little girl, for starters. That maybe . . . maybe it’s something else, something that just takes the form of a girl to make itself appear innocuous.”

“So you think this thing can change shape, along with all the other things you believe it can do. The super strength, the flying—all of that.”

“Well, maybe. I don’t know.”

“But like you say, if you just look at the evidence, there’s no one who’s said the thing has taken on a different shape, is there?”

“No. Well, one person said she had teeth, but . . . not like a different *person*. Or a monster.”

“So why couldn’t it just be a girl?”

Silence, as he tried to think about this idea with an open mind. “I guess there’s no good reason. But still—it seems hard to believe.”

Flora laughed softly, and in the dim light he could see her turn her head to look at the ceiling. “I can’t believe you’re getting hung up on *that* idea, when you’re prepared to admit everything else.”

Kurt smiled sheepishly, then chuckled himself. “I guess you have a point.”

She turned back to look at him. “What if it *is* just a little girl, Kurt? Didn’t you say that you thought she killed those schoolboys to save some boy’s life?”

“I think so. I think she and that Oskar kid lived next door to each other for awhile in Blackeberg.”

“So she knew him before all that happened.”

“I think so, yes.”

“If she knew him before the pool thing, why would she help him?”

“Mmm . . . well, because . . .”

“She fell in love.” She said it quickly and matter-of-factly. “That’s what happened, Kurt.”

Kurt made a scoffing sound. “Oh come on, Flora. This is getting well beyond the pale.”

“Is it? *You’re* the one who said you wanted to understand her better. And that’s what I think happened. If you’re right and you’re really dealing with a little vampire, then I think she’s a little girl who fell in love with that Oskar, and was trying to protect him. To save his life. Why else would she go to all that trouble, unless she cared about him?”

“Flora, please. Something that squeezes people until their ribs break, sucks out their blood, twists their heads around 360 degrees, tears their heads off—falls in love. No way.”

“Kurt, that’s the dumbest thing I’ve heard you say in a long time,” she retorted. “You’re saying that anyone who’s capable of extreme violence can’t love someone? You’re talking about the whole human race.”

“Hmm. Well, yeah, but—”

“Let’s just take this all the way, Kurt. Imagine that you became a vampire. Suddenly you need to kill other people to live. What would you do?”

“I’d go see a hematologist or something like that. Try to find a cure.”

“Of course you would. Because you’re a mature, grown-up man who believes in the power of science to solve problems. But what if you had become a vampire when you were only 11 or 12? Do you think you’d do the same thing?”

“I’d try to get my parents to help me.”

“Okay. I would, too. But how did this kid become a vampire, Kurt?”

“Flora, I have no idea. This seems kinda silly.”

“Yes, you *do* have an idea. Don’t you believe that the lady that caught on fire became a vampire? Because she was bitten?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

“So this girl was bitten, too. Doesn’t that follow?”

“I guess so. Unless, maybe she’s the first one.”

“When do you think she was bitten?”

“I don’t know. Could be any time, I guess.”

“Don’t you ‘freeze’ once you become a vampire? You don’t change afterwards.”

“Well, I think that’s what happens in the movies. Vampires live forever, and they always look the same.”

“So you have no idea how old this ‘little girl’ might actually be. What if she was born in the Middle Ages? Before they had decent health care? What would you have done then, if you were her?”

“Well, I’m not sure. But I know I wouldn’t go around killing people.”

Flora stared at him briefly, until he began to feel uncomfortable. “That’s easy for you to say, isn’t it?”

“Flora. I’d rather kill myself than kill an innocent human being. You know that—I’m a police officer, for God’s sake.”

“Of course I know that, Kurt. But are you prepared to think that others might make different choices?”

“Well, it’s difficult to imagine. I don’t know of anyone who has to kill other people to live. There’s never been such a person, as far as I know.”

“Well, if you’re right, maybe now there is. You know, Kurt, sometimes I wonder if you can see the forest for the trees on this.”

He frowned. “What do you mean? I’ve been analyzing this thing until the cows come home.”

“I mean that if she really *is* a vampire, there are broader ramifications that merely catching her.”

“Such as?”

“Such as a person unlike anything the world has ever seen, Kurt. A different form of human being. Someone with incredible abilities. Someone who maybe is able to live forever. She could be a walking history book.”

“Yes, you’re right, of course. But it’s really not my job to worry about those things. This girl is killing people *left and right*, Flora. She *has* to be stopped.”

“I think it *is* your job, Kurt. I think it would be everyone’s job to think about it. And if you’re right about what she is, then there’s no *way* she should be killed. Captured, yes. But not destroyed.”

“Well, we’ve gotta find her first. And no one has any idea where she might be.”

“Is that still your concern?”

He looked at her, stony-faced. “When the next person dies, they’ll change their tune. You can count on it.”

†

Eli began to wake up to the soft, rapid *lub-dub* of Maria’s heart. She lay in the crook of her arm, warm under the covers facing Oskar on the other side. He and Maria were still asleep.

She could not remember the last time before Oskar that she had fallen asleep with someone. There had been times when she had promised to lie down in a bed with Håkan, but she had not had to follow through before he had been arrested. And Håkan’s desires to be close to her, to touch her, had been selfish. He had not wanted to make her feel good; he had just cared about making himself feel good. Maria was different; after she had given them her own blood and the dawn had approached, it had just seemed natural to lie down with her. And they had.

With her ear pressed against Maria’s shoulder, Eli listened to the rhythmic sighing of her breathing, and the other sounds that she made while she slept: an occasional, soft clucking from her throat when she swallowed; a gurgling from her stomach; a low-pitched, rumbly creaking sound when her muscles moved beneath Eli’s ear . . . so different from Oskar, whose only sounds were a sluggish heartbeat and the animalistic purr they made. Maria’s were the sounds of a natural, living person--warm and alive.

She felt badly that she might have misjudged Maria, for mistrusting her. But her feelings had been a muddled response to Maria’s changing attitude towards them. At first, Maria

had seemed to Eli to be very self-centered, but at the same time she wanted to become a social worker so that she could help others. Then she had agreed to help them move to Norrköping, and not only had signed a lease, but had dropped out of her classes and moved with them. Her pointing the gun at them had been frightening and very difficult to take, but Eli had been impressed that Maria had fessed up to it, and had given her the gun. And of course, she understood why Maria would have been scared after reading the *Expressen* article.

What had most impressed Eli was that Maria had offered her own blood to them, so that they would not have to go out. She was genuinely concerned for their safety because of what had happened with the police report, and she wanted to protect them. That was a first, in her experience—not the desire to protect, in itself—no, that was not new—but that this desire was not selfish or perverse. Maria had shown that she loved them as a mother would love her child, and Eli knew that she loved the good in them, not the bad. And she was completely different from Håkan, who had loved Eli's body more than he had cared about her. She supposed that maybe Maria felt badly about her own baby, David, who had died. Maybe this was her way of making up for what a bad mother she'd been before.

She opened her eyes a bit and studied Maria's features. She did not look anything like Eli's mom. Her mom had had black, curly hair and brown eyes, similar to Eli's; Maria was a natural blond, and her eyes were blue. Her mother's face had been thinner than Maria's, too, and had lacked the cleft chin.

She had been angry and embarrassed when Maria had revealed how she'd crawled around the apartment, calling for her mom. But when the truth had finally come out about how disturbed she felt about being back in Norrköping, and Oskar had said he understood, it hadn't seemed so bad after all. In fact, Eli had been secretly pleased that Maria had done her best to comfort her. She had been kind to her, just as she had been kind to Oskar the night that he had bitten Rafael.

Could she accept Maria's love? That was really the big question. Oskar had done so without reservations, it seemed, and Eli struggled to understand why it seemed so easy for him when it was hard for her. She knew from what he had said that Oskar had mixed feelings for his real mom; that although he knew that she loved him at one level, she had been unable to love him in a way that recognized or understood who he was, or was becoming. He had been . . . outgrowing her love, and for whatever reason, his mom didn't want to see or deal with what was happening to him. Maria's love was based on a simple, brutally truthful understanding of who the two of them were: that they basically good kids with a terrible disease who needed help.

Eli squeezed Oskar's hand and then stroked the back of his fingers. Was she jealous of Maria? Of how Oskar had, with natural ease, seemed to open up and accept her as part of their life? Was that part of the reason she had had such a hard time with Maria? Yes, she realized—in all honesty, it was true. A part of Eli, the part that was insecure and needy, was afraid of the relationship that had developed between them; was afraid that Maria might somehow pull Oskar away from her. Eli sensed that what Maria was offering them filled an

emotional hole in Oskar's life that she, Eli, was probably unable to fill. After all, she could never really be Oskar's mom. While it was of course true that she did her best to look out for Oskar, she was more like Oskar's one and only best friend—his . . . *soulmate*.

But could *Maria* ever be Oskar's soulmate? No. Just saying it sounded foolish. Maria's love did not truly threaten Oskar's love of her. She was being stupid to feel jealous of Maria in this way.

The real problem, Eli realized, was that it was simply very hard for her to think of Maria as a substitute for her own mother. In a perverse way, she felt that to accept the love that Maria was offering would betray her feelings, her longing, for her real mom; would be like closing the door on a relationship that she had struggled to keep alive for her entire life, one that was central to her understanding of who she was: her mother's son.

Yet, she also understood that her own mother was long dead. She, Eli, was stuck in the present—had to live in the present. Longing for her real mother was, in a way, a useless thing; trying to relive sensations, re-experience feelings that now only caused pain. And somehow, this woman, whose life Oskar had chosen to spare, had decided to give up everything to be with them; to take care of them. Now, even to feed them.

Had Maria given Eli any reason *not* to love her?

No.

Could she love Maria, but still cherish the memories of her real mother?

What would her mother have told her to do, if she were still alive: remain trapped in a dead, painful past, or embrace the present, and accept the genuine love of a living person? The question answered itself.

Feeling better, Eli sighed and snuggled closer. She could have her mom, Oskar *and* Maria, too.

She smiled a little when she thought about last night; about Maria's frustrated attempt to dye their hair. She had put it on both of them, working it into their hair, and then Eli and Oskar had sat around for several minutes, grinning at each other in anticipation of their 'new look,' and feeling silly with clear plastic bags on their heads. But it quickly became obvious that nothing was happening. They had rinsed the dye out in the shower, but their hair had looked no different. Maria had been nonplussed. They had tried a little more, but to no effect.

Then Maria had suggested that maybe she could cut their hair to help them look different. Eli had told her it wouldn't work, but hadn't minded when Maria asked if she could try anyway. So she had cut Oskar's bangs, and just as Eli had predicted, before their eyes his hair had inched down to where it had been a minute before. Eli had been secretly amused by the look on Maria's face. Some people just had to learn by themselves.

But in truth, it wasn't really all that funny. Changing their hair would have helped quite a bit to make them look different, and right now, Eli felt like they needed all the help they could get.

The article in the newspaper had been deeply upsetting. Before reading it, Eli had not really understood how strongly the odds had been stacked against them. It was shocking, almost unfathomable, how the police knew so much about what had happened; how they had tied it all together. And it was all because of this one detective who was pitted against them; out there somewhere, bound and determined to catch them.

Tears silently appeared in the corners of her eyes, ran down the side of her face, and soaked into Maria's nightgown as she squeezed Oskar's hand harder. It just wasn't *fair*. Why couldn't they just be normal, like everyone else? Her whole life had been spent like this—full of fear and anxiety, harried and harassed. Always running away, always looking over her shoulder, pursued by people who didn't understand her and had no desire to. And they had only grown more powerful over the decades—stronger and stronger, with longer and longer memories. The whole world was against them—two little kids who were just trying to stay alive. And now, just when she had finally found Oskar and things seemed to be getting better

She sniffed, wiped her nose, and cried in earnest, trying hard not to make any noise and wake up Maria.

Oskar.

She opened her eyes and saw Oskar open his; saw him look at her in confusion.

I'm scared. I need you.

Together they lifted their heads from Maria's sleeping form and looked at each other. He didn't understand exactly what was wrong, but he felt her anxiety, and understood that she needed to be comforted. They got up and hugged.

He whispered in her ear. "Eli, what is it? What's wrong with—"

"Shhh. I want to go away with you. Just for a little while—where we can be together. Take me to another party."

Still he did not understand, but it did not matter—he accepted. With their hands holding their arms, he kissed her neck, and she kissed his. And by the gentle workings of their mouths they broke through their barriers and began, once again, to share each other. But after they sank to the floor, it was *Oskar* who felt the rising pulse as Eli fell asleep, and he was pulled into her, into her rushing darkness, and went . . .

. . . under a bed.

Lying on his stomach, on a rough, wooden floor. There was a coil of rope next to him.

He heard muffled giggling above him, and then footsteps on some stairs, growing louder.

The bed creaked and suddenly Elias' face appeared, upside down, in the gap between the bedrail and the floor. It was very shadowy, and Oskar realized from the slight flicker on the wall behind Elias that the room was lit by a candle, not a lightbulb.

Elias gave him a big, secretive smile. Oskar was surprised at how . . . *happy* he looked. He appeared to be about the same age as the Eli he knew, but there was something different. His eyes . . . they were not the eyes of someone who had been alive for centuries, or who had experienced the horrors of the world. He was seeing Eli as he had been before--

“Shhh! Oskar—don't make a peep until I tell you!” Just as quickly, he disappeared, and Oskar heard more subdued giggles as the footsteps reached the top of the stairs, somewhere to his left.

He turned his head to look out the other side of the bed. He saw a pair of old-fashioned, leather shoes with ankles and legs sticking out of them. Somewhere from downstairs he heard a man cough.

“What are you boys up to? It's time for bed.” A woman; the owner of the shoes. Oskar immediately understood that it was Eli's mother.

“Nothing!” replied two voices in unison.

The feet moved and then turned, and there was another creak as Eli's mom sat on the edge of the bed. “Come now, quiet down. Let's say our prayers.”

“Yes, Mama.” Elias' voice.

He heard the faint sound of a book being opened; of pages being turned. “We were on Psalm 37, weren't we, Jakob?”

A voice, older and deeper than Elias', murmured assent.

“Who's turn is it to read tonight?”

Jakob's voice again. “I think it's Elias'.” There was a pause, and then he heard Eli's voice. He had never heard Eli read from the Bible before, and he was startled by how crisply and clearly he spoke the words.

“The righteous shall inherit the land, and dwell therein forever.

“The mouth of the righteous speaketh wisdom, and his tongue talketh of judgment.

“The law of his God is in his heart; none of his steps shall slide.

“The wicked watcheth the righteous, and seeketh to slay him.

“The LORD will not leave him in his hand, nor condemn him when he is judged.

“Wait on the LORD, and keep his way, and he shall exalt thee to inherit the land: when the wicked are cut off, thou shalt see it.

“I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green bay tree.

“Yet he passed away, and, lo, he was not: yea, I sought him, but he could not be found.

“Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright: for the end of that man is peace.

“But the transgressors shall be destroyed together: the end of the wicked shall be cut off.

“But the salvation of the righteous is of the LORD: he is their strength in the time of trouble.”

“That was very good, Elias. The Lord loves those who do good, doesn’t He? Now, are either of you thankful for anything that happened today?”

Elias snickered. “I’m thankful that Papa made Jakob bring down the hay instead of me.”

Jakob spoke, but not too harshly. “Shut up, Elias. You could’ve helped.” The bed creaked once again, and there was a soft smacking sound. “Oww! Stop it, Jakob!”

“Boys, no more foolishness—it’s late. Jakob, I found plenty of chores for Elias to do while you took care of the cows.”

Respectfully: “Yes, Mama.”

“Now don’t tell me that neither one of you hasn’t got a single thing to be thankful for today.”

Elias spoke. “I’m thankful that the harvest’s coming in like Papa wanted.”

“Yes. Me too,” Jakob chimed in. Then he said, “and I’m thankful that Lilja had her calf this morning without dying.”

Elias’ voice, happy and excited. “And that we have a new baby calf—Magnus!”

“‘Magnus’ was a good choice, Elias,” his mother replied. “He certainly was big—had your Papa worried for awhile.”

Jakob spoke. “Oh . . . that Mrs. Bergman made it safely back from her trip to Stockholm with Paula.”

Oskar’s mother said, “You’ll be able to play with Paula on Saturday. I’ve invited the Bermans over for supper.”

Jakob and Elias both talked about how happy they would be to see her, so they could pepper her with questions about her trip.

“Now, is there anyone you want to pray for?”

There was silence for a few seconds; then Oskar’s mom spoke again, this time with a note of disappointed expectancy. “What about Uncle Mårten?”

“Yes, of course,” Jakob replied. “Sorry. Lord Jesus, please make Uncle Mårten’s fever go away soon.”

“And let’s not forget about Mrs. Andersen with her leg pain?”

Jakob and Elias dutifully said a short prayer for Mrs. Andersen.

“Okay, you two. Time for our last prayer, then?”

The three of them now spoke in unison.

“I thank Thee, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ,

“Thy dear Son, that Thou hast graciously kept me this day;

“and I pray Thee that Thou wouldst forgive me all my sins where I have done wrong, and graciously keep me this night.

“For into Thy hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things.

“Let Thy holy angel be with me, that the wicked Foe may have no power over me.

“Amen.”

Oskar heard movement on the bed and the sound of the covers being arranged; then, very faintly, the soft sound of kisses. Both boys exchanged 'good nights' and 'love yous' with their mother. Then the light went out, and she left the room.

For several seconds, Oskar could not see as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Then, faintly, he was again able to make out the wall. There was no sound except the footsteps receding down the stairs. There was some more coughing, and the sounds of movement from downstairs for a minute or so. Soon, the whole house was silent, and Oskar realized that the wind was blowing around outside.

He waited for what seemed like forever, lying still under the bed. As the minutes ticked slowly by, he realized that instead of a box spring, there was a network of ropes supporting a tic mattress over his head.

He was beginning to wonder what he should do when Elias' hand appeared, motioning him to come out. With a whispered hiss he said, "And bring the rope!"

As quietly as he could, Oskar slid out from under the bed. He found the rope with his leg, and pushed it out ahead of him with his foot. Once he was out, he popped up next to the bed.

Elias and Jakob were sitting up, waiting for him. At Elias' prompting, Oskar sat at the end of the bed, which creaked under his weight. Jakob's finger flew to his lips. "Shhh!"

Elias whispered something in Jakob's ear, and then Jakob extended his hand. Oskar took it as he studied Jakob's face. He didn't look like Elias at all. In the darkness he could not tell the color of Jakob's hair, but it was cut quite short. His face was broader, and his ears and nose were bigger.

"Hi. I'm Oskar."

"Good to meet you. I'm Jakob." He looked Oskar in the eyes. "Are you in?"

Oskar didn't know what to say. He looked to Elias, who looked back at him and said, "He's in." Then, more forcefully, "You're in, aren't you, Oskar?"

Oskar was a little apprehensive and confused, but hesitantly agreed: he was in.

"Good, good!"

The two boys sprang into action, their movements quick and quiet. They stripped off their nightshirts, found some clothes in an armoire, and changed. Then Jakob looped the rope around a broomstick and made a knot as Elias opened the window. Oskar turned to look out the window as the night air blew in.

A thin layer of clouds drifted past a waxing moon that laid the sleeping fields bare in a ghostly pallor. As far as Oskar could see there were fields, trees, and occasional clusters of small farms. He stared in awe. *The world—two hundred years before I was born.*

Jakob tapped his shoulder. “Whatcha looking at? Come on.” He threw the coil of rope out the window and secured the broomstick across the window frame; then looked at Elias. “You go first.”

Elias grabbed the rope and clambered out the window. Carefully he lowered himself a little ways, then dropped deftly to the ground. Jakob looked at Oskar. “You next.”

Smiling, Elias looked up at Oskar from the ground outside and motioned with his hand. He whispered encouragement. “Come on, Oskar! You can do it!”

Uncertain of himself but caught up in their excitement, Oskar got ahold of the rope and carefully swung himself out of the window while Jakob held the top steady. He dropped down so that he was more or less hanging by his arms, lowered himself a little further, and then let go. He dropped backwards and down, landed hard on his feet, and rolled. Then he got up, shaken and dusty but unharmed. Within a few seconds, Jakob was clambering down the rope, and soon the three of them were standing in the yard. Elias picked up the end of the rope and threw it behind some bushes next to the house.

“Come on!” They motioned to Oskar, and the three of them ran quietly across the yard toward a fence on the opposite side of a lane. It had thin poles that were nearly twice as high as the fence itself. They climbed over and began moving past a barn through a barren pasture stewn with rocks and cow pies. When they were behind the barn and out of earshot from the house, Oskar caught up to Elias and grabbed his shoulder. “Wait! Hold up a sec!”

Jakob and Elias slowed, then stopped and turned to look at him. Elias’ eyes were darkly excited. “What—what is it?”

“Where are we going, Eli—I mean, Elias?”

Elias did not seem to notice that Oskar had called him ‘Eli.’ “To Mr. Eriksson’s place. You know—the tax commissioner.”

Jacob gave Elias a puzzled look. “I thought you said he was in on this.”

“He *is* in on it.” He shot Jakob a stern look. “Oskar’s my best friend. We stick together through thick and thin. Right, Oskar?”

“Yeah, but . . . are they expecting us, or—”

Jakob snorted. “*Expecting* us? I sure hope not.”

“Well, then . . . I don’t understand.”

Elias stepped up to Oskar and put his hand on Oskar’s forearm; leaned in so his face was very close. “*You* know, Oskar . . . the *dare*.”

“The dare?”

“Yeah—with the Lundgrens. We can’t back out *now*. Not after last week.”

Oskar’s unease grew. “Umm . . . what’re we going to do?”

“Take a midnight horse ride. Don’t *worry*—nothing’s gonna happen.”

“Elias—I don’t know how to ride a horse.”

Elias raised his eyebrows, but then made a dismissive gesture. “It’s all right, Oskar. You can ride with me. All you haveta do is hang on.”

Jakob turned and headed toward the far corner of the barnyard. “Come on—if we don’t get moving, they won’t wait for us.”

Oskar hesitated; he didn’t like the sound of this. But Elias was looking at him imploringly, and he didn’t want to be a stick in the mud and spoil their plans. He especially didn’t want to disappoint Elias. So he gave him a little nod and with that, Elias turned and followed after Jakob, with Oskar taking up the rear.

They climbed over another fence, and then followed the tree-lined edge of a wheat field a long way. The wind blew and the wheat responded in whispering, undulating waves. When Oskar wasn’t watching ahead to keep track of Elias and Jakob and to avoid tripping over rocks, his eyes kept returning to the mysterious, rippling patterns.

The ground rose gently, and soon they came to another fence. They climbed over and then began to walk along it, parallel to a field of barley. Then the fenceline stopped, but they kept going. To Oskar, it seemed as though they must have gone about another half-kilometer or so before they started downhill to an irregular line of tall trees. As they drew close, Jakob cut across the corner of the field, angling toward a small clump of trees.

They came to a large pile of stones just outside the little grove. Elias climbed up the pile, and when he got to the top he called out. “Erik! Mikael! You out here?” But there was no response. He called again; still, there was nothing.

Then Jakob called out a few times. They waited several seconds, but heard only the wind sighing through the trees.

“Shit!” Jakob looked angrily at Elias. “We’re too late. They didn’t wait up.” Oskar was relieved. Maybe now they could just go home. He began to wonder if he could climb back up the rope and into the bedroom.

Elias spoke. “Maybe *they’re* late. Let’s go down to the creek and wait a bit. Come’on, Oskar.”

Jakob didn’t reply, but apparently found Elias’ plan agreeable; he moved with Elias into the trees, and Oskar followed. They passed a makeshift play fort made of rocks and logs, and then popped out on the other side by the edge of a small stream. Elias climbed up on a log that lay across it, and putting one bare foot carefully in front of the other, walked slowly over to the other side, holding his arms out for balance. Then he hopped onto a boulder located next to the exposed stump end of the log and sat down. Jakob motioned for Oskar to go next, and then he took up the rear.

They rested for a minute or so in the moonlight, not saying much. Then Jakob said, in a tone of obvious disappointment, “This is *stupid*—they probably chickened out.” He looked at Elias. “Well? What do you want to do? We came all this way”

“Yeah—let’s do it anyway. If we don’t, we’ll never be able to show our faces at school again.”

Oskar spoke softly. “Are you sure this is such a good idea?”

“Awww, we aren’t going to *steal* his horse, Oskar. We just want to take a ride, that’s all. They won’t even know it happened.”

“How much further is it?”

Elias pointed to another small hill. “Just over that field yonder.”

“Where’s the horse?”

“In the stable out back. Come’on, we’ll show you.” Before Oskar could protest further, they began moving again.

When they crested the rise, Oskar saw that they were approaching a large manor house made of stone, with several outbuildings. It was surrounded by a generous, carefully tended yard; tall, stately trees; and a stone wall. Oskar realized that they were moving toward it from the rear and at an angle, because he could make out a long, tree-lined driveway stretching away on the opposite side to join what must’ve been a road somewhere out in front. Dim, yellow candlelight came from a couple of the windows on the first floor.

They entered an apple orchard, and the two brothers began to sneak from tree to tree so that they would not be seen. Oskar, feeling increasingly nervous, followed suit. The

house looked very imposing, and he imagined that whoever owned it must be quite wealthy.

After climbing over the stone wall, they ran the last, short distance the back wall of the stable. They snuck around the corner and without making a sound, moved through a flowerbed alongside the stable toward the front. Oskar smelled the unfamiliar odor of hay and manure, and thought he heard something big moving on the other side of the wall.

When they reached the front corner, they crouched down behind one of the large, wooden doors that had been opened and pulled back. Jakob carefully sneaked a peak around the corner of the door; then turned and whispered. "I don't see anyone."

Oskar looked at Elias with concern. "Does anyone tend to the horses?"

Elias grinned impishly. "Usually Mr. Mikkelsen—but it's Saturday night, which means he's over playing cards with Mr. Lundgren." Jakob spoke. "Don't worry. This'll be easy."

Still keeping their eye on the back of the house, the brothers carefully crept around the corner and entered the stable. Oskar followed.

The smells were even stronger inside, and were now mixed with the scent of leather and an odor peculiar to horses. In the gloom, Oskar shortly realized that they were standing in a central aisle with a series of stalls running down either side.

Jakob began looking into the stalls, and after a short period announced that he had found Mr. Eriksson's horse. "Here she is—that dappled mare."

Then Elias piped up. "Wait a minute. Come're and look at *this* one."

Jakob was about to unlatch the stall door; he stopped and joined Elias and Oskar at a door on the other side. A large, black horse thrust its head out of the stall toward them.

"Whoa. He's *big*," Elias remarked.

"Sixteen hands and pure black," Jakob added. "I don't see a lick of white on him."

Elias looked at Jakob. "Oskar and I will ride this one. You take Mr. Eriksson's."

"You sure you can handle him?"

Elias chuckled, then shrugged. "No, but . . . so what?"

Jakob gave him one last look. "Okay."

Jakob quickly bridled the mare; the black horse was already bridled. A saddle lay on a rack near the front, but there was no time for that. After another quick glance around, the

boys led the animals out of the stable and around the corner toward the back. The mare was compliant; the stallion was not. It did not like Elias pulling it by the reins, and whinnied so loudly that Oskar was certain someone would come running out of the house. Elias jerked its head smartly by the halter and said as loudly as he dared, “Come on, you stubborn devil!” Then he looked back at Oskar. “Don’t walk behind him—he’s liable to kick you.”

When they were safely back of the stable, Jakob quickly mounted the gray. It was skitterish, and turned in a half-circle, but he managed to get it under control. “You catch up, okay, Elias? We’ll go to the stream and then come back.” And before Elias could answer, he exclaimed “Watch this—Yah!” and jabbed the animal in the flanks with his heels. The horse broke into a run and Jakob guided her straight at the stone wall circling the property, which was about as high as Oskar’s chest. Appalled at Jakob’s recklessness, Oskar watched helplessly as they rushed toward the wall. At the last second they jumped over and ran off at a gallop through the orchard.

The black horse was a bundle of nerves, and did not want to be mounted. It kept turning and rearing as Elias attempted to swing up onto its bare back, and when he got too close to its head, it tried to nip him. Elias cursed and swore at it. Finally he told Oskar to hold the reins while he got on. Oskar came to Elias’ side and grabbed the animal’s halter. He was frightened of the horse, but mustered his courage and held it firmly. He realized for the first time, now that they were out of the almost pitch-black confines of the stable, how finely made the halter was. The metal parts were bright and shiny, and the bridle loops appeared to be silver with onyx centers.

With Oskar’s help, Elias was finally able to get up. Oskar handed him the reins and moved back to the animal’s side; it was only then that he truly appreciated how tall it was. Understanding this, and knowing that Elias barely had control over it, he realized the futility of what Elias had in mind. There was no way he could climb up onto the animal.

He looked at Elias as the horse neighed and stepped sideways away from him. “I can’t do it, Elias. I can’t possibly get up there. You—you go on ahead. I’ll walk.”

“Aww, come on, Oskar! At least try!”

Oskar had finally had enough of the tomfoolery. Quietly and forcefully he looked Elias in the eye. “No Elias. I *can’t*.” The trickle of fear he’d been feeling all night gained force in his chest, widening into a steady stream. “Are you even sure that Mr. Eriksson *owns* this horse? Can’t we just leave this one here, and go after Jakob?”

A wave of anger flickered over Elias’ face. “Shit, Oskar—I’m already on’im! Let me ride him a little bit, and then we’ll switch, okay? Don’t worry—I’ll help you get up.”

Disgusted, Oskar turned away. “Yeah—whatever.” He started toward the orchard, muttering under his breath. “This is *stupid*.”

Elias said nothing, and for a short time all Oskar could hear behind him were the sounds of the horse, snorting and stamping. Then Elias goaded the animal, and the black stallion shot like a bolt past Oskar.

In less than five seconds they had reached the wall. Oskar prayed that the horse would jump high enough to clear it, but at the last second it balked. It thundered to an abrupt stop, and Elias was thrown forward over its head and onto the grass.

Terror filled Oskar's heart, and he ran to help him. "Eli!"

The horse swished its tail, snorted, and began to walk toward him, its head held high and its ears laid back. It paid him absolutely no attention as he raced past.

He rushed to Elias' side. "Elias! Are you all right?" Elias slowly rolled over onto his back, eyes closed, his mouth contorted in pain. Half of his face was scratched and covered with dirt, and both palms were scraped and bleeding. He held his left arm gingerly with his right hand.

"Did you break it?"

Elias grimaced. "*Oww, oww* . . . no—no, I don't think it's broken. Maybe just—"

They both heard the approaching footsteps at the same time.

"Come'on, Eli, we need to get out of here. *Now!*" Oskar began to help Elias to his feet.

A deep, melodically hypnotizing voice, too close to be escaped, rang crisply through the air. "Midnight! Who's been riding you? Such a good horse, to come back to your master."

Frozen with terror, they turned their heads to look.

Two men stood less than five meters from them. One of them was short and held a lantern. The other was robed, tall and dark, and was leading the horse by its bridle.

"Well, well. Are these your boys, Mr. Eriksson?"

The pale, powdered face was startling in its whiteness, framed as it was by a blond wig that fluttered in the breeze. A pair of blue eyes studied them with intense interest, like a butterfly collector might study a rare and freshly acquired specimen he has just pinned to a board.

"No, I'm afraid not." Eriksson held the lantern higher and looked directly at Oskar. "You, I don't know." His eyes turned to Elias. "You . . . you're Mr. Johansson's boy, aren't you?"

“Y-yes. I am.”

“You’re the youngest, aren’t you? What’s your name?”

“Elias.”

“And you?”

“I’m Oskar. Oskar Eriksson.”

The short man harrumphed and then both men laughed. The man with the wig said, “Must be a distant branch of the family tree, hmm, Olaf?”

“Must be,” Mr. Eriksson gruffly replied.

The men stepped closer as Elias got to his feet. Now Oskar could clearly see that the tall man wore a suit of dark gray, and was wearing a red-lined robe. He looked almost caricaturish, with his makeup and red lipstick. But there was nothing funny about his eyes, which were the palest of blues; they appeared to be amused, but behind the amusement there was something deeply frightening. Oskar had never felt so afraid in the presence of another person before.

The man with the wig released his horse. He ignored Oskar and stepped forward to stand directly in front of Elias, who looked up at him, rooted to the spot, his eyes as big as saucers. He was now too afraid to cry, so all he could do was sniffle.

“Master Johansson . . . I believe you’re bleeding.” A hand, just as pale as the man’s face, reached out, and the long, thin index finger touched the abrasion on Elias’s cheek. Elias stayed stone-still; he didn’t flinch. The fingertip dabbed the bloody spot and came away, wet and red. Like a snake slithering quickly into its hole the fingertip disappeared between the thin lips and into the gash-like mouth with a kissing sound.

“Do the two of you know what the penalty is for stealing horses?”

Oskar had no idea what the answer to this question was, and Elias was too afraid to speak. His eyes were locked to the wig man’s face, and all he could do was slowly shake his head.

“Why it’s *death*, of course. You didn’t know that?” His gaze shifted from Elias to Oskar, then back again.

Elias and Oskar both managed tiny, petrified “no’s” in unison. Oskar was so frightened, he felt as though he could hardly breathe.

Mr. Eriksson stepped up and cleared his throat. “Lord, I’ve known this boy’s family for years. He comes from a good, God-fearing home. His father works some land a little ways southeast of here. I’m sure they were just out having a little fun. Isn’t that right, boys?”

At the speaking of the man's name, Elias lost all color; he now looked positively sickly. He and Oskar both nodded rapidly; then Elias looked down and said softly, "We weren't going to steal your horse, Lord. We were just looking to have a little fun, that's all. It was my idea, not Oskar's. I'm very, very sorry."

There was a long pause. Then the Prince lifted the terrified little boy's chin up so that their eyes met once again. "I've decided to let the two of you go, Elias, because Mr. Eriksson has vouched for your good family. It doesn't look like you got very far with my horse in any event. Now you and your friend run home as fast as you can, and don't ever do anything like this again. Remember, the Lord destroys the wicked, but the righteous man shall inherit the earth."

Chapter 15

Thursday 11 AUGUST 1983 - 9:30 p.m.

Maria woke up in the dark, sticky-mouthed and a little cold. As she turned onto her side and pulled the blanket around herself, she felt the slight tug of the band-aid on her left arm, and recalled the events of the previous night. Oskar and Eli had drunk from her, and later had fallen asleep with her. She opened her eyes--where were they now? She was alone on her mattress, but--

. . . she was not alone. What was that sound?

Sucking, swallowing noises, subtle and soft, very near. She frowned--what on *earth*? She groped in the darkness for a table lamp that they had put on the floor an arm's length away, found it and clicked it on; then sat up.

The children were lying together on the carpeted floor, very close to the end of the mattress. Oskar was on his back, and Eli was lying across him, but more on his left side. They were embracing each other, and when Maria saw the juxtaposition of their heads, she thought that they were

(necking)

. . . but then she realized that Oskar's mouth was open upon Eli's exposed neck, and that there was blood trickling thickly from its corner; and when she saw the movement of his throat, and heard Eli's, too, she understood that they were *biting* one other; that they were . . . *swallowing*. The sucking sound was--

Oh my God.

She gasped and recoiled backwards toward the wall, pulling the blanket up as she stared at them in mute horror. They gave no sign that they were aware of her or the light from the lamp.

After a few seconds she relaxed her grip on the blanket, and her horror slowly evolved into fascination. She sat up straighter and tilted her head this way and that to see more. Their eyes were closed and their bodies were completely still, not moving at all; as if they were in some kind of trance.

Their embrace brought to mind what she had seen yesterday morning, when Eli had crawled into her arms, calling for her mama: that Eli was sexless. And Oskar?—she didn't know, but whatever he had, he wasn't using it right now. Could he ever, she wondered, now that he was a vampire? He was still a little boy, and she assumed that like Eli, he would remain so forever. Then she felt ashamed for even thinking about the two of them having sex. After all, they were *children*, for Heaven's sake. And whatever she was seeing, it wasn't sex. But if it wasn't sex, what was it?

The longer she watched them, the more she realized that they were sharing the most vital and precious thing that they had; the thing that kept them alive.

They're sharing their blood. My blood.

In a way that Maria could not understand, she was no longer disgusted by what she saw. Somehow, it now appeared . . . beautiful. It was, she thought, something that perhaps no other person in the history of the world had ever been privileged to see. And it was so private--so intimate--that she suddenly felt ashamed to be watching; as if she were a voyeur peeping through a window to watch two people making love. She no longer wanted to be in their presence; to continue staring at them just felt wrong.

As quietly as she could, she got up. Then she thought about how cool Eli's body had been the night before, so she took the blanket and carefully laid it on top of them. After it had settled over them, there was a soft sound like a departing kiss. Oskar's mouth broke free of Eli's neck, and then Eli's did the same. Oskar's head lolled limply to one side; he sighed and closed his mouth. Blood oozed from two small wounds on Eli's neck, and a wavelet of her blood escaped from between his closing lips.

He opened his eyes and saw Maria. She caught his gaze and froze. He clearly recognized her, but she sensed no surprise, consternation, anger, hostility nor any other emotion in his eyes. Maria hastened to leave. As quickly as possible she turned out the light, stepped out of the room, and carefully shut the door.

She stood in the hallway, staring at the door, and thought once again about how strange, yet beautiful, the children were. What had they found in each other? She knew she did not fully understand it, but whatever it was, Maria wanted to protect it at all cost. And with this thought, she felt the impulse to eat something to build up her strength, and turned toward the kitchen. They would be hungry again soon, and she would need to be ready for them.

†

Eli and Oskar lay on their sides, facing one another in the dark under the blanket.

“Eli . . . that didn’t work the way you wanted, did it?”

“I guess not. I wanted it to be like last time, but I just . . . fell asleep. What happened to you?”

He touched Eli’s face; gently stroked her cheek. “You took me back again to a time when you were just a boy—a kid, really. And I met your brother, Jakob. And the two of you said bedtime prayers with your mom, and then . . . well, we went on a little adventure. Some kind of a dare to ride some guy’s horse. Only . . . you picked the wrong horse. And you got hurt, and then that man came—the one who did everything to you—and Eli, I got so scared, just looking at him. And you were scared, too. But then—”

“I remember. You don’t need to say more. I’m—” She paused, and then her tone grew frustrated. “. . . and here I thought it was something you could *control*, somehow . . . that maybe you could pick a place, a memory, to go to. To share.” Eli looked down, crestfallen; then said in a small voice, “But I guess that’s not how it works, is it?”

“No. I guess not. I’m not really sure *how* it works. But still . . . it wasn’t *all* bad. Because . . .” He paused.

Eli looked at him, her dark eyes searching his face. “Because?”

“. . . because I saw a side of you that I didn’t know real well, I guess. You know—you were happy; just having fun. Like the night we told stories in my bed and played bulleriblock and Rocks, Paper, Scissors. Fooling around together. And I’m glad that I got to—” he paused, searching for the right words. “I’m happy that I got to spend time with you just having fun, before you were bitten. I think it made me realize what kind of person you are—you know, deep down inside.” He touched her chest with his finger, then laughed a little. “Even though I was kinda mad at you while everything was happening.”

Eli laughed. “You just aren’t used to living in the country, are you?” Then she rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling, the memories coming back with greater force. “Yeah, we did some pretty stupid things back then, I guess. That was just the tip of the iceberg.” She looked at him and smiled. “But you know what? My brother was an even bigger prankster than me. Seriously. He got into trouble with Papa *all* the time.”

“But about what you were saying . . .” She rolled back over to face him; gently ran a hand down his slender arm. “You make me feel the same way. I always have fun when we’re together, just doing little stuff. You know, ordinary stuff. That’s one of the things that make me happy being with you, almost more than anything else. And I’m happier, too, now that you were there that night—I mean, up here, at least.” She pointed to her head. “It makes it . . . very special, somehow. Just something between you and me. And you know, we really *will* be together through thick and thin. *Always*.”

Oskar smiled, then touched Eli's neck where he had bitten her; felt the smooth, healed skin with his fingertips. Then he scooted closer and kissed her softly on the cheek. "Maybe someday we won't have to hurt anyone anymore, Eli, but we'll still have all of our memories together. If we could just find more grown-ups like Maria who could help us. Wouldn't that be cool?"

Eli nodded reluctantly—not because she didn't want to stop killing, but because she was scared to hope that it might be possible. She was afraid that even daring to *think* it would destroy the possibility. She kissed Oskar back. "Yes—maybe. And I've changed my mind about Maria. I guess I was wrong about her."

Oskar gave her a small smile. "She really cares about us, Eli. To do that for us, without looking for anything in return. I think maybe that--"

Eli finished his sentence. "--she's starting to love us." Then she nodded solemnly. "I know. And it's . . . well, I can't really say how it makes me feel. Just—*amazing*. But I'm still afraid that we'll need more than she can give."

"Maybe, but we need to try—at least for now, like she said. And I'm not really very hungry. Are you?"

"No; I'll be okay for awhile, I think. But I've been feeling a little . . . run down lately."

His voice dropped a little; became confidential. "I think she saw us."

Eli's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Uh huh. I woke up and she was standing there. I think maybe we freaked her out a little." He gave her an embarrassed little grin.

Eli giggled. "She's probably wondering what the heck we were doing."

"Well, we can tell her, can't we? Would there be any harm in that?"

"No, I guess not."

"Well, come'on, then. Let's see what she's up to." He started to get up.

She grabbed his arm. "Just a minute, Oskar."

"What?"

She pointed to her mouth and smiled. "Your face. You know—you look a little . . . you should probably go to the bathroom before we go out to see her."

Oskar felt around his lips, then grinned. “Oh yeah—I forgot. But maybe *you* should go look in the mirror, too.”

†

Maria was steaming some broccoli when they came into the kitchen and sat across from each other at the little table. She turned from the stove to look at them.

“So, how are you two?”

“We’re good,” they both replied. Then Eli spoke. “And we want to thank you again, for what you did last night. Both of us were just saying how lucky we are to have you. And I think I owe you an apology for the way I acted.”

“You don’t need to apologize, Eli. I knew you’d probably get upset if I told you, but I felt that the only way I could earn your trust was to be completely open about how all of this was affecting me. And still *is* affecting me.”

Oskar studied her face, trying to discern the context of her last statement. “You weren’t upset about what we were doing in the bedroom, were you?”

Maria didn’t answer right away. She took the pot off the stove, drained the water into the sink, got a plastic bowl and put the broccoli into it. Then she sat down at the table between them.

“Well, to be honest, Oskar, I’m really not sure I know *what* I saw. But it looked like something that was kind of private, so I thought maybe the two of you wanted to be alone.”

Oskar smiled broadly. “We were . . . sharing memories.”

Maria’s fork stopped halfway to her lips. “Sharing memories—what do you mean? It looked to me like you were sharing blood.”

Eli spoke. “That’s right—we were. We found out that when we do that, we can go back into each other’s memories. The first time, I went back to Oskar’s eleventh birthday party. And then tonight, I took Oskar back to something that happened when I was a kid. Before I became what I am now.”

Maria put her fork down and looked back and forth at both of them. “That’s—I’ve never heard of such a thing. Are you asleep? Just dreaming? Or—I mean, how does it work?”

Oskar looked earnestly at Maria. “It’s not a dream, it’s *real*. I mean, it was like I was actually there, with Eli. Back when there was no city here—just fields and farms. And then when we wake up, our memories are different. I can’t remember my birthday party anymore without Eli being there. Even though I know she wasn’t, since I didn’t even know

her then. And now, I can remember clearly being with Eli a long time ago. But we can't choose the memory—it just happens.”

Maria just shook her head. Then she took each of their hands into both of hers and squeezed them gently. “You two are the most extraordinary people I’ve ever met. Maybe the most extraordinary people in the history of the *world*. Do you understand that?”

Neither of them knew what to say; they just looked at her with little smiles. Then Oskar said with a note of excitement, “Actually, there’s more.”

“What?”

“Well . . . we can make you see things, just by kissing.”

“See things?”

Eli joined in. “Uh huh. Thoughts and memories. And we *can* pick what we want you to see.”

“You can do that, even though I’m not a—even though I’m not like you?”

“Yup. It doesn’t matter.”

Maria looked very puzzled and uncertain. Then she said softly, “I’d like to see that.”

Oskar and Eli looked at each other; then Eli said in a low voice, “Something *nice*, Oskar.” He smiled and nodded in reply; then he rubbed his chin, thinking. “I’ve actually never done it before, so I’m probably not as good at it as Eli. You want me to try?”

“Mmm . . . it doesn’t hurt, does it?”

“No.”

“I’m not going to get . . . you know, infected or something, am I?”

“No.”

Maria glanced at Eli. “Do you mind? Or maybe you’d feel more comfortable if—”

“It’s okay—go ahead.”

Oskar stood and came to Maria’s side. He was a little taller than her while she was sitting. She looked up at him nervously.

He looked at her, then back at Eli. “This is a little weird. Do we have to kiss on the mouth, Eli?”

Eli nodded. “Mmm hmm.”

“Okay.” He looked back at Maria. “I’m kinda nervous, but . . .”

Maria chuckled softly. “Not as nervous as *me*.”

Oskar grinned. “No, I guess not. Don’t worry.” Then he took her head into her hands; lowered his face to hers. She relaxed at his touch and closed her eyes. Then he closed his, too, and kissed her, pressing his lips softly against hers. They remained that way for about half a minute as Eli came around to Maria’s other side to help if she needed it. Then Oskar withdrew.

Maria grabbed for the edge of the table and slumped sideways in her chair. Her face was slack, and her eyes flitted around the kitchen wall before her in a daze, seeming not to recognize what they saw. Oskar and Eli each took an arm to keep her from sliding onto the floor. Then she came to her senses and looked first at Oskar, then at Eli.

“So that’s when the two of you first began to fall in love—on a jungle gym, playing with a Rubik’s Cube.” She shook her head in disbelief. “It’s as if I was *there*.” She squeezed Oskar’s hand. “As if I was *you*.” She looked at Eli, her face blankly astonished. “This is probably a dumb question, but . . . do you know how much he loves you?”

Eli gave her a warm smile. “Yes—of course I do. Good choice, Oskar.” Oskar beamed.

Maria gave Eli a puzzled look. “What did you mean when you asked him, “Do I smell better?”

Oskar blushed; then Eli explained how he had told her that she “smelled funny” the second time they’d met. All of them laughed.

“Eli . . . you don’t remember when your birthday is?” Eli shook her head.

“I know this may be kind of a sensitive topic, but would you *like* to celebrate your birthday? You know . . . maybe we could have a little party for you. Do something fun.”

“I don’t even know what day to pick.”

Oskar spoke. “You can share mine, if you’d like. It’s May 30th.”

Eli brightened. “Then maybe we could celebrate them together?”

“That’d be fine with me!”

“You know, there’s something else you two might want to consider. How about an anniversary?”

Oskar looked confused. “Isn’t that just for people who’re married?”

“You can celebrate an anniversary for anything you want. Maybe the day that you first met. Or the day that Oskar just showed me. Or some other point in your relationship that’s important to you.”

The children thought it over, and decided that they wanted their anniversary to be the day that Eli had rescued Oskar from the Blackeberg pool: November 12. “That’s the day that we really decided that we were going to be together.”

Maria smiled. “Good!—it’s settled. So now you have two dates to celebrate. But November is a long ways away. Maybe we can do something fun tonight—the three of us. I bought a deck of cards and some games we can play. Because I still don’t think it’s safe for you to go out. And maybe we can take a look at the map, and try to figure out where it is that you want to go.”

†

Maria unfolded the map of Östergötland and opened up the visitor’s guidebook. They had stopped playing Skitgubbe a little earlier, after it had become clear that the two of them were not above using their ability to project thoughts to one other to gain an advantage over Maria. She had realized something odd was going on when she had been told she smelled like a goat four games in a row.

In their defense, when she had challenged them they had readily confessed to their crimes. Once the cat was out of the bag, she had realized how, the first time they’d met, Oskar had manipulated her sympathies to get himself into her apartment.

They had quickly lost interest in card games as Eli and Oskar explained how they were able to project thoughts and ideas. Then they had practiced a few on Maria, and had described some strategies she could use to block them. The children had been intrigued when Maria had told them that they ought to meet her old Psychology professor at Stockholm University, and that maybe their powers could be used to help people suffering from depression; but of course, this possibility seemed farfetched since publication of the *Expressen* article.

After an hour or so of receiving their mental suggestions, Maria had developed a headache, and so she had gently suggested that they work on the castle. She had felt lightheaded a few times anyway when standing up or sitting down, although she did not tell either one of them about it.

“There are many castles in this book,” she said as she flipped through the small, thick traveler’s guide. Löfstad Castle is here in Norrköping. It was built in 1630.” She showed a picture of the castle to Eli. “Was that it?”

Eli peered curiously at the photograph. “No.”

“Hmm. Okay.” She looked some more. “Here’s Ållonö castle; it’s nearby, too. How about that one?”

Eli looked again. “I don’t remember it looking like that. That’s more of a palace, like Löfstad.”

“Okay . . . Well, Stegeborg Castle is only about 17 kilometers southeast of Norrköping. It’s actually on an island near Söderköping.” She showed Eli a picture. “It looks more like a traditional castle, and it’s got a big tower on one side. Is that it?”

“Mmm . . . I don’t think so.”

“All right. Let’s see . . . there’s several castles around Linköping, which is a ways further, actually northeast of Norrköping. How about this one—Ekenäs?”

Eli looked and then shook her head.

“Ljung?”

“Huh uh. It wasn’t like a big house.”

“Okay.” Maria was beginning to get a bit frustrated. Oskar watched quietly, not saying much. She flipped the page. “Bjärka-Säby?”

Eli looked. “No.”

“I guess that one was built too late, anyways.” She looked further. “How about this? There’s some ruins of what once was called Stjärnorps castle. See it? There’s a church next to it.”

“That doesn’t look like it either.”

“Here’s one: Finspång, which is northwest of here, has a castle. Is that it?”

“No way. It didn’t look like that.”

“There’s one called Vadstena, further away to the southwest.” Maria looked at the map for a moment, then back to the book. “Wait a minute.” She picked up another book and looked through it. “Here’s a good picture. It was a royal castle built by King Gustav, so it’s probably not it either, but . . .”

“I don’t remember it having a moat, or whatever that is, like that. There was a big wall around the outside, with a gate. And the castle was inside.”

“Well, according to this book, there was a fortress called Johannisborg right here in Norrköping that was built back in the early 1600s north of the Motala River. This picture shows that it had a big, star-shaped wall back then. But maybe this won’t work, because it says that it was burned by the Russians in 1719 and later torn down. Now all that’s left is a rebuilt gate tower.”

Eli studied the engraved picture. “The walls didn’t look like that. They were more square, not pointy.”

Maria sighed. “Are you sure it was in Östergötland? ’Cause that’s about it, from what I’ve got here.”

Eli nodded, feeling bad that she couldn’t be more helpful. She wanted to help find the place, but none of what she’d seen so far looked like what she remembered.

Oskar spoke up. “Maybe the castle is gone now.”

Maria brightened. “That would explain things, wouldn’t it? Maybe we’re doing this the wrong way. Eli, do you think you could remember where the castle was by looking at our map?” She handed it to her.

Eli’s dark eyes slowly scanned over their map from west to east; she talked as she looked. “Now that I think about it, it was near a lake or a big thing of water. Like it stuck out into the water, or something.” She focused on a bay east of Norrköping called Bråviken. Then she picked up the map and brought it closer to her face, scanning the shores of the bay carefully. Her eyes settled on a promontory on its southern shore, due south of a small island. She put it down and pointed at the small piece of land jutting into the bay. “I think it may have been here, but I’m not sure. There are a couple of others that sorta look the same.”

Maria and Oskar looked at each other, then at Eli. Maria picked up the map and studied it for a minute; then she flipped through the guidebook. “That land is not identified in this book. But that little island is a nature preserve called Södra Lunda.”

Oskar looked at the map for a moment. “I wonder what’s there now?”

Maria scrutinized the map. “I don’t know—it just says ‘Djurön.’ I could take a cab out there in the morning and take a look around.”

“Or we could go tonight. What do you think, Eli?”

Eli sighed. “I really don’t want to go out there at all. But I made you a promise, Oskar, and I’m going to keep it, so I know we’re going to end up there sooner or later. If Maria wants to do some scouting first while things out there settle down, that’s fine with me, although you and I are pretty good at moving in the dark without being seen. And of course, we can see very well in the dark, so that’s not an issue.”

Maria broke in. “If it’s all the same to the two of you, why don’t you let me go out first, just to take a look around. Maybe I could even talk to some folks who live around there now about the history of the place, and get some useful information that way. Or if there’s nothing obvious to be seen, I could ask about it at the library—see if anyone knows about there having been a castle there in the past. That might make things easier for you later.”

Eli and Oskar agreed. Then Maria looked at Eli and spoke gently. “Eli . . . I know you’re not looking forward to this. Would you like to talk about what’s going on with you? I mean, about your feelings?”

Eli was sitting cross-legged on the floor; she put her head in her hands, looked down, and was silent for a moment. “I don’t know. I guess Oskar already knows some of this anyways . . . I’ve shown him my memories of what happened, and other stuff. But we’ve never really talked about it much, and I—it’s just . . . I don’t even really know where to begin on this.”

Oskar tilted his head to see Eli’s face. “Eli, would it be easier if I told Maria a little bit about it? And you can . . . you know, jump in when you want to?”

Eli looked at him. She trusted him implicitly, and so, slowly nodded yes.

“You see, Maria . . .” Oskar paused. “Eli used to be a boy. His real name is Elias.” He expected Maria to react, but she didn’t; she only nodded slightly.

“And back when all of this happened to him, the vampire who did it to him, I mean, he . . . well, he—”

Eli interrupted; Maria could already see how wet her eyes were. “He cut off everything down there. He made me into a, a . . .”

“A eunuch.” Maria finished Eli’s statement, trying to keep her voice level. She blinked the tears out of her eyes.

“Yes. A *eunuch*.” Eli bit her lower lip, looked down, and started to sob. “Oh, God. Why, why did he, why did this . . .” But she couldn’t finish her sentence.

“Eli. Look at me, honey.”

Eli sniffed and wiped her nose; then she looked up at Maria.

“You’re still a person, even though that happened to you. There was a point before you were born where you were neither a boy nor a girl, too, and you were a person then. You’re still a person now.”

“Not every person out there is a perfect man or woman. Some men have penises, but they can’t use them. They can’t make love to a woman and get her pregnant—they’re impotent. Other men might be born with only one testicle, or maybe even no testicles at all. But they’re still people who are able to love, and worthy of being loved. And you know, there are some women who have vaginas, but they can never get pregnant. Or maybe for them, having sex is very painful, so they can’t do it. But again, they’re still people. Now I know that’s not quite as bad as what happened to you, but the point is that at some juncture, you have to look at yourself in the mirror and say, even though I’ve been terribly damaged, I’m still worth something. I still have dignity. And if other people can’t see that, then you tell them to go to hell—and that’s all there is to it.

“And I have to tell you personally, that although I was pretty darn scared of you when we first met, and I’m still not sure I understand everything about you, I know one thing: you’re a very *beautiful* person. And there’s someone sitting beside you who loves you very much, just the way you are. I think, actually, that there’s *two* people sitting beside you who love you very much.” She wiped her tears away. “So, I know this has caused you enormous pain and distress, but just don’t ever think you’re not worth something because of what was done to you. That would be a horrible lie. This man, this creature, who did this to you, has done his damage. Don’t let him keep damaging you with a lot of negative feelings about who you are.

“And I already know what you look like, down there. I saw it when you were crawling around the other morning. I didn’t understand it at first, but now I do. And it’s not going to stop me from hugging you, or kissing you, or telling you how wonderful you are. Ever. Okay?”

Eli wiped her eyes and tried to smile. “Okay. And . . . thanks.”

Oskar put his arm around Eli and spoke in a low voice. “You know I don’t care about it either, right?”

She looked at him and gave him a small, trembling smile. “Yeah. *Thanks*, Oskar.” They kissed; then Eli looked at Maria once more.

“I know I’m lucky I found Oskar, especially since he doesn’t care whether I’m a boy or a girl. And I realize now how much you’ve come to care for us, Maria . . . all because Oskar decided not to hurt you. But what happened to me goes deeper than just . . . that.” She nodded downwards. “It’s . . . *everything*. It’s the whole ball of wax . . . my whole life. Everything was changed. And I’m not sure that I can explain it.”

Maria was quiet for a moment. “I don’t know either, Eli. But if you want to try, I’m willing to listen. If you think it would help you.”

“Okay—I’ll try.” She sniffed and dried her eyes. “You talked a bit ago about having dignity. About looking in the mirror and liking what you see. Let me tell you why I’m afraid of this man, even now. I was just as old as I am right now—living with my family on a

farm not too far from here. Papa was a farmer. We were poor. We had nothing, didn't even own the land we were farming.

"This guy, he owned the land. And he took me away from my mama one night after we were invited to come to his castle. Other families came, too, all of them with boys like me. He lined us up and rolled some dice, and at first it wasn't me who came up. But somehow he changed the dice from six to seven, and then it was me. I don't know how he did it—it was like magic—but it happened. I think maybe he wanted me from the start. I don't know, but I think that's what happened."

Maria frowned and shook her head a little. Oskar began to fidget as he stared at Eli, growing uncomfortable because he had experienced directly what Eli was describing.

"He had me dragged away into this little room—Mama was screaming but she couldn't do anything—and they tied me to this table. Tied me up with rope in my mouth so I couldn't talk. And then he—there was this fat little helper guy—he told his helper to go under the table. The guy had a bowl and a knife, and he went to where I was hanging out, like there was a hole in the table down there." He pointed to his groin. "And while he watched, the little fat guy, he . . ." the tears started again and her voice grew hoarse, but Eli angrily brushed them away with a trembling hand, and continued. ". . . cut everything off, and he, he caught my blood in a bowl, and he gave it to the lord, and he drank it right in front of me."

Maria sat completely still, galvanized, and listened with rapt attention. She felt her heart beating faster in her chest as Eli talked. If she had not offered to listen, she would have asked her to stop, so she wouldn't have to hear any more. But that was not possible.

"And then he bit me. And bit me again . . . and again. Over and over. It hurt so much, I wanted to die. Just die. But I didn't, so when all of that happened, I disappeared. I went away, somewhere . . . away. I was—all I could think about was my mama. And the other night, when I was up crawling, I was having a nightmare about being back there. And I was trying to get away, get away from him, to find Mama.

"But that was just the beginning. He kept me in that place a long time—I really don't know how long because I lost track of time. Most of the time I was kept locked up in a hole about the size of that mattress in there, maybe a little bigger."

Maria swallowed, looked away and said, "Oh my God." All of the color had drained from her face. Oskar, who had been listening to Eli with his mouth open, said very softly, "Oh *Eli*, why didn't you *tell* me? I never would've wanted to—"

"It doesn't matter, Oskar. It's over, it's done with. I'll . . . I'll be all right."

She continued. "So then I got hungry, only I didn't understand why, or what I needed." And he starved me, made me really hungry, and then started bringing people for me. People for me to eat and kill. At first, they were cut and made to bleed for me, so it was

something that was irresistible. I couldn't . . . *not* attack them, not suck them dry. Even though it made me sick inside to do it. You know, emotionally. I started going away when I'd do it. I'd go away, and something else inside me would be doing the bad stuff, would change into this thing that was like me, only with claws and fangs. I tried to resist at first, but this just kept going on and on. Until I started to get used to it, basically. Until I was numb, until it didn't bother me anymore, or at least it didn't bother me like it had at first. I stopped thinking about it. And that's when I started to realize that I wasn't really a person anymore. Because the 'Elias' inside me had shrunk down into this little tiny—like a little tiny ball. Hidden away, far away deep inside behind lots of walls where it couldn't be touched. I wasn't human . . . I was a monster.

“But I wasn't just a monster—I was *his* monster. His pet. Because after I'd eat, he'd take me out of my hole for awhile. To be with him, in his bed. So he could touch me, and do things to me that I didn't like. Horrible, disgusting things. All the sick bastards who've touched me since then, they're nothing compared to him. But again, I guess if you're made to do things often enough, you can get used to just about anything.

“But I . . . I basically died in that place. The part of me that was *me*, I mean—died. So that—” she paused, looked down, and started to cry again—“when Oskar, or you, or someone says I'm beautiful, I hear the words, and I understand what they mean, but I . . . I never really feel that I can agree, can just say 'yes.' Because I don't *feel* beautiful—I feel *ugly*. Ugly and worthless. *Worse* than worthless—*cursed*. It makes me think that you must be stupid to love me, because I know I'm not something that should be loved.”

Oskar stood up, breathing rapidly. He exhaled heavily and began to pace around the room, clenching and unclenching his hands. Then he stopped and stared at Eli, who remained sitting on the floor, and began to make a whining sound. He bit the back of his hand and the anger in his face dissolved into tears. Maria motioned for him to come sit with her, and when he saw the pleading look in Eli's eyes, he did. He sat close beside Maria, and she put an arm around him and stroked his hair. “It's all right, Oskar; it'll be okay. I know this is hard, but let her continue.” With a weak, mournful 'okay,' he agreed.

“Then I guess he got bored with me, because he turned me loose. I never knew what happened to my family—they were gone, wiped out, I guess. I ran around in the woods, scared to death, and lived in caves. Trying to avoid doing what I knew I'd have to do. But it was impossible to avoid. Because you see, we need blood the way you gave it to us last night. I can't have the kind that's been donated by some nice person and is sitting in a hospital somewhere—that would just make me sick. It's like, if I told you that to get a drink of water, you have to go out and catch raindrops on your tongue—you can't just get it out of a faucet. So if that's what you had to do, how would you spend all your time? Chasing after thunderstorms, trying to find some rain. Only, it's rain that people would kill you to stop you from taking.

“But that's not the end of it, either. Because we're not awake all of the time. Oskar hasn't been through this yet, but I've told him about it. About half the time that I've been alive, I've been asleep. Asleep for months at a time. And when I wake up, I'm weak and I'm . . .

little again. It's like moths who've eaten a shirt, only it's my memory they've eaten—little holes everywhere in my memory. So I've needed help over the years to survive. And what kind of people do you think would want to help something like me? Men who like pretty little boys. Or I guess I should say, men who like to *touch* pretty little boys.”

“So now you know why I have a hard time looking in the mirror and saying, ‘You are a beautiful person . . . even though you were stripped away from your family. Even though you were made into something that’s neither a boy nor a girl. Even though a single ray of sunlight would burn you to a cinder. Even though you thirst for blood the way normal people thirst for water. Even though you’ve killed over thirty-six hundred people to stay alive.”

Maria and Oskar both gaped at her. “Yes, I know how many—3,654—no, fifty-five, counting Miguel.

“You said a minute ago that you love me, and that nothing will ever stop you from telling me I’m wonderful. Are you so sure about that now, Maria?”

Maria stopped comforting Oskar. It was time to be brave. “I love the person in you that was Elias before all of this was done to you.”

Eli got up; stood before Maria in her washed-out pink p.j.’s. “The problem is, though, that that’s not the only thing that I am any more. And that’s not the person who makes the most important decisions in my life. This is.”

The changes occurred silently and in the space of a few seconds.

Oskar ceased crying. “Eli, stop it—you’re going to scare her.”

Eli took a step toward Maria, who stared up at her with huge eyes and her mouth hanging open. “Do you still think I’m wonderful?”

Maria began to scoot backwards on the floor. “Yes—yes, I do.”

Eli took another step; opened her ghastly mouth and smiled. Maria scabbled backwards until she bumped into the back of the couch, then pushed herself up onto it and began sliding sideways down its length, away from her. “You don’t sound so sure, Maria.”

“Eli! Cut it out! Why are you *doing* this?”

Eli ignored Oskar and continued to advance. Maria slid down to the far end of the couch. When she bumped into the armrest, she dragged her eyes away from Eli’s, looked down and away, and then closed them. Then she pulled her legs up and clasped them defensively in front of herself, and spoke in a small, trembling voice. “Yes . . . I do love you, Eli.”

Eli stood directly in front of Maria, who was now curled up into a ball, trapped and shivering, her blond hair hanging in her face. “If you love me, why can’t you look at me?” I thought you said I was beautiful. Don’t you want to be my mirror?”

Oskar spoke again, his voice pleading. “Eli, please *stop*. This isn’t right.”

Maria opened her fear-filled eyes and like a rabbit cornered by a fox, glanced fleetingly up at Eli. Then, haltingly, she stretched out a shaking hand and touched one of Eli’s claws. With eyes closed, she felt their hardness with her fingers; ran them over their sharp tips. Then she took it into hers, and forced herself to look at Eli; made herself look into her reptilian eyes.

“I do love you, Eli.” She gently squeezed her hand. “And you’re wrong about what you said. Because the *real* you is what chose to love Oskar—not the thing you are right now. And that was the most important decision you’ve ever made.”

Eli’s eyes returned to normal; Maria felt the hand change like putty in hers, losing its hardness and becoming smaller. Then, suddenly, the small child’s body was in her arms, weeping silently on her shoulder. A voice whispered in her ear through the tears. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Maria.”

Maria let out a long, ragged sigh and embraced Eli. “It’s all right; it’s all right.” But she knew that it was *not* all right; that the cruelties inflicted upon Eli were well beyond her capabilities, were perhaps beyond anyone’s capacity to repair or make right. She was so terribly damaged; even if she could be cured, she would need years of therapy. It was almost beyond hope.

Oskar came over and sat beside them on the couch. He was extremely upset by what Eli had said. She had revealed things tonight that she’d never shared with him before, had kept from him because it was just too painful to discuss. He was especially angry and upset about how she had been abused by the vampire lord and other men, and how she now felt worthless. That she’d been so crippled that she couldn’t accept the fact that he loved her so much; that all those times he’d told her that he loved her, it hadn’t really sunk in. That was really the bitterest news of all.

He stared at the wall and spoke in a halting voice, choked with emotion. “If this is how it’s going to be, I don’t want to go to that stupid old castle. It’s not worth it. It’s probably gone now anyways . . . what’s the point? It was a dumb idea from the start.”

Eli pulled herself up from Maria’s embrace. “No, no, Oskar—it wasn’t a bad idea. Please don’t say that. We’re going to go.”

Maria spoke to both of them, her voice still unsteady. “Oskar, if Eli is willing to go, then I think you should. Maybe there is something there that could help you. And you know what? Even if there isn’t, I think this is helping Eli. Because the only way she’s going to get

over all of this is to start talking about it. And I can't think of a better person to talk to than the one person who loves her so much—you."

"I know." He took Eli's hand into his and pulled her into his arms. "But it's not fair to Eli, to have to go through all of this again . . . to have to think about all the pain and everything. I don't want that for you, Eli."

Eli hugged Oskar tightly. "It's all right, Oskar. I'm okay. Maria's right—I do feel better, talking about it."

"But Eli . . . I don't understand. When I tell you I love you, it doesn't mean anything? You don't really—"

"No no, Oskar. *No*. It *does* mean something to me. It means *everything*. I know that you love me; I understand it. And I'm so happy that you do. I'm happier than I've ever been in my whole life. It's just that . . . it's hard for me to love *myself*, that's all."

Oskar nodded. "I know how you feel. Actually, I felt the same way sometimes, before I met you."

"Because of those boys, right? Picking on you all the time?"

"Yeah."

Maria broke in gently. "Being able to love yourself is really important. It's clear to me that both of you have a lot to talk about, especially Eli. And if you want to tell me about anything, I'm here to listen . . . you know that. Just don't scare me half to death, please."

"But I have a feeling that things aren't going to change much for either of you until we solve your main problem; that's really the first step. So if both of you are in agreement about the castle, we'll do it. And if there's nothing there, then we'll talk about doing something else. Where there's a will, there's a way."

Friday 12 AUGUST 1983 - 8:52 a.m.

Kurt and Flora headed east on Vendevägen in their Peugeot. It was a beautiful, crisp and clear August morning in Stockholm. The rising sun shone down from a cloudless sky through their windshield, and it was warm enough for their lightest jackets. They had their side windows cracked open, and as the beautiful homes and green trees rolled past, the cool air slipped in, bringing with it the occasional sound of birds calling to each other.

Britta had just called to tell them that Gabe had died overnight. She and Jon were going home, and they had accepted Flora's suggestion that she and Kurt come over to be with them.

They had spoken very little during the trip. Flora's crying, which had begun in earnest as soon as she had hung up the phone, had settled down into steady sniffles. She had brought along a box of tissues, and had used one after another as they headed toward Djursholm; the pockets of her coat now fairly bulged with them.

Kurt had cried, too, just before they left, when he'd gone upstairs to get his wallet. Flora had a picture of Brit and Jon holding Gabe on her dresser, and it had caught his eye as he turned to leave the room. He had been trying to prepare himself for the phone call, and had thought he'd had himself fairly well under control, but the close-up of their smiling faces did it. The strain of the last few weeks--of Gabe's unexpected illness, plus the shitstorm going on at work--suddenly caught up with him, and as he felt the familiar weight of his wallet slide comfortably down into his back pocket, he saw Gabe's little happy face and lost control.

But even in the depth of his grief, he managed to cry as quietly as possible, and was able to get a handkerchief out of his dresser drawer to blow his nose. He sat down on the bed, hoping that Flora would not wonder what was taking him so long, took off his glasses, and let go. It lasted about a minute, and then he felt better. He was able to begin thinking about what would need to be done: what he would do for Flora; how he could support Brit and Jon. He had stepped into the master bathroom and splashed some cold water on his face, imagining that maybe Flora wouldn't notice his breakdown. Then he went downstairs and they headed out.

It wasn't fair, he thought; Brit and Jon's first child being taken away like this. They'd wanted a baby so much--Brit had taken all the classes for first-time mothers, and Jon had attended most of them with her. They'd converted their guest bedroom into a nursery; Britta had picked out the wallpaper, and Jon had hung it and done the painting. And of course, they'd bought the crib and everything else that was needed nowadays to take care of a newborn. Gabe had decided to enter the world butt first, so they'd elected to do a Cesarean rather than attempt a vaginal delivery. Other than that, things had gone smoothly, and until he'd developed meningitis, Gabe had been a happy, healthy little fella. And now this.

Of course, Kurt knew better than most people that life wasn't fair. During his career in law enforcement, he'd seen terrible tragedies befall the nicest people, usually acts of violence committed by family members, or sometimes by strangers. But still, there was a part of him, a part that was admittedly irrational, that had always thought that these things happened to other people, not to him or his family. As a husband and a parent, he had done everything he could to take care of Flora and Britta, to protect them from the world and the bad things in it. But this . . . there was no protecting against something like this. It just happened, like a divine judgment. Inscrutable and incomprehensible, leaving the heartbroken mortals like Brit and Jon behind to pick up the pieces as best they could.

As he drove up the sunlit avenue, his thoughts wandered to work. He knew they shouldn't, felt guilty that they did, but he let them wander just the same.

He was still working on cases, but things downtown had definitely changed. No one said anything, but he saw it in their glances, in the way they interacted with him. He was tainted; damaged goods. No one wanted to work with him lest they invite career death by association. Even his relationship with Martin had been affected. It was infuriating, but he didn't let it show—what good would that do? So he simply kept his head down, tried to ignore everything, and plugged away on what was on his plate.

It wasn't just at work, either. People on the street looked at him, too. Gave him funny looks and sideways glances. Of course, being the trained observer that he was, none of it escaped him. A few strangers had even come up and started asking questions, which he'd brushed off with his usual brusqueness.

His relationships outside of work had also suffered. Flora and he had enjoyed an active social life before all of this had come along. But since his report had been leaked, they hadn't been invited to a single evening with any of their friends. Frankly, Kurt had not been eager to spend much time socializing, anyway; he imagined the *Expressen* article hanging like an invisible cloud over the dinner table, making everyone uncomfortable. Flora hadn't said much; was suffering in silence, he supposed.

But at night, as he lay in his bed trying to fall asleep, he kept thinking about the most important case he'd ever had. About *her*.

He was convinced now that Flora was right: this was a person, not an 'it.' And it was a *her*. If he was right about how often she needed to feed, she would have to kill about 26 times a year. That meant, depending on how old she really was, that she'd killed a staggering number of people. Even if she had only lived for a single year as a vampire, she would be the worst murderer in Swedish history, far surpassing Tore Hedin's killing spree back in the '50's. And if she'd been a vampire for even five or ten years, she'd surpass most of those serial killers in the U.S.

She wasn't some kind of a maniac, though; he'd figured that much out. If he was right about Lind, and if the vampire lore really did apply, that meant that the girl herself had been bitten at some point, God only knew when. So it was possible that she didn't really want to be what she was. Maybe she just killed out of necessity.

It had not escaped his notice that she had spared Siskov during the pool massacre. Why? He had read over that case file with a fine-toothed comb to try and understand. By his own account, the only thing that was different for him was that when all hell had broken loose, he'd been sitting with his head in his hands a few feet from where the Forsberg brothers were trying to drown Eriksson. Perhaps to the girl it didn't appear as if he'd been actively participating, so she had spared him. If she'd had any brains, she would've killed him, too, so there wouldn't have been any witnesses. But she hadn't. Was this just a mistake, or did she discriminate between people who were good and bad?

Flora believed that she'd attacked those boys to save Eriksson's life because she had fallen in love with him. As difficult as it was to believe, her intuition made sense. After all, she

hadn't fed on the Forsbergs or Ahlstedt; she'd just killed them as quickly as possible with, he supposed, the only means at her disposal: her hands and her mouth. Just thinking about it made him pause. To have been there and witnessed that being done to those boys . . . *Christ*. No wonder Siskov had offed himself. But the point was, she'd gone out on a limb for the Eriksson boy: entered a public building and left a witness behind. Not the smartest thing to do, when you thought about it. From a stone-hearted, ruthless point of view, one might even call it a mistake. But in his experience, people in love often displayed poor judgment, especially young people. What would be her next mistake?

He wished mightily that he knew more about the Fransson case. The piece of information from Larson had certainly been tantalizing. Could his suspect have been responsible for her death, too? And if so, what had been going on immediately before Fransson had been slammed against the side of that apartment tower? *God damn*--he couldn't understand the attitude of his superiors, to be turning a blind eye to all of this. To be making no effort to tie it all together in a way that made sense.

He hadn't been at Jon and Brit's ten minutes before the phone rang. Jon called him to the phone by the breakfast nook with a questioning look on his face that said, *it must be important if they're calling you at our house*. After she'd heard that he got a call, Flora left Brit's side on the couch in the family room and came into the kitchen, ostensibly to get a glass of water; in truth, to be nearby when Kurt got off the phone. It didn't take long.

He hung up the receiver and gave her a long, knowing look. "They just fished a body out of Lake Mälaren--same deal as the others. They want me back on the case. I've been told to report downtown in 30 minutes."

"Did you tell them that your grandson just died?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

Jon came in, hovering in the doorway to the kitchen, his eyes wet and red.

"They understand my situation, but said this can't wait. They want me to be there when they do the autopsy."

"What's going on?" Jon looked from Kurt to Flora and back again.

"I have to go. Can you take Flora home when she's ready?"

"Yes, sure. Is it--"

"Jon, someone else has been killed. Please keep quiet about this." He turned to Flora and took her into his arms. She was stiff and unyielding for a few seconds, then relaxed and put her arms around him. She began to cry again and spoke, her voice muffled against his

chest. “Those bastards down there expect you to go *back*, after the way they’ve treated you? And *now*, of all times? Oh, Kurt; *please*. Please don’t.”

“Flora, I know, I know.” He hugged his wife’s small, thin body to his and kissed her tenderly on the top of her head before speaking further, his voice low and soft. “It’ll be all right. *I’ll* be all right. And I’ll call you as soon as I can.”

†

The bus wheezed to a stop, its big diesel clattering loudly and forcing Maria to raise her voice to say thanks to the driver. She stepped off and down onto the street as it pulled away, looking around at what, until now, she’d only known as a name on a map: Djurön.

At least the weather was nice for her little adventure, she thought. It felt good to be out of the apartment and getting some fresh air and exercise, particularly on a sunny day like today. And this place—from what she’d seen so far riding out, it was lovely, with modest, well-kept houses on big, wooded lots; the kind of place where she had sometimes imagined herself living, if she ever had the resources to buy her own home, or married someone who could afford one.

Her stop at the library in Hageby had been disappointing, and had heightened the sense of mystery about Eli’s story. There were a couple of shelves of books and other materials devoted to local history, but none of it mentioned there having been a castle at one time in Djurön, or anywhere else along Bråviken Bay. Nor had the librarian, a helpful, soft-spoken woman in her mid-sixties, heard of it either. She had confessed that she was not the most knowledgeable person to ask, and had gotten on the telephone with someone at another branch while Maria looked through what was there, but after a short time had reported that she had been unable to learn anything further.

Maria had studied her map, and figured that if someone had built a castle in Djurön, they would’ve put it at the far end, closest to the water. She really didn’t know why she thought this would be the case, but it just seemed logical. So she walked up Djurövägen toward the tip of the little promontory, headed toward what she’d already seen from the bus, and could now see looming over the tops of the trees on her left—a gigantic grainery complex, its twin columns of huge, white and silver silos gleaming in the sunshine. A pulsing, humming sound rose from it and could easily be heard where she was, some four blocks away. Maybe someone there would know.

A couple of heavily laden grain trucks rumbled by as she walked, stirring up the dust on the road. Other than their drivers, the only other person she saw along the way was an elderly woman tending to some flowers in her front yard.

She reached a turnabout where the main road veered off to her left, and an access road situated along the enormous, cylindrical silos ran straight ahead. An administrative office lay just beyond the turnabout with a couple of pickup trucks parked out front. She went up the steps as another grain truck, this one empty, rattled past.

Once inside she was greeted by a dark-haired woman in her mid-twenties who was sitting hunched on a stool behind a long counter painted gray that ran almost the entire length of the wood-paneled room. She smiled at Maria blandly and spoke with a nasal twang. “May I help you?”

“Hi. I’m a student from Stockholm University. I’m doing a research project on the castles of Östergötland County. I have reason to believe that there used to be castle here in Djurön, maybe even on the spot of this grain mill. I’m wondering whether anyone here might know something about it.”

The woman raised an eyebrow and without taking her eyes off Maria, called over her shoulder for someone named Isak. Maria heard the sound of a chair scraping on linoleum, and after a second or two a thin, wiry man in his early seventies with close-cropped, steel-gray hair emerged from the back office. He smelled like oats, and wore dusty jeans and a faded blue shirt with “Lantmannen Cooperative” embroidered on the front pocket. He had the hardened, lined, wind-beaten face of a lifelong farmer, and looked Maria over with unconcealed skepticism; clearly, she was not their typical customer. Then he spoke with a courteous drawl. “I’m Isak Karlsson, the general manager of the mill. What can I do for you, ma’am?”

Maria explained once again why she was there.

“What’d you say your name was?”

“Maria. Maria Fridell.”

“I see you have your camera and notepad. Got any I.D.?”

Maria dug in her purse and dutifully produced her student identification card. He looked it over, looked at her face, and then handed the card back.

“Well, Ms. Fridell, I’ve lived in Norrköping all my life, and I’ve been running this grainery for 14 years. No one’s ever told me there was a castle around here.” He paused. “But maybe there’s something you should see, if you’re interested.”

Maria immediately agreed. Isak took a hand-held radio out of a rack behind the counter, and then flipped open a hinged portion of the countertop and emerged from behind the front desk. He told someone that he’d be on the “southeast gantry,” put the radio into a pouch on his belt, and then motioned Maria toward the back door.

They walked across a short stretch of grass toward the grainery. As they got closer, the noise of the machinery grew increasingly louder. They went around one end of the grain silos to the other side of the facility, then walked down a path of crushed oyster shells to a central elevator tucked behind some kind of equipment shed. Isak stopped before they got on. He shouted, “You afraid of heights? ’Cause we’re going up about ten stories!”

She yelled back that she was not, upon which they boarded the elevator, a steel cage that was open to the air. Within a few seconds, they rose with a steady electric hum.

The noise abated as they reached to top and was replaced by the sound of the wind blowing in off the bay. Isak got a cap out of his back pocket and put it on as he unlocked the door. Then he glanced at her fair-skinned forearms and face. "It's very bright up here. Get a sunburn quicker than you can spit. Gotta hat?"

"No."

"Well here—wear mine, then." He took it off and handed it to her. She thought about politely refusing, but decided it would be better to accept his offer and put it on. "Thanks."

"Com'on."

They descended a short flight of stairs, and then headed down a covered metal walkway with a grate floor and metal railings. When they reached the end, they turned right and walked a little further. The overhead cover ended at the turn, so when Isak stopped they were about 25 meters above the ground on an exposed metal catwalk that was a little more than a meter wide. Immediately below them, extending to their left and right in a straight line, were ten silver grain silos that matched the taller, white ones behind them.

Maria was immediately taken in by the beautiful, panoramic view of Bråviken Bay. "Wow! It's gorgeous up here, Mr. Karlsson. You can see for long, long way."

"Yes. Always enjoyed the view—one of the nicer perks of working here, you could say. Ships from all over the world come in here from the Baltic to load up our grain. There'll be one coming in this afternoon from Ethiopia. Along with a storm, if the weatherman is right."

"Mmm." Maria closed her eyes for a moment and lifted her smiling face to the sun. Then she looked at Isak. "So what is it that you wanted to show me, Mr. Karlsson?"

He came and stood beside her. "I noticed this one day when I was supervising a crew of guys who were repainting these silos." He motioned below them. "I was eating my lunch, just standing here looking out over this little patch of forest down here below us, and I saw it. Can you see it?"

Maria looked at the wedge-shaped little forest that began on the far side of the access road running along their side of the grainery. At first she saw nothing remarkable. Then she noticed something unusual about the trees; or perhaps more accurately, about the spaces between the trees. The more she looked, the more she discerned that there was a straight line running across the middle of the forest. It began near the access road to her right, and to her far left, it made a right angle and ran back into the end of the grainery farthest from

where they were. The vegetation along the line was different from the rest of the forest; it was less dense, and the trees weren't as tall.

She frowned and looked at Isak. "What *is* that?"

He smiled. "I'm not sure, but I think it's a foundation line for a wall that's no longer there. And a mighty big one, too. Might be that's the castle you're looking for."

The shock of seeing it made her pause; made everything sink in. *It's all true. Everything Eli said—the bowl, the knife, the cutting—it really happened.* She shuddered despite the warm sunshine.

"Would it be alright with you if I walked that line through the forest? I'd like to take a closer look at it."

"Sure. All the land down at this end is owned by the co-op. I've never spent much time traipsing through those woods, but I can't see any harm if you just wanna take a look. Now, if you're going to start digging something up, that's a different matter. You'll need to get permission. But I can give you the name and number of the fella on the Board to talk to if you want."

Maria gave him a small smile. "That would be lovely. Thank you so much." She handed him her notepad, and he rested it on the railing, took a pen out of his breast pocket, and jotted down the information. Then he handed it back to her before gazing back out over the trees.

"If I'm right and that's the outer wall, then it would mean that we're probably standing right on top of where the main keep would've been. This grainery was constructed in the mid-sixties. I wasn't working here when they put it up, but I began within a year of them opening the place. And I never heard anyone say there was anything here before but forest and some pasture land. Where'd you hear that there might've been a castle?"

"I have a source, Mr. Karlsson, but I'd prefer to keep that confidential, if it's all the same to you."

There was a pause, and for a moment a perverse part of her mind mused about what would happen if she told him about her "source." *Well you see, Mr. Karlsson, I know someone who was alive back then. And she—I mean, he—was made a prisoner in the castle, sexually mutilated, and then turned into a vampire. And now he wants to come back here and check things out.* How would that little disclosure sit with Isak?

"I understand, miss. I suppose you can't be too careful, doing all this research and everything."

“Thanks. I appreciate your understanding.” After Maria snapped some pictures and made a sketch and some notes, the two of them returned to the ground and she set off to explore the forest.

†

Dr. Persson stripped the latex gloves off into the waste container and began to scrub his big hands in the sink. “Well, Kurt, it’s just as we suspected when they wheeled this guy in here: he died the same way as the others. That’s what I’m going to say in my report.”

They had spent the last 1-1/2 hours together at the stainless steel table as Persson had carefully labored over the pale, wrinkled lump of flesh that was once a human being. The body had been remarkably well-preserved in the chilly waters of Riddarfjärden, the easternmost bay of Mälaren.

For Kurt, the key things were the bite wound on the neck and the severe traction injury to the cervical spine; similar, if not identical, findings to Bengtsson, Sorrensen, and Christensen. The rest of the autopsy had confirmed what they already knew. The man had not died from drowning; he’d been weighted down with rocks tied to both ankles, one of which had slipped loose, causing the body to rise up and drift downstream before it got hung up on a support column for the bridge south of Gamla Stan. Also, there was no hemorrhaging in the ears, and the lungs were relatively dry. It was hard to determine how long he’d been dead, but according to Persson, it had been a week or less because the fatty layer beneath the skin had not yet broken down. They had been able to get fingerprints, and the NLFS was running them for a match.

As Persson’s assistant wheeled the body out to the freezer, the two of them took the elevator up to the main floor and entered Persson’s small, overcrowded office. Kurt transferred an untidy stack of files off the single chair and to the floor and sat down as Persson slumped into his desk chair. He picked up a styrofoam cup half-filled with cold coffee, swirled it around a little, and then took a drink. “Mmm—my morning coffee. Still pretty good.” Then he looked at Kurt and sighed.

“Kurt, I know I owe you an apology about the thing with Christensen. I told you that while it could have been bite wound, it was hard to tell because of all the other damage. When the Chief called me on it, I had to tell him that I couldn’t say it was a bite to a reasonable degree of professional certainty. So he asked me to clarify my report. What else could I do?”

Kurt waved his hand. “It doesn’t matter now, Jan. Let’s just forget about it—I understand why you did what you did.”

“You know, I wish I had had some other options, Kurt. But there just weren’t any. Now, this guy—the bite wound is clear. I measured 24 millimeters between the punctures. And I have the autopsy file for TRK right here. He’s the only one who had a good, clean

wound.” He opened the file, pulled out the sheet with the diagram of the external exam, and handed it to Kurt. “You see the measurement?”

“Mmm hmm. It matches exactly. 24.”

Persson swiveled in his chair and pulled a thick, imposing textbook from a low shelf to the right of his desk and dropped it onto his blotter with a heavy thump. “Sopher’s *Forensic Dentistry*. It’s considered authoritative by everyone in the business.”

“You don’t need to show it to me, Jan—I know this is a child’s mouth we’ve got here.”

Persson shook his head. “That’s not the point.” He opened the book to where he’d marked it with a slip of paper. “With most bite wounds from humans, the depth of the wound is the same for the canines and the incisors. Dog bites are different. Yeah, they’re wider than a human’s, usually like 40 millimeters versus 30, but the canines leave deeper wounds, too, because the teeth are longer and more dagger-like.”

Kurt straightened in his chair. “Uh huh.”

“Now here’s what I didn’t put in my report for TRK, but I want to tell you now: unless the assailant was using a dental prosthesis, the puncture wounds for the canines were too deep to be made by a normal human—they were more like an animal’s. Yet the other aspects of the bite pattern in his case, and in the guy downstairs, all point to a pre-adolescent human about ten or eleven years old.”

Kurt said nothing at first; just stared at him. Finally he looked away, shook his head, and let the cold hardness pass through his body. When he finally spoke, his voice was harsh despite his best effort to keep an even tone. “You know, Jan, it would’ve been nice to know that little piece of evidence three days ago when I signed a report that put my career on the line.”

“Kurt, try to understand. I did the post on TRK *last year*. No one had any idea back then what would happen over the last month, with the Tyresta thing, and now this. I thought it was a fluke, and it wasn’t ’til I read your report that I began to realize its importance.”

“Oh *bullshit*.” He shook his hand at the small sheaf of papers that was now mostly hidden under Sopher’s treatise. “It was a highly unusual finding that related directly to how the guy died. Especially with the blood loss. It should’ve been in there—that’s Pathology 101. I could’ve used a little support this week when my ass was handed to me. Do you know where I was when I got called to come down here this morning?”

Persson shook his head.

“I was at my daughter’s house. My first and only grandson just died from meningitis. Hardly a month old.”

“Oh. *Jesus*. Sorry, Kurt. Sorry to hear that.” His voice was small and apologetic.

“Yeah, me too. It’s been pretty rocky lately, know what I mean? People startin’ to think there’s something wrong with me. *Shit*.”

“Kurt, I just couldn’t . . . You know, it was just too strange to draw any huge conclusions. I really did think it was artifactual.”

“Did you think it was an artifact when you examined Jimmy Forsberg’s severed arm?”

Persson didn’t answer.

“It matched, didn’t it?”

Persson slowly nodded yes.

“You old *fuck*. I want this specifically mentioned in your post on John Doe down there: TRK, the Forsberg bite wound—*everything*. Don’t mess with me any more, Jan, do you understand? Or I’ll personally see to it that your next job is studying reindeer shit in Kiruna.”

†

Maria trudged back down Djurövägen toward the bus stop under a cloudy sky. It was late afternoon, and she was tired and dirty. She had followed the line Isak had shown her through the forest from one end to the other.

She was now certain that a wall had stood where she’d been. Not too far from the corner they had seen from the gantry, a stream running northeast toward the bay had eroded some of the ground. It was only about two or three meters wide where it ran across the strip of altered foliage, and the streambed was a little less than two meters below ground level. As she crossed the water, which was very shallow, she realized that the substrate was too firm and flat to simply be mud. She paused, frowning, and looked down at the water gurgling playfully past her submerged sneakers. Then she pressed one foot down hard and twisted it from side to side, exploring the streambed with the bottom of her foot; but no matter what she did, the substance underneath felt flat and hard. Like rock.

Her frown deepened. She reached down and plunged her hand into the chilly water, forcing her fingers through the soft layer of mud. It was rock, all right. She took a step and felt the same thing. Further effort revealed that she was standing on rock all the way across. It was smooth and finished, not natural. She slogged upstream and downstream a few steps until she had the thickness: about four-and-a-half meters. She stopped, turned, and tried to imagine a wall as wide as a car, and God knew how tall—seven meters? Eight meters?—running all the way back from where she’d started, then turning and continuing toward the granary.

It must've been huge.

Her mind had been filled with all sorts of new thoughts as she climbed up out of the stream and continued on. A huge castle that had been standing here in the late 1700's, but was now completely gone. Why? How? She really didn't know much about castles, but everyone knew that they took a great deal of effort and wealth to construct, and most importantly, tons and tons of finished stone. Demolishing one was no simple task. If there had been a big castle here, where on earth had all of the rock gone when it was torn down? And why would anyone bother to clear the space and then leave it undeveloped? Wouldn't they just leave the rubble, like countless other sites strewn across Europe? Or if it had been razed in a battle, wouldn't there be some mention of it in the history books?

She supposed that maybe they had torn it down to build the granary, but that didn't make sense, either. Isak had said there was only forest and pasture when they came in the sixties. Surely if there had still been the ruins of a castle, he would've heard about it. And could they even have built the granary on an historic site like that? She didn't know.

She arrived at the bus stop and began waiting. While she waited, wrapped in thought, a couple of red-headed kids—a boy and a girl—rode up the sidewalk on bicycles toward her, both of them pedaling furiously. The boy careened by her, perilously close, and slewed into the yard of the house on the corner by the bus stop, causing her to gasp in surprise and jump back. The girl followed her brother off the sidewalk and into the grass, laughing.

“Hey! Watch it!” She glowered at them, but they continued to giggle. The boy, who looked to be about nine years old, had on a dirt-smeared, green t-shirt that matched the color of his eyes; the girl, who looked a couple of years younger, wore a light-blue dress with food stains down the front. Then their laughter tapered off, and the boy offered a small apology. “Sorry. Didn't mean to scare ya.” But he looked like he did.

“You should learn to be more careful,” she said crossly. “You could hurt someone.” But it was hard to remain angry with them, with their mischievous grins and freckles. Inwardly she smiled at their appearance. They looked like quintessential kids, and she wondered what their mother must be like—either at her wit's end, or completely happy. Or perhaps a little of both.

The girl spoke. “He didn't mean it. He always rides that way.” Then she turned around so that she was facing Maria and pulled a little closer, still sitting on her pink, mud-stained bike, her hands on the white grips with their silver tassels. “You're pretty.”

Maria was taken aback by this unabashed compliment, and at first she didn't know what to say. She certainly didn't *feel* pretty, standing there, sweaty and tired, in her soggy sneakers. Finally she just said, “Thank you, honey. You're pretty, too.”

The boy wheeled his bike around next to his sister's and stared at Maria. “Whatcha doin' in our woods?”

“Yeah. We saw you walking around out there.”

“*Your* woods?” She smiled. “I was told they belong to the grain mill over there.” She nodded toward the silos.

“Aww . . . they don’t know nothing. We play there—that makes it ours.”

“Well, I . . .” Maria hesitated to disclose what she was really doing. But after thinking about it, she decided there would be no harm in telling them. “I’m actually looking for a castle. One that used to be out here a long time ago. But now it’s gone.”

The girl looked puzzled. “How’re you going to find it if it’s gone?”

Maria chuckled. “Well, I don’t know. It’s kind of a mystery, actually. But I thought there might be something left behind, I guess.”

“We built a fort,” said the boy. “Want to see it?”

“A fort? Oh, I don’t know. It’s been a long day, and I’m waiting for my bus to come and take me home.”

“It’s not just any old fort,” he replied. “It’s really cool. When we’re in it, no one can beat us.”

“Oh yeah? Hmm. Well . . .” she looked down Djurövägen, but saw no sign of the bus. Somewhere behind her, to the north, she heard the distant sound of thunder. It was 4:33 p.m. according to her watch, and the bus wasn’t supposed to arrive for a little while longer. And if she missed it, she could always catch the next one and still be home in plenty of time for Oskar and Eli, since it wouldn’t be dark for several more hours. She imagined that the two of them might enjoy a playfort when they came out here together; if everything else proved fruitless, it could take the edge off things. So she agreed.

She followed the kids on their bikes back up to the turnabout, where they turned right down a road that led in a northeasterly direction to the water. They passed some homes, and then the two of them pulled their bikes off and laid them down in a ditch. At the end of the road, between the trees and above the greenish-blue waters of the bay, Maria saw slate-gray clouds building, and heard another rumble. An image of Nick’s umbrella flashed through her head.

The three of them went into the woods, following a little trail through the underbrush. Soon they came to a small, meandering stream and began to follow it. Maria wasn’t sure, but she thought they were still headed in a northwesterly direction toward the granary, which could be heard somewhere off in to her left through the still, August air. They went a little further, and then Maria realized that they were approaching the spot where she had discovered the blocks under the streambed. But the children didn’t stop there; didn’t even pay the area any attention.

They went another 50 meters or so; then the kids scrambled down the shallow sides of the stream, splashed across the middle, and began to climb up the other side, angling toward a depressed area, overgrown with a cluster of trees, on the opposite side. The boy said, “There it is,” without pausing or looking back at her. Maria stopped and looked at the little spot. She could see where they had used logs and tree branches to make some walls facing out, away from the stream. The girl turned her head. “Aren’t you coming?” Maria sighed. Oh well . . . her shoes were already wet; a little more wouldn’t matter. So she clambered down into the streambed.

As she was sloshing across to the other side, she looked up the stream and saw part of a large drainpipe around a bend, a fair distance away. Then she climbed up the opposite side with the help of some exposed roots, and joined the children in their fort.

“Isn’t it neat?” the boy asked. Then the girl added, “Yeah. Don’t you think it’s awesome?”

Maria nodded. It was a pretty cool fort, at that. A couple of big, shady trees stood at either end, and she was surprised at how well they had used the fallen logs and tree branches to create the walls, left gaps to serve as embrasures, and camouflaged the whole thing with small, leafy branches. The depression in the middle gave the defenders a natural advantage, and Maria only had to stoop a little to peer out through the walls. They’d even erected a flag using a pillowcase, on which they’d drawn or painted a skull and crossbones, tied onto a sagging stick that jutted up from one wall.

The boy grabbed a chipped and faded toy gun out of a corner, laid down in front of an opening, and began to make shooting and explosion sounds as he snapped its bolt open and shut, firing on unseen enemies. “Yah! The Germans are coming! Defend the fort, Elsie!” She shouted “okay!” and began hurtling rocks from a small pile over the walls. Their shouts and war sounds, which now included the wailing of falling artillery shells, rose up over the still, darkening forest. Then, after another boom of thunder, the boy announced that the walls had been breached, and ordered Elsie to fall back. They moved to a spot near Maria and lifted up a rotting piece of plywood that she hadn’t noticed, revealing a hole underneath. Then the two of them climbed in and disappeared from view, Elsie lowering the plywood back down on top of the opening with one hand.

Maria was surprised. She stepped over and lifted the plywood. “Where’d you guys go?”

Elsie’s dirty face grinned up at her. “It’s our secret hideout. Nobody knows about it except us and our friends.” Maria heard the boy’s voice. “Yeah. We *told* you it was cool.”

The patter of rain on leaves began with a soft sigh of wind, and Maria realized that it was now gloomier than it had been ten minutes ago. She looked up at the sky and saw that it had begun to rain. Then she looked down at the hole with curiosity. “How big is it down there?”

“You’ll have to see for yourself!” They giggled.

She unslung her camera from around her neck, grateful that she had had the foresight to bring it in its case now that it was raining, and put it with her notepad down on the plywood cover next to the hole. Then she sat down on the damp earth next to the hole and slid down in.

She didn’t go far before she hit bottom, and she had to duck down to get all the way in. When her eyes adjusted, she realized that she was in a space that was barely a meter and a half high; tall enough for the kids to move about without much difficulty, but definitely cramped for an adult. She was standing on wet, uneven earth. Above her she was startled to see, uncomfortably close to her head even while stooping, a ceiling constructed of dark, wooden beams that appeared very old and saturated with water. The space was square and about six by three meters in size. The children’s’ entry hole was in one corner where the floor was even higher. When she turned and looked at the hole from underneath, she realized that the wooden beams in this area were uneven and had rotted away. The children must have discovered a smaller hole and enlarged it sufficiently to create what she’d just passed through.

She was even more surprised to discover that the walls of the small room were constructed of finished stone. They appeared intact, except the wall on the side nearest the hole, which had collapsed, causing the roof to sag and allowing water and earth to penetrate the room.

Elsie had circled around the room, and she came back to Maria’s side. “Do you like it?”

“Uh huh,” Maria replied, a little uncertainly. “How’d you find it?”

The boy piped up. “We were playing out here one day and I fell down right up there.” He pointed at the hole. “That’s when I found a little hole and started digging. And we found this cool little room, and turned it into our clubhouse.”

Maria peered around and then moved, hunched over, toward the far wall. “It is pretty neat, all right. What’s in here? Is there a floor under the dirt?”

“I don’t know. But there’s nothing in here, really. Just that door down there.” The boy was beside her, pointing. Then he added, “Hey! Could this be part of the castle you’re looking for?”

Maria shook her head distractedly; his remark about the door had seized her attention. “I don’t know. Where’s the door?”

“Right there. Can’t you see it?”

At first, Maria couldn’t; but when she was only a few feet away, lightning flashed outside, for an instant providing additional light and allowing her to see a wooden door, banded with iron, inset into the wall. Only the top half was visible; its bottom portion was covered

by the dirt that she was now walking on. A metal lock was visible just above the dirt floor, but she saw no handle. The whole thing looked extremely old.

“Wow, look at that,” she exclaimed, touching it briefly. “What’s behind it?”

Both of the children were now with her. The boy spoke. “We don’t know—it’s locked, and we’ve never been able to open it.”

There was another flash of lightning, followed almost immediately by thunder. Maria turned back to the hole and saw raindrops coming down into the room. “Gee, that was close.”

“It sure was,” Elsie replied anxiously. She looked toward the hole and then asked, “Ma’am, do you know what time it is?”

Maria pushed a button on the side of her watch and reported that it was a little after five.

Elsie gave her brother an alarmed look. “Frank--we gotta go home! Momma’ll be mad if we’re late for dinner.”

The boy rolled his eyes, but he followed Elsie when she went to the hole and scrambled up. Maria came up behind them and climbed out, too. She shouted thanks to them as they ran away through the forest, and their fading goodbyes drifted back to her.

Maria paused, crouched next to the hole. The rain was coming down harder, and a chilly breeze made her shiver. She looked up to study the sky, and debated whether to go back and wait at the bus stop in the pouring rain, or poke around a bit further until the thunderstorm passed. She doubted that it would last very long, and although she was already a bedraggled mess, she finally decided to stay and wait it out. So she flipped the plywood onto her camera and notepad to try and keep them as dry as possible, and slid down once again.

As she turned her back to the hole and headed toward the mysterious door, it began to rain harder, and the temperature in the little room noticeably dropped. Water trickled in through the opening, and dripped here and there through the ancient wooden ceiling.

It was almost completely dark at the far end of the chamber. She touched the door with her hands, running her fingers around its edges. She felt no hinges, so she figured that it must swing away from her. There were deep chips and gouges on the edge of the door above the lock, presumably where the kids had attempted to pry it open with something.

She pushed against the door. There was a little give, but not much. *Too bad the kids aren’t here*, she thought. *They’d make short work of it*. But they weren’t, so it was up to her.

When she pushed against the door, she realized the something was carved on its face. It was too dark to see the pattern clearly, so she traced it with her fingers.

A cross. Its lower arm disappeared into the dirt.

She decided to clear some of the dirt away from the door. Once she'd hunkered down on all fours, she began to dig in front of the door like a dog, scooping away moist hunks of earth and pushing them to the side while she thought about how she was ruining her nails. She dug in earnest for a few minutes, methodically scooping and clearing, until her arms began to ache; then she stopped for a moment. She touched the face of the door again, this time in the area where she'd dug. The wood was rotted and soft; in spots it almost felt as though she could punch through it with her fingers.

It occurred to her that what she was doing was amateurish. She wasn't equipped for her task; didn't even have a flashlight. Maybe it would be better to tackle the door later with Oskar and Eli and some tools.

As she crouched in front of the door debating what to do, she realized for the first time that she really didn't like being where she was. She had been so preoccupied with her desire to gather information for Oskar and Eli, and then distracted with the neighborhood kids, that she hadn't really focused on what she was doing. There was something vaguely sinister about the whole situation: the lack of any official information about the castle; the fact that there seemed to be no trace of it in Djurön, at least above ground; and now this weird room with its solitary door.

She frowned. Where, exactly, did the door go? And why wasn't there . . .

She turned and looked back at the entry hole, where water was now coming in at a steady rate. The hole was a fluke; it hadn't been built that way. If Frank hadn't found it, the room would've just remained underground the whole time, unless there was another door on the opposite wall that she'd missed.

She loped, bent over, back down to the other end and studied the collapsed wall carefully. Although it was a little hard to tell, she couldn't see any sign that there had ever been a door there. Which meant that . . .

. . . *the door has to go outside*. Yes, that was the only explanation. Probably the only thing behind the door was a flight of steps leading upwards. Why anyone would construct such a room was beyond her, but that had to be the answer.

She crawled back up out of the hole, slipping a little because of the mud, and looked around at the fort. She imagined where the door should be down below her, and climbed over the walls of the fort in that direction. She paced out about six meters, stopped, and looked carefully over the ground for any sign of an entrance. Then with small steps she began to walk slowly in the same direction, scrutinizing the ground carefully for any signs of

a man-made structure. But there was nothing but ordinary forest floor, seeming to mock her.

She stopped, sighed, and looked around the forest. It continued to rain steadily, saturating her hair. Irritated, she scratched her head.

The hell with it, she thought. *I'll just go on home and tell them what I found; we can come back out later tonight, maybe, if I'm not too damned tired.* She turned around and headed in the direction of the bus stop.

†

Maria hadn't gotten very far from the children's playfort when she realized she had forgotten to get her camera and notepad. She swore softly to herself, turned around, and headed back, crossed the stream yet again in the steady rain and scrambled up the bank to the fort. She glanced at her watch: 5:39 p.m. This was turning into a very long day. There was no way she would have the energy to come back out here tonight.

She was lowering the plywood back over the hole when it occurred to her that it might be a good idea to take some pictures of the hole and the room, in case it took them awhile to come back out. Maybe Eli had seen the door at some point, and could tell them about it. And the camera had a flash, so she figured she could get a few snapshots.

She took a quick picture of the hole, and then carefully slid down in once again. *These pants are ruined*, she thought. The mudstains on her bottom would probably never come out.

She ducked down to clear her head, then crouched and pointed her camera at the far end. She didn't really have to aim because at this distance, it was impossible to avoid getting a picture of the door. So she looked through the viewfinder into the blackness, held the button down halfway, and when the light turned green, snapped the picture.

In the bright flash of the camera she saw it: a dark gap on the lock side of the door.

Her breath caught in her throat. *Couldn't be.*

She froze, trembling, and thought about what Eli had said; the one thing, of all the unbelievable things, that Maria's rational mind had quietly refused to accept, that she had thought, in her heart of hearts, had simply been Eli's imagination: *But somehow he changed the dice from six to seven, and then it was me. I don't know how he did it—it was like magic—but it happened.*

Like magic.

Her previous unease blossomed and expanded in her chest into full-blown fear. The door had been locked; she was sure of it.

She waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. Slowly, hesitantly, she felt herself drawn to the door. In the light from the hole, she could see it, but not very well. She stretched out a trembling hand and pushed. Silently it swung further open, revealing . . .

A cool draft moved past her with a smell of ashes. Something white, moving a little, beyond the door. She strained to see what it was. A large cobweb, fluttering in a shaft. A shaft that sloped steeply down and away.

For the first time in her life, Maria felt that she was in mortal peril. The urge to flee overcame her. She turned toward the light, wanting to get away from the door at all costs. And that was when she slipped, fell on her chest, and felt the black, moist earth give way beneath her. In one, quick motion, she slid down the shaft into the darkness, her scream echoing behind her.

Chapter 16

Eli . . .

Eelii . . .

Footsteps on the cold stone of the darkened hallway

Coming for me, coming in the whistling dark

Run and hide, hide where He won't find me My feet go pitter patter

The flames flutter in their iron flickering shadows they cast

Try one door then the next but they're all locked, pull and pull but they won't open

Growing louder getting closer I'm so afraid

(St. Michael the archangel defend us in battle . . .)

I reach the end nowhere to go He sees me and I see Him

A Monster, no clothes now no wig

(Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the Devil)

I am trapped the roughness on my back He grabs me, He takes me

My face pressed against His dead white flesh can't breathe can't move

(And may God rebuke him we humbly pray)

*The door shuts Puts me down on a bed of silk a boy tied there in candlelight beautiful and
clean like a girl silk knotted in his mouth so quiet*

*(And do Thou O Prince of Heavenly Hosts by the power of God cast into Hell
Satan and . . .)*

My head thrust against the boy's thigh, slick tense and sweaty Holds me there

(. . . Satan and all the evil spirits--)

His silver knife comes out

It makes the cut swish between his jerking legs blood spurts forth

(who prowl—who prowl throughout the world seeking to--)

My face forced into the cut, the hole, the warm stream, He commands

(--seeking to ruin souls)

Drink . . . Drink . . .

In my mouth my nose I'm drowning

Twist and squirm, must get away but my face is thrust down even harder . . .

(St. Michael please please)

Yes.

I surrender.

I drink . . . and drink . . . and drink.

I drink and now I am destroyed I must hide my face from God

He knows, He is happy now and lets go

I rest my head upon the dead stomach and look

Oskar Oskar it is your dead face I see No, no Please no

Your dead eyes staring at me I cry

He lifts me by my hair pulls me to Him holds me tightly

You are mine Forever He says face changes as He kisses me clean and loves the evil in me

He is Nils Tobbie Johan Ake Rutger Håkan their hands, their fingers, they are everywhere upon me

And I . . . I . . .

(die)

“*Eli.* Wake up. Wake up, Eli.”

“Oskar?”

“Yeah.” The soft touch of his hand on Eli’s face. A touch and a voice, full of love and concern. “You were having another nightmare, I think. You kicked me in your sleep.” He tried to smile.

“Oh.”

She turned her face from him and began to cry.

Friday 12 AUGUST 1983 - Stockholm Police Station

“Kurt--Kurt.”

“Yeah, Martin. What is it?” He paused and looked up as he pulled a file from the cabinet in the outer office.

Martin held up a fax and tried to suppress the excitement in his voice. “Just got the ID on our floater.”

“Good. Who is he?”

“Miguel Aguilar, age 29. Had a rap sheet as long as my arm.”

Kurt smiled. “And you’ve got long arms.”

Martin laughed. “Yeah. Well, apparently he was running a little prostitution ring before he disappeared. I’ve got some uniformed guys out right now, interviewing known associates about his last whereabouts. And we’ve found his car. A really nice Porsche, over in the parking lot of an apartment complex in Rinkeby. But there’s no record that he ever lived there. And the car is clean.”

“Okay, good. Where do things stand with the flyers?”

“They’re being wired out tonight. Stockholm, Göteborg, Malmö, Uppsala, Västerås, Norrköping, Örebro, Linköping and, uh . . . Helsingborg, I think.”

“Great. I liked the work the artist did on the girl. Good thing that Carlberg got such a long look at her.”

“Yeah, that was a lucky break, all right.”

“And we’re going to have the boy’s picture right below the sketch, right?”

“Yeah.” Martin looked away, then back to Kurt. “Oh, Kurt—I know you’ve been wrapped up with the ME today. Did you hear the news?”

“News? You mean about the floater, or—”

“No. About the guy they just arrested over in Rågsved.”

Kurt shook his head and gave Martin a puzzled look. “No. What guy?”

The eagerness in Martin’s eyes was abruptly replaced by a guarded, cautious look. “He, uh . . . apparently burned his house down with his wife inside while she was asleep. Said he thought she’d turned into a vampire.”

“Oh, *Jesus*.” He visibly slumped, and his hand, with the file still in it, dropped onto the open drawer of the cabinet. “Tell me you’re joking.”

“No.” There was a pause. “I’m sorry, Kurt. Word is that he had a history of mental illness, if . . . if that makes you feel any better.”

Kurt grunted. “It doesn’t.”

“Well, I’m . . . I’d better get on the phone to those guys and find out what we can about Aguilar. Talk to you.”

“Yeah.” Kurt turned and went back into his office and shut the door behind him.

His chair wheezed under him as he sat down at his desk and stared at his wall in silence. He looked at the dusty plaques and awards, some of them hanging askew, and suddenly felt very old and tired. Just about burnt out, yep; right on the cusp.

He shook his head. What would be the next thing—mass hysteria? People running around with torches and stakes? Some nut job had read the goddamn *Expressen* article--

(your report, you mean)

--and now some poor woman was dead.

Yes--*my* report. That fucking goddamn report that he never should've put together and signed. That some SOB in the department who had a hardon for his job had leaked to the press. They were *still* trying to figure *that* out, he thought with a touch of cynicism. He'd be surprised if they ever did. A nod and a glance, and Koch would get the message: don't look *too* hard. It was time to turn old Magnusson out to pasture; he'd gotten a little too big for his britches. Hell, it would happen even if that kid marched right in here tonight and turned herself in. No one ever took the Department on that way without paying a price.

But yet, the report represented his best work; was the consummation of long, hard hours of solid investigation. The Chief hadn't liked it, but no one had come forward with any *evidence* to contradict it; instead, it had been met with disbelief; with willful blindness. He felt, intuitively and logically, that his conclusions were correct, even if they were unbelievable. Dammit, he would call a spade a spade--anything else was cowardice, pure and simple. And he would not be a coward.

A spade is a spade. He looked down at the carefully rendered black and white sketch on the middle of his blotter.

She was very beautiful, that was certainly true. Big, plaintive eyes in a small, round face. Not the kind of face you were likely to forget. But what was behind that face? What lived in those eyes? That was what he wanted to know. It was the only thing that mattered.

He pulled a directory out of the left upper drawer of his desk and scanned down the names; picked up his phone and dialed a number. It was time to talk to Hagen about what had happened in Sundbyberg.

†

Stunned and shaking, Maria clutched her right leg, squeezing her upper thigh above the break in her femur. She groaned and whimpered in pain, breathing in panicky, ragged breaths of fetid air that stunk of ashes and burned her nose and throat.

It was utterly dark; she could see nothing. She had landed, more or less on her right side, in a pile of sticks. The sticks under her were jabbing her. One had torn like a giant splinter through the skin and muscle of her right arm, and the first thing she had done after falling was to pull it out; an instantaneous reaction to remove an offending object from her body. Then she had realized that her right foot was pointed sideways. Her right leg was jammed down into the sticks, and the pain in it was explosive, pumping up past her clenched fingers in heavy, brutal waves that threatened to make her pass out.

As she squeezed her leg, trying to will the pain to stop, she felt a warm wetness trickle past her elbow and run down her forearm. Then it coated the ring and pinkie fingers of her right hand and began to drip off.

She was bleeding . . . a lot. She reached over with her other arm, trying not to move her lower torso, and explored the wound. It was an angled puncture wound that had left a large flap of flesh gaping open on the back of her upper arm. She had to find some way to stop the bleeding, and quickly. She was weak already from when she'd helped out Oskar and Eli.

Her belt. Maybe she could figure out a way to wrap it around her arm just below her armpit and pull it tight.

She reached down with her left hand, found the smallish buckle, and after a little bit of struggling, unfastened it. And as she began to pull it free—

(oh my God if I move too much my leg My Leg MY LEG)

--she felt something round down under her left thigh. Round and hard.

She paused; let go of the belt, which was still halfway around her waist. What the hell was it?

She extended her hand again and tentatively touched it; explored it with her fingers. It felt dirty. Something—

(something burnt)

it had a hole . . . two holes, side by side, like a bowling ball, but too big for a bowling ball, and then her fingers traced a third hole, and then they touched some little hard things, like-

-

(teeth)

She gasped and wrenched her hand away; then paid the price for her violent reaction with a bolt of pain.

A skull. There was a skull underneath her, and she was lying on

(sticks let it be sticks please God)

--bones.

Her hand felt the other protrusions that were supporting her weight. She imagined a Halloween skeleton in her mind, trying to match the picture with the objects she touched: a curved something here; another that felt a bit bigger at one end than in the middle, with a ball-shape on its end.

She screamed, screamed, and screamed again. Her screams echoed, then died.

She was in a pit. An ash pit, chock full of skeletons. She extended her left hand again and carefully felt all around her as far as she could. More skulls and bones, some of them that broke and crumbled at her mere touch; others that were hard and unyielding.

She pulled her hand back and tried to get herself under control; fought to master the nearly overpowering urge to begin clawing and scratching her way to, to . . . what?

Up. Up somewhere. Get over to the wall, then maybe find the shaft that must be above her somewhere. She'd had a good, long fall; she was sure of that. She called out, and listened to the echo. It sounded like a pretty big pit; not small and enclosed. There was no way to know how far up it was, but it had to be a fair distance. Could there be a ladder, or something to climb?

Her right hand now felt completely wet. She wiped it on her pants, but the wetness soon returned. The adrenaline kicked in and she struggled to get her belt free.

†

He touched her again and she did not pull away. He thought about asking questions, or saying "it's all right," but decided that they were not what she needed, and simply held her instead. She turned in his arms to face him; her arms came up to encircle him. She pushed her face against his neck, under his jaw, and continued to cry, and he comforted her as best he could, waiting for her to slow down.

"We can't—" she sniffed and swallowed, "do the blood thing anymore."

Surprised, he stiffened a little, but continued to stroke her hair; her back. "Why not?"

"Because it's not safe. It wouldn't be safe for you. You might end up in something really bad. And then you'd be stuck with the memories forever, just like me."

Some time passed before he answered. "Bad like the dreams you've been having?"

"Yes."

"But are they just dreams, or are they real memories?"

"They're both. And some of them I don't ever want you to see. *Ever.*"

He nodded slightly, feeling as though something dark and terrible was lurking just beneath the surface of their conversation, and whispered "okay." He hugged her, willing his disappointment to depart; wishing that his love for her could somehow purge the bad memories from her, could remove all of her pain and leave only happiness in its wake. But there was no easy out; no quick and painless way to make everything right. He could tell her he loved her, hold her forever, kiss her endlessly, and she would still be . . . damaged. Some hurts, it seemed, lasted forever; left scars that could never be erased. Maybe she would never be a whole person, even if they did find a cure for their problem.

And if he wanted to be with her, to love her, to be her one special person, he would have to accept that, and . . . take her as he found her. He now understood this; with Maria's help, he had been able to understand it. And with this thought his love for Eli flared up in his chest: the knowing certainty that he was the one person in the whole world who had chosen to be her lover, whatever she was; through thick and thin--no matter what.

He pulled her more closely to himself and wished that there was some way he could express the totality of his feelings for her, transmit the raw force of his emotions beyond the mere use of his arms to hug, or his words to comfort. If that flame, he thought, could only be moved through the few inches of skin, muscle and bone that divided his heart from hers, then she would know its power; could experience it directly.

But of course, there *was* a way. The way that she had shown him; the way that he had shown Maria.

This is probably a dumb question, but do you know how much he loves you?

I *can* do it.

He gently lifted her face to his. "Eli."

She felt his fingers under her jaw, bringing her head to his as he spoke her name; then the soft moistness of his mouth, closing over hers. And in the darkness of Eli's mind, the pleasant sensation of his lips was transformed into a door, a white square appearing in the blackness, its whiteness growing and growing, becoming larger and larger until the darkness was pushed away and obliterated. So bright, but not harsh or blinding. A lightness warm and soft, washing over her, like settling into a tub of warm water, but it was not wet, it was

(joy dancing around me)

Seeing herself on the jungle gym Seeing her hands twist the Rubik's Cube Hearing her voice say start with the corners Hearing herself tap Sweet Dreams into his ear Feeling her hand pressed into his as they run across the courtyard Hearing their shared laughter at the kiosk Feeling the touch of her body upon his back The caress of her hand upon his shoulder upon his arm their fingers intertwining the sensations pouring out faster One after another Ten meaningful glances One hundred soft touches One thousand kisses now so fast that they tumble over one another too fast to be counted to be measured they blur together and merge into one mighty tidal wave of--

*Eli Eli
I hear you
I touch you
I kiss you
I know you
I want you
I love you and*

I will love you forever

...

†

Trying to move her torso as little as possible and work through the fiery pain from her broken leg, Maria pulled the end of the belt up and cinched it down tightly around her arm. In the process of getting it the rest of the way off her pants and into place, she had bled quite a bit, and her injured arm was now completely slick. She had blacked out briefly while trying to get it threaded under her armpit.

She realized as she held the belt tightly that the idea of trying to crawl anywhere was out of the question. There weren't enough holes on the belt to lock it down, and the leather was too stiff to tie into a knot. This knowledge, and knowing how the slightest movement caused her leg to hurt, forced her to abandon the idea. She was stuck where she was, and would have to wait until someone could come along and rescue her.

But *would* someone come along?

Those kids. Maybe they'd come back to play some more after supper.

(if it's not raining and their mom lets them play in the woods after dark, you mean)

Yeah--exactly. *Shit.*

Oskar and Eli, then. They'd wake up and she wouldn't be there, as she'd said. She shifted a little and checked her watch. They ought to be up by now, she supposed. What time did it get dark?—she wasn't sure. How long would it take them to figure out something was amiss, and come looking for her? It wasn't as if she had been off on a dangerous mission, or anything

(at least, that's what she'd thought at the time)

... but still, they'd get worried soon enough, and come out. Start looking for her.

So, what were the chances of them finding the secret room? A small hole in the middle of the woods was the only clue. Even with their super-keen eyesight, that wasn't much. They wouldn't want to talk to those kids if they could help it. And they might not even start looking for her up here. Just because she had chosen to start looking for clues at the granary didn't mean that *they* would, did it? When she'd been up over the silos with Isak, she had seen all kinds of woods lining the eastern side of the promontory. What if they started to look there? Plus, they couldn't stay out forever, and the nights were short in August. It might take them days.

Those kids—Frank and Elsie—they were her best hope, then. If they didn't come back tonight, maybe her wound would clot and she could hang on until morning. Maybe they'd come back then, see the door standing open, and . . .

She paused. *Was the door still open?*

Her breath caught in her throat. It had opened by itself . . . had it—

(oh, Jesus please not that)

Panic gripped her, and with the panic came the abject whimpering of total fear. Her mind raced with terrible images of herself trapped in this horrible pit forever, sealed off and eventually dying, alone and undiscovered, from loss of blood or from starvation; becoming a mummified corpse, decaying away, one more body on top of innumerable bodies, no one ever knowing, ever learning of her fate. Forgotten.

Then she felt something that made her stop crying. She sniffed, wiped her face with her good hand, and then lay absolutely still and quiet, hoping and waiting to feel it again.

Yes—there it was. The faintest movement of air. Not strong enough to be called a breeze, nor loud enough to be heard, just . . . a soft coolness that she felt on her face and arms. Which meant that—

. . . the door was open.

An enormous wave of relief passed through her. There was a chance, then, if the kids came back, or maybe even Eli and Oskar, that she would hear them

(assuming you're not asleep or passed out)

and call to them, and they'd realize she was down here, and go get help. Yes. That would be her hope; was what she would now live for. She relaxed a little, and wondered if the bleeding from her right arm had stopped.

†

Later, after she had stopped crying and they had lain in peaceful silence, he pulled away and looked at her stomach.

“Hmm.” He lifted her shirt and probed her gently with his finger.

“What?” She looked at him with mild curiosity.

“Did I ever tell you that I think your belly button is cute?”

She snorted. “Oh, *you*.” She pulled the shirt’s edge aside and looked down at herself as she spoke. “It’s just a normal belly button.”

He poked her some more. “I’m glad it’s not an outie. Outies are gross.”

She giggled. “Stop it! That tickles.”

“Just checking.”

“Checking? I know there’s no lint.” Mock haughtiness.

“Not any *more*, at least.” He snickered and she glared at him. “But no, not that. Just wanted to make sure your screw is tight.”

Now she was truly puzzled. “My *what?*”

“You know . . . your belly button screw. If it’s loose, your butt will fall off.”

She laughed, and once she did, he joined in. Then she gave him an evil grin. “Well, your butt has been dragging a little lately, so . . . let *me* check *yours!*”

After their playing in the tub had ended, they came into the darkened living room, holding hands, puzzled that Maria wasn’t back; she had promised to be home by dark. They were both concerned, although neither of them could say precisely why; after all, it was 1983, not 1783, and the most dangerous thing that could happen to her was stumbling over some old stones. Bad dreams were just that—dreams. So they chose to wait awhile.

After half an hour had passed, they decided to act. They wrote a note for Maria, telling her that they had gone out to look for her, and that she shouldn’t worry; that they would be back before sunrise at the latest. Oskar folded up the map and stuck it in his pocket, and then they left.

It was a cool, blustery evening. A thunderstorm had blown through earlier, leaving puddles and broken tree branches in its wake. They moved cautiously from shadow to shadow in a westerly direction, their hats pulled low over their heads to hide their hair as best they could. Fortunately for them, it was still drizzling, so they didn’t meet anyone. Eventually they reached an open, grassy field, which they ran across toward a small forest on the opposite side.

Once they were inside the dense stand of trees and were sure they were alone, they rose straight up and headed northeast toward Djurön, flying just below the lowest layer of clouds. On their way, they passed directly over an airport and admired the twinkling blue and white lights outlining the runways and taxiways. Off in the distance to their left, they saw the lights of a plane break out of the cloud layer on final approach for a landing. They looked at each other and smiled.

†

Maria.

A man's voice, deep and formal.

She heard the words in her mind, and was confused because she thought she was hearing them in her ears. Frightened, she looked around in the eerie blackness, trying to pinpoint the source, but it had none. When she spoke, her own voice was high and terrified.

“Who . . . who's there?”

You know who it is, Maria. The one for whom you searched.

For a moment she was unable to do anything at all, so total was her fear. A paralysis of mind and body gripped her entirely, stopping all movement and all thought. And once she realized that she was hearing the voice in her mind, she tried not to think at all.

Why are you so afraid? I mean you no harm. Indeed, I may be able to help you . . . if you will help me.

She spoke again; it was easier to speak than to think the words she wanted to say.

“You're the vampire, aren't you?” Her voice echoed back to her in the dark, mocking and empty, making her feel small and powerless. “The one who did all those awful things to Eli.”

I was once a 'vampire' as you say, but now I am virtually nothing. In my present condition I am harmless. I seek only release from bondage--my freedom--just like you.

She tried to inject some strength, some force of will, into her reply, but wasn't sure if it worked. “I don't believe you. You're evil, a liar.”

Every coin has two sides, Maria. So quick are you to judge the hearts of others. Shall I judge yours? I can, if you wish.

“I . . . I know what I've done. I know I'm not perfect. But I've never abused little children, I know that much.”

Define 'evil' for me, if you can.

“It's . . . it's the opposite of good. I can't explain it. But I know it when I see it.”

She felt an emotion, with no words attached: a mixture of pity and contempt.

You know nothing—you are pathetic. Soon you will die here. You are tired, and your wounds are grievous. There is only one way out of the pit, and that is the way you came in, quite unattainable to you in your present condition. Your friends will not find you. Soon you will fall asleep from exhaustion and your tourniquet will loosen. Then your bleeding will resume and you will exsanguinate. That is the fate that awaits you, foolish woman.

“They’ll come,” she replied in a small, trembling voice. “They love me and they won’t abandon me. And they’re smart and they can see really good in the dark.”

If they find you at all, they will find only your corpse. And they will cry, as children do. And then they will go on their way and soon forget you, as children also do. And no one will ever know what happened to Maria Fridell. You will not be missed; you will not be lamented.

“You shut up!”

A pause; then: *As you wish.*

Suddenly, Maria was alone. And to her surprise, she discovered that her fear of being alone surpassed even her fear of Him.

†

They were about three kilometers away from Djurön when they saw the lights of the granary and the ship that was moored offshore. A tall radio antenna jugged up from the middle of the complex, over 30 meters in height and lit with a flashing white light. They headed for it, and soon silently alighted midway up its length, hanging on either side of the cold, tubular bracing of one steel strut. Both of them were sopping wet.

Oskar swept the hair out of his eyes and looked around. The antenna swayed gently in the wind, which made a low moan around the wires. He looked down at the triangular pattern of support beams that disappeared beneath him, then up at the same thing above his head, and whistled. “Wow, Eli, it’s pretty cool up here. Check out those big silos down there. And that ship. It’s huge.”

Eli murmured a vague response. She was not looking at the granary below them or the ship; instead, she was gazing toward the horizon all around, and at the trees and homes to the east. When she continued to look in silence for what seemed to Oskar an inordinate amount of time, he spoke.

“Eli . . . what is it?”

“It was here.”

“Here? You mean, the—” But he knew what she meant, and her nod confirmed it.

“How do you know? I mean, there’s sure no castle around now.”

The distant look in her eyes remained as she spoke. “It’s just . . . the lay of the land. The view out over the bay. And especially that little island over there—I remember that.” She paused, as if trying to organize her thoughts. “What’s that word?”

“Word?”

“You know, when you’ve . . . when you feel like you’ve been somewhere before, or done something—”

“Déjà vu.”

She nodded. “Yeah—déjà vu. That’s kinda how I feel right now.” She looked down, puzzled. “They built this thing right over it. I wonder how long it’s been here.”

“Dunno. Looks like they’re loading grain onto that ship . . . do you see the boom?”

“Uh huh.”

“Do you suppose Maria came here today?”

“It would make sense. I mean, it seems like a good place to start looking, I guess.”

“Maybe we should ask them if they’ve seen her. Or should we just look around first?”

They looked at each other for a long time; both of them understood the risks that the question entailed. Then Eli looked out over the wooded promontory once again. “This place is bigger than I remembered. She could be anywhere, although she’s probably on her way home right now—that’s the stupid thing about all of this. But if she’s not, then I think we need to do what we can to find her. I’m just worried about her—I don’t know why, but it’s not like her to be late or not follow through with what she says. It’s already almost ten o’clock. She was supposed to be home an hour-and-a-half ago. And the sun will be up around 5:30, so we don’t have much time . . . we could spend all night out here and not see a thing. As much as I hate to, I think we should risk it.”

“Well, Eli, they probably know my face better than yours, so”

“I’ll go, don’t worry. Just need to figure out where the office is.”

“What’re you going to say? I mean, if you tell them she’s missing, they might insist on calling the police.”

“We’ll work it out when we get down. I have an idea, but we might both have to do it. Come’on.”

Isak stepped out of the white-washed office and yawned as he turned and deadbolted the door. Another 14-hour workday was behind him, and he was ready to call it a night. The comforting hum of the transfer augers continued to fill the air; the crew foreman had everything under control with the *Maartensdijk*, and the loading operation would be completed in the morning.

Quite a storm they'd had earlier, he thought as he zipped his jacket all the way up against the cool night air, stepped down onto the gravel parking lot and headed toward his truck. As he skirted the dark, cold puddles, he wondered if the college student had found anything interesting after she'd left the granary. Their meeting had been in the back of his mind all day. Maybe he'd call Christoffersen next week to see if she'd gotten ahold of him about doing some excavation. Would they let her? He sure hoped so.

He found it fascinating to think that there really might've once been a castle in Djurön. It could confirm his theory about the foundation line running through the woods. He wondered why they would've torn the whole thing down, though, assuming there'd been one. Maybe the ground was deemed too valuable because of its deep water mooring potential to waste on yet another historical site. Well, the old always had to make way for the new, he supposed. That was progress, right?

He was unlocking his truck when he heard a young, anxious voice behind him. "Excuse me, sir. Can you help me?"

He turned around quickly, a bit startled to hear someone out here at this time of night. A kid was standing a few meters away. He wore a winter jacket and a dark hat, and it was hard to make out his face in the streetlights that illuminated the parking lot, positioned as they were behind the boy. He was a little surprised that he hadn't heard him approach, but then again, he knew his hearing wasn't what it used to be, what with all the racket around here.

"Hi. What can I do for you, son? Aren't you out kinda late?"

The boy adopted a self-embarrassed tone; shuffled his feet a little and stuck his hands into the pockets of his coat. "Yeah—I guess I am. Do you work here?"

"Sure do . . . just going home. Quittin' time."

The boy took off his hat, letting his blond hair fall free around his head. "I'm looking for my sister. She came out here earlier today, looking around for a castle. I'm a big castle fan. My mom and my little sister and I spent the day in town looking at some down there, and she said we could come out here and join my sister afterwards. Sis told us to meet her down at the corner," he motioned vaguely down Djurövägen, "but I can't find her. I was wondering whether you might've seen her, or know where she is."

“I talked to her this mornin’. College girl, right?”

“Yes.”

“Nice young woman. Well, I don’t know where she is now. I told her that there looked to be a foundation wall buried out there in those woods behind you, and that she was welcome to go take a look. But I haven’t seen her since.”

“What time did you talk to her?”

“I don’t know for sure. I guess it was late morning . . . you know, a little before lunch.”

“Oh.”

He glanced up at the dark sky, which had finally stopped raining. “I can’t imagine that she’d still be out there at this time of night, son. Not with the thunderstorm that came through and all.”

The boy turned his head and glanced back over his shoulder at the dark stand of trees; then he said softly, “Yeah. Me neither. Unless someone took her in for a bit.”

Isak pulled the keys out of the door of his truck and flipped through them until he found the one for the office. “You, uh, want me to call anyone? Get ahold of the police, or something?”

“Well, I . . .”

Suddenly a new voice—maybe a girl’s, although he wasn’t quite sure—arose from the opposite side of the service road. “Oliver! Oliver!” The voice grew louder. “I found her!”

The boy turned and they both looked at the small, dark figure who trotted into the parking lot, splashing through the puddles. She ran up and stopped, panting, a short distance from the boy.

“What? Where, Sofie?”

“Down there,” she spoke breathlessly and pointed back toward the curve in the road, “where you told me to wait for her. She just showed up, and said she’s tired and wants to go home. We’ll have to come back out some other day.”

“Aww . . . but I wanted to see it.”

Isak spoke up. “You’re welcome to come back anytime—tomorrow, if you’d like. I’d be happy to show you around.”

The boy's face brightened a little. "Really? Gee, thanks."

"Come on, Oliver. We need to go."

He turned back to Isak. "Could you just maybe show me where that foundation wall was?"

Isak sighed; then he stepped up next to the boy and turned him to face the line of trees across the way. "You probably need to come back out during the day. I don't know if I'm right about this—maybe ask your sister—but you see that spot right there where there's sort of a dip in the treeline?" He thrust out a lanky arm next to the boy's head so he could look down its length.

"Uh huh."

"Well, that's what I was tellin' her about. It runs back through them woods in a straight line, then turns ninety degrees and comes out way down there." He pointed off to their left.

"Oh, yeah. I see it."

"Yep. Now you two and your sister better get home to your mom, and maybe come back when it's daylight and the weather's a little more decent, okay?"

"Okay. Thanks."

"You bet. You want a lift?"

"No thanks—it's not far. But we appreciate the offer."

In his truck on the way home, he passed the two of them walking southeast down Djurövågen, but he didn't see the college girl waiting for them anywhere. He frowned briefly, but kept driving. It just felt too good to finally be off his feet and in the warmth of his truck to turn around. And like the boy said, someone in one of those homes along the road probably let her come in for awhile. After all, the people in Djurön were the nicest folk.

†

Maria snapped awake. She had fallen asleep for a few seconds, her head drooping down, her breaths becoming slow and shallow. She gasped and looked around blindly.

She had fallen asleep despite her best efforts to remain alert and the throbbing pain in her arm and leg. She had been up for almost fourteen hours, mostly tramping around in the woods. There was no light and virtually no noise in the pit, and being so tired, coupled with the nearly complete lack of sensory input, was having its effect.

He's probably right.

She pulled the belt tight to shut down the fresh flow, and inhaled deeply for several breaths until she felt more alert. The increased oxygen helped clear the cobwebs from her mind, and she decided it might be better to put her wounded arm up over her head. Then she started thinking about how she could keep herself awake.

Songs. Yes, songs—she would sing them to herself. Any song she could think of. A few seconds passed as she tried to think of something. She was surprised at the difficulty of this simple task, but she supposed that she had good reason to be distracted.

Her voice, wavering and uncertain, rose up from her dry throat and over the bones and ash.

“It happens all the time
“This crazy love of mine
“Wrapped around my heart
“Refusing to unwind
“Ooh, ooh, crazy love . . .”

The lyrics faded out into dead silence as she paused, trying to remember the next part.

“Count the stars . . . in the southern sky
“That fall without a sound
“And then pretend that you can't hear
“These . . .”

How did it go? Oh yes. “. . . teardrops coming down.”

She returned to the refrain and was starting to repeat it when his voice broke through, calling her. She stubbornly ignored him and continued to sing, but he was persistent, and somewhere around “ooh, ooh, crazy love,” he broke her concentration and she stopped. This time, she spoke to him in her mind.

Go away. Leave me alone!

I told you I mean you no harm.

I don't believe you, damn you. Get out of my head!

I have already been damned. I want to be released from my prison only so I may die. Only you can help me accomplish this. Help me die, and I will help you live.

What . . . what do you mean?

Reach out your hand.

A new wave of fear gripped her; she instantly withdrew her right arm to her body.

No.

It is our only hope of escape. Soon I will lack the energy to speak with you. Unless you do what I say, we will both be lost.

Why should I stick out my hand? What good will it do?

Silence.

She started another song, but her mouth was so dry that she developed a tickle in the back of her throat and began to cough. With each spasm of her airway, pain spiked down through her broken leg. She desperately needed some water, and in its absence, she worked up some spit and swallowed. When this failed to help, she stuck a finger into her mouth and touched her uvula, which made her retch but seemed to improve things a little. Then she tried to breathe through her nose so she could keep her mouth shut.

For a few moments she lay still, listening, hoping, *praying* for the slightest sound of salvation from the shaft above. And after only silence greeted her ears, she reached out with her left hand, and felt . . .

. . . nothing.

Further. Reach further, woman.

I can't.

Then die.

She gritted her teeth and with a quick lunge, moved her body forward over the bones; then screamed in agony as her leg shifted. After the pain had passed, she reached again. Her fingertips touched cold, rough stone. She moved her hand around, feeling further. It was the wall. Without knowing it, she had been only centimeters away from it the entire time.

I feel the wall.

Break it.

Break it? How?

Use your fist. Use a bone. It is exceedingly thin; anything shall suffice.

How could it be thin?

Because I scratched it for over a century.

†

Oskar stopped walking and looked at Eli. His voice was hoarse from calling Maria's name. "We've lost the line again."

"No, it's over . . . I think it goes that way." Eli wandered in a semicircle and then pointed vaguely off in one direction.

Oskar gestured in a slightly different direction. "Seems to me that it should be *that* way." He looked up and scanned the trees overhead. "Can you see it?"

Eli looked up and around at the treetops waving in the wind. "I can't tell. It's hard from here."

"Well, let's just keep going. I know we came from that direction." He glanced back over his shoulder.

Eli looked at him with frustration. "She's not out here, Oskar—you know that, don't you? I mean, why would she be? Once it started to rain, she would've turned back."

"Well then, where is she?" He glanced at his watch. "I mean, it's almost 10:30 now. She should've been home hours ago."

"I don't know!" Eli's voice was high and near to breaking with emotion. "I don't know, Oskar. But something bad happened—I can feel it." She looked around. "This place is bad. We never should've let Maria come out here by herself." In the span of a few seconds, Eli remembered that just days earlier she had thought about breaking Maria's neck, and she felt ashamed. Just who *was* the monster, anyway?

"Well I'm not sure, but I think we need to go that way. Come'on, we have to keep looking." He offered his hand to her.

"Okay." She relaxed as she took it, and together they jumped over a fallen log and kept moving through the scrubby underbrush.

"It's starting to rain again." He couldn't conceal the dejection in his voice.

"Maria? Maria? Are you out here? Maria?"

There was no answer.

†

The stone broke under her fist like a piece of fine china, but it was still quite hard. She cried out, withdrew her hand, and put her scraped knuckles into her mouth; sucked. The semisweet, bitter coppery taste spread across her tongue.

She caught the whiff of an odor and wrinkled her nose. She had almost gotten used to the all-encompassing smell of ashes, but this was different, like . . . cabbage that had gone bad in the back of someone's root cellar. A sulfurous smell.

She groped around for something to use against the wall. Some ribs . . . too fragile. A spine . . . no way to hold it. Some long bone . . . maybe. Something round—

Another skull. Her stomach turned as she grasped it, twisted, and tore it free of the spinal column. And as she brought it up to strike the wall, she realized how small it was. A child's skull.

Oh my God, what is this place? What happened here? Oh Jesus, please—

The townsmen dumped them here and burned them. Some of them weren't dead yet . . . did you know that?

She sobbed as she began to beat the stone with the little skull. It lasted precisely three blows before it collapsed in her hand. She felt the spot and realized that she had made an opening the size of a grapefruit.

I'm sure you were the reason for all of this, you murdering bastard.

Yes, I was. In a way.

Then why should I trust you? She reached back where she'd felt the long bone, found it again, and pulled. It came free, but something was still attached, a little thing that swung on one end like a golf ball, it was a--

(a kneecap)

Her stomach took another twist; it was too much. She stopped, turned her head, and vomited down into the blackness. There wasn't much to give up, making the dry heaves that followed that much more painful.

You have no choice. Your friends are not nearby; if they were, I would know it.

You wouldn't tell me even if they were.

Perhaps not. But you must continue to enlarge the hole.

She hammered repeatedly at the wall with the little femur, ignoring the increasing smell, the pain in her leg, and the loosening of the belt. When a piece of bone flew off the end, she

turned it around and used the other. After it, too, shattered, she threw it down and touched the opening, pulled and snapped thin pieces of stone away from the edges. She was surprised to realize that it was now about the size of a child's ball.

It is sufficient. Now you must do what is necessary.

What?

Release the tourniquet and reach into the hole.

She froze. *I don't want to. I won't. You'll do something to me, hurt me.*

Take a bone, then; thrust it in. Then you will know what I now am.

Slowly, hesitantly, she reached back for the ribs. As she found one and snapped it off the sternum, her fingers were enveloped in a spider's web. Under any normal circumstances, she would've flung her hand back and forth, terrified, to get the sticky strands off. Now she just thought, *Fuck it—who cares?*

She put one end of the rib into the hole and prodded around. The rib got caught in something . . . something stick-like. It was light and movable, yet attached at the far end.

She realized with growing horror that it was the bones of his arm—dry and dessicated. It was limp and lifeless; she sensed no independent movement.

Suddenly it all made sense to her. The vampire had been entombed in this place. Buried alive, they must've hoped, for all eternity—a punishment worse than death. They'd torn down his castle and found the bodies of all the people he'd destroyed—men, women and children. It must have been horrible beyond description. So they'd dumped them into this pit, burned everything, and then sealed it up; sealed it off so no one would ever discover it. That was why everything was underground; why there had been no stairs. No one had ever intended this pit to be discovered. And now here she was . . .

She pulled the rib out and let it go.

I'm not going to do this. No fucking way.

I cannot save your life without your blood, Maria. It is the only way.

Shut up! You're nothing but skin and bones—you should be dead!

And yet, I live. Put in your arm, Maria. A few drops is all that is needed.

You go to Hell. No. No way.

I would rather be in Hell than to remain here. Once I have saved you, you and your friends may kill me, or leave me for the sun. I will welcome it.

She strained to hear. *Please Oskar, Eli . . . please save me.*

†

They drifted like mist through the tall, dark trees in the pouring rain, looking ahead and side to side. They figured that the chances of meeting anyone were very low, and moving through the forest in this way had proved much easier than walking. When they began to feel unsure of their course, one of them would float up above the treeline to get a better view.

They came to a stream and were beginning to cross it when Eli paused, hovering, over the running water. “Hey Oskar, look at that.”

He followed her eyes and looked off to their left into the blackness. He saw something white, limply fluttering in the light gusts of cold wind. He frowned. “What is it?”

“Don’t know.” She looked as perplexed as he did, and without speaking she began to move toward it. Oskar followed.

†

Maria reached down with concern and gingerly felt below the break in her leg. Ever since she had shifted herself closer to the wall, the pain in the limb had diminished. At first she had been relieved, but her relief had been short-lived because the pain had rapidly been replaced by a numbness that was somehow worse. She couldn’t feel her toes, and when she tried to wriggle them, she wasn’t sure if she was doing anything. The whole leg up to the break was starting to feel heavy, congested and cold.

Something’s blocking my circulation down there, she thought. Probably the bone itself, compressing a vein in her thigh. How long could it go on like this before the muscles died? She had no medical training, but she doubted that it could be very long.

She swallowed, closed her eyes and looked up toward the ceiling. Somewhere up there, beyond the wood-beamed ceiling, beyond the layer of earth and rock, beyond the forest, beyond the sky, beyond the stars, someone was there. Someone who cared about what happened down here; Someone who would not lead her astray. Would God, in his infinite kindness and wisdom, allow her to make a mistake and give birth to an abomination merely because she was desperately trying to cling to the little sliver of life that he had deigned to grant her? Wasn’t it written somewhere that God helped those who helped themselves? Didn’t Jesus teach about mercy and forgiveness? Would she be serving God by just lying here and dying? Would her pathetic little death be a part of his Grand Scheme of the Universe?

She experienced a doubling back, the sense that she was once again in her apartment in Sundbyberg, pointing a pistol at Oskar and Eli. The simplest action of my hand could determine whether thousands live or die.

A cry from the dead in the pit seemed to rise up around her and into her mind; as if they could sense what she was about to do, and were begging her to stop. *No, no no . . .*

Dear God, please forgive me if I'm wrong.

She loosened the tourniquet, then thrust her hand and forearm into the hole, found the skeletal fingers, and seized them firmly, holding the gagging sensation in the back of her throat at bay by sheer force of will. The blood oozed anew from her wound, leached sluggishly down the undersurface of her arm, gathered itself for a moment on the heel of her hand, and then trickled down to intermingle with her ghastly handshake.

At first nothing happened; she felt only the pocket beneath her palm slowly fill and grow sticky from her blood. Then she heard the sighing in her mind, like the exhale of a man who has just downed his first mouthful of water after a long, grueling march in the desert. There was a tingling sensation in the center of her hand and the little pocket of blood there drained away, only to be replaced by more as she continued to bleed. Then she felt a faint twitch of the fingers, and started to pull away; but then the hand squeezed hers gently as the sighing changed to his voice, now pleading. *Please, don't. Please . . . please.*

An image rose in her mind, and she instantly tried to will it away: Oskar and Eli's upturned faces, their tongues moving busily over her forearm. Lapping up her life, just like the thing in the hole. She suddenly wished that she had never met them; that time could be rewound back to that night she had gotten out of Nick's car, so that she could now march right by Oskar and leave him in the rain. She moaned loudly in fear and anguish, wishing with all her strength to be removed from this horrible place, away from this awful, grotesque thing that was now coming alive in her hand.

As the seconds slipped by she heard wet, organic sounds from the cavity. They reminded her of the time she and her sister had played with a bowl of fresh Jello, picking up globs of the cherry-flavored, translucent gelatin and squishing them gleefully between their fingers, letting it squirt out of their clenched fists. The fingers in her hand rapidly grew thicker, expanding, like tiny balloons, into miniature sausages; then into the fingers of a child; then into those of an adult.

Just as she began to grow fearful that her blood loss was becoming too great, he broke their handgrip. She jerked her hand back as she realized that he was now thrusting his arm out of the hole. He groaned, and she was surprised to realize that she was hearing it with her ears, not in her mind. There was a cracking, crumbling sound, and bits of stone and debris began to pop off the wall, some of it sprinkling onto her arm. Then the sound and activity increased, as did his groaning. Something moved very close to her in the darkness. She tried to scoot backwards, then remembered the tourniquet. *Need to tie it—*

“Give me your uninjured hand.” His voice was not the same as it had been in her mind. It was deeper; smoothly commanding. It was not a voice to be resisted. She reached out and he clasped her forearm; she instinctively grasped his. It was hard to believe that such a thin layer of muscle over bone could be so strong.

“Pull.”

She tried to pull back her arm as he strained against her, and for a moment she feared that he would pull her into the wall. But instead, a tense equilibrium was reached, and then the angle of his arm changed and she felt him shift. More stone gave way and then suddenly he relinquished his hold on her, and she felt the weight of his body fall next to her. He was free. A deep sigh escaped from him.

For a brief time nothing happened, and the longer it lasted, the more frightened Maria became. She imagined him gathering his strength, preparing to lunge upon her. And why shouldn't he? She was helpless, and undoubtedly had what he needed. Killing her would be easy.

“I require more blood to carry you up that wall.”

His statement prompted her to remember the tourniquet, which she twisted down tightly over her upper arm.

“No. I've given you enough.”

“It is not sufficient. If we fall, you could die.”

“No.”

A pause; then his hand lightly touched her arm. She recoiled, but he did not follow; and when he spoke again, his voice was a model of gentleness and compassion.

“Maria, we have come this far. I have grown weary of taking; hence, I now ask. Let us do what is necessary to achieve our goals. Otherwise, all that you have given up will be placed in jeopardy.”

“All right. Shut up, you bastard. How do you want it?” She sighed, loosened the tourniquet again, and wondered with disgust how many liters she had left.

“Give me your hand.”

She extended her arm to where she heard his voice, then felt it grasped in both of his hands. He guided it into some sort of position, then held it there. She saw nothing in the blackness, but felt her blood run down and off to . . . she didn't know where. And she did not want to see it.

“Enough.”

She heard his voice, and that was when she began to feel light-headed. She fumbled for her belt, tried to tighten it, and failed. She didn't have the strength to keep tension on the leather.

He moved on the bones; then his hands were upon her neck, on her . . .

She screamed and began to beat against him, her fists thudding weakly against his chest. “Stop it! Stop it, damn you!”

He didn't stop, but he wasn't strangling her, either. His hands moved down to her blouse and with one, quick motion, he tore it open.

“Be still.”

She continued to strike at him; tried to hit him in the face. When her hands slammed against his flesh she realized that he was naked; his skin felt thin and leathery. “What're you doing? Stop that, dammit!”

Relentlessly he yanked at her shirt, pulling it out of her pants and raising it up to her arms, where it gathered and caught on her shoulder blades. She thought about the things Eli had said. How she had been his pet, in his bed, so he could do awful, unspeakable things to her. She struck him with renewed fury while making a continuous growl of denial.

A sharp, painful slap rocked her head back, bringing stars to her eyes. “Stop struggling and raise your arms, woman. You are losing too much blood and you will die if you fail to cooperate.”

In the few seconds that Maria was stunned, he pulled again on her shirt, jerking her arms up over her head, and it came free. She drifted in and out of a foggy daze, vaguely aware of tearing sounds, followed by his manipulation of her wounded arm. Then she felt a snug pressure coiled around the arm just above her armpit.

For a short time she sensed that he was no longer near her. When he returned, crawling over the cracking bones, he spoke again.

“I am going to free your leg now and try to straighten it. There will be pain. Bite this.” A flap of something was suddenly in her mouth, tasting bitter on her tongue. She reached for it and realized it was a length of her belt. Without ceremony he lifted her.

The pain was so intense that she thought she was dying. She bit down, her teeth making a deep, crescent-shaped pattern in the tough hide, thereby transforming her scream into a long, loud, muffled moan; then she blacked out. When she came to, something stiff was tied to her throbbing leg. She reached down and felt a tight piece of cloth--her shirt. The stiff thing was . . .

Her hand closed around a smooth knob of bone.

“Yes—a leg bone. It will have to suffice.”

Her hand fell limply away. Then she felt, very briefly, his hard, bony hand upon her cheek.

“You are very brave. Ignorant and foolish, but very brave.” There was only admiration, not condescension, in his voice. Before she could reply, he continued. “Are you now prepared to do the hardest thing?”

She wasn’t ready to do much of anything, but she understood that just lying there was not an option. “Yes.”

“I cannot fly, and you are too weak to withstand climbing with me to the shaft opening. Therefore, I will jump from here to the opening, and then ascend the shaft. You must hang tightly onto me. This will be best achieved if you lock your good arm around my neck, as if you were want to choke me. Do not try to hold me with your legs. If I miss the shaft opening, we will fall a distance of some fifteen aln, and it is likely that you will die. Do you understand?”

“Yes. But . . . fifteen what?”

“Aln.”

“What is that?”

She sensed a smile. “A long way.”

†

Oskar shook the water out of his hair, pulled ahead of Eli, and alighted in the middle of the fort. He looked at the logs and branches arranged around him. “Pirate flag,” he murmured. “Some kids built a fort.” For a moment he was reminded of Eli’s and Jakob’s play fort by the stream, the one he had seen in his shared memory with Eli so long ago . . . but not really. “Pretty cool one, too . . . don’t you think, Eli?”

“Eli?” He looked around.

She was tensed on top of the log wall closest to the stream, and at first he thought she was staring at him. Then he realized that she was staring at the ground, at something not too far from his feet. He frowned and looked down.

A hole. A hole and a splintered old piece of plywood, cocked up at one end, dark and drenched with water.

“What is it, Eli?” He looked back up at her and saw the fear in her face and heard a deep whining coming from her throat. Then she scuttled backwards out of sight, down the face of the fort.

“Eli!”

†

She tightened her left arm around his neck, locking its scrawny thickness in the crook of her elbow and seized her forearm with her right hand. She closed her eyes and tried to shut out the revolting sensation of the dry, sandpapery skin on the back of his head pressed against her cheek and the rough skin of his back, pressed to her breasts. He felt like a living skeleton, animated by a wiry, supernatural power.

“Hold me tighter.” She tried.

He crouched, tensed; she felt him tremble, and then . . .

Whoosh.

They slammed onto the bottom lip of the shaft and her head smacked into the back of his with incredible force. Her right hand was jolted free of its grip on her left arm, and she hung freely from his neck. The broken ends of her femur ground together, producing explosive pain in her leg. She screamed and instinctively tried to cling to him with her good leg, but it was impossible because like his arms, his legs were too busy working beneath them, kicking and scrabbling for purchase. He bucked furiously, his arms reaching over and over, clawing, digging into the stone; and yet they slid backwards. She felt his pelvis slide down, slipping off the edge as her legs did likewise and dangled out into space. Then there was a long, continuous screech of claws on stone. He swung his pelvis to the side, seeking to gain purchase with his leg, and she swung in the opposite direction like a pendulum, her weight dragging him down. He cursed and lunged forward, swung his leg up again, and caught his knee up over the edge, swung his left arm wide, and dug in with his left hand. And held.

†

She cowered next to the wall outside the play fort in the rain, her arms crossed protectively in front of her chest. When Oskar came to her side, he realized she was shivering.

“What is it? What’s wrong, Eli?” But somehow he knew, even before she spoke.

“It’s him. He’s down there . . . in that hole.”

He paused, standing completely still by her huddled form, and looked back, straining to see the hole which was now just out of his vision. He closed his eyes and tried to reach out

with his mind; tried to listen. But he felt nothing, and heard nothing except the rain. He turned and started to climb back up the wall of branches and tree trunks toward the hole, but she grabbed his wrist and looked up at him with huge, pleading eyes.

“Don’t! He’s coming--we need to leave!”

He twisted out of her grip and scrambled up into the fort.

“Oskar! *Stop!*” But he was already lowering himself into the hole.

†

He crabbed up the terrifyingly steep shaft, pulling them with one clawed hand and then the next, grunting with each thrust of his legs. Maria hung on, feeling him straining beneath her, but her arm was loosening with pain and exhaustion. The shaft was just as black as the pit, but the air was fresher. She could feel its coolness more strongly now; almost a breeze.

She closed her eyes. The breeze . . . it felt good against her face. Like that time when she was seven, just a little girl, and she and Lena had run through the park down by the river after that thunderstorm; the air had been full of a fresh, wonderful dampness, cool on her face and arms, almost mist-like, the wet grass beneath her bare feet . . .

He began to slow down and slip, and as she faded in and out, Maria was dimly aware that her elbow under his neck was being dragged through loose, wet earth. She thought about opening her eyes to try and see what was happening, but decided not to. It was dark anyway, and she was now used to being blind. And it was better, easier, just to keep them closed. She no longer had the energy to be repulsed by his lizard-like skin, and allowed her face to settle down onto the side of his neck, gently lolling upon his flexing shoulder. He would either save her, or he wouldn’t; it didn’t matter one way or the other. She had done what she could, had held up her end of the deal, and it was all the same. She relaxed to the rhythmic movement of his body beneath her.

Momma, sing me a lullaby; rock me to sleep.

Suddenly his purchase on the floor of the shaft failed and they slipped down abruptly. His body tilted as he reached out and up with his left arm, straining to seize the bottom corner of the door with the last of his energy. Maria’s unconscious body broke free and rolled off him to his right, but his right arm was also above his head and in no position to stop her. He pistoned his right leg out against the wall, trying to block her descent, but her body merely crumpled briefly against his thigh, rolled over, and slid soundlessly down the shaft. He froze and heard the faint thump.

†

Oskar slipped down through the hole. He had never seen Eli so upset. She was usually very collected and self-assured, and her sudden and complete loss of self-confidence and

transformation into a shivering bundle of nerves was shocking. But when he saw the terror in her eyes, and understood that for reasons unknown he was not scared like her, he could think only of protecting her. And so he had scrambled toward the hole with the sole purpose of stopping the thing that had hurt her.

His feet hit a floor of damp earth with a soft thud. He ducked his head down a little, and then he was in. Being inside and cut off from the rain and the wind, he was able to hear movement from an open door at the far end of the low, underground room. There was no additional chamber beyond the doorway, only a wall that slanted down and away. He assumed that there must be a flight of stairs going down somewhere.

Something or someone was coming up toward the doorway. Oskar couldn't see it, but he could hear it. Scratching, clawing sounds, and the grunting of exertion.

He's crawling up the stairs.

A pale, clawed hand, accompanied by a scrabbling noise, suddenly appeared in the bottom of the doorway and grabbed the lower edge of the wooden door, which swung over in a short, rigid arc as weight was applied to it.

He heard Eli as she drew near the hole, her voice shrill and full of alarm but muffled by the earth over his head. "Oskar! Get out of there! *Please!*" And as she spoke, her voice growing louder, the rotten wood at the bottom of the door broke away, and the hand disappeared. He heard a sliding sound, like someone being dragged across the ground. Then there was silence.

"Oskar!" Now she was directly over the hole, shouting in.

He saw something glimmering on the floor by the doorway and went to it. As he approached he realized that on the other side of the door there was a shaft, not a set of stairs. And the shiny thing at his feet was—

. . . a camera. He recognized it as he picked it up.

"*MARIA!* Eli, get down here! Hurry!"

†

They found her lying on her right side, sprawled in the ashes at the bottom of the shaft. Her injured leg, with the old bone, now broken, still tied to it, was splayed in front of her at a grotesque angle, as if she were attempting to kick a ball with a leg bent at mid-thigh instead of her hip. There was a dark, bloody tear on the back of her thigh from which protruded the broken end of her femur, glistening whitely in the darkness.

The vampire was near to Maria when they arrived at the bottom of the pit, but he crawled to the opposite wall when Oskar snarled fiercely at him to get away. He slid down to a

seated position, pulled his legs up to his chest and sat, quiet and motionless, with his eyes closed.

Upon seeing Maria, the children began to cry in earnest. They crouched down on either side of her, and Oskar patted her cheek.

“Maria, Maria . . . can you hear us?” He sobbed, his voice trembling. “*Maria?*”

When she spoke, her voice was barely audible. “Oskar? ’s that you? Eli?”

“Yeah--we’re here,” they replied in unison. Eli brushed the ashes off her face and out of her hair, and Oskar took her hand.

“I should’ve waited.” She mumbled something that ended with “. . . so stupid.” Then she looked up at them and frowned, and when she spoke again, her voice was slurred. “Don’t even think about . . . you know.”

They looked across her at each other, puzzled; then they understood. Oskar squeezed her hand. “It’s okay; we won’t.”

“Good.” She coughed harshly and swallowed.

“Now you two remember . . . there’s more people like me out there. You find ’em and . . . try to make some new friends. In my purse you’ll find my sister—Lena . . . you’ll find her number. Get me back to her if you can, okay? And Marta’s in there, too. Tell her you’re my kids—and that I want her to help you. She’s nice.”

“Okay.”

She reached for Eli, trying to touch her face, but couldn’t. Understanding what she wanted, Eli took her hand into hers and pressed it to her cheek. “Honey . . . don’t be too bitter. He tried to get me outta here . . . it just didn’t work. Whatever he did to you—try to forgive a little, if you can. Not for him—for yourself. Maybe you’ll feel better. Okay?”

Eli felt a lump in her throat that was so huge, she could barely speak. “kay. I’ll try.”

Maria turned her head to look at Oskar and gently tugged on his hand. He bent down so his face was next to hers, so she could whisper in his ear.

“Don’t ever stop loving her, okay? And give her a kiss for me once in awhile, will you?”

Oskar closed her eyes and they cradled her for a long time in their arms, crying and moaning as they kissed her smudged and dirty face over and over, unable to believe that she was really gone. And when their emotional energy was completely exhausted and they could cry no more, they turned their attention to the one who remained with them.

They picked their way over the bones and stood before him, their eyes red and faces swollen from crying. Oskar spoke first, his voice loud and demanding. “What’d you do to Maria?”

His eyes shifted briefly upwards to Oskar, then down again, and a few seconds passed before he spoke. “I caused the door at the top of the shaft to open. Of her own accord she came to the entrance and fell in.”

“What else?”

“I persuaded her to release me from my imprisonment.”

“What do you mean?”

He looked up once again at Oskar, and Eli was able to get a good look at his face. She tried to conceal her shock, but was unable to prevent a tiny gasp, her hand flying to her mouth like a small bird.

It was the same face she remembered, yet different. Without the wig that he once wore, his head appeared shrunken, and his scalp was pocked with small patches of long, thin, white hair. The gray skin of his face was pulled tightly over his skull. His cheekbones jutted out over cheeks that were sunken, like those of a starving person. The mouth was still small, but even more flat and gash-like because his cracked, almost nonexistent lips, the corners of which were hidden in deep crevasses that ran down from the corners of his long, delicate nose.

His wrinkled brow was more prominent than she remembered, but the eyes underneath were still incredibly huge and blue. They no longer held the dark, terrifying eagerness that she remembered, though; they were flat and bereft of any spark of emotion—the eyes of someone who has seen all that there is to see, and does not wish to see any more.

He nodded toward the opposite wall and then looked down once again. They both looked at the hole in the stone face of the pit.

“You tricked her, you mean!”

“There was no trickery—I was merely persistent. I asked her to give me her blood so that we might escape this place, and she did. Just as she has given her blood to you—has she not?”

Eli spoke, her voice cracking with fury. “That’s none of your *business!* She gave it to us because she *loved* us, not because she was trapped and tricked into it by someone like you!”

“I have told you the truth, and she herself told you the rest. It is unfortunate that she died—her bravery was admirable. But I wanted to be free of this place, and she agreed to help. I will not answer further to you.”

He stood and made as if to walk past them, but took only two steps when they leapt upon him, knocking him onto his back.

Although he was bigger than both of them, he did not have their strength and was overmatched. After a brief struggle in a cloud of dust and ash, they pinned him against the wall on his knees. Oskar held his arms behind his back while Eli held his neck in a deadlock.

“You’ll answer to us!” she screamed. “You’ll answer for what you did to me!”

He turned his head slightly in her vicelike grip to look up at her out of the corner of his eye. “Your name is Eli?”

“Yes!”

He gave her a mocking smile, his fangs gleaming. “I . . . don’t remember you.”

It was the final insult; the last indignity. Perhaps, had he said something different, she might have been able to heed Maria’s wishes, to find some modicum of forgiveness. But there was nothing in his face that warranted forgiveness.

“Well now you *will!*” She drew his head back and began to slam his face into the wall of the pit, screaming between each impact.

“This is for *Maria!*”

His nose shattered, crumpled against his face.

“This is for cutting my *cock off!*”

She rammed his head into the wall twice in quick succession. The bones of his forehead flattened into the stone.

“This is for *biting me!*”

She tilted his head up and slammed his mouth and lower jaw into the bloody splotch that was rapidly forming on the rough surface. The fangs and front teeth snapped off, and his lower jaw fractured on both sides.

“This is for *Mama and Papa!*”

With each thrust she turned his head slightly to the side, angling the impacts to destroy first his left cheekbone and then his right.

“And this is for ruining my whole, goddamn *life*, you miserable son of a *bitch!*”

Oskar felt the vampire’s arms go limp as he counted the impacts, each one sounding more sickening than the last: one, two, three, four, five, six . . . He reached and touched her small, heaving back. “Eli . . . Eli, that’s enough. Eli, *stop.*”

She delivered three more blows, then released him. He toppled over sideways and rolled onto his back.

He no longer had a face; just a pulpy mess of blood and bone. Even the globes of his eyes had ruptured. The vampire made a muted gargling sound. Eli seized him by one slowly twitching arm and began dragging him toward the other side, toward the base of the shaft.

Oskar was in shock and felt sick to his stomach. Finding Maria—who had, through some miracle, come to love them unconditionally—broken and dying at the bottom of the pit had been bad enough, but the brutality of Eli’s total destruction the vampire’s face had completely unnerved him.

More than the loss of Maria, he now feared losing Eli. He had seen her panting face when she had released her chokehold on the vampire, and he had been simultaneously repulsed and moved with pity. It had been the most scary thing of all, much more frightening than the vampire—a distorted mask of hatred so deep that it seemed as if she had become a different person, an impression reinforced by the spasmodic clenching and unclenching her claw-like hands, held rigidly at her sides. Yet, he also saw that she was crying, and crying quite uncontrollably, the tears running freely down her cheeks in rivulets through the dust and ash. Hers was a picture of anger and grief mixed so completely as to be inseparable; a confluence of bitter emotion that held her with such force that he feared that she might never be the same person again, might never return to being the Eli he knew and loved, whenever this awful day finally ended.

He understood her urge to inflict pain and punishment on the vampire, and did not oppose it. He knew too much about her past to feel any differently. Through her shared kiss he had experienced directly the horror of her neutering, turning, and the trauma of her separation from her mother. By that same kiss, he had also come to know the sadism that lived within the vampire. He had seen the gleeful anticipation in his eyes when he had given the little fat man the signal to proceed with the cutting under the table. It was akin to the pleasure that Oskar had seen, over and over, in the faces of the classmates who had tormented him for days on end—a perverse desire for happiness in the destruction of another human being—body, mind and soul. And in the few seconds before Eli had begun to batter his head into the wall, he had seen it again in the unrepentant face of the vampire lord.

Oskar also understood completely the rage that had found its expression in Eli's act. More than any other person, he knew how the vampire had, for no good reason, forever destroyed a joyful little boy named Elias. He knew that Eli had felt the same intense release that Oskar had experienced when he had thrust his knife as hard as he could into the tree in the courtyard of his old apartment complex, imagining that it had been Conny's eye—the raw, unadulterated desire to be free of unreasoning malice and oppression; to get even and to right, with the power of one's own hand, unseen, cosmic Scales of Justice. But could that same emotion, given its full and unbound expression, be self-destructive? Could abandoning herself to it turn Eli into a monster, too?

She flopped the beaten creature down near Maria's feet, and twisted one broken end of the old femur free from its binding on her leg. Then she straddled him, held it with both hands, and pointed its jagged end at the middle of his chest.

"Wait, Eli." She looked up at him, surprised.

"Are you sure this is the right thing to do? What if he knows about a cure? He might be the only one who does. Isn't that why we came here in the first place?"

"If he did, do you think he'd tell us? You saw what he did—he enjoys being a vampire! He killed Maria, and he'd kill you, too, if he could. My God, Oskar, look around you! Why do you think all of these bones are here? Who do you think's responsible for all of these dead people?"

"I know, but I'm more worried about *you* than about him. You're scary."

Oskar saw the flash of confusion and consternation in her face, the anger of one unexpectedly opposed from friendly quarters. "What do you mean?"

"The way you're acting. What you just did."

"He *deserved* it, Oskar, for what he did to me. And to say he doesn't remember me—that's . . . that's just—" She groaned loudly.

"Go ahead and kill him, then. I won't stop you. But I don't think it'll make you feel any better in the long run. It'll . . . leave a bad taste in your mouth, or something."

"Oskar, it *has* to be done."

"Then do it."

"I want to feel like you're with me on this, Oskar. That you're behind me."

"I *am* behind you, Eli."

"It doesn't feel like it."

“Yeah. Well, I’m sorry.” He broke her gaze and came to Maria’s side, crouched down, and straightened her fractured leg. Then he undid the piece of cloth around her calf, and used it to tie her ankles together so that he could move the body more easily, all the while feeling Eli’s eyes on him. He couldn’t bear to look at her, and as he hoisted Maria’s body up over his shoulder, the tears came.

“I’m going to take Maria out of here,” he said bitterly, his voice choked with emotion. “You do whatever you need to do.”

As he drifted up toward the shaft’s opening, he heard Eli sob loudly, followed by the sound of the broken femur being driven through the vampire’s chest. An inhuman moan rose up from the floor of the pit. Then there was thrashing in the bones as the moan grew softer and died away, and suddenly Oskar felt as if he might vomit.

Eli. Oh dear God, Eli . . .

†

He was wiping Maria’s face clean with a shirt sleeve in the rain when Eli emerged from the hole. She came to his side and stood over him.

“It would be easier to leave her here tonight, and come back for her tomorrow night when we know where to take her.”

He looked up at her, his face sad and forlorn. “I can’t do that, Eli. It wouldn’t be right.”

She sank down beside him, sniffed, and took one of Maria’s hands into her own. “I know—I can’t, either.”

“Okay.” He started to rise, then stopped when he felt her hand on his forearm.

“And Oskar . . .”

“Yes?” Her dark eyes searched his, seeking understanding.

“I’m sorry—about down there.”

He put his hand over hers and squeezed. “We’ve just lost Maria, Eli. I don’t want to lose you, too—you’re all I have. Know what I mean?”

She nodded silently, then looked down and away. “Yes—I think so. Now, let’s get her home.”

†

Saturday, August 13, 1983 - 9 p.m. Hageby, Norrköping

They sat facing each other at the kitchen table. The library books on the castles of Östergötland County were shoved to the side, in a small pile on one end of the table. To Eli, last Thursday, when Maria had helped them figure out the mystery of the castle's location, seemed like a long time ago. An earlier life.

Maria lay in the bathtub, wrapped in a blanket, completely covered. They couldn't stand to look at her face any more.

They finished composing the note to Maria's sister, folded it, and put it on Maria's chest. Then they took their bags and headed for the train station, leaving the door unlocked. Eli placed the call.

"Hello?"

"Is this Lena Fridell?"

"Well I'm Lena, but I'm not Fridell any more. Who is this?"

"Your sister, Maria, is dead. You can find her at Formaregatan 220C, Hageby, Norrköping."

"*What?!*"

The tears came, stinging Eli's eyes. Someone else who had loved her would now suffer her loss. "Do you have a pen?"

"Y-yes." A rustle of something at the other end—panicky fingers searching through a drawer. "Who is this? Is this some kind of a joke?"

"Write it down. Formaregatan 220C, Hageby, Norrköping." She swallowed; almost couldn't speak.

"We're sorry." Click.

Dear Lena,

Your sister Maria was a good person. She loved us like no one else ever has. She was like a mom to us. And we loved her too, very very much. She died trying to help us, trying to do a good thing. We are very sorry that she is gone, and we miss her terribly. She asked us to call you about her, so we did. Please do not think she died for no good reason. Maybe someday we will be able to tell you more about how brave she was. The bravest.

Chapter 17

The call came late at home after another long, hard day full of surprises. He was on the john reading the paper when he heard the muted ring of the phone downstairs. Halfway through the third ring, there was the faint sound of Flora's voice. When she stopped talking, he knew it was for him.

As he had anticipated, there was a soft knock on the bathroom door. "Kurt, there's a call for you." He debated asking her to tell whoever it was to call back.

"Who is it?"

"A detective in Norrköping."

"Norrköping?"

"Yes. Do you want me to tell him you'll call back?"

"No—I'm coming." He stood, flushed, and washed his hands. Didn't bother to get a robe, and went down in his underwear and t-shirt—to hell with what the neighbors might see.

"Kurt Magnusson. Who's this?"

"Hi. This is Detective Lonnqvist. Sorry to bother you at home, but I was told it would be all right."

"That's fine. How can I help you?"

"I'm responding to a Wanted for Questioning Notice that your department issued earlier today on a Maria Fridell."

"Yep. Did you find her?" He grabbed a pencil and paper he kept by the phone and made a note of the time: 22:37.

"Yes—well, we found her body and confirmed her identity with an ID found on the premises. Down here in an apartment in Hageby. They'll be taking her out shortly. Her sister in Södertälje got an anonymous call earlier this evening, telling her that her sister was dead, and where to find the body. Then she called us to report it, and we sent some officers to check things out."

"Any evidence of foul play?"

"Well, I don't have all the details yet, but doesn't sound like it. The apartment was unlocked and barely furnished. She was found in the tub with an external fracture of the right femur. And there was a note."

“What’d it say?”

“I don’t have that yet.”

“Can you get someone to fax it?”

“Will do.”

“Who’s the sister?”

“Lena Bergman.”

“Who’s in charge of the investigation?”

“Inspector Nordin.”

“All right. What’s his number?”

“Her number.”

Kurt searched his memory as he jotted down the information. Something he’d read in a departmental newsletter about . . . a year-and-a-half ago? A promotion.

“Sorry. Is that Tyra Nordin?”

“Yup. That’s the one.”

“You planning on speaking with her later tonight?”

“I expect so.”

“You mind telling her I’m driving out, and I’ll be there first thing in the morning?”

“Not a problem.”

“Good. Thanks very much for the call.”

“I look forward to meeting you, sir.”

Kurt wished he could still hear things like that without wondering what they meant.

†

Oskar pulled the blanket up a bit more around him, then glanced at Eli over the top of the newspaper they’d bought at the station in Norrköping. She was sitting on the opposite aisle

facing toward the rear of the train, kitty-corner to him, pretending to read the sports section. There was no one else around, but they didn't think it would be smart to sit together. He couldn't see her face, only the white poof-ball on top of her tobogganer's hat, joggling a little with the movement of the train.

Are you okay.

The newspaper lowered a little, just enough for him to see her dark eyes, peeking out beneath the edge of her gray hat that was pulled low on her face.

About as good as I can be, I guess. How about you.

There was a squeak and a metallic clatter as the train entered a bend. The aluminum trim around his window was loose and it vibrated behind the beige curtains.

Nervous. Scared, really. I've never been to Malmö before. It was cool outside and he had the window cracked a little; the slipstream fluttered the top of his paper.

It's just another city. Actually, it's neat because it's on the Öresund—you'll like that. And if we need to, it will be easy to go into Denmark. There was a pause, then: I hope you're not mad about not calling Marta.

No-- I guess not. I would've liked to see her, but I don't know. You're probably right—she wouldn't have known who we were, and once we told her about Maria, there would've been too many questions.

Yeah. Who knows how she would've reacted.

Probably not too good.

Yeah.

So where are we going again once we get there?

About 25 years ago I lived in a little place called Linhamn. It was near the water and there were these little cottages. I thought maybe we'd start there.

Find one that's empty?

If we can, yes.

And if not?

They looked at one another across the car. It was only for a few seconds, but to Oskar, it seemed much longer.

I guess we'll do what we have to do. We'll see--maybe we'll get lucky.

Are you very hungry?

Her eyes searched his. *I'm getting.*

He nodded a little, and suddenly wished he could sit next to her and feel her hand in his. She surprised him when she whispered “me too”; as soft as a cat’s paws, but he heard it, no problem. He lowered his newspaper a little further and they exchanged smiles.

...

Eli finished reading the newspaper for the third time. Because it could no longer serve as a satisfactory distraction she sighed, folded it, and put it on the empty seat across from her. Then she pushed up the armrest to her right, swung her legs up onto the adjacent seat, pulled her hat down so it covered the upper half of her face, and curled up with her head on a pillow from the overhead luggage compartment, pretending to be asleep.

An image came to her mind, a recent memory that she had returned to, again and again, since yesterday night: Maria, sitting on the edge of the couch, nervous but trying not to be, with her arm extended down as Eli explained how she was going to make the cut. The gentleness, the warmth that the three of them had shared as they worked through the process together; all of them wanting the same result, with no one dying for once. The love that she had expressed for the two of them and that they had keenly felt; a love which had materialized before their eyes as the razor had swiftly done its work and the red freshet of life had sprung forth for them to consume. It had been like a miracle.

The bitter disappointment remained in the center of her chest like a heavy weight, and she knew it would not be leaving anytime soon. To be cheated out of the glimmer of hope for a better life that Maria had represented by the one who had ruined her life to begin with—it was the hardest thing. And it never would have happened if they hadn’t agreed to let Maria scout out Djurön in advance.

Her inner voice assumed an outraged quality. But how could they have known?—there was no way they could have. The only thing that was supposed to’ve happened was for Maria to talk to some of the locals and gather information, do some of the things that it would’ve been hard to do at night. Instead, she had wound up meeting the worst thing of all. Maria—the one who’d been the kindest, most understanding grown-up that Eli could ever remember—meeting the worst creature imaginable. Of course she’d become yet another of his victims—it could not have been otherwise.

Her slaying of the vampire lord was no recompense, did not make up for their loss. It brought no satisfaction, represented nothing because he was supposed to have been dead in the first place. Why had those foolish people let him live? Hadn’t they known he’d find a way out?

She resisted the urge to begin crying again, and was able to control it. She was beyond crying—burnt out, a hollow shell. There was no question in her mind anymore: God really was against them—against her. The snatching away of Maria proved it beyond a doubt to any reasoning mind. He hated her, had cursed her, and would not tolerate her having a smidgen of happiness. She was not allowed to hope for a better life, one in which the burden of killing other people was lifted. If it had not been clear before, now it was—that was forever forbidden to her. And to Oskar, as well.

Oskar’s face floated up in the darkness behind her closed eyes. The one thing she had left, the one person to live for. She would never allow God to take Oskar away from her. Never.

She heard a creak and shuffling sound, and instantly recognized that it came from Oskar’s side of the car. He was probably getting comfortable, too, she supposed. Then, suddenly, she felt his blanket being laid over her. And before she had time to lift her hat, she felt his lips on hers, giving her a soft kiss.

†

Martin yawned and put on his turn signal before swinging the Volvo into the adjacent lane to pass a truck. He glanced over a Kurt, who was rereading the fax he’d gotten with the little passenger-side map light, and suppressed a chuckle.

He’s got his tie on. It’s almost midnight, it’s just the two of us, and he’s wearing his tie. How old school can you get? He shook his head. Then he picked up the styrofoam cup from between his legs and had a swig of coffee, wishing it was still hot.

They sped south through the night on E4/E20, headed toward Norrköping, the congestion around Stockholm finally behind them. Martin glanced out the window at the seemingly endless series of pine trees steadily passing by. The August sky was dark and clear, and the stars twinkled brightly. A beautiful night.

“You know anybody who lives in Norrköping, Kurt?”

He didn’t look up from his reading. “Nope—but I’ve visited it a few times with Flora. You?”

“Huh uh.”

Finally, Kurt lowered the paper and looked at Martin. “You know, I don’t think I thanked you yet for all the work you’ve done over the last few days. I think you’ve managed to get us back on the trail.”

“Thanks.” Compliments from the old man were not a daily occurrence, so when they came he knew they meant something. “But finding that hooker who knew Aguilar, Fransson, and Fridell was just a lucky break for us, I think. As was discovering that the

brother's car had been towed from Fridell's apartment the morning after Fransson was killed and was sitting right in our own impound lot." He smiled at the irony and shook his head. Left hand, right hand—did they even know each other? Then he added, "I wonder if he'll wash up at some point."

"That's a good question. I guess we'll find out."

"You think that really was her who called Bergman? And wrote that note?"

"I think it's a good possibility."

"And that she killed Fransson."

"Yup."

"Mmm. That's just bizarre in the extreme, you know what I mean?"

"Sure is. I think Fransson was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. She wasn't killed like the others; she was just . . . taken out of the picture."

"I think you're right. But the concept of a person being pitched against a building like a ball . . . I mean, what're we *dealing* with, Kurt? This girl, or—thing, or whatever she or it is, has left a trail of bodies unlike anything in the history of this country."

"Got that right. Whatever she is, she's dangerous as hell."

"Yeah. I mean, these guys—the Aguilar brothers—they were no wimps. Not the kind of people I'd think would be easy to take down, and maybe even armed to boot. Yet the one who floated up—Miguel—he was killed just like all the others."

"Martin, the problem is that these people aren't suspecting any trouble before it happens. They don't understand what they're dealing with. If they did, they'd turn and run at the first sight of her. And once she gets close, it's too late. If half the stuff in our file is right, including our theory about how Fransson died, she's amazingly strong. She could toss you or I around like a soccer ball. Break our necks like that." He snapped his fingers.

Martin nodded, but although he understood what Kurt was saying on an intellectual level, it still wasn't in his *gut* where it needed to be; hadn't sunk down into him to the level of real *knowledge*. He supposed it was because it was just too fantastic, even for him at the epicenter of the investigation. It was too difficult to believe that something that looked like a nice little girl could do these kinds of things. He wanted to keep that knowledge at arm's length, because to truly embrace it would mean he'd have to accept a fundamental shift in his understanding of the world and of mankind. And his inability to truly grasp what they were dealing with scared him. It scared him because he was smart enough to know that when the chips were down, he wasn't going to have time for reflection—he was going to need his brain in gear, and *act*. If he didn't . . .

“Do you suppose a bullet will kill her, Kurt?”

“Who knows? I guess that you and I had better hope it does. Because unless she decides to cooperate with an arrest, which I can’t foresee, I don’t know what else we’ll have at our disposal.”

Martin glanced over at the thin sheet of curled paper in Kurt’s hand. “I have to tell you, I’m not sure that’s from her. That sure doesn’t look like something a stone cold killer would write.”

“I agree.” Kurt held it up once more, trying to see it better in the weak overhead light. “You know, I’ve never seen handwriting like this before. All caps, printed neatly, but—”

“—*old*.” Martin felt a shiver as he said the word. One little word that covered an awful lot of ground.

“Yeah. It looks like it was lifted out of a book of ancient manuscripts or something.”

“It feels weird to be talking about this, but how old do you suppose this thing is, Kurt? I mean, if she really is a”

“I have no idea. Could be centuries, I guess. Did you notice that ‘us’ is used four times, and ‘we’ is used five times?”

“Yeah. You think Eriksson is with her?”

“Who else *would* be? She saved his life, didn’t she?”

Martin smiled. “I guess that’s one interpretation.”

“Really. Can you think of another?”

Martin pondered the question for awhile. “No.”

Kurt turned a bit in his seat to face Martin, took off his glasses, and began to polish them with his tie. “Who do you think this person really *is*, Martin? Have you stopped to think about that? You know as much about her as I do. I mean, look at this note. ‘She was like a mom to us. We loved her very very much.’ It’s not exactly the sort of thing you’d imagine Count Dracula writing.”

“I don’t know, Kurt. I mean, we’re assuming she wrote that, for starters.”

“True—but just assume it for argument’s sake. Two days ago I went through the same thing you’re struggling with right now. Who is this person we’re dealing with: is she a ‘she,’ or an

'it'? And the more I thought about it, the more I concluded that this really is a person, and not only that, but that this person really *is* a little girl.”

“Hmm. I—”

“And you know what? When I talked to Flora about it, she had no problem with the concept. In fact, she went so far as to say that this girl-slash-vampire had fallen in love with this Eriksson boy. Because they lived next to each other over in Blackeberg, before all hell broke loose. And you know what? I think this note proves she’s right.”

Martin glanced at Kurt, his eyebrows raised. “How so?”

“It proves that this thing we’re dealing with had some sort of relationship with the Fridell woman that didn’t involve her instantly dying, that’s what I mean. And not only that, that somehow this . . . *vampire* began to view Fridell as a mother. So that tells you—”

“Tells you what?”

“. . . that we’re dealing with a child. A little girl. She’s somehow a little girl and a blood-sucking monster, all rolled into one. How that can be, I don’t know. But that’s what I think is going on.”

Sunday, August 14, 1983 - 2:08 a.m. Central Station, Malmö

The lights inside the car, which had been turned down so passengers could sleep, flickered back on brightly, momentarily hurting their eyes as the conductor announced their arrival in Malmö. A few minutes passed and then the train lurched to a final stop after its last, slow crawl into the station.

They disembarked separately; first Eli, then Oskar. Before leaving Norrköping they had decided, with considerable regret, to consign Eli’s old steamer trunk to a garbage dumpster, and so they took with them only Eli’s money and toys, Oskar’s album, and whatever clothes they could cram into their suitcases.

Eli walked up the chilly platform about a car length, found a shadowy spot and paused, turning slightly to wait for Oskar while a handful of bleary-eyed people passed by. Once she saw him step down from the train, she turned around and kept walking toward the main hall.

She wasn’t sure whether to be happy or unhappy that the station wasn’t too busy at this time of the night. If it had been crowded, she and Oskar could’ve blended in better, but the risk of being spotted could’ve been higher. But as it was, with few people, they stuck out more—young kids without parents.

They proceeded without incident through the main hall with its old-fashioned steel arches. The restaurants and shops were all closed and dark. Then they went outside through the

main entrance, turned left, and proceeded down under the covered walkway to the bus stop, the little plastic wheels of their suitcases clicking as they passed over the cracks between the sidewalks. They plopped down on different park benches and waited in the cold night air for a bus to take them to Limhamn.

Eli stole a glance over at Oskar. He sat in his brown coat and brown and orange-striped hat, looking around with big eyes at the unfamiliar buildings and streets laid out before them. A car honked off to their right on Norra Vallgatan, and instantly his head swiveled over to see. Some Swedish flags flapped near a little pavilion across the canal, and soon his attention was drawn to them. Despite their circumstances, Eli smiled to herself--some things hadn't changed. Then she frowned. Why hadn't they gotten him some different winter clothes?

When he pulled out his Rubik's Cube and began to work on it, she stopped looking at him and started scanning around herself, especially to their left, where she presumed the buses would come. Soon a big bus rumbled up, but it wasn't going to Limhamn. It stood for about a minute with its doors open, and then left.

A thin old man approached with a little kid in tow, smiled at Eli, and then sat down on the bench next to her. The kid was about three years old, and had a hat with a long tail on it. The man held the boy on his lap and played patty-cake with him. Then the boy caught sight of Oskar's cube and began pointing at it, saying "me want." He struggled to get off his grandfather's lap, but the man wouldn't let him. Oskar glanced over at them with an open expression, unsure of what to do; then quietly slipped the cube back into his coat pocket. The child began to cry, and the man tried to console him with a toy he produced from his own pocket.

There was a sound of breaking glass on the far side of the street, followed by drunken laughter. A small group of young men had rounded the corner of Bruksgatan onto Norra Vallgatan and were strolling down the street, talking loudly and laughing. A dark blue car moving in the same direction slowed as it passed them, and someone in it yelled an expletive. One of the men yelled back and threw a bottle at the car, but the driver sped up with a squeal of tires, and the bottle missed. Surprisingly, the bottle didn't break, instead clattering loudly across the pavement before rolling to a stop in the gutter.

When the men reached the corner of Norra Vallgatan and Hamngatan off to Eli's right, a police car came into view. As it pulled up to them its flashing lights came on, but not the siren. It stopped and two officers got out, stepped up onto the sidewalk, and began talking to them.

Eli glanced over at Oskar again. Now he stood with his back to Norra Vallgatan, apparently studying the facade of the train station in earnest.

She felt as though she was being watched, and when she looked back to see if another bus was coming, she realized that the little boy was staring intently at her, his face expressionless, mouthing some brightly colored plastic keys. He had settled down, and

except for the movement of his jaw, was now completely still. His grandfather was watching the action across the street, and hadn't noticed. She wanted to move to another bench, but knew it would be a bad idea, so instead she smiled at the boy and waved her hand a little. He didn't smile back.

Much to Eli's relief, at last their bus came. As they boarded they looked down at the steps, not up at the driver, and they didn't reply when he gave them an offhand greeting. They found some empty benches toward the rear.

Only after she had sat down with her luggage beside her did Eli see herself and Oskar plastered on the interior wall of the bus, up by the driver. She sat with shocked stillness, staring at the grainy images—a photograph of Oskar, an artist's sketch of her. Not a bad sketch, either. When had someone seen her? She searched her memory, but everything seemed to blur together. Oskar didn't look dangerous—he was actually smiling—but her? Her eyes looked empty; a pretty face, but . . . soulless. Not someone who cared about very much.

At the top of the flyer, written in large, capital letters, was "WANTED FUGITIVES," and below that, in slightly smaller letters, was "MULTIPLE MURDERS." Beneath each picture was their physical description. At the bottom, immediately below "CAUTION," was written "THESE INDIVIDUALS ARE SOUGHT IN CONNECTION A SERIES OF BRUTAL MURDERS AND ARE CONSIDERED EXTREMELY DANGEROUS. If you have any information concerning these persons, please notify your local police department."

She glanced over at Oskar, one row forward on the other side of the bus. He was staring, open-mouthed, at the sign. Then he slowly turned his head around to look at her, closed his mouth, and slouched down, sinking out of sight behind the back of his chair. Eli did the same.

†

It was three o'clock in the morning when they got off through the back door and stood alongside Limhamnsvägen by the bus stop shelter. The door hissed closed with a thump and then the bus pulled away, its diesel fading into the distance, leaving them under the orange streetlamps.

Up and down the tree-lined road neither cars nor people could be seen. Behind them a reddish-brick wall ran as far as they could see in both directions, enclosing a community of attached, single-family homes. On the other side of the road there was a tall, scraggly boxwood hedge, behind which some smokestacks and the roof of an old warehouse jutted up. Unseen behind the hedge they heard the squeak and rumble of a slow-moving freight train. A lonely whistle rose up about half a kilometer away.

Oskar looked around, his face drawn and tired. "Where do we go now?"

“I’m not certain we’ll have enough time to go looking for an empty house tonight. What do you think?”

“I dunno. What time will the sun come up?”

“It was up around 5:30 the other night.”

He pulled up the sleeve of his jacket and peered at his watch, which he noticed, for the first time, had a deep scratch across its face. “It’s a little after three, so . . . probably in a couple of hours?”

“Let’s see if we can find a hiding place on the other side of that hedge to put our luggage and sleep. Then if we feel up to it, we’ll do some scouting around, okay?”

“Okay.”

They trotted across the street and then moved along the hedge until they found a spot that was thin enough to push through. They were tempted to fly over, but since neither of them knew what lay on the opposite side, they didn’t dare.

Eli peeked out of the bushes with Oskar crouched right behind her, his voice an anxious whisper. “You see anything?”

“Just that train and a couple of warehouses. With some trees beyond.”

“Okay. You go on through and I’ll push the suitcases out to you.”

As they got the second suitcase through, he asked her whether she recognized anything.

“Not really. Those homes across the road must be new; I don’t remember them. But these train tracks have been here a long time.”

They hunkered down in the shadows for a few seconds, looking around while they waited for the train to roll by.

“How long did you live here, Eli?”

“Not long—maybe about a month or so.”

“Mmm.” Oskar nodded. “Did you have someone to help you back then?”

“A guy named Ake.”

“How’d you meet him?”

“I don’t really remember.”

“Was he with you long? What happened to him?”

“I woke up one night and he was gone.”

“Oh. Why’d he leave?”

“He couldn’t take it anymore, I guess.”

“Never saw him again, huh?”

“No, I found him.”

Their eyes met. *Don’t ask, Oskar. Please.*

He squeezed her hand. *Okay.*

When the train had finally passed they ran across a series of tracks and around the short end of the biggest warehouse, where they paused by a large, partially enclosed loading dock that extended out from the main building.

Oskar peered under the elevated wooden floor into the darkness that surrounded the support posts. “How about under there?”

Eli looked. “I don’t know. It does go back a ways, but I’m not sure this place is abandoned. It looks old, but”

“Yeah, I think you’re right—someone’s been here recently. We’d better look somewhere else.”

Behind the warehouse, near the line of trees, they saw a spur track with a couple of old traincars on it. Quickly they moved over to them and walked around, inspecting the cars carefully.

“They must be old streetcars.”

Oskar’s mood improved a little. “Yeah. They might work, huh?”

“I don’t think so, Oskar . . . too much glass.”

Oskar’s mouth twitched with disappointment. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“Let’s see what’s behind the trees.”

They moved through a thin strand of trees that opened into a scrubby field. Off to their left they saw some sort of industrial complex with one of the smokestacks they’d seen

earlier. Soon they came to a chain link fence. On the other side was the back of a large parking lot, lined with old trucks and other heavy equipment.

Oskar put his hands up on the fence, grabbing the wire with his fingers, and looked around. “I don’t know—it doesn’t look very promising.”

“You’re right; it doesn’t.” She dropped the end of her suitcase dejectedly.

“Wait a minute—what about that?”

He pointed and together they stared at an old milk tanker that was sandwiched in between a couple of rusting trailers. It obviously hadn’t moved in some time, given its nearly flat tires and flaking paint. It had a cabover design like something from the 1940’s or ’50’s, and the window glass was cracked and milky. On the side of the tank was a ladder that ran up to a hatch on the top.

She looked at him incredulously. “In *there*?”

“Uh huh. Let’s check it out.”

They looked around, didn’t see anyone, and then flew with their suitcases over the fence. There turned out to be a ladder on both sides of the tank, so both of them dropped their luggage and clambered up to the top.

“Wow. Check out this lid,” Oskar remarked, running his hands over the heavy, cast iron locking wheel. He pulled, but it didn’t budge.

“Twist it.”

Together they grabbed the wheel and turned it counter-clockwise. After a few squeaky turns there was a faint crackling sound as the desiccated rubber seal loosened from the seating ring.

“Pull.”

The lid came up, and they were rewarded with a puff of stale air. When they looked in they saw that the interior, like the exterior, was constructed of stainless steel. A series of baffles divided the tank into five compartments, but they did not extend all the way up. It was very clean and dry inside.

Oskar dropped down in; Eli followed. She could stand completely upright in the middle, but Oskar had to duck a little.

He looked at her. “What do you think?”

She sighed and gave him a half-smile. “I think it’s good. About as good as we can hope for right now, I guess.”

She looked up at the hatch. “What’ll we do about our suitcases? They won’t fit through there.”

Oskar thought for a minute. “Well, we could put them up in the cab, or . . . wait a minute. Let’s just empty them out and then fold them up a little. Then I bet we could get them through there.”

After several minutes of effort, they finally had everything inside. They spread their extra clothes out in the bottom of the compartment furthest to the front, followed by their winter coats, making a makeshift bed.

Oskar checked his watch again. “It’s a quarter to four. What do you want to do?”

“I think I’d just as soon stay here. How about you?”

“Fine with me. It’s been a long day, what with the train and all.”

“Do you want to go back out and look around a little?”

“No--not unless you do.”

“Huh uh.”

“Okay. Well, I’ll close the lid then.” He drifted up to the hatch, grabbed the lid, and lowered it into place.

“Wow. It really is dark in here,” he remarked.

“It sure is. Can you see anything?”

“Nope.”

“Oskar . . . come here.”

He turned, felt with his hands in the pitch blackness to find the baffles, and traversed first one, and then the next. When he clambered over the second one, he stepped on something soft, but hard underneath.

“Oops. Is that you?”

“Yeah. You’re standing on my ankle.”

“Oh. Sorry.” He moved his foot; felt himself blush.

“It’s okay. Can you come under here with me?”

He didn’t reply, merely sunk to his hands and knees, feeling for her in the darkness. He slid under the loose clothing and jackets and into Eli’s embrace. They wiggled around a bit until at last he was lying on his back with her next to him, her head resting on his shoulder. She lifted her head, and then he felt a kiss on his cheek.

“I’ve been waiting for this all day. It was hard, being separated from you on the train.”

“I know. Do you feel safe in here?”

“Yes. I don’t think anyone will bother us.”

“That poster on the bus scared me, Eli. They’re really out to get us, aren’t they?”

“I guess so.”

“What’re we going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

They were quiet for a time. He touched her hair; ran his fingers gently through it, then down over the back of her shirt. Turned his head a little, and kissed the top of her head. She made a soft murmuring sound and her hand tightened on his upper arm, drawing herself closer to him. He heard her swallow, then felt her breathing slow.

He thought about where they were—inside an old milk truck, in some industrial parking lot, in a city he’d never been to before. They hadn’t even been in Norrköping a week before they’d had to move. They had talked about staying—they had the lease—but that would’ve meant finding some other way to deal with Maria’s body. They’d both agreed that there was no good way to get her to her sister’s home in Södertälje, which was over 100 kilometers to the northeast. And they didn’t just want to dump her somewhere, either. So, they had reluctantly agreed that it would be best to leave her there and move to Malmö, since going back to Stockholm so soon was too risky.

He was finally beginning to understand what life with Eli really meant: being on the lam. Three times in less than a year, from one place to the next. At the time, he hadn’t thought much about their escape from Blackeberg; it had all been new and exciting, to be striking out with Eli, so beautiful and amazing, after the thing at the pool. And when they’d moved from Tensta in Stockholm to Norrköping, they’d had Maria along, and the move had had a purpose: to find the vampire’s castle. Then they’d barely settled in Norrköping before they had to move again, apparently with the police hot on their tails. Their move to Malmö had just been to escape, forced by their circumstances. Would it always be this way? Why wouldn’t it? It wasn’t like the police would just forget about them. Even if they went away

and slept for a long time, they'd still wake up hungry, and have to start the whole process over again.

His thoughts returned to their conversation in Tyresta, after they'd killed that camper guy. He had wanted answers; had wanted to find a way to undo themselves. Eli had agreed, but that really hadn't panned out, had it? Maria had been a lucky break, but in truth, how long could she have held out against their needs? He didn't know, but even when he'd licked the last few drops off her forearm, he had been worried that it wouldn't be long. Eli had probably been right about that.

Was there anything else they could do to avoid killing people? He didn't know.

He sighed and hugged her tighter. *Eli, Eli . . . what are we doing? Where are we going?*

Sunday, August 14, 1983 - 9:07 a.m. Norrköping

Inspector Tyra Nordin was shorter than Martin had expected—short and feisty-looking. They met her after roll call. She strode briskly up to the two of them where they waited in the hallway, and vigorously shook first Kurt's hand, and then Martin's.

“Detective Magnusson--Lieutenant Lundgren. I'm Tyra Nordin. How can I help you?”

She wore her full navy blue uniform, neatly pressed, and her short, black hair was mostly hidden under her gold-embroidered cap. Her dark brown eyes regarded them with quiet intensity, looking up directly at their faces.

Martin resisted the urge to roll his eyes. *She's all business.* Would she be the typical newbie detective—everything by the book?

He looked in her face for the smallest hint of an attitude about their report on the Christensen killing, but saw none. If she had any views about supernatural killers, she was keeping them to herself.

Kurt offered her a warm, disarming smile, and made no effort to return her handshake with equal forcefulness. “Inspector Nordin, it's a pleasure to meet you. We have reason to believe that the death of Maria Fridell may be related to a series of murders we're investigating in Stockholm. We'd like to see the body and her apartment, and talk with you regarding the status of the investigation. I may also want to speak with her sister, Lena Bergman.”

“All right. The autopsy hasn't been done yet, but the body is downstairs and you're welcome to look at it. Her purse and the other evidence gathered at the scene are in the evidence locker, and I'm happy to let you examine those items. I spoke with Ms. Bergman last night, and it's my understanding that she is driving down from Södertälje to make arrangements to have the body transported back there for the funeral. Depending on when she gets here, you can either speak with her first, or go to the apartment; that's up to you.”

Kurt nodded. “Excellent.”

As Martin waited for Nordin to board the elevator first, the reptilian part of his mind glanced at her backside. She wasn’t slender, but she wasn’t overweight, either; she was more or less straight up and down, as if she had no hips—not particularly attractive.

After they got on, Nordin seemed to lose some of her stiffness. She looked from the glowing floor numbers over the door to them and asked, “I read your report. Why do you think Fridell has some relationship to the Christensen slaying?”

Martin spoke up, explaining how Fridell had been a prostitute, working for the Aguilar; how Miguel Aguilar, whose manner of death closely resembled Christensen’s, was last known to be alive headed for Fridell’s apartment in Sundbyberg; and how, on the same day, Estella Fransson, Rafael Aguilar’s girlfriend, had been brutally killed just a few blocks from Fridell’s apartment. He also related how Fridell’s fingerprints had been found on the steering wheel of Aguilar’s Porsche, found abandoned in Rikeby two days ago, and how Rafael Aguilar’s vehicle had been impounded on August 5 in front of Fridell’s apartment—and that Rafael was missing, too.

She raised her eyebrows as the doors opened, admitting the familiar, antiseptic smell that everyone in the elevator immediately associated with cadavers. “Hmm. Sounds like you’ve got good reason to believe there’s a connection.”

With a heavy, metallic click, the orderly unlatched the stainless steel door, releasing an invisible plume of frigid air. Then he grabbed a handle, lifted it, and pulled. The metal slab under Maria’s body rolled out smoothly on the steel casters.

“Here you go. Make sure that door is latched nice and tight when you leave, all right?”

“Sure. Thanks.” She pulled the blue sheet down and off the body, and all of them stared in silence for a brief time.

Martin had seen more than his share of dead bodies during his career, but never got used to it. Some folks, especially the pathologists, could get fairly callous when it came to dealing with them, but not him. He always found himself thinking about the person who once lived in the bodies he saw, imagining what they might have been like while they were alive. This girl . . . he felt a tightness in his throat.

“She was very pretty.” He said it softly, his tone somber.

Kurt, who was standing on the other side of the rack, glanced up at him. “Yes.” He stepped to his right a little, so that he was closer to her legs. “Give me a hand, will you, Martin? I want to roll her toward you a little bit so I can get a better look at that leg.”

Martin reached across, grabbed the body by the opposite hip, and pulled as Kurt pushed up from his side. Kurt bent down so he could look underneath. He whistled. "Mmm. That's a nasty fracture—must've been painful as hell. Wonder how she did that?"

"Must've been some sort of blunt trauma," Nordin offered. "Force applied directly to the front of the leg, to displace the bone backward like that in mid-shaft."

He studied the skin on her legs carefully, starting from her hips all the way down to her feet. "Huh."

Nordin spoke. "See something interesting?"

"Yeah—a couple of things, actually. One, there's some ligature marks above and below the fracture, indicating that something was tied around the circumference of the leg in both locations. Do you see them?"

Nordin stepped from her position at Maria's head around to Kurt's side and looked. "Yes."

"Was anything found on the body?"

"No. She was laying under a blanket in the tub, naked."

"Was there much blood at the scene?"

"Almost none."

"Well, that's consistent with the other thing I see. There's very little hypostasis in the buttocks or the backs of her thighs. She probably bled out somewhere else and her body was brought back to the apartment."

"Kurt, take a look at her arm."

"Yeah, I was getting to that. Hang on a sec, though. Take it one step at a time." He looked carefully at her feet, then came back up, trying to scan every square centimeter of her skin. Only after his eyes had swept across her torso and chest did they come back down her right arm, which was closest to him. Once again, he stooped down, this time trying to see the underside of her arm.

"Grab her shoulder, will you, Martin?" He complied, and Kurt lifted the stiff, white appendage a little.

"She's got a pretty severe puncture wound back here. I'd be interested in knowing if that opened up the basilic vein or the brachial artery."

"We'll let you know."

“And she had something tied up here, too, just under her armpit.”

He straightened up and looked at Martin. “That thing under there had to have bled quite a bit, but I don’t see much blood on the skin. She must’ve been washed or cleaned up, somehow. Let’s remember to swab the inside of the tub’s drain for blood.”

Martin let the shoulder down and Kurt turned the arm over so he could see the crook of the elbow with its the small, purple discoloration. “Now this is *very* interesting.”

Nordin looked around Kurt’s shoulder. “Cephalic vein was opened.”

“Yep--and not accidentally, either. You see that?” He pointed at some patches of reddish discoloration on either side of the mark. “There was a bandage over that at some point not too long before she died.”

Nordin ran her finger over the clean, closed cut. “Maybe she donated at the Red Cross, or for one of the local hospitals. Although, being a prostitute, I’m not sure”

Kurt paused, glanced at Nordin. “We’ll need to check into that, for sure. But maybe it was a . . . private donation.” He looked directly at Martin; caught his eye.

“We’ll check it out for you.”

He continued to scan down her arm. Martin spoke up. “I don’t see any evidence of trauma to her left arm. But there’s quite a bit of dirt or something under her nails.”

“Yeah. Her fingernails look pretty rough. Broken.”

“That’s a bit surprising for a woman who workd as a prostitute and was also enrolled in college,” Nordin observed.

“I agree, especially when you consider how nice her toenails look. She was someplace, or doing something, that was out of the ordinary for her, I’d say.”

Kurt examined the neck very carefully, but saw nothing abnormal. When they had finished looking at her head, Nordin rolled the body back into the cooler.

“I’d like to see the autopsy report on her as soon as possible.”

“Not a problem.”

“I’d like to see what you recovered from the scene now, before we go out and look at the apartment.”

“All right. We need to go back upstairs.”

“So she was taking a weekend tour of Norrköping, huh?” Martin spoke in half-jest as he put the little paperback tourbook down on the table.

Kurt smiled. “Seems like she had a keen interest in your local castles, Tyra.” A map of Östergötland County was spread open before them. They studied the red circles with interest.

“Kinda looks that way. Someone’s bookmarked them in here, too.” She closed the older book on the castles of Sweden. “Do you want me to send someone out to the libraries in town, speak with the librarians? She must’ve checked these out from somewhere.”

“I think that would be a good idea—a great idea, in fact. Have them start with the one closest to Hageby.” He picked up the map and looked at it carefully, flipping it over. “I’d say someone shoved this thing into their pocket at one point or another, don’t you, Martin? And it’s been exposed to water, too.”

“It did rain over the weekend.”

Nordin spoke. “You think she went around to these sites?”

“Yeah, I do. And we ought to have someone talk to the staff of any that were open over the last week. I think someone might remember her.”

Kurt surveyed the small handful of remaining items on the table: a purse, small address book, student I.D., driver’s license, apartment key, some credit cards, and a small amount of money.

“Martin, let’s remember to check with the credit card companies for recent charges. I want to know where she was spending her money in the last week of her life.”

He flipped through a little set of photographs tucked inside the wallet. “Looks like she had a baby at one point or another.”

“Yes,” Nordin replied. “There’s a larger version of the same photograph in the box with her clothes, so it probably was hers.”

“What do you suppose happened to her baby? I don’t recall that the property guy in Sudbyberg mentioned a child.”

“Maybe with the father?”

“Could be. Need to ask the sister.”

He continued. "I wonder who this gal is." He slid the picture out of its plastic sleeve and flipped it over, but nothing was written on the back.

"There's a picture of that woman with Fridell in the other box, too. Must've been a friend."

"Maybe she's in here somewhere." Martin had picked up the address book and was going through it. He looked at Kurt. "Yeah, yeah . . . make a note to get someone on the phone."

Kurt chuckled. "You know me too well, my friend." Then he fingered the apartment key and looked at Nordin. "Has someone talked to the property manager yet?"

"I did, last night." Nordin pulled a small notepad out of her pocket and flipped it open. "His name is Liam Samuelson—a lawyer. He remembered her quite well. Said she signed the lease last Saturday, August 6. Paid with cash." She read her notes out loud. "From Stockholm. Seeking employment with the county welfare office. Said she was alone, but—" she looked more closely at her handwriting, "mentioned that her niece and nephew might visit on occasion."

Kurt and Martin looked at each other. Then Kurt spoke. "Did he ever see anyone else with her, or in the apartment?"

"No. Oh, also, she had no furniture."

Martin grunted. "That's no surprise. Her previous place came furnished."

"That's all I've got."

"Did you talk to any of the neighbors?"

"Yeah—some. No one knew her."

Martin and Kurt began to examine the second box of articles removed from the apartment. Martin pulled out a black plastic telephone answering machine, plugged it in, and rewound the little tape.

There was a click; then a man's voice, with a heavy Spanish accent. "Hey Maria, this is Miguel. Have you seen Rafael? He hasn't called, and I've been looking for him all morning. Call me, will you?" A robotic voice announced the date and time: Friday, August 4, 11:23 a.m.

Kurt raised his eyebrows, looked at Martin and grinned. "Bingo."

Another click, then this time a woman who sounded happy and unburdened. "Maria? Hey girl! Pick up if you're there." A pause; then: "Okay, guess you must be at class. Hey

listen, I was wondering if you'd like to get together tonight. I want to do some shopping downtown—I need to pick up a new skirt for work. Give me a call when you get home, okay? See you soon.”

“Friday, August 5th—10:53 a.m.”

Kurt sat up abruptly. “Let’s go see the apartment.”

Sunday, August 14, 1983 - 11:20 a.m. Djurön

Isak trailed after the two kids and their worried mother, Mrs. Sandgren, as they walked through the muddy woods southeast of the granary. This was not how he had anticipated spending his day off, especially on a Sunday morning.

His foreman had called him at home around 10:30 a.m. He'd been in garage, putting his fishing pole and tackle box into the back of his pickup, when the phone rang.

"Yeah."

"Isak? It's Jon."

"Hey, Jon. What's cookin'?"

"Hey, listen. There's a woman here at the front office from the neighborhood who says there's some sort of hazard on our premises. What she's saying don't make a whole lotta sense to me, but she's very insistent and is refusin' to leave until someone does something about it. And I gotta get that wheat transferred over to Silo No. 5 this mornin' to get ready for this afternoon, or there'll be hell to pay."

"Aw, Christ, Jon. Why are you bothering me with this stuff? Get her name and number, and let's deal with it tomorrow."

"Hang on a sec." There was the sound of movement, the rustling of a hand cupping the phone, and he heard a muffled "excuse me, ma'am." Then a door closed.

"Sorry, Isak. Look, I already tried that, but she said no. She won't leave, says one of her kids almost fell into this thing."

"What? What the hell is she talkin' about, Jon?"

He sighed. "She said her kids were playing out in them woods and found an underground room. Really old. And there's some sort of deep hole or shaft or something that she's worried could be dangerous to the kids who play out there."

Isak frowned. "Underground room?"

"Yeah—I know, it sounds pretty kooky. But do you mind coming out and talking with her? I just don't have time to mess with this thing right now, you know?"

Isak thought wistfully about the fishing he'd planned to do today. Then he thought about the hidden foundation line he'd explained to the college girl and frowned. *Hidden room . . . shaft . . .*

"Alright. Tell her I'm coming, and that I'll be out there in about 15 or 20 minutes."

"Gotcha. Hey thanks, Isak. I know this is your day off, so . . ."

"Yeah. Well, I'll see you in a few."

†

"There's our fort!" The little boy pointed happily at the pile of sticks and logs marked with an old pillowcase turned flag, and ran forward.

His mother spoke up, her voice shrill. "You be careful, Little Frank! Don't you go down there! You too, Elsie!"

The girl said 'yes ma'am,' but the boy paid her no attention. He reached the forward wall, climbed up to the top, and turned to look at them. "I'm king of the mountain!"

Isak smiled in spite of himself. "Little Frank" could've been him, 65 years ago. As he drew near he looked things over and said, "Pretty nice fort, kid."

The boy beamed as his sister climbed up to join him. "Come'on inside and we'll show you!"

"Oh, these things scare me to *death*." The mother climbed carefully up and over the wall of branches. "You two have no business playing out here in this. You could twist your ankle, or break your leg, or . . ." Isak rolled his eyes as he watched her overweight backside swaying slowly up to the top.

They all stood around the hole, peering in. Isak's fishing trip was now the furthest thing from his mind. What in the hell . . .

"Huh. Never seen anything like this before. How long you two known about the hole?"

Elsie looked at her brother, then up at Isak. "Since Easter."

"Yeah, it was right after Easter when I fell and found it. Then we made it bigger."

"What's this?" Isak flipped over the piece of plywood.

"That's our cover, is all," the boy replied.

Isak froze—the girl's notepad. He reached down and picked it up; turned it right-side up flipped it open with his hands, which now felt oddly detached from himself. Her summary of his remarks up on the gantry stared up at him in the leaf-dappled Sunday morning sunlight.

"Did either of you know this was here?"

The children peered at it with curiosity. "No." Then the little girl's mouth dropped open and she looked at Little Frank with wide eyes. "Wait a minute—wasn't that that woman's we met out here on Friday?"

"Uh huh. She must've forgot it."

Isak found that very unlikely, but didn't say anything. An uneasy feeling crept into the pit of his stomach. "Did you show the hole to her?"

"Uh huh."

"Did she go down the—whatever it is?"

"No. The door was closed when we were with her."

"Door?"

"Yeah—there's a door. It was closed, but this morning it was open. That's why we told Mom."

"Well, show me what this is all about." He took the flashlight off of his belt and switched it on.

"Don't you two go down there!" The mom looked sternly at her children. "You let him go!"

"Aw, Mom! The thing is down at the other end, not right here."

"I don't *care*. You let him go first." She put her hand firmly on Little Frank's shoulder.

"Okay."

Isak looked at her. "You mind holding this?" He handed her the damp notepad, then slipped down into the hole.

He grunted when his feet touched bottom. His arms and shoulders wouldn't fit through the hole. "Shit—kind of a tight fit." He glanced up at the mother and saw her disapproving

frown. "Sorry, ma'am." Then he lifted himself up and dropped first one arm in and then the other, snaking his shoulders past the narrow opening.

"Not much headroom," he remarked, his voice rising up from the hole. He clicked his flashlight on and shined it around. "Someone's been down here, all right. Footprints everywhere."

The girl looked in at him. "Those're ours."

"Mmm. Well—oh, I see the doorway. Hang on a sec."

"Please be careful, Mr. Karlsson."

"I will be, Mrs. Sandgren. Don't you worry, now."

Isak crept, bent over, to the opening. He saw the displaced dirt; saw that the bottom portion of the door had recently been torn away. Then he saw the steep, dangerous-looking shaft beyond, and stopped. His instincts told him that he was close enough.

He yelled up. "Did you kids open this door?"

Faintly the answer came. "No. It was locked last we saw it."

He glanced down at the dirt near his feet and saw the corner of something shiny poking up. He pulled it out and realized it was a camera, covered with dirt. He tapped it on his forearm to try to get some of the dirt off it. Then the conclusion sprang into his mind like a lightning bolt: the girl had opened the door and had fallen in, sure as shit. That was why her camera was here, and her pad had been lying outside.

"Ms.Fridell? You down there?" What was her first name?—oh yes. "*Maria?*" He repeated her name three times, the final time shouting at the top of his lungs. But there was no answer; just the smell of . . . ashes.

Isak frowned deeply, slipped the camera into his pocket, turned and crawled back to the hole as quickly as he could, responding to the panic that had abruptly settled into his chest. Jesus H. Christ—the girl was down there, unconscious and probably badly hurt—if not dead. All because he'd told her about that goddamn wall. He pitched his flashlight out, then hoisted himself up.

Mrs. Sandgren did not miss the alarm on his face. He spoke rapidly. "I think the gal that the two of you met may be down at the bottom of that shaft, wherever it goes. I need to call the police and the fire department right away."

The woman's face grew pale. "Oh my God." The little girl looked at their frightened expressions, and began to cry.

"Do you all mind comin' back with me to our office? I reckon the police may want to talk to you."

"Not at all, Mr. Karlsson. We'll help however we can."

†

It was almost noon as they headed back to the police station in Norrköping, after checking out Fridell's apartment in Hageby. Nordin piloted the unmarked patrol car skillfully though the light, Sunday morning traffic with Kurt riding shotgun; Martin sat in the back.

There hadn't been much to see. Kurt and Martin had spent most of the time evaluating the bathtub, but it had been scrubbed clean. There was a little bit of food in the refrigerator, a mattress on the floor, some brand new, heavy drapes, and that was about it.

Martin finished updating his list of to-do's, folded his notebook, and tucked it into his jacket. Then he ran his window down a little to let in the cool morning air. "So what do you think, Kurt?"

"About what?"

"You know—about how Fridell died."

"I'd be more interested in hearing what Inspector Nordin has to say. After all, she's heading up the investigation of her death."

Tyra glanced over at Kurt, who was looking at her expectantly. Then she cleared her throat.

"Well . . . looking at it chronologically, her life seemed pretty stable until, you know, whatever happened, happened. She was convicted over four years ago for possession of methamphetamines and was put on probation, but she's got nothing since then. We don't know too much about her personal life—maybe her sister can help with that—but from what I understand, you two have interviewed some people up in Stockholm who knew she was hooking at night, and going to college during the day. Right?"

"That's right." Martin shifted forward in his seat.

"So, I mean, I think something unusual happened to her on August 3 involving this Rafael guy. Who was, I guess, her pimp?"

Kurt nodded.

"Okay. So he disappears, and his brother thinks that Fridell knows about it. Or knows why. The next morning, he calls Fridell's apartment, looking for Rafael. Then *he*

disappears, too, and turns up in the river however many days later it was, bitten with his neck twisted all to hell.

“Then suddenly, for whatever reason, this hooker-slash-college girl decides to go looking at castles down here. And she’s so interested that she breaks her lease, packs up all her stuff, and rents a new apartment in Norrköping.” She looked at Kurt. “Did you talk to her school? What was it, Stockholm U.?”

“Yeah, but not yet. Tomorrow.”

“It’ll be interesting to know what she told them.”

“I agree.” He smiled.

“Anyway, the note that was left and Fridell’s statement to Samuelson about her niece and nephew suggest that these two children you’re after were with her. And Aguilar’s death wounds match some of the other deaths you’re investigating.”

“Very much so. And in some ways that are not described in the report.”

Tyra looked at him, intrigued. “Such as?”

“I’ll tell you later—it’s not important for this. Go on.”

“So it seems to me that there’s a good chance that she was harboring a couple of fugitives. Somehow, they persuaded her to help them. And since I can’t imagine why this girl would, just out of the blue, develop an intense interest in old castles, I have to believe that she was trying to help the two of them find something. What, I have no idea.

“In terms of how and when she died, her death was reported by—well, we think one of the kids did it—to Bergman on the night of August 13, so I’d bet she died either on the 13th or the day before. The map indicates she was out looking at castles, and her fingernails suggest that she was digging in the dirt.

“The two major wounds could be accidental or intentional—there’s no way to know that right now. The ligature marks indicate that a tourniquet or something like that was applied to stop the bleeding from both limbs. Or maybe a splint of some sort on that leg. But the small cut on her arm was not accidental. Why it was done, I’m not sure.

“You can do better than that on the last part, Inspector. Come on, think.”

“I know—you’re thinking that she gave her blood to—”

“The note said she was ‘very brave.’ ‘The bravest,’ in fact. If she knew what this girl is—and her uprooting herself so completely strongly suggests that—then I’d have to imagine that letting her have her own blood would be very brave, indeed. Do you agree?”

“I—I guess I have to admit I’m having a hard time with that whole part of your report. I mean, a creature of fiction taking on reality . . . it’s just a little hard for me to get my head around that.”

“It was for us, too,” Martin commented. “But alot of evidence points to it.”

Tyra continued. “The note may or may not be true. Or some parts may be true, and some parts false. But if we take it at face value, as you seem prepared to do, then she died while engaged in some effort to help the two children. She was doing something dangerous. What, I can’t imagine and I don’t feel that I have enough information to offer an opinion.”

“Me either. But unless the kids themselves broke her leg and did that thing to her arm—which is possible, I suppose—then she got into some sort of trouble. Serious trouble, from the looks of things.”

“I agree.”

“Do you want to hear now about the other fact? The one that’s not in my report? It may help you with that big question.”

“Sure.”

“The bite wound on Aguilar’s neck, and on the neck of ‘The Ritual Killer,’ match that of a preadolescent child, age 11 or so. But they were not made by the teeth of a human. The incisor wounds were too deep for that.”

Tyra looked once again at Kurt; saw the seriousness of his expression.

“And also, those bite marks match the wound on Jimmy Forsberg’s amputated arm found at that pool in Blackeberg. His arm was *bitten off*, Inspector. Does that help you with the big question?”

Suddenly the radio, which had been quiet all morning, came alive. “Unit 51, please acknowledge.”

Nordin grabbed the mic and keyed it. “Unit 51, responding.”

“Please respond to incident involving Maria Fridell. 100 Djurövägen, Djurön, Norrköping.”

Tyra frowned as Martin began jotting down the address with a puzzled expression.

“Message received. Please clarify regarding nature of incident.”

“Clarification not possible. Please report to Officer Marks on scene as soon as possible.”

“Give us that address, again?”

“100 Djurövägen. There’s a grain mill there. Can’t miss it.”

†

Fire Engine No. 7 and the Emergency Rescue truck pulled out of Djurön and headed back downtown with their flashers and sirens off. Two of the firemen almost wished they’d had someone to rescue; it would’ve been better than what they’d just seen, which would haunt them the rest of their lives.

Nordin, Kurt, and Martin were speaking with Officer Marks near the hole in the ground. One wall of the play fort, including the pirate flag, had been cleared away, and the hole had been enlarged somewhat to give the first responders access. Two nylon ropes were anchored around to a nearby tree and ran down into the hole.

A dozen or so people from the neighborhood and the Co-op were milling around. A few tried to get close enough to peer down into the hole before they were shooed away by the small handful of police officers on the scene. Some were snapping pictures. Isak Karlsson and Mrs. Sandgren with her children were standing near the edge of the clearing, chatting with some neighbors who’d showed up.

A portable generator had been unloaded from the rescue truck, and a fireman who had remained on site was spooling out electrical lines for lights.

“Officer Marks, this is a crime scene until further notice,” Nordin barked. “Tape it off 30 meters in all directions and have your men get these people back. Tell Mr. Karlsson and the mom with the kids to come up so we can get their statements. Do you have the evidence?”

“Yeah. Here.” He handed her a plastic baggie with Maria’s notepad and camera.

“Did any of the rescue people actually go down to the bottom of the pit?”

“I don’t believe so. Once they saw there was no one alive down there, they came back up.”

“What did the EMS people do to the scene?”

“I asked them to rig their rope ladder before they left so we can get down there. And the generator and lights, too, so you can see.”

“Good. Call Central and have them send out the evidence people ASAP. No one else goes down in until they’re on site.”

Karlsson came up, and Kurt shook his hand. “Hi, I’m Detective Kurt Magnusson with the Stockholm Police. Tell me everything you remember about Maria Fridell.”

Sunday, August 14, 1983 - 2:35 p.m. Djurön

Even though it made it harder to breathe, Tyra Nordin was grateful for the face mask as she climbed down the rope ladder—it helped keep the stench at bay. Lt. Lundgren was on the ladder too, a few meters above her. To her left, a black electrical line ran parallel to the ladder, providing electricity to a set of powerful lights that had been rigged, with considerable effort, below and to the side of the shaft’s terminus into the pit.

This shaft is scary as shit, she thought to herself. If it weren’t for the rope ladder, traversing it would have been impossible; it was much too steep, and covered with loose dirt to boot.

She hadn’t realized that it would be harder to climb down a rope ladder lying on an angled stone floor than if it were hanging vertically. She couldn’t get a proper foothold on the rungs, and had to do most of the work with her fingertips and toes.

Another light had been set up in the room above and angled down to illuminate the shaft. If she tried to look straight up the shaft, the light was blinding, so she kept her eyes more or less in front of herself.

She began to notice a series of scratches in the stone. She didn’t think much of the first few because she figured that the fire crew had made them when they’d come down to set up the light. But when she saw some more, she paused.

“Lt. Lundgren, hold up a second.”

“What is it?”

“Have you noticed these scratches?”

“Yeah. Just now, actually.”

“I think we ought to get some photographs.”

“Can you do it safely while we’re on this ladder?”

“I don’t know. Let me try.”

“Okay—but for God’s sake, be careful.” There was a pause, then: “By the way, you can call me Martin.”

She smiled a little. “Yes, sir.”

He chuckled. “Smartass.”

She surprised herself with a grin, then coaxed her little Kodak 35 mm camera out of a pouch on her belt, and as best she could, snapped a few pictures before resuming her descent. When she reached the point on the ladder where it cleared the edge of the shaft and descended vertically to the bottom, she carefully maneuvered herself over the lip and started down the eight or nine meters remaining to the bottom of the pit. Here at the edge she found even deeper gouges, and she snapped some more pictures.

“Do you think the firemen made those?”

“If they did, they sure beat the hell out of their equipment . . . but I doubt it. We’ll need to ask them after we get back up.”

She paused and looked down over her shoulder at the indescribable scene below. It reminded her of photographs she’d seen of some of those concentration camps in Germany at the end of World War Two. Dachau, Bergen-Belsen . . . burnt human bodies, stacked up in an enormous pile in the bottom of a pit, right here in her home town, only a few kilometers from where she’d grown up. She struggled to control the nausea that was attempting to take command of her gut.

“Stinks like hell down here,” Martin remarked.

“It’s like an ash pit.” Kurt’s observation, made just a few minutes ago standing outside the hole, was right: Fridell had found what she was looking for. But why had she come here?

“What do you suppose this place is? Or was?” She looked up and saw that he, too, was now staring down with revulsion.

“I don’t know, but I’ve never seen anything like it, I can tell you that. And I’ve never heard about anyplace like it in Sweden, either.”

“That door up there looks really old. It must’ve been sealed up for a long time.”

Martin looked straight down the dangling ladder to the bottom. “If that guy is right and that really was Fridell’s camera, I’m beginning to see how she might’ve broken her leg. It’s a long way down.”

When she was a short distance from the bottom—or at least, from the top of the heap of bones—Tyra told Martin to hold up a moment. The light from above was good, but there were still quite a few shadows at the lowermost reaches, so she took her flashlight off her belt and began to shine it around the edges of the pit, then back and forth across the cremated skeletons, looking for anything unusual.

Anything unusual, she thought. The irony did not escape her. *How could I even tell?*

For the first time, she realized that some of the skeletons were immature--children had died here. Her sense of unease grew. In her 33 years she had witnessed events and met people that she had thought were truly evil, but she had never felt as though she was in the *midst* of evil; surrounded by it, immersed in it. That was how she felt in this place, and it made her skin crawl. Inside her, not too far from the surface, a little girl about six years old who was afraid of the dark wanted to take charge and high-tail it out of here.

Another beam of light joined hers: Martin, too, was scanning the bottom of the pit. Then, at nearly the same time, both of their beams passed over a place on the far wall, stopped, and returned to it—a dark, irregular patch on the rough-hewn surface, about the size and shape of a serving platter, just above the top layer of bones.

She frowned. “What *is* that?”

“It looks like blood.”

She shook her head. “What in God’s name went on down here, Lieutenant Lun--Martin?”

“I don’t know, but we need to check that out. I just don’t know of any way to get over there except to climb over all these bones, and I’m not sure we ought to do that just yet.”

“Well, the evidence crew already photographed everything from up there, so . . .”

“I know, but . . . well, I guess there’s no other way.”

“Let’s get off this ladder; then we can maneuver around the edge, huh?”

She climbed the rest of the way down, then stepped off and into the ash and bones. Her right leg sunk down up to her kneecap, cracking and snapping the bones underneath. Her left went in, too, but not as far, and she tottered, off balance, and almost fell.

“Shit! It’s like a deadfall down here.” She began to laboriously move along the wall to make room for Martin, lifting her legs high with each step, as though she were marching. She tried to ignore the horrifying crunching sounds that her feet made as she trampled down the brittle bones. Her face began to feel sweaty under her thin mask, and she noticed that she had begun to breathe too fast. She wanted to tell Martin that she wasn’t feeling well, but didn’t dare. This was not the time or place to lose her cool.

Martin reached the bottom and stepped off beside her, sinking in even farther than she did. “Christ! I can’t hardly move.”

“I know. It’s like walking through a pile of—”

“Hey . . . did you see this?”

She turned back to look at him. He was crouched at the bottom of the ladder, which he held aside with one hand.

“What is it?”

“It’s a hole.” He got down further and aimed his flashlight in. “It’s like a little room, or . . . cavity. Not very big, and—”

He held his flashlight very still; then leaned in so that his face was only a few centimeters from the opening.

“What the hell . . .” He looked over at her, his eyes wide.

“What?”

“There’s some really old handcuffs in here, bolted to the floor.”

“Handcuffs?”

“You know . . . not handcuffs, but—what’s the word . . .”

“Manacles?”

“Yeah--manacles.” He reached in, and she heard a soft clanking sound. “They’re locked.” Quickly he withdrew his camera and took a few shots, then put it away. He looked back at her, his face pasty. “I sure as hell wouldn’t want to be locked away in *there*.”

Tyra had maneuvered back over to his side, and she ducked down and looked in. “It’s some kind of a little prison cell, right? I mean, what else could it be?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know.” Then he frowned. “How’d you even get someone *in* there? There’s no door.”

She shined her light around the opening, then below it. “Look—loose rock.”

Martin looked down between his knees and saw the hunks of stone. “Jesus, I’m practically standing right in it.” Quickly he stood up and snapped some pictures as she held her light on the spot. And as he focused the camera he saw not only bits of stone, but a broken skull.

He put away his camera and looked at her again, his face drawn and tense. “If that Fridell woman was down here, then that note’s no lie--she really *was* brave. I’ve *never* seen anything like *this*. It’s fucking *medieval*.”

“Martin, was this place marked on that map? The one that we recovered from the apartment in Hageby?”

“Not that I remember. You ever heard of a castle being out here?”

“No.”

“Well I don’t know if this is part of a castle or not, but it’s as weird as hell.”

“Yeah.” She surveyed the heap of charred remains, then looked up at the dark, enclosed ceiling. “Something happened here a long time ago that someone didn’t want anyone to know about.”

It took them more than five minutes to get around the edge of the pit to the macabre spot on the opposite wall. It was dried blood, just as Martin had said. Small drips had run down from the bottom, and in the middle small bits of tissue were stuck to the stone surface. Both of them got out their cameras and took several pictures.

Tyra took out a small tape measure and noted the size of the blood pattern. “Do you think that could’ve come from Fridell?”

Martin shook his head. “Don’t know. But I can’t really see how that open fracture would bleed on the wall like this. Or that arm wound, either. It almost looks like the splatter pattern you’d see with a bullet wound. Or like a part of someone’s body has been battered into the wall.” He didn’t say what it actually reminded him of: the mark Estella Fransson’s body had left on the wall of that high-rise in Sundbyberg.

He produced an evidence bag and scraped a sample off the wall, his face twisted in disgust. “We’ll have the lab check it for blood type and see if it matches her.”

Tyra scanned the wall around and below the splotch, looking for any additional evidence. In her flashlight beam, something small and white glittered down in the bones.

“Martin, can you hold my light right there? I see something.”

“Sure.”

She stooped as he held the light and carefully moved some bones out of the way. A small cluster of white and red objects lay in a fine bed of ash, a few centimeters from the wall. She quickly took some photographs, then pulled out an evidence baggy of her own, tore a piece of paper from her notebook, and folded it in half to make it stiff. Then, very carefully, she slid the paper into the ash under the objects, lifted them up, and poured everything into the bag.

Martin was trying to see what she had as he held the light steady. “What is it, Tyra? What are those?”

She straightened and held up the sealed baggy. “Not sure, but I think they’re . . . teeth.”

She held the baggy flat in the palm of her hand as he shined the light on it. She tapped the bag and shook it a little. Small, bloody pieces of enamel—two of them quite long and sharp—emerged out of the ash. Martin leaned in and looked at the teeth very closely.

They stared at each other for a long time.

The six-year-old girl could no longer help herself. “Martin, I’m sorry to tell you this, but . . . I want to get out of here. *Now.*”

“I agree.”

When they emerged from the hole, they saw that some members of the press had arrived and were standing just beyond the tape, snapping pictures. They were photographed, too, as they approached Officer Marks with their pants covered in gray ash. Kurt was nowhere to be seen, and they learned from Marks that he had headed over to the granary with Karlsson.

The office receptionist for the Co-op summoned the day crew foreman to escort them up to the southeast gantry, leaving behind some aggressive reporters who had followed them to the granary. Up on the narrow platform, they caught the tail end of Isak and Kurt’s conversation.

“. . . and I’ve already called Christoffersen—he’s headed over here right now. ‘Cause I don’t know how to handle this.”

“Well, confirm with Inspector Nordin here, but I doubt we’ll need to do much beyond what’s being done now—walking that line for any evidence. Once we’re finished with that, and once our inspection of the pit is concluded, we’ll have no further jurisdiction. And that’ll likely be by the end of the day. Then it’ll be up to the Cooperative to decide what to do about the discovery, unless the government intervenes.”

Kurt smiled broadly at Martin and Tyra as they came up. “Guess who was out here Friday night?”

They stared at him expectantly; then Martin spoke. “Let me guess.”

Kurt nodded; for once, his customary aplomb was broken, and he almost seemed excited. “You got it—Oskar Eriksson and the girl.” He held up one of the wanted posters, then nodded at Karlsson. “Isak here says he’s sure it was them.”

“What were they doing, Mr. Karlsson?”

“Lookin’ for that girl—Maria. Only they said she was their sister.”

Martin's mind whirled as this new piece of information fell into place, tightening down some parts of an intricate network of facts, and opening up others. "And when did you say that you met Ms. Fridell?"

"Same morning. Brought her right up here to where we are now. Showed her what I just showed Mr. Magnusson." He pointed out at the forest and at the strange line that ran through it. "That's what led to all this trouble." He put down his hand and held the railing; shook his head sadly. "That poor girl—to've been hurt like that, down there. Jesus God Almighty, what happened out here?"

Martin stood close to Isak and briefly put his hand on his shoulder. "Mr. Karlsson, don't be too hard on yourself. We've learned quite a bit about Ms. Fridell in the last few days. She was actually a prostitute, and we don't think she was actually doing a research paper on castles. It seems pretty clear that she knew what she'd gotten involved with."

Karlsson shrugged, removed his cap, and looked despondently down at the grain silos below them. "Well I don't understand any of it, I really don't. Been workin out here practically all my life, and everything's been fine. Then one day, boom—this sorta thing happens. Just makes you wonder what kinda things are goin on in the world." He looked at Kurt. "I heard about your investigation in the news. You really think all them murders are tied together like they say? That that little girl I met the other night's responsible for all of 'em?"

Kurt pulled a cigarette out and lit up. "Yes I do, Mr. Karlsson. And you should consider yourself a very lucky man, to have met her and lived to talk about it. Because a lot of people haven't, and now I suspect that the list may be much longer than we've realized."

Nordin spoke. "Kurt, we need to speak with you right away about some evidence we recovered." She glanced at Isak. "When we get down from here, I mean."

They shook hands with Isak, and thanked him for all of his help.

†

Eli woke up, alone in the dark steel belly of the milk truck. Within the span of a few seconds she got her bearings, and rolled from her side to her back to look up.

The lid at the top of the tank was open, and she could see a small patch of the starlit sky beyond. Oskar was not inside, but she could hear his voice, very soft and low, somewhere near.

"Don't be afraid . . . I won't hurt you." Silence; then: "Come on. *That's* a boy."

Lighthearted, joyful laughter. Intrigued, Eli got up and pulled her head and shoulders out of the hatch.

“Oskar?”

He was crouched down by the chain-link fence with his back to her, but when he heard her voice, he got up carefully and turned. He was smiling, and holding something brown in his cupped hands.

“Eli, look! It’s a little owl! I think his wing is broken.”

She quickly scanned around and saw no one, so she climbed out the rest of the way and jumped down. She came to him, and he held it up for her to see.

A pair of baleful yellow eyes peered silently up at her out of a mass of fluffy brown and gray feathers. It was the smallest owl Eli had ever seen, fitting comfortably in Oskar’s palm. When she extended her hand toward it, it opened its tiny beak and hissed at her, and all of the feathers on its head and chest rose up, making it appear to grow like a dry sponge suddenly soaked in water. Its left wing was tucked in against its body, but its right was splayed out at an awkward angle.

“Where did you find him?”

“I saw him hopping along the fence--I think maybe he flew into it. We need to find a box or something to--”

He abruptly stopped in mid-sentence and suddenly looked down at his hands. “Ow ow ow ow OWW!” Although he didn’t want to, he couldn’t help it; he flapped his hand, dropping the little bird onto the concrete. “Ow! His claws are *sharp!*” He seized his right wrist and stared with shock at the small, bloody cuts on his palm.

Eli did not reply right away. Instead, she stripped off the old sweater she was wearing and bundled the bird up in it. “Sorry, Oskar. I must’ve scared him. Let’s look around for a box to put him in.”

Oskar looked at her sheepishly. “I didn’t realize he’d be so strong.” Together they went to a metal trash dumpster standing at the far corner of the parking lot, and Oskar began to root around in it as Eli looked closely at his find. The owl continued to hiss at her whenever she brought her face close to it. “He’s got eyebrows, but no ear feathers. I don’t think he likes us too much.”

“Maybe he’ll settle down once we make a little bed for him.” Oskar climbed out of the side door of the dumpster with a small, cardboard box and a rag. He put the rag into the bottom of the box, and together they laid the owl inside. The bird swiveled its head around nearly 360 degrees to watch them as Oskar carried him back to the milk truck.

They decided to take the owl up into the cab, rather than the milk tank. Together they sat on the old bench seat, the owl between them in its box.

Eli gently probed its broken wing. “I don’t think there’s much we can do for him, Oskar. He’s so tiny, and his wing’s so fragile”

“Maybe we can keep him until he’s healed. You know, good enough to fly again. Then we could let him go.”

“I guess we can try. He can’t go anywhere anyway, the way he is. Some cat would probably get him.”

“What’ll we . . . how will we feed him? I mean, I don’t even know what he eats, do you?”

“Probably mice. Or maybe some big bugs.”

Oskar thought for a moment. “I guess we could try to find a mousetrap somewhere”

Eli shook her head. “We won’t need to. Catching mice is easy.”

“Really? How?”

“I’ll show you a little later. But shouldn’t he have a name?”

“Is he a boy or a girl?”

Eli chuckled. “I have no idea.”

“Me neither.”

“I guess it doesn’t matter either way.”

They both thought for little while. Oskar ventured “Hoot,” but they both decided it was probably overused for an owl name.

“Hmm. How about ‘Athena’? Didn’t she have a pet owl?”

Eli looked doubtfully in the box. “Don’t you think it’s a little small to be named after a goddess?”

“Well . . . yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“Maybe ‘Griffin’?”

Oskar giggled. “Like you said, he’s kinda puny to be named after something like that.”

Eli thought a little more while she watched the owl. “Pudge.”

“Pudge?”

“Yeah—‘Pudge.’ What do you think?”

Oskar grinned. “I like it.”

“Or maybe, ‘Leta’?”

“Mmm . . . I like ‘Leta’ too. ‘Leta.’ It sounds good.” He leaned down. “Hi, Leta.”

Eli did the same. “Hey, Pudge.”

The owl hooted.

They looked at each other; then Oskar announced, “I think he likes ‘Pudge’ better.” Eli nodded. “Then he’s ‘Pudge,’ huh?”

“Yeah.”

They took turns petting Pudge’s head and back with their fingers. Soon he stopped hissing and just looked up at them as they stroked his feathers.

“Oskar, we need to find you another coat and hat. I didn’t realize until yesterday that you’ve still got what you had before we left Blackeberg. Your mom probably told the police what you wear.”

“Oh yeah—my brown jacket.”

“And maybe we can find some hooded sweatshirts, too. To help cover up our hair.”

“Are we going to go looking for an empty house tonight?”

Eli was quiet for a moment. “I don’t know . . . all the homes around here are so close together. Even if we found an empty one, there’d probably be some nosy neighbors keeping an eye on things. I sorta like this truck. I don’t think anyone would ever think to look for us in it. What do you think?”

“I like it, too. I mean, as long as no one sees us getting in and out of it. And with these big trailers,” he nodded to either side, “it’s not easy to see except from the front and back.”

She smiled. “It makes me feel safe--all that steel.”

“I also realized when I woke up that we can lock it from the inside. I can move the locking part with my hands.”

“Really?”

“Uh huh.” He smiled.

“So, do you want to just stay here?”

“Mmm hmm.”

“Good. Me too.”

“Are we gonna catch a mouse, now? It’s still kinda early to start running around.”

She smiled. “Yeah—let’s do that first. Then maybe we can start exploring.”

They crept out of the truck, taking Pudge with them. Once they were sure no one was watching, they passed over the fence, and went out into the neglected little field behind the parking lot.

Eli angled over to a spot that offered some cover—some scrawny bushes, choked around with weeds, standing next to a twisted scots pine. The remnants of a plastic trash bag had caught on the lower branches of the tree, and rustled forlornly in the breeze. She knelt down next to the bush, her knees together, and composed herself as she looked out over the brown, stubbly grass.

“Keep an eye out, will you? I need to concentrate to do this. And be ready to catch one of the mice.”

Oskar frowned. “Okay.” He crouched down behind her, looking around for anyone who might pass by. But his eyes kept returning to her.

She bowed her head with her eyes shut, and her chin settled to her chest. She was perfectly still; the pale moonlight glinted on her hair. At first her hands lay, palms down, on her thighs. Then, after a short period—Oskar wasn’t sure how long, maybe 15 to 20 seconds—she lifted her head and her hands. Her eyes remained closed, but her hands began to make an eerie, *come-hither* gesture, her fingers curling inwards, over and over, toward her palms.

Soon he heard it: a soft rustling in the grass. He thought at first that the grass itself was merely swaying in the wind, but then he realized that the movement was independent; it seemed to boil in a cone-shaped pattern that had its narrow point closest to Eli, and widened out as it stretched away from them. Then the first of the small gray shapes began to emerge.

Oskar took a step back into the bushes and almost fell down.

The crept hesitantly, uncertainly toward her, many taking a few steps forward, then pausing with a paw lifted, to stare at her with small black eyes, noses twitching, before creeping closer. Some moved sideways as they slowly advanced, as if trying to slide out of the arc of

her invisible power, but none seemed able to free themselves. And a few intermittently ran in frantic circles, as if chasing their tails, before leaping forward and repeating the process. Interspersed with the mice were a few dark gray rats, who behaved in the same manner.

The ground swarmed with their squirming bodies. The closest ones to her stopped and, strangely reminiscent of the big gray wolf at Skansen, flattened themselves out on the ground, or rolled over onto their backs with their legs up in the air.

“Take one, Oskar.” She spoke in a trance-like, impersonal whisper, not at all like her usual voice.

He came to her side. He was afraid to touch her, or to get too close to the roiling mass before her, but finally he reached out, plucked up a little one by its tail, and plopped it into Pudge’s box. “Got it.”

She opened her eyes and her hands fell limply to her sides. Immediately the mice and rats stopped their advance, then scattered like the wind into the field. She swayed, and for a moment Oskar was afraid that she was going to fall over, but then she righted herself.

“Eli—are you okay?”

“Yeah. Just . . .” She exhaled heavily and staggered to her feet. He goggled at her. She looked up at him, blinked, then smiled a little.

“What?”

“What? What do you mean, ‘what’? How’d you do that?”

“It’s kind of like when we talk to each other without talking. Only . . . they don’t talk back.”

“What do you say to them?”

“It’s not words. It’s like a command.”

“Do they think like we do? Do they have thoughts?”

“They think—but not like us.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re not like us. They don’t—well, it’s hard to explain. It’s like, they’re not aware of themselves.”

“I don’t get it. How can they not be aware of themselves?”

“Sorry. I mean—well, that’s not quite what I mean. It’s like, they can’t think of themselves outside of themselves. So when you give the command, they think you’re . . . like God. Or maybe, that you *are* God.”

Oskar just looked at her, nonplussed.

She shrugged. “You’ll just have to try it. Then you’ll understand.” She peeked into the box. “He’s not eating it.”

The mouse had hidden under the rag and was busy scratching in a corner of the box, trying to get out. Pudge ignored it, and was staring up at them instead. Oskar watched for awhile. “I don’t want to leave the mouse in there. Can we take it out?” I’d rather just feed him bugs.”

Eli suppressed a smile. *Oskar, Oskar.*

“Sure. Just take him out, then.”

“You sure you won’t be mad?”

“No.”

“Kay. It’s just that . . . since Maria died, I don’t want to . . . I just need a little more *life* right now. You know what I mean?” He lifted the mouse out by its tail and let it go in the grass.

“Uh huh—I do. And you know, maybe Pudge isn’t hungry now, anyways. Let’s wait a while, and then we’ll find some bugs to put in there.”

Together they walked, hand in hand, back to the truck.

Since he might hoot, they decided not to leave Pudge at their truck, so instead they carried him across the field and left him in one of the old trolley cars they’d seen the night before. Then they set off in search of some clothes.

†

Oskar had no idea where they were, and was beginning to give up hope that they would ever find something useful when they came to a cluster of big green trash dumpsters located at the corner of a T-intersection. They were still in an industrial area, and had crossed a seemingly endless number of chain-link fences and weedy parking lots. A cluster of low, beige, nondescript commercial buildings were scattered around the intersection. Only some of them had windows, and the ones that did were dark. A line of streetlights stretched out before them on the far side of the street, one of them directly over the dumpsters in their small, fenced-in area.

They dropped to their hands and knees in a line of untended, overgrown bushes fifteen to twenty meters away, and studied everything carefully. Then Oskar spoke, his voice only a whisper.

“You know, I always thought Blackeberg was kind of boring, but at least it didn’t look like this place. Why would anyone want to live around here?”

“I guess there must be good jobs. People want money to buy things.”

“Should we check those out?”

“Yeah. Problem is, they’re right out in the open, and that light . . . it doesn’t help.”

“We could break it.”

“Okay—let’s find some rocks.”

They took turns pitching heavy stones, pieces of asphalt, and broken bricks at the light. A couple of times their near misses hit the pole and bounced down off the dumpsters beyond with loud clangs. Each time, they stopped and scanned around fearfully to make sure no one had heard. Finally, Oskar managed to break it.

They ran across the street in the shadows, hurdled the fence, and began to examine the big steel containers. On the third one they hit the jackpot; it was full of donated clothing.

Oskar wrinkled his nose as they slid a metal side door aside, climbed inside, and began to rummage around. “Ugh. Smells like old sneakers in here.”

“Sure does. I guess they don’t have to wash their clothes before they give them away.”

Soon Eli found a big, gray, hooded sweatshirt with a pouch and a blue shield logo on the front. She held it up for him to see. “Hey, look at this—it’s got Malmö’s football team on the front. Wanna try it on?”

“Okay.” Oskar put it on over the thin shirt he was wearing. His hands remained hidden inside the too-long sleeves.

“Guess it’s a little big.”

“It’ll work, don’t worry.” He pulled it off, then took Rafael’s knife out of his pants pocket. “Here, hold the ends, will you?” He handed the sleeve ends to her, and once they had the arms of the sweatshirt taunt between them, he cut the wrist cuffs off. While he put it back on, she asked him where he’d gotten the knife.

“It was that Rafael guy’s. You know, the one who came into Maria’s apartment when I was there that night.”

“Why’d you keep it?”

“I don’t know—I guess I thought it might be good to have.”

She laughed softly. “That seems like the last thing we’d need.”

“Maybe not. I’m actually wishing we’d kept that gun, too.”

Her puzzled expression deepened. “Why?”

“’Cause if we’re going to have to keep killing people, I think maybe we should use ordinary weapons. When we do it the usual way, it’s like leaving a big note behind saying, “vampires were here.” And then we have to try and get rid of the body somehow. And I don’t think we can afford to keep doing that, if we’re going to go on sneaking around like this.”

“Hmm. Well, guns are loud. It’d be better to use knives, I think.”

“You can get silencers for guns; I’ve read about them. They fit over the end of the barrel and slow the bullet down so it doesn’t break the sound barrier. Then you don’t get the bang. It’s just like a little popping noise.”

He continued digging for something for Eli to wear. “But really, Eli, I’m wondering whether there’s anything else we can do to try and get rid of our problem. Or whether we should keep living like this.”

“What do you mean?” She pulled a dark blue nylon windbreaker with a hood out from under a pile of clothes in one corner, slipped it on, and then fumbled with the zipper. “I hope it’s not broken. There.” It made a soft zipping noise as she pulled it up. “What do you think?”

He tapped the emblem of the Swedish flag on the left breast. “Very patriotic.” Then he pulled her hood up around her head. “Let’s see how your hood looks.”

He carefully pulled it over her head, tucked the loose strands of her hair inside, and pulled the drawstrings to tighten it down around her face. Then he made a bow knot under her chin, and gave her a smile. “You look kinda cute in there.”

She grinned. “Oh yeah? Well, let me do yours.” She pulled up his hood and drew it tight around his face. Then she giggled. “You look really stupid like that.”

“I didn’t want to say it, but you look kinda silly, too.” They laughed.

They couldn’t find a winter coat to replace Oskar’s, so they stopped looking and curled up together in the back of the dumpster for a little while.

“So what did you mean about what you said?”

“What I mean is . . . I guess before we met Maria, I never thought anyone would be willing to give us some of their blood to live. But now, I’m wondering whether that’s really true. And . . . well, they already know so much about us—you know, that newspaper article and everything . . . but the problem is, they don’t really know about the stuff that’s good. I mean, like Maria was saying, maybe we could use some of the cool stuff we can do to help people. So I’ve been thinking, how can we tell them about the good stuff? About how we don’t really want to hurt anyone? But without just . . . turning ourselves in, I guess? And I’m thinking that maybe we could write to that policeman. You know, write a letter.”

Eli frowned and pulled away so that she could see his face. “A letter? What good would that do?”

“Well, these guys that I used to read about . . . a few of them, usually the really bad ones—they’d write letters to the police. To make fun of them, or give them little clues about the murders they’d committed. It was sorta a power trip to them, you know—‘look what I can make the police do.’ Make them scurry around and stuff. But the thing about using a letter is, you can send it without getting caught. And then the cops, they’ll put their answer in the newspaper somewhere. Like in the personals section. Sometimes it’s in code, you know, so only the bad guy understands what it means. But we wouldn’t need to go through all that. We could just write a letter to that guy and tell him we’re really not bad, we’ve just got this disease and that we need help. And then we could see what they say. They could just announce it on TV or the radio, or whatever. And if we don’t like what they say, we don’t have to do anything. We’ll just keep going. But maybe they’ll decide to help us.”

“They’d just tell us what they think we want to hear. Make all sorts of promises to get us to turn ourselves in, then go back on them once we’re caught.”

“Not necessarily.”

“Oh come on, Oskar—of course they would. They’d do anything to stop us.”

“Well, who says we have to turn ourselves in?”

“What do you mean?”

“Eli, we’re the ones with all the powers. You know how fast we can fly, when we really want to. We could be halfway across the country in one night. They’d never know where we went, or be able to find us.”

“—”

“So, I—”

“So what are you saying? That we just—”

“We tell them we need fresh blood to live. Maybe we ask them for volunteers? We choose a time and place . . . pick someplace where there can’t be any traps, the first few times, until they know we’re serious about trying to be good. Then, maybe, who knows? It becomes more regular. And then gradually we show them what we can do.”

“And then?”

“Well, we’d have to tell them we’re not going to be locked up somewhere. We won’t be studied like a couple of guinea pigs . . . you know, tied down and stuck with needles. None of that. Maybe we’d even tell them that it all has to be in writing, signed by Carl Gustaf or the Riksdag, so they can’t go back on it. And if they don’t like it, if they aren’t willing, then we can say at least we tried to do the right thing. And we go back to the old way. I’d feel much better about what we have to do, if we tried that first.”

“They’ll never agree to that. They’d say we have to be tried for murder. If they even *give* us a trial.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oskar—we’re *vampires*. Don’t you get it? There’ll probably be a lot of them who’ll say we should just be killed like rabid dogs.”

“I’m *not* a vampire. And the first time we ever talked about this, you said *you* weren’t, either. Right?”

She sighed with frustration. “That’s not what I mean, and you know it. I’m talking about how *they’ll* think of us. They’ll be afraid. People are superstitious, scared of things they don’t understand. And that’s us, to a T.”

“Yeah, but maybe now’s our chance to prove them wrong. To give them a chance to understand us. Because now, we can tell them about Maria. About how she loved us, even knowing what we are. And we can tell them about how she changed our minds—gave us hope to try to do something different. Because I have to tell you, Eli: as much as I love you, I don’t think I’m cut out for this. I mean, Rafael, he was different. He was threatening to hurt Maria with the knife. But I couldn’t kill Maria . . . I just couldn’t. And I don’t know if I want to go on like this, skulking from city to city, living the way we are now—you know, with neither of us wanting to talk about what we’re going to have to do soon unless something changes. I think we should give it a shot. What do we have to lose?”

She crossed her arms. “*Everything*, that’s what. We stand to lose *everything*. Don’t you see that, Oskar? What we’re talking about is both of us dying. I don’t want to die, and I don’t want you to die, either. And I don’t want to ever be separated from you. The whole thing is cruel, horrible. Like a cruel joke. God’s little joke on us. To give us a person like

Maria, and then snatch her away from us, just like that. Open the door a crack and then slam it in our faces. That's just what happened."

"But God didn't take Maria away, Eli--the vampire lord did. God didn't want Maria to die. How can you say a thing like that?"

"Okay, maybe not. But it's still their fault for letting him live. They should've killed him a long time ago. Instead, they sealed him up in there, alive. That was just dumb. And then we paid the price for it."

"*Maria* paid the price for it."

"Yes, she did, but *we* did, *too!* She died for us! That wasn't supposed to *happen*, Oskar! It wasn't--it wasn't--oh dear God, Oskar, it . . . I had just started to love her, to think that things might, you know, might *change* for once, might somehow get better, and then, then--"
" She began to sob bitterly.

He put his arms around her and drew her close. "Eli, Eli . . . *shh, shh*, com'on; com'on now, please don't, please"

"I can't help it, Oskar. I *can't*."

She continued to cry, and Oskar found himself joining in, despite his desire to be strong for her.

He began to speak again after bringing his tears under control. "Eli, I know sticking that guy in there was stupid, but how can we blame the people now for what they did in Norrköping two hundred years ago, or however long it's been? They're not the same people, are they?"

"I understand that. But some things don't change. The way people think about us won't change."

"Hmm. Maybe--but do we really know for sure?"

"Oskar, the biggest thing that's kept me alive for so long is that people *can't* believe I exist. If we go and write a letter or whatever, then they won't be able to do that anymore. Then there won't be anyone out there who isn't prepared to kill us. They'll pass a law saying it's okay to kill us on sight. Heck, they'll probably give a reward."

"I wonder if that police report has started to change peoples' minds about that, Eli. And you said yourself that you've never had someone on your tail like this before. Do you ever see it getting any easier for us? To live like this?"

“It’ll lighten up once our big sleep comes. We won’t have to do anything for awhile, and they’ll lose interest, maybe.”

“I doubt it—there’s too many people dead, and now there’s two of us. And besides, what if we don’t go to sleep at the same time, like we talked about? Then one of us will have to keep going.”

“I just think it’s a really, really bad idea.”

“Well I don’t see how it can make things any worse for us. They already know just about everything about us. At least maybe this way, they’d know that we’re not psychopathic maniacs who don’t care about anything. And like I said, I just don’t know if I can keep going on killing people like that camper. Or someone like Maria.”

“Okay, then I’ll just do what I promised originally. Then you won’t ever have to kill anyone again.”

Now it was Oskar’s turn to sigh. “I thought we agreed that that wasn’t much better than both of us doing it. And are you really saying that you feel the same way about this now as you did before we met Maria? Because I don’t.”

“I—I guess I don’t know how to feel anymore. I feel all burned up inside. Burned up and burnt out. You’re the only thing that really keeps me going anymore. And I’m scared to death of losing you.”

“Sounds to me like your heart’s really not in it, either.”

“I’ll do what I have to do to survive, Oskar. I always have.”

“Yeah, but that’s just it—all we do is *survive*. Why can’t we ever *do* anything?”

She looked at him, confused. “What do you mean? We do lots of things—have fun together, run around and stuff. Aren’t you happy spending time with me?”

“Well yeah—sure I am. But that’s not what I mean. I mean—don’t you ever want to *be* somebody?”

“Like who?”

“Like . . . I don’t know. I mean . . . didn’t you ever think about what you wanted to be when you were little? Back before . . .”

“It was always pretty much assumed we’d be farmers, Oskar. Just like our dad was.”

“Hmm. Well I’m not sure I’m talking about going into farming. I just feel like maybe we should be trying to do something *useful*. With all these powers we have, I mean. You

know, *Maria* sure thought we were awesome. What was it that she said? That we were maybe the most amazing people in the history of the *world*?”

“Extraordinary.”

“Yeah—‘extraordinary.’ So—I mean, if *she* thought that, then maybe other people will think so, too.”

“So you’re not happy, just being with me.”

He rolled his eyes and sighed. “No, no—I’m not saying I’m not *happy*. I’m just saying that maybe we could be a lot *happier*. You know, just . . . take a little thing, like finding someone to help fix Pudge’s broken wing. Wouldn’t it be nice to be able to do that without being afraid of getting captured or killed? Wouldn’t it make you feel good inside, if we could help *save* somebody once in awhile? I mean, just think of all the things we could do that no one else could.”

“Like what?”

“Like . . . I don’t know, maybe help a climber trapped on Mount Everest? Help those sea scientists explore those super-deep trenches in the bottom of the ocean? Or maybe even find sunken ships—*that’d* be cool. We don’t need to breathe, right? Or like *Maria* was saying, we could try to help people who’ve got mental problems? Or even,” he chuckled, “just help people who’ve got rat infestation problems? We could start our own business . . .”

She giggled.

He grew serious; took her hand into his. “Or you know, *Eli* . . . how about just being able to go to sleep at dawn with me in a real bed, and not have to worry about who might come along and kill us? To not have to live in fear all the time? Because—I don’t want you to be burned out; I want you to be happy. Isn’t that worth taking a chance?”

She looked down, her voice barely audible. “Yes. I guess.”

“Did you just say ‘yes’?”

“Uh huh.”

He uttered a little cheer, and kissed her.

“But no letter.”

“*What?*” He looked at her incredulously.

“We go see this policeman in person—no warning. Talk to him face to face. Then we’ll know how serious they are. And if they’re not, then all bets are off.”

†

They saw it on their way back, on a TV inside a little gatehouse in front of an industrial storage facility. They were on the opposite side of the street, moving along behind a screen of bushes, when the flickering bluish light from the cathode tube caught their eye. The guard was sitting on his chair in the tiny room, facing away from them, with his feet up on a desk under the TV, which sat on a shelf beside some binders and a stack of paper. The screen was small and wasn’t easy to see through the old, bent blinds that hung in the gatehouse’s front window, but the images under the header “Charnel Pit Discovered in Norrköping” were unmistakable. Both of them stared in transfixed silence, wishing mightily that they could hear the anchorman’s words.

The camera cut to footage of the hole in the ground, the door and the shaft beyond, and even showed the bloody splatter mark on the wall, prompting Eli to utter a tiny gasp. Oskar’s mouth opened even wider when the image shifted to an interview of the man at the granary whom they’d met the night they were looking for Maria. And when this was followed by a black-and-white mug shot of Maria, and then by the pictures of themselves they’d seen on the bus, they looked at each other despondently, both of them reexperiencing that sinking feeling they’d had when Maria had given them the *Expressen*. Then they sank to the ground in the bushes, comforting each other with soft hugs and little kisses, and murmured whispers of “don’t worry” and “it’ll be alright.” They tried not to cry lest they attract attention as their eyes were drawn back, over and over, to the TV, catching glimpses of the banner scrolling continuously across the bottom of the screen:

“pit believed to be secret remains of castle that existed more than 200 years ago . . .”

“number of cremated bodies estimated to exceed 300 . . .”

“Government denies knowledge of pit or castle on site . . .”

“evidence of recent trauma, but no body recovered . . .”

“Stockholm woman believed to have suffered fatal injuries falling into pit, although cause of death remains under investigation . . .”

“death is related to two preteens wanted in connection with seven deaths in greater Stockholm . . .”

“. . . remain at large, and are believed to be extremely dangerous.”

Oskar sniffed and shook his head dejectedly. “How did they find out about it?”

“I don’t know.” Eli pulled away from him a little and continued to stare across the street. “Someone must’ve discovered the open shaft and called the police.”

Sudden realization passed over Oskar’s face. “Her *camera*--I left it by that door!”

“Maybe they found it and started asking around; talked to that man at the granary. He probably told them about Maria.”

“And about us, too.”

Eli nodded. “He must’ve. No other way they could’ve known we were there.”

“And they know about what happened to Maria, so they have her body--and our note to her sister, too.”

“That’s not really surprising.”

“No; you’re right,” Oskar agreed glumly. “They’re probably saying that we killed her.”

“Maybe.”

“Hey--there’s that cop.”

They both stared at the man identified as Kurt Magnusson. He had been filmed standing by the playfort while he spoke to a middle-aged, heavy-set woman.

Eli’s mouth turned down in disgust. “He must be back on our case. We need to get a newspaper and find out what’s going on.”

“I thought Maria said he’d been temporarily fired for writing that report about us.”

“Yeah. They must’ve changed their--” Eli’s eyes widened in astonishment. “Miguel!”

Oskar locked his eyes onto the TV. Sure enough, it was a picture of Miguel; there could be no doubt. “But I sunk him in the river, Eli! How could they--”

She stared at him. “Did you weigh him down?”

“Yeah!”

“And Rafael?”

“Yes!”

“Hmm. Well, things have a way of coming back, I guess. Nothing stays hidden forever.”

“I swear, Eli, honest! I tied rocks to his feet and everything.”

“It’s okay, Oskar; it doesn’t matter.” Her voice was flat and without affect.

“Eli, I—”

She shook her head. “You don’t need to explain—it’s hopeless. You’re right, Oskar, there’s no fighting against this. They find out everything, no matter which way we turn. We really do need to go talk to that cop and try to cut some sort of deal.”

“Looks like he’s in Norrköping.”

“Yeah. Who knows where he’s staying. Or for how long.”

“Maybe we could catch him leaving the police station in a car.”

“We might have to wait a long time. And what if he’s only at the station during the day?”

“I have an idea. But let’s get a newspaper first.”

Wednesday, August 16, 1983 - 3:45 p.m. Stockholm

A soft knock, one he knew by heart, came on Kurt’s office door, followed by Karla’s voice. “Kurt, there’s an unusual-looking letter here for you—it looks personal. Do you want me to open it?”

He had been lost in his work, and with her knock he glanced up, slightly annoyed at the interruption. But the emotion did not last. “No, just bring it in.”

The brass knob turned and the door swung open with a creak. Karla scurried in with a stack of mail, the single, unopened letter on top. She put the pile in his in-box, and put the letter down on the corner of his blotter. She was old enough, and had worked with him long enough, to refrain from doing anything more, even though the handwriting on the envelope was very intriguing. He thanked her and she left, closing the door behind her.

For a moment, all he could do was stare at the envelope. The script was unmistakable, each letter of his name written in capitals with apparently painstaking care, all of them embellished with curled serifs. Handwriting that he knew in his heart had been learned centuries ago.

No return address.

He moved the papers he’d been reading off the middle of his desk, picked the letter up by its corners using only his fingertips, and flipped it over. Nothing written on the back, but a smear of dirt across the lower right corner. He took his letter file out of its holder and, as

carefully as he could without handling the letter, slit open the top. Then, pinching the edge of the note, he carefully removed and unfolded it.

It was a flimsy, used restaurant napkin. From the stains it was clear that someone had wiped their mouth with it, then crumpled it up and thrown it away. And it was equally clear that someone else had then found it, flattened it out as best they could, and written on it with the same ballpoint pen that had been used to address the envelope. In a few places, the pen had torn through the thin paper.

DEAR MR. MAGNUSON

WE ARE EVERYTHING YOU THINK WE ARE, AND MORE, BUT WE HAVE A DISEASE. WE NEED SOMEONE'S HELP, JUST LIKE MARIA HELPED US, BUT WE'RE AFRAID PEOPLE WILL TRY TO KILL US. YOU KNOW US BETTER THAN ANYONE SO MAYBE YOU ARE THE ONE WHO CAN HELP US THE BEST.

WE WANT TO TALK TO YOU. MEET US AT THE TOP OF KOCKUMS CRANE, THURSDAY AUG. 17 AT 2:00 A.M. JUST YOU, NO ONE ELSE. NO GUNS. IF WE SEE ANYONE ELSE, OR IF YOU HAVE A GUN, WE WON'T COME. WE PROMISE WE WON'T HURT YOU.

PLEASE. WE DON'T WANT TO KEEP DOING THIS.

He rocked back in his chair, feeling the nervous energy course through him, starting with his toes and flashing up his body. Kockums Crane: the world's largest, down in Malmö. He wracked his memory, trying to recall how tall it was, but couldn't. It didn't matter—it was super-*fucking* tall. *Jesus.*

He wiped a hand across his face, his mind racing. Looked at his watch—tomorrow at 2 a.m.—barely ten hours from now. How long would it take to drive down there? Seven hours—six, maybe, if he drove like a maniac. He had about four hours to prepare. Make it two, to play it safe. He stared at the note again.

I could die.

This fundamental knowledge settled into his stomach; never before had it been there, throughout the entire investigation. He'd always come along after the fact, but now it would be different. Face to face, just like he'd hoped would happen. Only—not like this. A jail cell? Yes. A treacherous, narrow metal platform, hundreds of meters in the air? No.

He looked at his in-box. What would happen if he weren't around tomorrow? His paperwork would be left unfinished. He reached for the report he'd been completing before Karla had interrupted him. He moved it to the center of his desk and brought his pen to it, but then put it down. No time for that. Not important.

What would he tell Flora? They had invited friends over for dinner tonight. When was the last time he'd looked at his will? And he'd promised her he'd finish rebuilding those flower boxes this weekend . . . the ones that had been sitting on his workbench for the past four months.

He picked up the phone and dialed home; got the answering machine. She must be out buying something at the last minute. He was starting to leave a message when she picked up.

"Kurt?" She spoke loudly, trying to be heard over the drone of the answering machine's robotic monotone. Then there was a beep.

"--Flora. I thought you were out."

"I just got back. I was unloading some groceries." He heard the rustling of paper and imagined her standing by the wall phone, a little breathless from running in from the garage, putting a grocery bag down on kitchen counter.

"Well, I'm sorry to say this, but something important has come up in my case, and I need to drive to Malmö as soon as I can."

"*Malmö?* I thought you said they were spotted in Norrköping."

"Apparently they moved. Anyway, I'll be gone overnight, and may or may not be back tomorrow afternoon, depending on what happens."

She sighed. "I'll call Rog and Bonnie and reschedule."

"I'm sorry to do this, Flora, but it's important. You can still get together with them if you want, you know. I won't mind."

"Lately, your work has been a lot more important than us, Kurt."

"I know, but there's nothing I can do--I *have* to go. We may be close to catching them."

"Oh! That's wonderful news!"

"Yeah--well, we'll see."

"Will you *please* be careful."

"I always am--you know that."

"Kurt."

"Mmm hmm."

“I don’t know what’s going on, but . . . remember what I said about her. That night we talked.”

“I’ll try, Flora.” He read the note again as he talked: *We don’t want to keep doing this.* “But I’ve got to keep in mind how dangerous she is.”

“Just do your best, Kurt. That’s all I’ll ever expect from you.”

“I will. And I’ll try to call you later tonight, if I can.”

“Okay. Just not too late, alright? I’m tired.”

“Okay.” He paused. “I love you, Flora.”

“Love you too. Drive safe.”

He returned the phone to its cradle, dissatisfied with their conversation’s emotional superficiality. It had been like hundreds of other calls he’d made to her over the years—gotta work late, won’t be home for dinner. He’d wanted to say more--had wanted to convey to her that this might be their last conversation--but he just hadn’t been able. To say more would have been akin to admitting his own mortality, and he didn’t want to do that. Nor did he want her to suffer worry and anxiety over his well-being. What would be the point of that? What would happen, would happen.

It did not occur to him that he should not go.

He picked up the phone again and punched four numbers. “Martin? I need you in here right away. And get Hallberg, too.” He hung up and swiveled around in his chair.

“Karla?”

The thump and squeak of her chair; then she appeared once again at his door. “Did you call me?”

“Yeah. Call Berta and tell her I need to speak with the Chief immediately. Tell her it’s urgent. And get me the phone number for the police in Malmö ASAP.”

†

Oskar’s eyes snapped open in the pitch blackness.

The soft and gentle sound of raindrops came from overhead, tinging gently on their metal home, trickling down the old, peeling paint on the outside of the tank. No thunder, nor wind; just a continuous, light drizzle.

He turned and stretched his legs under the blanket. Although he was wide awake, he didn't feel like getting up yet. It felt good just to be in here, listening to the rain, safe in bed with the only person in the world who mattered to him. He thought about how nice it would be to simply stay here all night with her, doing nothing but snuggling under the covers and listening to the rain; sharing the feelings he'd sometimes had when he'd been younger, lying in bed at night or on an early Saturday morning. No school, no job, no worries. Just relishing the feeling of security.

Hoo. Hoo.

He smiled and stretched out his hand in the darkness, feeling for the box. Touched it, and was reassured by its nearness. They hadn't been able to leave Pudge out in the trolley car across the way; somehow, it had seemed cruel. So here he was, with them in the milk truck. Oskar wondered if he'd eaten any of the insects they'd caught before going to sleep yesterday morning. He'd probably need more before they went to the crane tonight.

He turned back over, reached out again, and found her sleeping form. Eli was lying on her side, facing away from him toward the front wall of the tank. He inhaled deeply through his nose, then opened his mouth to breathe through it instead. Neither one of them smelled too good.

His stomach tightened and the gnawing rushed in to push out his languid equilibrium. He tried to remember how long it had been since they'd eaten. A week since Maria; almost two since Rafael. And although her love had been a beautiful thing, Maria's blood hadn't really fulfilled them. It had been sort of like eating half a dinner, rather than a full one. He was hungrier than he'd ever been, even more than after Eli had first turned him back in July. And he knew that Eli must be, too, judging by the whiteness of her hair last night when they'd crawled in to go to sleep. But they were trying to hold out.

To distract himself, he touched her shoulder, running his hand down her arm while he thought about what was coming. The thought of the approaching encounter with the policeman filled him with hope and dread; anticipation and anxiety. How would he react to them? Was Oskar right, that the risk was worth it? Or would something bad happen, as Eli feared?

What if he didn't even show up? What if the letter had been delayed and he didn't get it until tomorrow? Or what if he hadn't returned to Stockholm, like they thought he would? Then where would they be? His mind began to fill with fears of misadventure, and without thinking about it, he drew himself to Eli, pressing himself to her back and putting his arm around her. She stirred a little, but then settled down.

He didn't care how they smelled. She was his.

They had talked at length about what they would do tonight; had done what they could to prepare. On the night that they had hit upon their plan, they had gone to the crane, which was so tall that it could be seen from virtually anywhere in the city. They thought it would

offer the best chance to meet Magnusson without being trapped or shot. They had examined it from above, and when they were sure no one was around, had alighted upon its enormous upper span. It was amazingly huge, and Oskar couldn't help but wish he could see it in action, lifting something really heavy, like part of a ship or submarine.

There was a crane situated cross-wise on the top of the span which could offer some cover for them, and the policeman would have to come up via one of the elevators at either end that ran up inside the A-pillars. They could conceal themselves on the crane and have a clear view of the detective once he arrived.

They examined the tops of the elevator shafts carefully. In the machine rooms above each shaft they discovered the electronic controllers, and realized that they could disable an elevator simply by ripping its controller off its wall mount. In this way they planned to shut down all of the elevators save one, so no police officers would be able to come up behind them while they spoke with Magnusson.

Then they had looked around at the nearby buildings. Oskar was worried about the possibility that the police might put a sniper on top of a tall apartment building about two kilometers to the southwest. It seemed pretty far away, and it wasn't nearly as tall as the crane, but it was worrisome enough that they had gone to it and landed on its roof. It was a little more than half the height of the crane, and Oskar couldn't imagine how a gunman placed on its roof would have a decent shot at them over there. Nevertheless, they decided that they'd check it out before going to the crane on Thursday night. Neither of them had spoke about what they would do if they actually found someone up there, but Oskar knew it would probably spell the end of the whole scheme.

He heard a soft, swallowing sound as she awoke and yawned. Then her stomach rumbled loudly. She took his hand into hers, pulled his arm closer around her, and made a soft, satisfied noise. When she spoke, her voice was a whisper.

"Oskar—you awake?"

"Yeah."

"It's raining."

"Mmm hmm."

They said nothing further for quite awhile. Then she said, "I'm so hungry."

"Me, too."

She turned in his arms and embraced him. "I'm afraid."

"Me, too."

Pudge hooted again.

“I wonder if *he*’s hungry?”

“I don’t know. Want to see if he ate?”

“Yeah.” She stirred and got up, grateful that there was something to think about besides her empty stomach and the crane.

Carefully she clambered over Pudge’s box and the baffles. Oskar heard the now-familiar sound of the tank lid being opened, and suddenly he could see again, as fresh, damp air flowed in.

“Mmm. That’s better,” she remarked as she peered out. “Stinks in here.”

“Yeah—it’s us, I think.”

“Mmm hmm.”

She pushed the lid all the way open, then slipped back down in. Raindrops began to fall in through the hole. She made a low, bemused grunt as she opened her mouth and began to catch them on her tongue.

“Ahh.” He watched her; then realized with a start that her hair was now completely grayish-white; there was no dark anywhere. And her face . . . she looked the way he remembered, that night they’d gone down into the basement of his old apartment building to play knights and dragons. Only her eyes were the same.

“Does that help a little? With the hunger?”

“Water? Sort of. But if you try to drink alot of it when you’re really hungry, you’ll throw up. And sipping it won’t make the hunger go away. But it does make your mouth feel better.”

He got up to join her and smacked his lips. “My mouth’s so dry. Ugh–gross.”

“This’ll help. Here.” She stepped over a little to make room. Soon they found themselves sitting cross-legged on the floor of the tank, facing each other, craning their necks back to catch the raindrops. Oskar brought Pudge with him, and he sat in his box between them, getting wet.

“You don’t look so good, Oskar,” she teased. “You’ve got baggy eyes.”

His stomach gurgled. “You don’t look so hot yourself, smarty-pants.”

“I know.” She grinned. “I probably look like shit. Maybe this Magnusson will open a vein for us.”

He chuckled. “I wouldn’t count on it.”

She stroked Pudge’s head. “He doesn’t seem to mind the rain. Hey! Looks like he ate those crickets.”

“Awww—Yeah, Pudge!” He smiled down at the little bird and petted him with Eli.

“I think he’s starting to like us. He’s not hissing any more.”

“Yeah. Maybe we should take him out of the box tonight and let him move around.”

“Good idea.” He sighed. “I feel gross. I’ve been wearing these same clothes since we moved in here.”

She smiled. “Why don’t you take them off, go outside, and wash off?”

He looked at her hesitantly. “What do you mean—like, go out naked?”

Her smile broadened into a grin. “Uh huh.”

He tried to smile back, but faltered. “Oh, I don’t—I’d feel kinda weird doing that.”

“Why? It’s not as if you need clothes anyway. And if no one’s around, what difference does it make?”

“But what if someone sees us?”

“Ah—what are the chances of that? You know how good we are not being seen if we don’t want to. Besides, we’ll be seeing that cop in a few hours anyway.”

She stood and with no further ado, skinned the kitty with her shirt and peeled off her stretchy pants. She smiled at him again. “Besides, it might take your mind off your stomach. And bring Pudge with you, will you?” She climbed up, peeked out once again, and then she was gone.

Oskar frowned as he continued to pat the owl’s head.

“Well, Pudge, why not. It’ll be weird, but . . . what else is new, huh?”

He joined her beside the truck. The night was drizzly and foggy; so foggy, in fact, that they could barely see ten meters in any direction. He wondered if it was always like this in Malmö because it was so close to the water, or whether things tonight were unusual.

To distract himself from her nudity, and hoping that she would likewise be distracted from his, he brought Pudge's box up and looked in at him. "Do you think he'll be all right in this rain?"

She looked down into the box. "It's not sticking to his feathers. I think he'll be okay."

"Maybe we can open the back of one of those trailers, and let him hop around in there."

"No—let's not do it so close to our truck. Let's just take him back to the trolley car and then take him out. Maybe we can find some more bugs for him there."

He looked at her, still uncomfortable with their complete absence of clothing. "But Eli, it's clear across on the other side of the field. We don't have anything on, and—"

"Oskar, there's no one around here." Her voice became even more teasing and playful than before they'd climbed out, and Oskar suddenly realized that something had given way inside her; that her impulsive decision to go out naked was a release of built-up tension that they'd felt from having to sneak furtively about in the shadows for so long; always hiding, always fearful of being seen. "You're still thinking that you're like how you were before I bit you, but you're not. Like I said, you don't *need* clothes. You can take a bath in the rain. Com'on!" She took his hand, and they headed off toward the back lot. Her spontaneity was infectious, and as he ran by her side, he began to giggle; couldn't stop himself. *This is so crazy. But fun.*

He felt very strange to be running across the field not only in his bare feet, but without clothes. It was liberating and scary to feel the air over his entire body, and he kept wondering what would happen if they really *did* meet someone out here. Soon, he fell behind her as he felt the pebbles and grassy stubble on the soles of his feet, making him pick his way more carefully over the uneven ground. "Eli—wait up!" Her form resolidified from the gray, hazy shape it had taken in front of him as she returned to his side.

"Sorry. Not used to running without my shoes."

She waited for him and then swung in next to him as they continued. "Tenderfoot."

"I know it. I'm a city boy, I guess."

"When I was little, I always loved running around without my shoes on. You know, in the Spring . . . feeling the grass between my toes."

"Yeah, I like that, too." He thought for a moment about the summers he had spent at his father's place. Then he turned his head and looked at her. "You ever done this before? Run around outside with no clothes on?"

She smiled, and Oskar was happy to see that like her eyes, that, too, was unchanged by their abstinence. "Maybe."

“You have, haven’t you. Come on, fess up.”

She chuckled. “Okay, I did. But it was on a dare. It wasn’t like I did it all the time.”

“Uh huh. Sure.”

“It’s true. How ’bout you?”

He blushed. “Are you kidding?—no way. First time for me.”

They were silent for awhile as they continued across the field. A few kilometers away, the whistle of a train blew, the sound muted by the rain and fog.

“You’ve had a lot of firsts with me, haven’t you, Oskar?” Now she sounded reflective and thoughtful.

“That’s for sure.”

“Have they made you happy, or . . . do you wish sometimes you’d never met me? I mean—do you ever wish that maybe you could just go back to your normal old life?”

“Eli, if I’d never met you, I’d be dead.”

“That’s not really what I meant.”

“I know, but it’s the truth. You saved my life.”

“That’s because I love you, Oskar. And don’t forget, you saved mine, too.”

“I love you too, Eli. And I’ve never forgotten that time in your apartment. And yes, you *do* make me happy. Every minute of every day.”

She squeezed his hand. “Good.” Then she stumbled a little. “The grass out here stinks. It’s hard and crinkly.”

“I know.”

“Well, com’on—let’s not walk, then.” She pulled gently, and they both left the ground and began to skim like a pair of fish over the field.

“Eli, what if someone—”

“Shhh. Just be quiet, and keep your ears open. We’ll hear anyone before they hear us. Okay?”

“Okay.”

As silent as shadows, they slipped through the stand of trees and soon came to the spur track with the old, abandoned trolley cars. No one was around, and they stopped outside the one with the broken door. He put Pudge in his box down just inside the door, out of the rain.

Eli lifted an arm and sniffed her pit. “Whew. *Man.*” She began to scrub herself with her hands, and Oskar stood in front of her and did likewise. As he did so, he discovered that he was no longer self-conscious. Eli didn’t seem to care or notice that he was hanging out, and had been acting toward him as she always did. And although initially he kept glancing at her pubis, he soon lost interest; it seemed perfectly natural that it was accessible to view.

After a few minutes of vigorous scrubbing, she stopped and stepped closer. “Do I smell better?”

He leaned close and sniffed. “Definitely. How about me?”

“Yeah. A lot.”

“Good.” He watched her wring the water out of her hair. “You know, I really wish your hair wasn’t so white. I like it black.”

“Well, maybe we’ll get some help with that tonight. We’ll see, huh? Keep our fingers crossed?”

He smiled hopefully. “Yeah.”

“Come on. Let’s see how Pudge is doing.”

They took the owl inside and down to the back, where there was an open area for standing passengers. Eli lifted him out of the box and gently placed him on the floor. He shook himself, spraying a fine mist of water around, and then began to preen. Oskar cleaned out his box and refolded his rag bedding. Then they sat down side by side against the back wall and watched him.

“There was an owl who lived around our farm, once,” Eli remarked. “I only saw it a few times, but it was a lot bigger than Pudge.”

“What kind was it?”

“Not sure . . . but it was a full-sized owl. We’d hear it out in the trees. Papa liked it because he thought it’d keep the mice down.”

“What kind of owl do you think Pudge is?”

“I don’t know, but he sure is tiny. I wonder if he could even handle a mouse.”

Oskar laughed softly. “Yeah, I know. But he ate all those bugs.”

They were quiet for awhile. Pudge began to hop around.

“Does this bother you, Oskar? That we’re sitting here with no clothes?”

“Well, it did at first, but now it doesn’t. Actually, it’s starting to feel normal—which I never thought I’d say.”

“Do you ever wonder why people are so ashamed of their bodies?”

“I guess I’ve thought about it a few times. It does seem a little odd, when you think about it. I mean, it’s how we are. But of course, we need clothes anyway to stay warm—or I mean, I used to.”

“I think you look nice without clothes, Oskar.”

He wasn’t sure how to respond, and was preparing to tell her, in the absence of anything more intelligent, that she looked nice, too, when Eli spoke again.

“Animals don’t seem to mind being naked, do they?”

“No.”

She pulled her legs up to her chest, thinking for a moment. “Have you ever thought you’d like to be an animal?”

He relaxed, grateful that their conversation had shifted to more comfortable grounds. “Yeah. When I was little, I used to think it’d be cool to be a cat. Because, you know, it always seemed to me that cats pretty much had it made. And when Mom asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up once, that’s what I told her. I don’t think it was what she wanted to hear.” He laughed.

Eli smiled and slid over against him. “Sometimes I’ve thought it would be nice to be an animal. They don’t seem to have any worries, like us.”

“What kind of animal would you be?”

“I don’t know. Something peaceful, I guess. Like a horse, or maybe a giraffe.”

“A *giraffe*?” He smiled and looked at her quizzically.

“Uh huh—what’s wrong with that? They have cool spots and pretty eyes, and they don’t hurt anything. And they can run fast.”

“Nothing’s wrong with it. I just hadn’t thought of it, that’s all.”

They heard the freight train whistle again; two long blasts. Then there was a loud, low rumble and a rhythmic clanking, accompanied by squeaks and the groan of steel ties as it rolled by not too far away.

He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him. “Something you said last night got me wondering—when you talked about commanding the mice.”

“What’s that?”

“I started to think about whether animals know about god. Do you think they do?”

“Hmm . . . I don’t know. Maybe on a different level than us?”

“Different level?”

“Well, you don’t see them going to church, do you?”

“No.”

Her voice assumed a detached quality as she thought out loud. “Animals aren’t like us—they don’t know right from wrong. But you can’t look into the eyes of a wolf and say there’s no intelligence there. They think a lot—I know it. So I think that maybe they have souls.”

He nodded. “Uh huh. That’s why sometimes I’ve thought it’d be great to be an animal—you wouldn’t have to worry about trying to be good, or have grown-ups telling you all the time that you have to be good. Because they’re innocent. I mean—you wouldn’t know any better. You’d just *be*.”

“Exactly.” She turned her head to look at him. “But you know what? I think I’d rather *know*. Because if I were just an animal, then I doubt I’d ever be able to feel the way you make me feel, Oskar. I’d never know what real love is.” She took his head into her hands and kissed him gently.

A picture swam up out of the darkness behind his closed eyes. It shimmered, wavered, and then solidified. The top of his head and shoulders, seen from above, below the surface of the pale, unforgiving water; her arm extending down and her hand pulling him up, back from death. His own face—eyes first closed, then slowly opening. Then recognition, followed by a happy smile.

The image shifted and blurred, becoming briefly indistinct. Then he was shown something that he knew had *not* happened that night at the pool, but was what Eli *wished* had happened, had there been time and had they been alone: himself, laid gently and with

loving care down on the gray tiles by the water's edge, where there were no bodies, no blood. Himself, weak but alive, as seen through Eli's eyes: his slender arms; a pair of fragile, but perfectly formed clavicles above a pale, narrow chest that rose and fell with renewed life; his quietly smiling face, youthful and open.

In this now sharply focused image he experienced the yearning in her heart for him—for his innocence, his kindness, his acceptance. Then this yearning, this love, merged with the vision of himself as she knelt and drew him to her. His frail, vulnerable body *was* innocence; the beating heart within him *was* acceptance and understanding. And as she pulled his wet, naked body up and he felt himself clasped in her arms, he understood that to Eli, he *was* Beauty, body, mind and soul; that what she identified in her mind as Oskar and as The Beautiful were really one and the same. And she drew him as near as possible to herself; loved and cherished her Oskar, whom she had snatched away from death, with all her heart and strength, never, ever to let him go.

Their kiss broke in a soft, fragile silence. At last, he was able to speak. "Is that what you meant when you said you like how I look without my clothes?"

This time there was no smile. In her deep, dark eyes he sensed only the hopeful anticipation that what she had just expressed would not be too much for him to bear. "Yes."

He slowly nodded, then put his arms around her and pulled her to him; whispered in her ear before they kissed again.

"Eli, don't worry—I'll always be yours."

They slid to the floor and laid on their sides, face to face, heads resting on their arms, and touched one another softly while they listened to the thump of the train and the patter of rain on the glass. Time seemed to stand still as they kissed and kissed again, over and over.

A window at the front of the trolley suddenly exploded inward. A brick thumped against one of the padded bench seats a few rows back and then hit the floor. Then they heard approaching laughter. It was very close—at least three people, perhaps more.

Deeply frightened, Oskar scooped Pudge up in a panic and dropped him unceremoniously into his box as Eli scrambled over and peeked out the closest side window to see who was coming. Three . . . no, four, dark shapes emerged from the fog only a few meters away from the trolley. The rumble of the train had masked their approach.

"Quick, Oskar!" she hissed. Together they crawled up the aisle toward the middle of the trolley on their hands and knees, away from the open area in the back. Unhappy at being jostled, Pudge fluttered in his box and squawked. "Pudge, shh!" Oskar tried to carry the box more carefully as they scrambled across the dirty, threadbare carpet.

“*Here!*” Her voice was only a whisper as she crawled under a pair of back-to-back bench seats to their right. Oskar followed her in, pushing the box before him. They embraced each other and curled up on their sides as tightly as they could, with Pudge in his box a few centimeters from their heads, just as the first person stepped up into the trolley. They froze, hoping they were out of sight. Oskar, with his bare bottom facing out toward the aisle, now wished mightily that they had some clothes on. Anything would be better than this.

There was the sound of booted feet tramping up into the trolley, accompanied by more laughter. A scrape as the brick was lifted off the floor; then more glass shattered.

“*Yeah!*” A whistle; then more glass.

“Hey, check it out! I’m driving the trolley, man!”

Laughter and scuffling. “You look like a fuckin’ douchebag.”

“Hey—check *this* out.” A rapid, rhythmic thumping sound.

“Lookit that shit fly. Cuts through it like butter.”

“Yeah.”

A loud clang of metal on metal. Oskar thought of the stainless steel handpoles near the front of the cab.

“Hey, watchit with that thing, will you? *Fuck!*” Laughter. “You’re an *asshole*, Per.”

“Let *me* try.”

“No.”

“Give it to me, you *freak*. It’s *my* fuckin sword.”

“I’ll give it to you.”

“Hey you assholes, get out of my way.”

The sound of approaching footsteps grew louder over more thumping sounds and laughter. Oskar held his breath as the person approached; the boots made a grinding noise on the gritty shards of broken glass, and he waited for them to stop by their seat. But they didn’t; instead, they went past as whoever it was went to the open end of the trolley, where they had been only seconds before. Soon, the activity at the front door ceased as the rest of the group followed to the rear. None of them stopped. Oskar breathed a sigh of relief; then issued a thought.

Eli—what're we going to do?

Nothing. Just be still until they go away.

What if they don't go away?

She didn't answer.

"You got any cigarettes, Per?"

"Yeah, sure." The sound of someone flicking a lighter. More thumping sounds as someone sat down.

"Good to be out of the rain."

"Give me one of those, will you?"

"No one out tonight, man."

"Yeah. Everyone's scared." Laughter.

"*Booo . . . nice night for a vampire!*" More snickering.

"You believe that shit, Axe?"

"That cop's off his fuckin' rocker, man. He should be locked up somewhere."

"I dunno. Did you hear about that pit they found? With all the bodies?"

"Yeah. Some weird shit there for sure."

"I think it'd be *cool* to be a vampire."

"Yeah."

"Just think of all the cool shit you could do. You know—fly, have super strength—all that shit."

"Get to *kill* people, too—*that'd* be awesome."

"Got someone in mind, Isak?"

"Maybe." More laughter, softer this time. "I could think of a few."

“You could set yourself up real good. All the money you’d ever want. Turn a few girls into vampires, too, and have them as your slaves. Like Count Dracula with his witchy women. Keep them around and make ’em do whatever you want. That’d be fuckin’ *awesome*.”

Oskar sensed Eli’s reaction; the anger began to emanate from her like heat from a blacklight. *Eli* . . . She caught his apprehension and pulled the hostility back inside her, as if air was being drawn out of a balloon and back into her lungs. He could sense her clamp down, closing a door that had begun to swing open in her mind.

There was a clank as something was dropped on the floor, followed by a rustling and then a quiet sloshing sound.

“Ahh.”

“Hey, gimme some of that.”

“Yeah—pass it around, Per.”

“You pricks are so fucking *cheap*. Why don’t you ever buy your *own* shit?”

There was a lull in the conversation as they took pulls on a bottle.

“Fuck. Axe, you fuckin’ *pig*. Why’d you have to take all the rest of it?”

“’Cause it’s *good*, that’s why.” A loud, ripping belch.

Laughter, followed by more belching from someone else.

“Isak, you got any weed?”

“If I did, I wouldn’t give you any, you fuckin’ mooch.”

A different voice. “Com’ on, Isak—*give*. Let’s *toke* up.”

Grumpily: “I got a little.” A pause.

“*Woohoo*. *Big* fuckin’ joint. ‘Little’ my *ass*.”

“That’s ’cause I know I’ve always gotta share with peckerwoods like *you*, Axe.”

“Aww . . . ain’t you sweet.” A throaty chuckle. “When’re you gonna share *Sara* with me?”

“In your *dreams*, asswipe.”

“Got *that* right.” Loud laughter all around.

“Shut the fuck up.”

The sweet, cloying odor of marijuana drifted through the trolley car, accompanied by the sounds of heavy drags on the shared reefer. Time dragged by; seconds turned into minutes; five; ten; fifteen; more. The hard floor was beginning to grow uncomfortable, and Oskar began to wonder how long they would sit back there, enjoying themselves. Might be a long time—all night, for all they knew. He began to wish he could look at his watch, but he didn’t want to risk moving and making a sound.

“Man, that’s good weed.”

“No doubt.”

“Who’s dealin’, Isak? Jan?”

“Naw. The last pot I bought from him was laced with some shit that made me sick. I stopped buying from him. I got it from Ian.”

“*Ian?* I didn’t know he was dealing.”

“Just started. His brother got him into it.”

“Well tell him I’m interested. This must be that skunk weed.”

“Purple haze.”

“Mmm.”

“Hey Lud, you don’t look so good.” A mumbled, incoherent reply.

“Kick him, willya, Per?”

“What was that shit he took earlier, man?”

“I dunno. I think he’s been shootin up. He was in the toilet for awhile.”

Isak’s voice. “He told me he’s been doin smack. He was outta fuckin’ control at the club. Now he’s off his rush.”

A low whistle. “Expensive habit.”

“Fuck—who cares. His old man is loaded.”

“I feel so *mellow*.”

“So Per . . . Reggie told me tonight that she got a new tattoo for you—in a ‘special place.’ She was real secretive about it. Wanna tell us?”

Laughter. “Ahh, yeah. She showed me last night. And it’s none of your damn business.”

“Aww, com’on man.”

“Yeah. Fill us in.” Sniggering.

“Well let’s just say she can make it do a little dance if she wants.”

Loud guffaws. “Did *you* make it dance?”

“You bet your *ass* I did.”

“Mmm. Me like, me like. Me getsum pus—”

Hoo—hoo.

A sudden, surprised silence.

“*Shh!* What the hell was *that?*”

Eli . . . Eli . . .

Make him quiet down, Oskar.

“There’s a fuckin’ *owl* in here.”

“It wouldn’t be *in* the trolley, you dope.”

“Sure sounded like it to me.”

Hoo.

Pudge, shut up!

“It’s coming from up there.”

“Have Lud check it out.”

Someone chuckled. “I think he’s asleep.”

“More like comatose.” More laughter.

“I’ll go see.”

Hoo hoo.

Oskar dragged the box as close to them as he could. Eli could feel him tense in her arms, like a spring wound as tightly as it would go.

Don't move, Oskar. Don't move.

The footsteps advanced slowly; one or two steps, then a pause, then a few more. Coming up the aisle; searching.

Eli took her arm off Oskar's back and brought her hand over to the top of the box, poised to reach in and crush the life out of Pudge if he began to hoot again. But in the end, it wasn't necessary.

The footsteps stopped right next to their seats.

Axe's voice. "Hey, there's someone under the seat up here!"

"What?"

"I shit you *not*, man. And they—" the voice grew louder as Axe knelt down, "they don't got no *clothes* on!"

Adrenaline shot through Oskar like a hot knife. Yet still, he did not move—did not so much as twitch.

Per spoke from the back. "Let *me* see."

"Hey . . . hey *you*."

More footsteps, approaching rapidly. Then bemused laughter, right next to them. "There's *two* of them. They were fucking in the trolley car."

More laughter; then Per spoke again. "Lookit that naked little ass. Come outta there, you *two*."

Oskar felt a hand touch his back. Eli lay in his arms, absolutely still. The hand poked once, twice. Then it grabbed a butt cheek and squeezed.

"He's as cold as ice, man."

"Are you sure he's alive?"

A pause. "I *think* so."

“Well they ain’t movin.”

“*Shit.* Get outta the way, douchebag.” Isak.

A strong, hard hand grasped Oskar’s ankle and started to drag him out.

Eli Eli ELI—

Deep fear was suddenly transformed into hot anger, and the change overcame him. The hunger instantly followed. He twisted and rolled, and in one motion lunged out from under the seats with a barking noise. Like a viper striking from the tall grass he fell upon Isak, who flopped onto his back in the aisle with a surprised grunt. Then he began to scream as one clawed hand dug into his scalp, the other into his shoulder, crushing the bones of the joint beneath. Oskar opened his mouth wide and bit deeply into his throat. Isak stopped screaming and began to jerk and thrash under him.

The weed-induced fog was just beginning to leave Per’s startled brain at the amazing spectacle of the blond-headed boy leaping upon Isak, when the second, naked form crawled out from under the seats. A white-haired girl with bottomless black eyes, those eyes that he’d seen in that Wanted Sign, and her mouth was opening, and in that mouth was—

Oh Jesus--

She sprang upon him. He stumbled backwards onto the seat on the opposite side of the trolley, trying to fend her off; then they slid down onto the floor between the seats. She wrapped herself around him in a deadly embrace as he seized her head with both hands, trying to keep her away. For a few seconds they remained this way, face to face, his eyes wide and terrified; hers as black as midnight and full of dark abandonment. He strained with all his strength to keep her at bay, and he saw the pain and hatred in her writhing features as he clamped down on her head with everything he had. But it was not enough.

With seemingly inexorable force, her head descended toward him despite all of his efforts, her eyes gleaming, catlike, in the darkness. Then she was so close that he was no longer able to see her face. His last words came out harshly between ragged breaths. “No . . . no . . . *no—*” Then the pain began. He began to scream as his fists rained blows upon her head. Yet still her teeth sank deeper, biting and tearing.

Axel Pemfors stood rooted to the spot, staring in disbelief while his friends lay on the floor, struggling to remain alive. When both Isak and Pers stopped screaming, and the only noise was the sound of sucking and swallowing, his paralysis broke—he turned and ran. With a thump and a bang he fled through the broken front door of the trolley.

Get him, Oskar.

Oskar didn't respond; he was too caught up in his feeding. And Eli couldn't stop, because Per wasn't dead yet. Axel's footsteps faded into the fog.

†

The high-pitched screaming brought Lud out of his sleep.

Once he'd mainlined, he'd had a very euphoric time at the club. It was the second time he'd injected heroin, and the sensation was much better than all of the snorting he'd done. It was fucking unbelievable.

He had continued to feel pretty good after they'd left, but had started to come down when they'd gotten to Per's house. He'd wanted to crash there, but then Per and Isak had started talking about heading over to Jan's place, and of course he couldn't stay at Per's if they did that. So they'd all headed out into the shitty drizzle again, and halfway across the trainyard he'd really started to feel groggy. He was beginning to stumble when Isak had spotted the trolley car and decided it'd be fun to check it out. To Lud's befuddled mind, it had sounded like a great idea—anything to get out of the rain and off his feet.

The last thing he'd remembered was someone talking about vampires. Then everything had gone blissfully hazy and dark—until now.

With half-lidded eyes, he looked up the aisle of the trolley car. Everything was sideways because he had fallen over after whoever he'd been leaning against had gotten up and left him.

Who'd been screaming? He couldn't figure it out. He saw two people on the floor in the middle of the aisle, a few meters away. It was hard to tell in the dark, but as he slowly righted himself, it looked like they were making out. Hugging each other and kissing—no, necking . . . or something. And the person on top was someone he'd never seen before; someone with blond hair and—his eyes widened a little--no clothes. Looked like this person was lying on top of . . . Isak? Yeah, it was Isak, all right.

Soundlessly he continued to push with his left arm until he was more or less vertical. He began to feel more awake. *Jesus*—listen to that slurping sound. What the fuck were they *doing*? And where was everyone else?

The boy on top of Isak suddenly growled. He head shook and his hair quivered. He was

(biting?)

. . . yes—*biting* Isak. And Isak didn't look like he was moving too much. His body shook when the boy growled, but that was it.

He suddenly understood that Isak was dead—the boy had killed him. And now the boy was--was . . .

(that killer blond kid running with that fucking vampire holy SHIT he must be a vampire too and he's drinking Isak's BLOOD)

Something glimmered in his peripheral vision. As if he were in a dream, he cranked his head around and saw Axe's sword lying on the floor to his left. The so-called "sword" that was, in fact, a cheap reproduction of "Toledo steel" that Axe had bought on impulse at a pawn shop. Then, having grown bored with its dull edge over the summer, he'd taken his old man's grinder to it one day and given it a sharp, uneven edge.

A smoldering doobie lay a short distance from the sword near an empty vodka bottle. Where was Axe? Per? He couldn't figure it out.

The slurping, sucking sounds continued. The boy was really getting into it, biting deeper into Isak's neck.

He got himself moving; crawled over to the sword. Grabbed it and then tried to stand, then realized that he couldn't without some help. But fortunately for him, help was there in the form of a metal pole the trolley passengers had held fifty years ago, or whenever the fuck the trolleys had been running in Malmö. He slid his free hand up the pole, grabbed, and pulled as he pushed up with his legs. Suddenly he was surprised to find himself standing. A little wobbly, but by God, he was up.

He looked to his right and saw some double pneumatic doors and the big step down leading to them. The rear exit. Could he get to it without falling? And even if he could, would they open? He doubted it.

He looked back at the boy and saw that he was, indeed, as naked as a jaybird. His back was heaving like some kind of wild animal from the African plain—a lion or a cheetah, munching on a fallen gazelle or wildebeast. But he wasn't watching; wasn't paying any attention to Lud.

Then he saw Per's boots a little farther up, jutting out into the aisle, and realized that the boy wasn't the only one making those godawful noises. It must be that girl—the one with the black hair who'd killed all those people.

Somehow, he wasn't scared. He knew he should be; maybe it was the smack that was keeping his nerves in check. He felt positively serene.

Keep standing here—you'll die when the boy finally sees you. Try to run—you'll die when they hear you at the door. He looked down at the sword in his hand. Only one option, dude. He could do it—why not?

As Oskar drained the last of Isak's blood, he began to feel the effects of the alcohol and the marijuana. He was suddenly lightheaded and unsteady, and when he began to lift his head,

he felt as though he might fall over onto his side. He let go of the young man's shoulder and grabbed the edge of the seat next to him to steady himself.

Pudge hooted again; then he heard the scrape of a boot on the floor. He looked up. A dark figure and something shiny. Then an explosion of pain in his left shoulder, and a bizarre, intense feeling of . . . coming apart.

(arm's not where it should be)

Cold metal in its place.

He screamed—high and undulating. A geyser of blood blew out from the severed ends of his subclavian vessels, spraying over the seat to his left that he'd been holding a second before. His left arm and shoulder flopped down, now attached to his body only by the muscles beneath his armpit.

Lud yanked on the sword. It was imbedded in the boy's torso and wouldn't come free, so all he ended up doing was pulling the screaming boy down onto his face. As he fell on top of Isak's corpse his body twisted, and his nearly severed arm splayed out. An amazing quantity of dark red blood continued to flow onto the floor, rapidly forming a large puddle. Then the sword came loose. But Lud never had time to lift it again.

Over the boy's ear-splitting screams came a loud bark. The girl struck Lud like a bullet, knocking him all the way back to the open end of the trolley. He had no time to react. The clawed hands scrambled to kill; they seized him by the head and clenched violently. Lud's skull imploded, and his Morphine-addled brain squirted like pudding out the back of his skull, and blew out the front of his face in a liquid jet of pinkish-gray tissue.

She released Lud's lifeless body and turned, swaying drunkenly, blood and brain matter dripping from her hands. Her head was spinning. "Oskar!" She staggered back to him, and for the first time, took in his shocking wound. His blood was everywhere. He had stopped screaming and was lying face down, half on, half off Isak's prone form.

At the sound of her voice he turned his head sluggishly and looked up toward her, his lips and lower jaw smeared with blood. She wasn't sure if he was seeing her. "*Aaallii . . .*" His skin was almost completely white. She didn't know if he would live or die.

She pushed him onto his right side, where he lay as if cuddling up to Isak's still form. His left arm and shoulder didn't follow, remaining tethered to his body only by a narrow band of muscle and fascia. She took his nearly severed limb and attempted to lay it back in position over the enormous hole in the side of his body, but it didn't want to stay and kept sliding down. As she kept trying to push it back into place, she began making a panic-stricken, whining sound deep in the back of her throat, and her tears blurred her vision.

He needs blood. Lots of it.

She abandoned her effort to position his arm and took his head carefully into her hands. “Oskar, can you hear me? Oskar, talk!”

His eyes rolled sluggishly in their orbits, searching for her face. They weren’t tracking very well, and she realized with rising fear that his enormous pupils seemed to be looking for her somewhere at the ceiling. She punched the tip of her right index finger sharply into her left wrist at its juncture with her hand and dragged it in a straight line three to four centimeters upwards, barely aware of the pain as the slit widened and the dark redness flowing thickly out. She brought the wound up and jammed it squarely into his half-open mouth.

“Drink! Dammit, Oskar, *drink!*”

His lips moved feebly as it ran into his mouth and overflowed onto his cheek, then began to run back in a line toward his ear. She thought she saw his tongue moving inside his mouth, and then she nearly succumbed to a wave of dizziness. When her vision re-established itself, she saw that Oskar’s eyes were closed. The movement of his lips slowed, growing weaker, and finally stopped. His mouth hung half open and then his lips slid away in a smear of blood from the wound and down onto the pad of fat at the bottom of her palm.

“*No! Oskar!*” She grabbed his head from behind, fought off another wave of vertigo, and repositioned it back onto her wrist, forcing his mouth wide so that she could get as much of her blood into him as possible. But he was now entirely passive, not helping at all, and so most of it splattered uselessly onto Isak’s forehead and hair. Yet still, for many minutes she continued to try.

In the distance she heard sirens, blaring their high-low pattern. Getting louder. Her panic intensified.

A groan came from behind the seat—Per. He should be dead—but he wasn’t.

(didn’t twist his goddamn neck and soon this guy’ll get up too, dammit)

With a cry of fury and frustration she let go of Oskar and looked wildly around the floor; saw the sword lying one row back where Lud had dropped it.

(gotta get Oskar outta here back to the milk truck where it’s safe, safe yes that’s where we gotta go Oh please Oskar don’t die Please)

She lunged up and grabbed the sword; almost stumbled and fell. Turned and started to step over Isak and Oskar to get to Per. And as she did, she saw Isak’s eyes open.

Per’s head began to rise up behind the seat back. Then a pale hand with a skull tattooed on it followed, grasping the top of the seat. The sirens continued, cutting through the fog.

Eli stepped squarely onto Isak's stomach, stumbled past him, and turned to meet Per's vacant stare just as he was standing up. She swung the sword around in a flat arc.

The blade didn't quite make it all the way through his neck, but almost. Per's head toppled off, back and sideways, and dangled briefly by a thin piece of skin and fascia over his shoulder blades; then there was a soft, moist tearing sound as it gave way, followed by a heavy thud. The headless body wobbled briefly, then collapsed back into the footwell from where it'd come. Eli, herself swaying, watched the body for movement, uncertain of whether to use the sword again.

Suddenly a hand swiped at her ankle--Isak was starting to sit up. His long, brown hair hung in wild strands about his thin, pale face, and his eyes glared at her under heavy brows stained dark with her own blood. She leapt sideways with a little ungainly hop and shrieked with fear. Then she brought the sword around and plunged it squarely into his chest.

Isak fell backwards on top of Oskar. His body arched violently, his back rising completely off the floor, and his hands scrabbled to the blade jutting out from his chest, fluttering and fumbling uselessly around it. He grunted and then began to moan continuously as he thrashed back and forth--eyes bulging, mouth gaping wide in pain and surprise, his feet thumping a drumbeat of denial on the floor. Then, just as abruptly, he went completely limp and settled back next to Oskar with a sigh.

"*Oskar!*" Eli uttered a terrified sob and came to him once again. She grabbed the front of Isak's jean jacket and after a brief struggle, managed to pull it off his sagging torso. Then she wrapped Oskar's upper body up into it and with groggy, jerky movements, half-carried, half-dragged him toward the rear of the trolley.

As she reached the rear doors she saw them: police cars coming up the road behind the warehouses only a few hundred meters away, their blue lights blurred flashes through the fog, the wailing of their sirens so loud now that they hurt her ears. She thrust her fingers through the gap between the rear doors and pulled them apart with all her strength. They came open with a screech, but the effort this time really did make her faint, and she fell backwards onto the step on her bottom. She rested for a few seconds until her consciousness swam back, then regained her feet and struggled to haul Oskar down and out of the trolley.

Once she was out and onto the wet, rocky grass, she turned and started to drag him toward the stand of trees and the milk truck that she knew lay beyond. But she stopped short when she saw that police cars were already in that direction.

She spun and looked back across the trainyard toward Limhamnsvägen, where she and Oskar had gotten off the bus a few nights ago. More blue flashing lights, moving rapidly behind the big bushes they'd crossed through.

She sensed dark shapes, running toward her through the fog. Time to fly. She scrambled to get a better hold on Oskar, to hoist him up into her arms. His head bounced and flopped as she jostled his body into position.

His voice was weak, but she heard it all the same. “Eli. Don’t.”

She stopped and looked at his face, the tears now streaming freely down hers. They were tears of confusion and fear, but when she heard his voice, they became tears of relief. His eyes were open a little.

“Oskar! You’re alive! But we need to—”

He managed a weak, ironic smile through his bloodstained lips. “No. It’s over. They’ll kill you if you try.”

She hesitated, uncertain. All of her instincts told her to flee; to launch her exhausted, trembling body into the sky. But in the end, the uncertainty of whether she even could, together with the peaceful resignation in his eyes, won out. With a little cry of defeat, she collapsed down onto the ground, letting him slip in the process and go down harder than she wanted.

His eyes were closed again; his face, still pasty white. He seemed to be trying to raise his good arm, but it was under the jacket and he couldn’t. Then his eyes opened a little, and he looked at her. “What time is it?”

She frowned in confusion at this unexpected question, and when she realized he was trying to look at his watch, she pulled his forearm out from underneath the jacket.

“Five to one.”

A heavy-set police officer with gray hair emerged from the darkness. He was alone and carried only a flashlight. He stopped about three meters from them and shined his light into their faces, making Eli wince.

“I’m Detective Magnusson.”

She put her hand up to block the light and stared at him, half-blinded, trying to take in his features. He looked like someone’s grandfather.

He was pretty much out of breath from having run across the trainyard, and it was only with difficulty that he kept himself from putting his hands on his knees and panting like a winded dog. He and Martin had arrived at the central police station only a half hour before the report had come in that his suspects had attacked some people in Limhamn. Together with other units of the Malmö Police that had been on standby for the anticipated events at 2, they’d been vectored to the location with directions from the witness who’d escaped.

She was somehow smaller than he'd imagined, kneeling on the hardscabble ground by the tracks with the boy in her arms—unquestionably Oskar Eriksson, who appeared unconscious. Except for the dark stains that coated her chin and lower jaw, there was nothing about her that appeared threatening. She seemed like a very sad little kid who'd just been scolded for doing something bad. She looked . . . defeated. He fought hard to contain a rising sense of pity.

"Is there anyone in there who needs medical attention?"

She looked down and shook her head. "No." Then she thought for a moment, and looked back up. "But Oskar's hurt bad and he needs help. And our pet owl's in there. His wing is broken."

He took a step closer. Behind him were other shapes; more police officers. He looked angrily over his shoulder. "Stay *back*. Tell your men to stay *back*, dammit."

He looked back at her. "What's wrong with Oskar?"

"He got cut really bad. His arm's almost off, and he lost alot of blood."

"Well, we've—what's your name?"

She didn't look up. "Eli. I'm Eli."

"Well, Eli, we have some people here who can help Oskar, but we can't do anything when we're afraid you're going to kill us if we get too close. You know what I mean?"

She nodded silently. "Yes . . . I do."

"So if I come up there and take a look at Oskar, you're not going to attack me. Is that right?"

She shook her head forlornly. "I won't—I promise."

"All right—'cause I don't want anyone else to get hurt—especially me. Let me see him, then." He pointed his flashlight down and walked hesitantly to them.

She was holding Oskar's upper body in her arms, his head on the crook of her elbow. When he was at their side, he crouched down next to them and shined his light on Oskar's face. He didn't react.

"Lay him down, Eli, just for a second, okay?"

"He was talking a minute ago. He told me not to fly."

His eyes flicked briefly up at her face before returning to Oskar. “Mmm. Good advice, I think. Let me see him, now.” Carefully he pulled the jacket back from Oskar’s chest; sucked air in harshly through his teeth at what he saw. He put his fingers under Oskar’s jaw and gently pressed; felt nothing. Then he felt his right wrist.

“He’s got no pulse.”

“Our hearts don’t beat much, anyway—we don’t work like normal. Can you check again?”

He grunted; then put his fingers back on the jugular. Frowned. “Yeah, it’s there—a little.” He gently slapped Oskar’s cheek. “Oskar? Can you hear me? Speak, buddy.”

“He needs blood—but he can’t have the kind in those bags. I tried to give him mine, but he passed out.” She showed him her wrist with its thin, white scar—as if he would understand. “I need to try again.”

He frowned again, deeper this time, as he grasped the significance of the scar. Then he looked directly at her face, taking in her dark eyes and blood-smeared face, and tried to keep his voice level. “Eli, there’s some people here who can try to help Oskar, if you’re willing. He’ll need to go to the hospital. What do you say?”

“As long as I’m with him. I won’t leave him, ever.”

“Mmm. Well, we’ll try to accommodate you—and it sounds like you’ll need to be with him at least until he’s been stabilized. Want to ride in the ambulance?”

She didn’t answer at first; just stared long and hard at him. Then she pulled Oskar back to herself. “Try’ isn’t good enough. I won’t *ever* be separated from him, do you understand? Because he’s the only thing in this world that I really love.”

“Okay.” Her tone surprised him. He paused, hoping he could carry out what he was about to promise. “I give you my word, Eli. You can stay with him as long as you want.”

“And what’s going to happen after the hospital?”

“I wish I could tell you that—but the truth is, I don’t know. But I do know one thing: I’ll do everything I can to make sure you two are treated fairly. Okay?”

He saw the hesitation and uncertainty in her face and wondered which way she’d break. Had he said enough?

“Okay.”

They stood together over Oskar. He turned and looked at the men standing a short distance away. “Get that ambulance up here right now.”

“Can I get our owl?”

He looked at her. Could she be trusted not to run? Then he remembered what she'd said about Oskar and realized how foolish his thought was. “Sure. But hurry.”

As they climbed into the back of the ambulance together it came to him for the first time that she was naked. They sat down on the jump seats facing each other, Oskar lying between them on a stretcher.

“You want a blanket?”

She put Pudge down on the seat beside her and watched the paramedics anxiously as they started an IV in Oskar's good arm. “No. I don't need one.”

“Okay.” He paused; then said, “I thought we were gonna meet on the crane.”

“Things didn't work out the way we wanted. But they almost never do.”

“Mmm. Well maybe now things will change.”

Her voice was very soft; he almost didn't hear it. “I hope.”

“Me too.”

Epilogue

Saturday, June 2, 1984 - 10:15 p.m. Uppsala

The last leg of their journey from Stockholm behind them, Kurt and Flora turned right off Enköpingsvägen onto the freshly paved access road. The moon was new and could not be seen, but the stars in the night sky were amazingly brilliant out here in the country, seven kilometers southwest of Uppsala.

They rolled up to a gatehouse in their Peugeot. Kurt flashed his badge, and they were waved through. Flora stared at the high steel fence topped with concertina wire as it slipped behind them.

“Looks like a prison.”

“Mmm hmm. Well, it's probably for their own protection. There's a lot of people out there who'd like to have what they have, you know.”

“I suppose.”

The road ran a few hundred meters through an open area that ran away on either side of them parallel to the fence, and then they were surrounded by pines. The posted speed

limit was quite low, and so they found themselves creeping along through the forest for what seemed like a long time. Then the trees ended, and they could see the road's terminus in a brightly lit, nearly empty parking lot at the top of a modest rise, half a kilometer ahead. The parking lot fronted a low, concrete building with slot-like windows that glowed in the night.

Flora shook her head slightly. "Goodness—is that the best they could do? It looks sort of like a glorified bomb shelter or something."

Kurt nodded. "Yeah . . . it does look pretty cold. I've been told that the area where they live is mostly underground—their choice. You know, they're deathly afraid of sunlight. Most of the top area is administrative and medical."

She sighed. "I know. But you'd think they could've put more effort into making it look like a home. I mean, after all, they are *children*."

"I agree—but I think the overriding concern was security. You know just as well as I how dangerous they are, Flora. Unsupervised contact with them is always risky, even when they're trying to be on their best behavior."

"I suppose. But still, all that concrete—it's so dreary . . . well, why should I be surprised?"

After passing through a second checkpoint, Kurt parked immediately in front of a broad flight of stairs that led up to an entranceway tucked under a broad awning with a set of double doors. As they ascended the steps, Flora noticed that someone had planted flowers alongside the stairs.

"Those're pretty."

Kurt glanced at the small, white blooms, but didn't stop. "What are they?"

"Moonflowers. They open at night." She felt a small glimmer of hope, and squeezed Kurt's hand. Maybe things weren't so bad after all.

Once they were cleared through the security entrance—both of them were carefully searched—they were directed to a waiting room. They had only sat down for a few minutes when there was a knock on the door, and then they stood up once again as a man and a woman came in. The woman spoke first.

"Hello—I'm Helena Brandin. I'll be your nurse tonight."

"And I'm Jon Isaksen. I'm the security guy."

"Hi. I'm Kurt Magnusson, and this is my wife, Flora."

"Nice to meet both of you."

Helena brought a clipboard up in front of her. “So Mr. and Mrs. Magnusson, you’re here to make a donation, and you’re also cleared for a tour, is that right?”

“That’s right.”

Jon spoke. “Well, we certainly know who you are, Mr. Magnusson. And because we are trying to keep things around here as relaxed and informal as possible, the director has told me that my presence with the two of you during your visit is optional. So, would you like me to stay? Some folks feel more comfortable having me with them—but it’s up to you.”

“I don’t think it will be necessary; do you, Flora?”

“No, Kurt. If you’re comfortable.”

“Yup--I am.”

“Okay, then.” Jon glanced at his watch. “Are you planning to visit first, and then do the donation at the end?”

“I think that would make sense.”

“All right. It’s about 10:30 now, so what do you say, Helena? Have them come back up in about an hour?”

“Will that give you two enough time?”

“I think so. And if we run over, can we”

She smiled. “Just tell one of them to call me. They know my extension.”

“Okay. Sounds good.”

“Let me take you to the donation room to meet them. Then you can come back up there when you’re done.”

They left the visitor’s room. Jon took a left and disappeared, and Kurt and Flora followed Helena to the right, back toward the main entrance. There they came to a heavy steel door that they had passed on the way in. Helena unlocked it and they stepped through into a long, central hallway that Kurt guessed probably ran the length of the building. Halfway down, they came to a door on the right that was simply marked “Donation Room.” Helena produced another key and they stepped inside.

“You’re welcome to wait on the loungers or the chairs. It really doesn’t matter.” In the center of the small room, facing each other, were two recliners made of chrome and black padded vinyl. Next to each recliner was a stainless steel medical cart and a metal chair that

Kurt had seen in any number of medical offices over the years. Along one wall was a cabinet with medical supplies, and along the other were some moveable, fabric-covered panels. The floor was carpeted in a soft green, and the walls were paneled in beechwood which, together with the recessed lighting near the ceilings, gave the room a warm, relaxed atmosphere despite its stark furnishings. On the far wall was an elevator door.

Kurt and Flora both opted to sit in the office chairs while Helena went to a wall phone by the medical supply cabinet. It was only after he sat down that Kurt noticed the surveillance camera mounted by the ceiling in one corner.

As Helena spoke into the phone, Kurt looked at Flora and tried to gauge her mood. She had never met them face to face before; had only seen them at a distance during the hearings.

“Are you all right? There’s still time to change your mind, if you want. I’m sure they won’t be offended.”

“I’m fine. I’ve been looking forward to this all week. Well, longer, in fact—ever since you got the word that they wanted to see you.”

He smiled. “Okay . . . just wanted to be sure. I’ve read in the papers that some people who’ve come out to donate have had a hard time adjusting to them.”

“No, I . . . I want to meet them. Especially Eli.”

Kurt nodded. He knew why.

Helena hung up the phone and rejoined them. “Okay, they’re on their way up. Do you want me to stay for when they arrive, or”

“You don’t have to. They know me pretty well, and I’ll introduce them to Flora.”

“All right. I’ll see you in about an hour, then.”

“Thanks.”

She said ‘you’re welcome’ and then excused herself. Kurt barely noticed the sound of her keys in the lock, because all of his attention was focused on the elevator doors. It didn’t take long for the glowing number to change from two to one. Then there was a ding.

They drifted like ghosts into the room; first Oskar, then Eli. Both of them had big smiles on their faces and wore ordinary kid’s clothes; Oskar was in jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, Eli in a pink turtleneck and close-fitting, black sweat pants. Their feet were bare, and both of them wore a silver bracelet around one ankle.

They said nothing at first, merely circled around Kurt and Flora as they stood in the center of the room, slowly turning to keep them in view. Flora stared at them intently, her eyes huge. Kurt squeezed her hand and got a faint squeeze back.

They had almost finished one full rotation when Kurt spoke. “Aren’t you two even going to say hello?”

Their grins grew even wider and they chimed “hello” in unison. Then they stopped flying and landed. “Sorry—we were just playing.”

“That’s okay, Oskar.” Kurt smiled, a little uncomfortable. “Oskar, Eli—I’d like you to meet my wife, Flora.”

“Hello.”

“Hi.” They shook her hand. Flora was amazed at how ordinary they looked. They were beautiful, of course—she already knew that—but other than that, they looked like any children one might see on a school playground, or with their mother at the grocery store.

“Oskar, it’s good to see that you’re still in one piece. You had Eli really worried there for awhile, you know.” He offered them a warm smile.

Oskar laughed. “Yeah, I know I did. She was a big help, and so was that surgeon who stitched me back together. I guess he was just a little surprised when he got to take the stitches out before I’d even left the operating room.”

Eli beamed. “He came to visit us the other day. Wanted to check out Oskar’s shoulder and make sure it was okay.”

“And is it?”

“Uh huh.”

“Can I see?”

“Sure.” Oskar quickly pulled off his shirt. He turned so that his left shoulder was toward Kurt and Flora, and then began to move his arm around. “See? Good as new.”

Kurt leaned forward and traced his finger in a line down from the top of his shoulder, parallel to his breastbone, and then down past his nipple, studying the skin carefully over the tops of his glasses. “Huh. Not even a scar.”

Oskar grinned. “That took a couple of days to go away.”

“I’m sure the doctors are very interested in your ability to heal so quickly,” Flora remarked.

Eli looked at her. “Yes, they are. But I don’t think they’ve figured it out yet.”

Kurt straightened. “So why did you two invite us out here? We were talking about that on the way up, and we’re still not sure what you had in mind.”

Eli stepped closer. “To thank you.”

“Thank me? For what?”

Oskar answered. “Well—for helping us, really.”

“Yeah. While everything was going on—I mean, before that night at the trolley, we were really scared and mad at you. You know, for chasing us. But now, everything’s changed; things are better. And I was telling Oskar a few weeks ago that it turned out to be good that you *did* chase us, and finally caught up with us. ‘Cause otherwise, we might still be living the way we were. And so we both thought it would be nice to have you come visit.”

Kurt chuckled. “Well in that case, I’m sorry I didn’t catch up with you sooner. But yours wasn’t an easy case, by any means. Perhaps if I’d done a better job, fewer people would’ve been hurt. Or maybe, if you’d had the courage to ask for help a little earlier.”

Eli nodded solemnly. “Yeah, we know. And like we explained to the judges, we’re sorry about what we did.”

“Eli, once people realized who you really were and what you’d been through, I think they began to understand why you did the things you did. It’s just hard for ordinary folks to grasp that you’re really still 12 years old. And when you finally explained everything, you upset an awful lot of people who attended those proceedings—including me.

“But you know what? If I were you, I’d really be thanking *Oskar*, here. Because he’s the one who was such a good friend to you, and gave you good advice about trying to reach out for a better life. Because sometimes I’ve wondered how things might’ve turned out if you hadn’t had him. I think maybe not as good.”

Oskar spoke. “We fought a lot over that. But then Maria came along, and she showed us what might be possible. She gave us hope. And when she died, that was really the worst part about all of this. The lowest point for us.”

Kurt nodded. “Your first voluntary blood donor who wasn’t a total creep. And luckily for you, the first of many, as it turned out. And after tonight, you can add us to your growing list of supporters.”

Eli smiled and looked at both of them. “Are you really going to? We didn’t know!”

Flora spoke. “Yes we are. Kurt mentioned to me last week that you had a birthday coming up, and so we talked it over, and we thought it would be nice to give you a birthday present. We’re just sorry that it’s a little late.”

“That’s okay,” Oskar replied. “We need it all the time.”

Kurt smiled. “It looks like you’re finally getting what you need. You’re both the picture of health.”

The children nodded. “We’re not hungry any more. That’s the best part of being here.”

“Well. Are you going to show us your home?”

They took the elevator downstairs and entered a hallway leading to a suite of rooms. They moved slowly down the hall, peeking into each room.

“This is our bedroom,” Eli explained at the first door. “Well actually, there are two bedrooms, but we don’t use the other one.”

Flora saw how neatly the bed was made and smiled. “Do you make your bed every morning? Or, I mean, every evening?”

“Actually, we almost never sleep in the bed,” Oskar replied.

“Yeah—we like to sleep underneath it.”

“We feel safer there.”

“And they can’t watch us with the camera!” Eli whispered in a teasing voice as she pointed.

Kurt grunted. “I can see how you’d come to value your privacy. Why’d they need to stick one of those in *here*, for God’s sake? Ridiculous.”

“They’re all over. But after awhile, we sorta forget about them. Then sometimes for fun, we call the guard upstairs to make sure he hasn’t fallen asleep watching us. And then we’ll play a game of hide-and-seek with him. You know, through the intercom.” She pointed at a speaker grille in the ceiling.

Flora and Kurt chuckled. Then they went to the next door on the opposite side of the hall.

“Huh. They gave you a pool? Nice.”

“Yeah. It’s fun to swim in here. It’s not super big, but it’s big enough for us, right, Eli?”

“It’s just right.”

“What’s going on with the walls?”

“They said we could paint them. So it’s going to be like a coral reef thing, with lots of fish and stuff once it’s done.”

Flora nodded. “*Very nice.* I’m glad that they’re letting you make this place your home.”

“Uh huh. But this really isn’t the best part. Come on.”

They were shown the unused bedroom, connected to the other by a Jack and Jill bathroom. Then they came to a large playroom, where Kurt saw something that immediately caught his eye. “Is that your egg?”

Eli smiled. “Yes. Want to see it?”

“I sure do. I’ve been hearing a lot about it.”

The egg was resting in the middle of the set of shelves the lined one wall of the room, next to the Rubik’s Cube. Eli took it down carefully, and handed it to Kurt, who studied it closely before passing it gingerly to Flora.

“Incredible. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Want to see how it works?”

Flora looked up anxiously. “Oh, I don’t—the pieces look so tiny.”

“It’s okay. Bring it to the table.”

They brought it over and Eli pushed aside a watercolor she was working on. “Now cup it in your hands and rock it back and forth.” Kurt watched, fascinated, as the egg seemed to disintegrate in his wife’s hands. She brushed them together carefully over the pile, making sure all the pieces were there.

“Wow—they sure are tiny.”

Oskar spoke. “We just finished putting it back together. Professor Carlsson was here in April and he wanted to see it come apart, too.”

Kurt raised an eyebrow. “Would that be Arvid Carlsson?”

“Uh huh.”

“What did he think?”

“He said whoever made the egg must’ve been completely crazy.” Everyone laughed.

“That must have been an interesting conversation.” Kurt surveyed the toys, games, and hobby projects around the room. “Well, it certainly seems like you have a lot to keep you occupied.”

Oskar put one of the tiny pieces down on the table. “Actually, we haven’t been spending as much time in here, lately.”

Flora spoke. “We read that you were doing some TV spots for the Red Cross. Is it because of that?”

“Yup.”

Kurt laughed softly. “There’s marketing genius for you.”

“They’re supposed to start airing around mid-July. So maybe you’ll see us on TV.”

“Let’s hope it’ll be successful. I can’t imagine better spokesmen for them than you two.” He glanced at Flora. “You know, we really haven’t been very generous ourselves.”

“Let’s change that, dear.”

They proceeded down the hall to the next room—a study. They had matching desks, and the walls were lined with bookshelves.

“Oskar, I read a piece last fall in the *Dagbladet* that you had decided to take up Mandarin Chinese. Is that right?”

“Yeah.”

“How’s it going?”

“Well, it started out okay, but then I went to sleep, pretty much from mid-February to the end of March. And when I woke up, I basically had to start over.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. Did you forget much else?”

“Yeah--a few things.” Kurt sensed a note of sadness, and saw Eli glance at Oskar. He could see the unhappiness on her face, so he decided to let it go.

“How about you, Eli?” Flora looked at her. “Have you been studying anything?”

“We have tutors Monday through Friday, and homework just like regular kids. I’m really enjoying History right now, actually. I have a great teacher, Mrs. Thorsen, from the university. She’s really nice. And I’m telling her about what I know, too.”

“I’m hoping that at some point, someone will publish your experiences, Eli. I would very much like to read about your story.”

“Mrs. Thorsen and I are working on that, actually.”

“Oh, good! When can we expect it?”

“Not sure. We’re kind of shooting for early next year.”

“Great.”

Oskar spoke. “Do you want to see the back yard now?”

“Sure.”

They left the study and came to a door at the end of the hallway. It opened into a wide, back veranda that was separated from the outside by floor to ceiling windows with screens. Flora, seeing that this was the last room of their home, realized for the first time that there was no kitchen. She smiled to herself; it seemed so strange, but . . . there wasn’t any need, was there?

Kurt surveyed the space. “Well, this is certainly lovely. Can we move in with you when we retire?”

Eli laughed. “Sure. But you’ll have to talk to Mr. Petersson about that.” Then, with a little shyness, she took his hand. “Come’re and see Pudge.”

She led them to a large cage at the far end of the room. Eli opened the wire door, coaxed Pudge onto her finger, and brought him out. He looked noticeably lopsided, and flapped his left wing.

“It’s okay, Pudge. They’re friends.”

Flora gasped and marveled at him. “He’s a *pygmy owl*. He’s so *tiny*.”

“Uh huh. He’s our only pet.”

Kurt stretched out a finger to touch the right side of his body, but then withdrew it quickly when Pudge hissed. “Feisty little fella.” He laughed a little. “I guess that doesn’t surprise me. So they couldn’t save his wing, huh?”

“No . . . it was infected, and they had to cut it off. But he’s okay. He can walk real good.”

“I guess he’s lucky that you found him.”

“Oskar saved him from becoming a toy for some cat.”

“I think a cat might have second thoughts about *him*.”

Flora walked slowly around the room, looking at the flowers. “I love your hanging baskets. They make it smell so good in here. Is that a lipstick plant?”

“Not sure. Is that what that Mrs. Caris called it, Oskar?”

“Yeah. And the one next to it is Swedish Ivy.”

Flora stepped closer to a basket at the end and smelled. “Mmm. Your hoyo smells nice. But keep the ivy out of the sun if you can. I had some, and it did better indoors.”

Eli put Pudge up on her shoulder. “Turn on the garden lights, will you, Oskar?” There was a pause, and then the darkness beyond the windows was broken by spots of soft blue.

“Oh my goodness.” Flora’s attention was immediately drawn to the lights.

“That’s just some kind of beautiful,” Kurt added.

Oskar slid the door open with a happy grin. “Come see it.”

They followed him out into the garden.

“Is this more of Mrs. Caris’s handiwork?”

“Mmm hmm. She was one of our first donors—before they had even finished the construction. And when she heard that we were going to have a garden, she offered to plan it and lay it out for free.”

Kurt grunted. “Tell her to come see us when she has time. We could use some help—especially like *this*.”

Flora shot him a look. “I beg your pardon.”

“Sorry, Flora. But you have to admit, it—”

“I know. It puts ours to shame.”

They stepped out into a night of quietly singing crickets, onto a winding pathway made of wooden ovals that Kurt realized were made from slices of the same tree trunk—a very big tree, from the size of them. The path was marked by glowing blue lights made from glass molded into the shape of natural flowers. Deep flower beds lay on either side that were backed by low stone walls, whose serpentine curves matched the path’s. Behind the walls were a variety of shrubs and trees; conifers, mostly—blue spruce, and green and golden junipers, with some deciduous trees as well; birches, and some smaller ones that Flora

recognized as coral bark and japanese maples. Some of the trees were saplings, and others were larger, and had obviously been present before and adapted to the garden. The largest of these were also lit with blue lights. There were benches on either side of the path, and as they slowly ascended a gentle rise, they passed through three trellises covered with winter jasmine and Clematis.

Kurt paused. “Mmm . . . smells like vanilla. What is that?”

Eli smiled and pointed into the flower bed at some clusters of white flowers about 30 centimeters high. “Midnight candy. They open up at night.”

“We need to get some of that. Where’d she find it?”

Oskar spoke. “Mrs. Caris didn’t bring those . . . they’re from Vancouver. Mr. Christensen’s wife, Ms. McCullough, and her daughter, Lauren, had them sent here from their own garden.”

Kurt’s voice grew soft. “Oh. So you met with them after the hearings?”

Eli spoke. “Yeah, we did. We talked for a long time, especially with Lauren.”

“How did that go?”

“They turned out to be very nice. They said they were really angry for a long time, but when they heard all of the details, their feelings began to change. It was amazing, really. I can’t say we’re like, friends or anything, but at least we came to some kind of . . .”

“Reconciliation.”

Eli brightened. “Exactly.”

“That’s good.”

They approached the end of the path and came to another stone wall, this one twice as high as the others, with a doorway cut through it. As Kurt passed through, he heard the sound of running water.

Once they were through, Flora stopped and her hand went to her chest. “Oh, how lovely.”

“This is where we hang out most of the time when we’re out here,” Oskar remarked.

The stone wall was at the crest of the rise, and the ground on the opposite side sloped down to a pond, surrounded by large, flat rocks and overhanging trees. A fountain rose up in the middle, illuminated by a green light in its center. Water lilies rocked gently along the edges, and hidden along the banks, frogs sang to one another.

The spell was broken when Pudge hooted.

“I think he likes it out here,” Kurt mused.

Eli spoke. “We try to bring him outside every day. He gets bored in his cage.”

The path wandered down to the water’s edge, and they went around one side. Beyond the pool lay the pine forest that had been here when the complex was built.

“How far are you allowed to go?”

“It keeps going about two kilometers, and then there’s a fence,” Oskar replied.

“Huh. But you can fly, right? So are you just on the honor system, or what?”

“We’ve been told that our anklets have transmitters in them. We can’t take them off, so they can track us wherever we are. And right now, we’re under strict orders not to go beyond the fenceline without someone being with us.”

“But other than that, you have the whole forest area to yourselves?”

“Pretty much.”

Kurt peered into the darkness down the dirt path that led out into the pines. “What’s that shiny thing out there? I can’t really see it too well.”

Eli grinned. “It’s the milk truck. The guy who owned it didn’t want it on his lot any more— apparently it was attracting too much attention. So he called out here and asked if we wanted it. They brought it out a few weeks ago.”

“And we’ve slept in it already,” Oskar added. “Camped out, I guess you could say.”

Kurt laughed. “The good old days.”

†

He watched, fascinated, as Flora fed Oskar through the IV line in her arm. Just like Kurt, she was lying on the lounger, her arm laid out on the tray that folded out from the side. They had opted not to use the screens, and she kept looking at him and then at Oskar with a nervous smile, as if to say, I can’t believe I’m actually doing this.

Kurt felt the pain and glanced down at his own arm as Helena released the tourniquet.

“You’ve got nice veins, Mr. Magnusson,” she said. “No problems finding one.”

He grunted an acknowledgement as he watched the dark red line run forth from the crook of his elbow and fill the plastic tubing. Then he looked over at Eli, sitting in the chair by his side, and they exchanged smiles. Helena handed her the other end with its special fitting. She brought it to her mouth.

“Thank you, Mr. Magnusson.”

“Call me Kurt, Eli. And let’s do this again sometime soon, okay?”

“Okay.”

He watched with rapt attention as the blood reached the end and disappeared between her lips, and was grateful when she closed her eyes.

It was easier that way.