fusce

A DEBT TO THE DEVIL

"With these two books, L. Hagensen has become a clear favorite for me in a class with Stephen King, Katrine Engberg and Arne Dahl."

ULLA WEISHAPT, BOGRUMMET.DK

L. HAGENSEN

A DEBT TO THE DEVIL

L. Hagensen

FUSCE

I

What was wrong with Ylva?

At first I thought she had simply hit the wall. Succumbed to burnout. Taken a time-out. After everything we had been through, anyone could fall apart. But as if the gods weren't done with her yet, as if it wasn't enough with all the horrible things that had happened in Lövaren, where we were almost killed, her husband Conny died.

When I had recovered enough to return to my work as head librarian at Valludden's public library, Ylva was still at home, crying in her lonely bed. I was worried, I can't deny that, but Ylva got back on her feet. She returned to the library part-time and day after day passed without her falling into the darkness. But then, one day, everything fell apart and Ylva ended up in the psychiatric ward of the hospital complex that loomed over Valludden like a large, red factory chimney.

Was it the madness in Lövaren, the grief or something else? The more I thought about it, the more I wondered if it didn't have something to do with the little old codger. He had turned up in the library on a Thursday morning some time ago, bowed with his flat cap in his hand and asked, stuttering, if anyone could help him. As if he were Ylva's runaway puppy who had finally come back, she immediately befriended him and talked to him for several hours.

And I was relieved. Relieved! I thought that now she had some-

thing to do that would keep her up here in the light. The old codger kept coming back; regular as clockwork, he appeared every Thursday morning. Ylva and he would sit close together and she would show him how to search on the computer, they would write things in a pad and she would order books for him, which he took home in his brown briefcase.

Until one day he stopped coming.

Ylva had fallen ill the night before, but the old codger couldn't have known that.

Or could he?

Were his absence and Ylva's condition somehow connected?

"How can it be that you don't know his name?" I said to my colleague Carmen, who was getting fed up with my questions.

"Ylva took care of him. She called him her Legolas, that's all I remember."

What, was he an elf?

"Isn't it time we hired a temp?" said Solveig with the doo. "I can't work that much overtime anymore. Soon it's Christmas."

Soon it was Christmas and Ylva was lying in a hospital room staring at the ceiling, unable or unwilling to speak. I went to Conny's grave with flowers and greeted him from Ylva, I visited her mother and helped her with the shopping and I lied to my colleagues in the library and said that Ylva had broken her leg.

Ylva hadn't broken her leg. Ylva had broken her brain.

2

"How is Ylva?" Solveig with the doo asked. Her doo was indeed very straight today, cutting like a knife through the hair just above one ear.

"Uh, you know how Ylva is," I lied, pushing the book cart to the shelves with the crime novels. "She's driving the whole ward crazy."

Solveig with the doo carefully put the books in alphabetical order without answering.

"She'll probably be here soon," I continued, biting my lip. Ylva would definitely not be here soon. She was barely responsive and rambled on about incomprehensible things every time I visited. My life, I realized, consisted of rides in the hospital elevator, a bit of work in between and evening walks to the cemetery.

Solveig with the doo closed her eyes dramatically and sighed. I let my gaze wander over the bright and cheerful walls with thousands of book spines gazing reassuringly at me, to the window and the light seeping from some tattered clouds.

"I don't believe you, Raili," she said. "She can walk on crutches, can't she? When my friend broke her leg, she was able to go back to work after two weeks. She's a teacher, you know. Looking after seven-year-olds, mind you. Then it shouldn't be that hard to work in a library. It's not like Ylva worked herself to death *before* she broke her leg."

Bitch, I thought, turning my gaze to Solveig with the doo

with her mousy brown eyes and chapped lips. Friend? Would *you* have a friend? You don't know what it means to have a friend.

"It's a complicated fracture," I said, directing my steps toward my office. "If you can do without me now, Solveig, I've other things to do." Solveig with the doo remained standing, I could feel her pinched mouth and eyes on my back until I slammed the office door behind me.

I pressed the enter key so hard the keyboard yelped, and I watched as the computer screen flickered, displaying all the stats I should have finished by now. I couldn't concentrate. With my eyes closed, I heard the doctor's voice buzzing around in my head:

… called us herself when she couldn't walk, crawled around on the floor when the paramedics came, said it was moving like waves, a psychotic state we couldn't …

Ylva had gone to the hospital on a Wednesday night three weeks ago, and the old codger hadn't shown up the next morning. Of course it was bloody connected.

***

A machine hummed and some small lights flashed. When I couldn't detect a cable or tube connected to Ylva in the bed under the machine, I relaxed and ignored the annoying noise.

"Um…," came from the bed.

"Are you thirsty?" I said, fingering the glass of water on the bedside table. The straw was thin and seemed to float above the surface of the water.

"Let go …," Ylva mumbled.

"Do you want some water?"

"… of me …."

The moon had risen and turned the protruding hospital complexes into sharp-edged, black blocks. It was cold outside, probably fourteen degrees, and I wondered vaguely whether we

would have a white Christmas this year or whether the sleet would come just in time for the third Advent.

"What's the old codger's name, Ylva?" I whispered in her ear. "What did you talk about all those hours you were together?"

Ylva relaxed in bed, her breathing became calm and the rapid fluttering under her eyelids stopped.

"He hasn't been in the library since you got sick," I whispered. "What's this all about, Ylva?"

Loud voices and dramatic music permeated the room, but faded away immediately when someone turned down the TV in the common room. Ylva did not move.

"Legolas," I whispered and then something happened. Ylva's lips parted as she tried to formulate words and a strained expression crossed her face.

"What are you saying?" I whispered.

"Lasse ...."

"Lasse?"

"Search ... ans." The last word came out as a scream, and then it was as if someone had pulled the plug. Ylva's body went limp and her head fell to the side. I watched her chest for a few minutes and only left the room when I was absolutely sure she was still breathing.

***

"Carmen, did you hear Ylva mention a Lasse?" I asked the next morning over ten o'clock coffee. The outside wall shook as a truck drove past and the slush pelted the street.

"Lasse?" said Solveig with the doo. "That was quick, I must say. If only I could understand why some people are in such a hurry."

"Um," said Carmen, looking at Solveig with the doo. "No, I don't think so. Do you think that ...."

"I do *not* think Ylva has met anyone new," I said, but Carmen shook her head.

"No, I mean, do you think that's the old man's name? The one you asked me about?"

"I don't know," I said. "But when I asked her yesterday...." I stopped suddenly and cursed inwardly. The others thought that Ylva had broken her leg, not that she was lying like a dazed vegetable in the hospital's psychiatric ward.

"Yes?" Carmen said.

"Well," I lied, "she's on such strong painkillers that it's hard to talk to her at the moment. When I asked her about the old codger, she said Lasse."

"Well, that's his name then, isn't it?" said Solveig with the doo and stood up. "Break's over, on your feet."

Could Solveig with the doo be right? Was his name Lasse? Or rather, Lars, as Lasse is the nickname for Lars.

"Why do you want to know his name?" Carmen asked as we entered the library.

"He needed help with something and Ylva helped him," I said. "I want to know if they were done or if there's anything else we can do for him, that's all."

Carmen smiled at me as if she thought it was nice that I cared so much. I smiled back, pretending to care, while I wondered what the old bastard had been up to and what he had gotten Ylva into.

***

There was a knock on my office door and Carmen's dark-haired head poked in.

"Have a nice weekend, Raili. Say hello to Ylva for me when you visit her."

I nodded and tapped my phone. 6:32 p.m. faded out along with the wallpaper. Frowning, I wondered why in God's name I still had the photo of the cabin in Lövaren as my wallpaper.

Lövaren, hell on earth, and nothing you needed to be reminded of as soon as you used your cell phone.

"Is Solveig still here?" I called after Carmen, but she was already gone. I punched the code on my iPhone and went to the photos. Screenshots of food recipes and memes with funny messages scrolled under my finger. Suddenly Conny's grave appeared after the funeral, with all the wreaths on the freshly dug earth - why had I taken a photo of it? The last pictures were of the lake in Lövaren, where the trees were reflected in the metallic gray surface, and of my little gray cabin with the summer green front door. The estate agent's pictures. But the cabin was now sold and someone else's problem. I deleted everything from Lövaren and googled a picture of a sunset and chose it as the wallpaper.

Was I pathetic or was I pathetic? Maybe I should get a cat so I had something to take pictures of? And someone to wait for me when I got home.

Home. I should go home. The library had been closed for half an hour and Carmen had probably shut down all the computers and turned out the lights before she left. Maybe I should buy something tasty to eat on the way home, light some candles, check out a new book and crawl onto the sofa and pull the blanket over me. I fiddled with the mouse, hit Google on the computer and typed *psychosis* into the search box. *The brain is in an abnormal state*, it said. *Dissolution of the ego, hallucinations, thought disorders and delusions. Unusual and bizarre behavior.* Oh my God. It also said that stress-induced psychosis can occur when someone dies and that the prognosis is good, which was great. But if Ylva wasn't the way she was because of Conny's death, but because of something the old codger had said or done, then what was the prognosis?

There was another knock at the door and I flinched so hard that the mouse flew out of my hand and landed on the floor.

The door opened and Solveig with the doo's skinny face peered in at me.

"Damn, Solveig, you scared me. I thought you'd gone home."

"I did a search on the name Lars. You wanted to know if that was his name, the older man who was here."

"Oh," I said, feeling my eyebrows raise an inch. "Thanks, Solveig. How many did you find?"

"Two hundred and forty-two Lars have a library card with us. Well, I'm going home now. Good evening." Solveig with the doo pulled her head back and quietly closed my door.

Two hundred and forty-two? That was a hell of a lot of Lars.

3

Ylva's hair is no longer blonde. Silver-gray, matted curls coil like snakes over the pillow. When I lean forward, I see dull skin and sagging cheeks. The wrinkles make her eyes look withered.

"How long have you been here?" I whisper.

"You're not helping me," says Ylva. "I'll never get out of here if you don't help me."

I slowly opened my eyes and saw a hazy dawn outside the frosted window. The dream faded, but the horror it left behind remained. It was a peaceful dream, a melancholy dream and at the same time more terrible than the worst of nightmares.

"I'm Raili," I said out into the room. "I'm lying in my bed. It's Sunday. Ylva has been in hospital for three weeks and four days. That's not that long."

I'll never get out of here if you don't help me.

But how? How could I help her?

The cold seeped through the cracks in my 1930s apartment and I had to pull a cardigan over my pajamas and robe before I could get out of bed. I shuffled through the living room like a Michelin figure in thick wool socks, glancing at the cold tiled stove and the wood in the firewood barrel before heading to the kitchen to make breakfast. Small bright craters were bubbling in the pot of porridge when the phone rang. It was Britta, Ylva's mother.

"Have you thought about Christmas yet?" she asked.

Christmas? Ever since Leif left me for his skinny new one, I've always been away at Christmas. When you're single, have no kids and no parents, you have no choice if you don't want to crash your friend's Christmas party during this family holiday.

"I haven't booked a trip yet," I said, scratching my head with the phone. I didn't want to travel until Ylva was well. Somewhat well, at least. I remembered that Britta used to celebrate Christmas with Ylva and Conny. Ylva was now a vegetable and Conny was dead.

"Britta, you think Ylva will be better by Christmas, don't you?" I said and could literally hear Britta shaking her head at the other end.

"The doctors say it's highly unlikely," she said. "And now Anna has invited me to Spain for Christmas, but I don't know ...."

Anna, Ylva's younger sister, lived in Spain with her husband and child. Of course she wanted Britta to join them instead of sitting here alone. With me.

"You're going," I said. "I'll stay with Ylva."

"Can you do that?"

"Of course, Britta. I'll stay with Ylva. Go to Spain and visit your grandchild. I'll call if anything happens."

People scurried back and forth outside my kitchen window. I ate my oatmeal and drank my coffee, watching them chug by like steam locomotives with their puffing breaths and big Christmas bags on the street below. The snow was clean and white, and I could actually feel a small part of the excitement I had experienced as a child before Christmas. These days, my only concession was an Advent candle holder on the kitchen table and a lit Christmas star in the window above it. I licked my fingers, extinguished the two candles and got up. It was time to tackle Lars.

***

The windows of the library, dark and empty, looked out onto the street, where cars drove back and forth in the exhaust-brown slush. Due to austerity measures, we only had Advent candelabras in every third window, but the light from these candelabras enhanced rather than illuminated the darkness inside. My warm, wonderful library with thousands of books, books that had been *read*, now seemed closed and cold and more like an insane asylum. Maybe we could leave a few lights on even if the library was closed? I decided to raise the issue at the next budget meeting as I unlocked the door, turned off the alarm and switched on the lights.

The bookshelves glowed in the warm light and some of the stones in my stomach seemed to dissolve as I walked into my office and turned on the computer. It's always better to be doing something, anything, than just fret and feel powerless. I pushed the image of the transformed, frail Ylva out of my mind and went into the library's search engine, typed in the first name Lars and left the last name field blank.

Solveig with the doo was right. There were two hundred and forty-two Lars registered. Fortunately, the date of birth was added. How old could the old codger be? Sixty? Seventy? Maybe ninety? What had he looked like? I only remembered his old-timey clothes: dark pants with creases, a coat and the checkered flat cap he had taken off. He had been bald, it struck me, with rather protruding ears. But the face? I closed my eyes and tried to make out the features, but they remained blurred. He had definitely been short, the difference in height between Ylva and him hadn't been great.

Something moved at the edge of my field of vision. I looked up and saw a pointy nose under a bulky brown cap pressing against the office window. Two mittened hands appeared and

waved toward the entrance, but before I could get up, the figure disappeared and I heard the front door being unlocked.

"Hey Solveig," I said as she appeared in my doorway like a fillyjonk on the run from Moominvalley.

"I was so surprised when the lights were on in the library. I usually walk by here a few times on weekends to check on things, but I've never seen the lights on before."

"You walk by here and check on the library when it's closed?" I said, frowning. Wasn't that pretty sick?

"You never know these days," Solveig with the doo said vaguely, walking around my desk and looking at the computer screen. "I thought you might be doing that."

"I was just about to ...," I said, watching as her hat, gloves, scarf, winter coat and handbag landed on my visitor's chair. "Are you planning to stay?"

"While I'm here, I might as well help. How are you going to do it?"

Help? Wasn't everything bad enough already?

"You've got the date of birth there, Raili. It's probably best if we sort out everyone who's too young first.

"Of course," I said, feeling the stones in my stomach start to rub together. "But I don't know how old he is. I don't remember what he looked like."

"Seventy years, I'd guess, maybe eighty," Solveig said, crossing her arms. "I'll go to another computer and pick out those born in the forties, and you can take those born in the thirties."

Okay? Now she was giving orders too. I scowled at her as she left the room, but I couldn't think of a better alternative, so I started with all the Lars born in the thirties.

Seventeen. Fifteen lived here in Valludden, one in Forshälla and one in Ljungskile. It was a pity that we hadn't asked for a photo among other information.

"How many did you find?" I asked on the way to the coffee room. "I'll put the coffee on."

"Twenty-three. I'll be right there."

Seventeen plus twenty-three, that was forty Lars. How was I supposed to do this? Go to each house, knock on the door and see what they looked like? In that case, I had to come up with an excuse. Maybe pretend I was working for Greenpeace or the Jehovah's Witnesses. That wasn't a good idea. If Lars didn't live alone and didn't answer the door, I probably wouldn't catch a glimpse of him before I was thrown out.

"It'll be nice with coffee," Solveig with the doo said and sat down opposite me. I nodded and listened to the coffee maker's gurgling.

"It'll be ready in a min," I said.

"You know, Raili, I think we have some buns in the freezer that we can defrost in the microwave. Then they'll be like freshly baked," said Solveig, getting up and opening the fridge, and I realized that I actually like the fiilijonks in Moominvalley.

Forty Lars. How was I supposed to do this? Could I pretend to collect library books? Say that we were doing an inventory before Christmas and that all the books had to be returned?

"The milk is old," I heard from the fridge. "But it's only two days overdue, so it should still be fine." A door opened and closed and the microwave started humming.

And what would I do if I found the real Lars? Force my way into the house and interrogate him? The microwave beeped.

"So," said Solveig and put a plate of warm, cinnamon-scented buns on the table, along with two cups of coffee. "Now tell me why you're doing this. What's the deal with Ylva?"

"What do you mean?"

"You wouldn't be sitting here on a Sunday if it wasn't something personal, would you? I understand you don't want to burden the taxpayers with things that have nothing to do with work."

Burden the taxpayers? I closed my eyes. Could I trust Solveig? Fussy, anal Solveig, who complained about anything and

everything that didn't adhere to her narrow guidelines. *Lonely*, fussy, anal Solveig, I corrected myself, who runs past the library on Sundays to make sure no one has rattled the windows. She probably had her house full of cats too.

"Do you have a cat, Solveig?"

"Cat? Why do you ask that? No, I don't have a cat. I'm allergic." She fell silent and sipped her coffee. "But I do have walking sticks."

Our eyes met across the table, as if she was challenging me to question her choice of pet. Who was I to question her? I was just as pathetic, wasn't I?

"Ylva didn't break her leg, Solveig. She's … She's in a psychiatric ward, they say she's psychotic."

"Oh dearie me," said Solveig, setting down her cup. "Is it because Conny is dead?"

"They think so," I said, "but I don't know … I think it might have something to do with that Lars."

Solveig didn't ask why I thought it had something to do with the old codger. Maybe I had underestimated her.

"All those Thursday mornings," she said, frowning. "What were they doing, anyway?"

"I don't know. That's what I want to find out."

"Good," said Solveig, "then let's do it. We'll go through all the Lars we've found, one by one, and see what days they've borrowed books. You have an almanac, don't you? Write down which dates are Thursdays."

Clever. Much smarter than just knocking on doors.

"You're right," I said, taking the last sip of my coffee. "We can sort out everyone who's borrowed books on days other than Thursdays. That should be easy."

You'd think so. The only problem was that once we had sorted out everyone who had borrowed books on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, we had no more Lars.

4

It was like a wake. Britta, still in her red wool coat, sat on one side of Ylva and I on the other. Britta was crying. I could hear her sobs as I looked at Ylva's face. It wasn't marked by death, quite the opposite. I have rarely seen such peace. Her bright, curly hair lay scattered on the pillow, with no sign of gray, and her face was smooth and carefree.

"Today is her birthday," Britta sobbed. "Thirty-eight."

"I know," I said, placing my hand on Ylva's. "Happy birthday, Ylva."

"Why isn't she waking up?"

"Medication?"

"The doctors say they're not giving her anything. Just food and water."

"Did they say anything else, Britta? Do they still think it's psychosis?"

"They're not saying anything you can understand," Britta said, frowning. "They think it's Conny, but why would she be like this several months after he died?"

"She looks peaceful," I said, carefully removing a strand of hair from Ylva's cheek. "Maybe she just needs some sleep."

Britta sighed and stood up, panting. Her hip was worse than ever. "I've ordered the cab for a quarter to one," she said, looking at her watch. "I have to go now."

After stuffing Britta and her suitcase into the cab, wishing her

a safe journey and a Merry Christmas, and asking the cab driver to help her into the Landvetter terminal, I took the elevator back to Ylva. We had a birthday to celebrate.

"Hey," I heard from the doorway as I shoved a spoonful of cake into my mouth from the paper plate I had placed on Ylva's stomach. "What are you doing?"

"It's her birthday," I said as soon as I had swallowed. "We're having a little party here." I nodded toward Ylva's cake and the two coffee mugs on the high nightstand beside the bed. Next to Ylva's head on the thin, faded pillowcase lay a small, wrapped present, ticking merrily.

"She's going to be moved to another ward. I'm afraid she won't have her own room anymore, but will be placed in a six-bed room," the voice said, entering the room. I turned my head and looked into a pair of brown eyes beneath raven-black bangs. The eyes were smiling. "But we can wait until the party's over, I guess."

A sex-bed room? In another life, Ylva and I would have shaken with laughter.

"Don't forget to raise the backside on the bed when you give her the cake. And make sure the coffee isn't too hot."

I nodded and felt like crying too.

***

"How was she?" Solveig whispered when I was back in the library. She looked around to see that no one was eavesdropping and immediately revealed to everyone that we were up to something.

"Worse, I think," I said and went into my office. "She didn't say anything at all this time. She opened her eyes when I gave her cake and coffee, but it was as if no one was there."

It had been awful. Terrible. As if my Ylva was far away from here and the body in the bed was just a shell. It couldn't be psychosis. I had read everything I could find about it, but no-

where did it say that the patient had fallen into a vegetative state. Was that the reason why she was transferred to another ward? Did they no longer think it was psychosis?

"I spent my lunch looking for every Lars born in the twenties and fifties," Solveig whispered, although no one could hear us anymore. "But I didn't find anyone who only borrowed books on Thursdays. And I stopped looking when the lunch break was over, no one will say I interfered with work, I might add."

"That's good, Solveig," I said and sat down at my desk. After my lunch of coffee and cake, my stomach growled unpleasantly and I realized that I should have bought a hot dog on the way back. "Then what could she have meant by Lasse?"

"Are you sure she said Lasse?"

"Absolutely," I said, logging into the search engine for our borrowers. I absently typed Lasse into the first name field, pressed *enter* and could literally feel the hair on my head stand up.

"I'll be damned!" I shouted so loudly that Solveig winced.

"There's no need to cuss," she said, looking at me disapprovingly. "Being a manager actually implies a certain degree of seriousness. You very often express yourself as if you were completely uneducated, I'm just saying."

"Wait, Solveig," I called out, but the door closed behind her and I was alone. Alone with the three Lasses who had turned up, one of whom had the surname Legho. Legolas.

I flew up from my chair and heard it bang against the wall as I ran into the library and looked around for Solveig. She was standing talking to Carmen and Charlotta, one of the younger library staff, and all three of them flinched in horror as I grabbed Solveig by the arm and pulled her with me. Carmen and Charlotta's wide eyes followed us all the way into my office. I kicked the door shut and pushed a reluctant Solveig toward the computer.

"Look," I said, letting go of her arm. "Look what it says."

"Have you gone completely mad?" Solveig said, and took a

few steps back. “How dare you treat me like that? What are they supposed to believe out there?”

“But look what it says,” I shouted and grabbed her by the arm again. Solveig looked at me, startled, but went over to my desk and read the computer screen.

“Oh, my,” she said leaning forward. “Look at that.”

Suddenly I was breathless and the energy that had been humming in my blood faded, leaving me weak and dizzy. I reached for the chair, pulled it toward me and sat down. I felt like I was about to pass out.

“Lasse Legho, indeed,” said Solveig, clicking the mouse. “And he only borrowed books on Thursdays. That’s him. But I have to say that Lasse isn’t a real name. It’s like calling someone Kalle or Olle. They’re called Lars, Karl and Olof and have nicknames like Lasse, Kalle and Olle. There must be some order in this world. Raili?”

Solveig’s voice faded and came back like radio waves in an old transistor with a broken antenna. I bent my head down between my knees and swallowed the saliva that had run into my mouth. I didn’t want to throw up.

“How is it?” I heard next to my ear and looked up cautiously.

“I ate cake for lunch and rushed here,” I said, straightening my back. “I feel a bit sick.”

“Maybe you should call in sick,” Solveig said, “so you don’t end up like Ylva.”

“Stop it,” I said, feeling the dizziness slowly disappear. “Can you go to the kiosk and buy me a hot dog? Without mustard and ketchup. And a bottle of mineral water?”

Solveig seemed to consider whether what I was doing was bossy or not before she nodded and left the room. I could hear her talking to Carmen, probably trying to explain to her that it was me who was confused and not her who had done something wrong. It didn’t matter what she said, I didn’t care, I just stared at the borrowed titles from Lasse Legho on the computer screen.

Genealogy: The Path to Your Own History by Thorsell, Elisabeth and *Genealogy: Learn the Basics of Genealogy* by Berggren, Sten-Arne.

Genealogy? Was that what they had been doing every Thursday morning in the fall? Could the fact that Lasse Legho stopped coming when Ylva fell ill be just a coincidence?

So what was wrong with her?

There was a knock on my office door and Solveig came in with a bag and took out a grilled sausage with mashed potatoes, a small plastic box of salad and an ice-cold bottle of mineral water.

"I thought you needed more than just a hot dog," she said. "You owe me forty-five kronor."

5

Lasse Legho, I read on birthday.se. *Blackwater 35760, 45993 Ljungskile. 83 years old in sixty-nine days.* I clicked on the link *at the same address* and read: *Majken Legho, 90 years old in twenty days, Lisen Legho Andersson, 75 years old in two hundred and ten days,* and *Ellen Legho, 73 years old in forty-five days.*

What was this strange family? Was Majken his wife? Lisen and Ellen couldn't be his children, they were far too old. Were they his sisters? Or were Majken and Ellen his sisters and Lisen his wife? And what kind of place was Blackwater? I clicked on the map icon and saw the green map from Google fill my entire screen. Blackwater was apparently at the top of the fjeld, a small lake among other small, remote lakes with equally strange names, and with a single road winding through the desolate landscape. Why had Lasse Legho driven here every Thursday? It would have been much closer if he had gone to the library in Ljungskile.

I leaned my forehead against my folded hands and tried to think. If this had something to do with the old codger, what was the trigger?

The books must be returned. I raised my head, stunned by the thought that had struck me. Of course the books would be returned, and then I could nail him. Talk to him, I corrected myself, and went back into the search engine. He had borrowed

the books on October eighteenth and should have returned them on November fifteenth, the day after Ylva got sick and the Thursday he suddenly stopped showing up. To my great surprise, I saw that a renewal had been entered on November fourteenth. Who had done that? Ylva, before she went home and collapsed? Had the old codger been here on a Wednesday and not a Thursday that week? Had he been here the day she got sick?

"Damn," I said and stood up. Then I sat down again and checked when the books were due back. Wednesday, the twelfth of December. God, that was tomorrow. The old codger would be in tomorrow, either to return the books or to make another loan. What if he did an online renewal? I rubbed my sweaty palms against the legs of my jeans and shook my head. Ylva had shown him how computers worked, he couldn't possibly be that ignorant if he had one at home. But he could call. Maybe he had called and borrowed them again on November fourteenth, too. With my pulse pounding in my ears, I quickly clicked on the box that said the books were not available for loan and wondered if there was anything else I could do other than stand at the front desk until he showed up. Or called.

"Solveig," I called out as soon as I entered the library. "Has anyone seen Solveig?"

"She's at the dentist," Carmen said, squinting at me. "You've become awfully good friends, haven't you?"

"She's helping me with something," I said, "and I need to talk to her. Or with you. Do you know the name Lasse Legho?"

"Lasse Legho?" said Carmen. "Legolas?"

She's not stupid, this woman.

"That's right. Did he call and ask for a renewal?"

"I don't know ... When is that supposed to have been?"

"On the fourteenth of November."

"November? I can't possibly remember that. But of course he could have."

"Who was at the front desk that day? Who would have taken the call, Carmen?"

Carmen grabbed me by the shoulders and looked into my soul with concern. "Calm down," she said, and shook me gently. "Now breathe and calm down."

I closed my eyes and did as she said, but it wasn't easy. Something told me this was important. Lasse Legho had been here, or had called here, the day Ylva got sick. That meant something.

"So," Carmen said, letting go of me. "Do you feel better now?"

I did not, but I didn't want her to think I was a complete mess, so I nodded and smiled.

"Then we'll see who took the calls on November fourteenth," Carmen said, walking over to the front desk. Why hadn't I done this myself instead of running out screaming for Solveig? Maybe I really did need to calm down a bit.

"Ylva was sitting at the front desk on the fourteenth," Carmen said, frowning. She didn't understand what, but she understood that something was wrong. "Does this Lasse Legho have anything to do with Ylva's broken leg?"

"With her broken leg?" I said, backing toward my office. "No, not a bit. Please send Solveig to my office when she gets back."

They had met on the day Ylva fell ill. Or talked to each other. I'd be damned if that was a coincidence. I went to yellowpages.com and searched for Lasse Legho, but he wasn't there. Searching for the address revealed that Majken owned the phone number, a landline. There was no cell phone number registered to either of them. Could they have burners? I shook my head hesitantly. Most likely none of them had a cell phone.

Should I call Lasse Legho? I drummed my fingers on the desk pad and looked at the phone. No, I wouldn't call him, not yet. The smart thing to do was to sit at the front desk for the rest of the day and all day tomorrow. If he didn't come or call, I could call on Thursday and ask where the hell the books were.

There was a soft knock on the door. Before I could open my

mouth, the handle was pushed down and Solveig slipped in with a quick glance over her shoulder.

"You were looking for me," she said in a low voice. "Have you found out anything new?"

"Solveig," I said, shaking my head, "what are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Whatever. I have to sit at the front desk for the rest of the day and all day tomorrow." I told her what I had come up with and Solveig nodded slowly.

"Good idea," she said. "I'll tell Charlotta that she'll look after the children's group instead of the front desk, and I'll take care of the pick lists."

"But you have to sit at the front desk at lunchtime," I continued, "because I'll pop up to the hospital to see Ylva. Is that all right?"

Old Solveig, a stickler for rules and rights, would probably have gone mad at the mere thought, but now she just nodded and smiled conspiratorially. "I'll take the lunch box with me and eat secretly when no one's around," she whispered.

"You do that," I said. "You're a rock, Solveig. And hey, if Lasse Legho comes, keep him here and call me."

***

The little mint-green alarm clock on the bedside table ticked slowly. A pleasant sound, I think. Soothing. The clock was old, I had bought it for Ylva at the flea market at the Pentecostal church, and it was the old kind without a battery. That's actually the best kind. You sit on your bed before going to sleep with the little clock in your hand and wind it up, carefully so that the spring doesn't break, while at the same time thinking about the past day. There is probably not a single person who has wound such a clock up without meditating. I was glad that the hospital staff hadn't removed it.

Ylva was now receiving an infusion. Did that mean she was getting worse? Should I call Britta and tell her? Just as I was thinking about going out into the corridor to ask someone, the door opened and two auxiliary nurses came in with trays of food in their hands.

"Hello," one of them said. It was the same sweet, dark woman with raven-black hair who had let me party with Ylva. "Raili, isn't it? Do you want to help Ylva eat?"

"She's getting an IV now," I said, pointing to the tube that disappeared into Ylva's arm. "Is she… Why?"

"It's just a nutrient solution. Don't worry, she's not getting worse. We would have called you if she was. Her mom said you'd be the liaison during Christmas."

"Yes," I said, straightening up. "That's right. And of course I'll help Ylva eat." I accepted the tray and sat down next to Ylva's head. The woman - I saw that a name tag on one of her breast pockets said Hani - did something under the bed that caused Ylva to move into a sitting position. I winced, and some water sloshed out of the glass and slid around on the tray.

There was only one other patient in the room who was eating. Everyone else was in what looked like a deep slumber, with tubes stuck here and there in their bodies.

"Thank you for letting Ylva have her clock." I smiled at Hani. "I didn't know if that was allowed with others in the same room."

"Oh," Hani said, "I like that ticking sound. It sounds kind of soothing."

I smiled even wider and touched Ylva's lips with the spoon. Obediently, she opened her mouth and ate whatever it was.

"You're colleagues, right?" asked the other auxiliary nurse, who was helping a very old and frail auntie who was as small as a bird under the yellow hospital blanket.

"Ylva and me? Well, we work at the public library," I said. "But we're also friends. We often meet up outside of work. But we met at the library."

Hani walked around, looking at tubes and machines and fluffing pillows under lifeless heads. I wanted them to finish here and leave so I could talk to Ylva. A lot had happened since I was last here.

"So," Hani said when the old auntie refused to eat any more. "We'll keep going, you can put the tray here on the table when Ylva's done eating and we'll take care of it."

I nodded and watched the door close behind them with a sigh.

"Listen to me," I hissed in Ylva's ear. "I know Lasse was in the library the day you got sick. Or called you. But I know you spoke to him, Ylva. And I want to know what you talked about."

Ylva opened her mouth and swallowed another spoonful of the brown-green puree. I think it might have been steak and potatoes with peas, mashed beyond recognition.

"You should know that Solveig is helping me," I said. "She's actually quite alright once you get to know her."

"Um?" said Ylva. At least I thought a surprised sound came out of her mouth, along with a few squirts of beef puree.

"Ylva, you need to wake up now," I said, shaking her shoulder. "You have a *catheter*, for heaven's sake? And let's not even talk about what happens when you poop." God, I hadn't thought about that. Diaper? Ylva moved restlessly.

"Wake up," I said and heard a soft clearing of the throat behind me. It was the frail little auntie in the bed opposite.

"You shouldn't worry her like that," it vibrated softly through the air. It sounded like an old sheep lying under the bed, ventriloquizing. "Poor girl."

"I'm sorry," I said, turning around, "but I want her to wake up."

"She talks at night," the old auntie bleated. "She's scared."

"Scared? What's she saying?"

"She's talking about a book. You have to read the book, she says. It's in the book."

"What book?"

"Do I look like an oracle? I don't know what book, I'm just telling you what she says." A pair of watery, pale blue eyes under gauzy white hair peered at me over the edge of the blanket.

"Would you like a cup of coffee with your meal?" I asked.

***

"I'm one hundred and two years old," said the little auntie, sipping her coffee. According to her instructions, I had filled the cup halfway with cream and sugar so I wasn't afraid she would burn herself.

"Why are you here?" I said, sipping my coffee. It was black and slightly burnt after being in the brewer for too long. "Shouldn't you be in a nursing home instead?"

"A nursing home? I've my own home," said the old auntie, leaning the cup against her chest. "I broke my femoral neck, that's why I'm here. As soon as it's healed, I'm going back home."

No shit? I looked at the old auntie with renewed respect. "What's your name?"

"Justina. Justina Adolfsson." She balanced the cup on her chest with one hand and held the other out to me. We shook hands solemnly.

"Raili," I said. "Rydell."

"What happened to the girl?" Justina said, nodding toward Ylva's bed. "Was she involved in an accident?"

"Her husband died, but that was six months ago. The doctors think it's a stress-induced psychosis."

"Not anymore," Justina said. "At the last round, they talked about a brain injury."

"A brain injury? But how?"

"Her medical records said something about a previous concussion," said Justina, who obviously had good hearing, and drank some more cream and sugar laced with coffee. In my head, I could see the cast-iron kettle hit Ylva in the head and

her collapsing like a house of cards. But that was over a year ago, surely that blow couldn't still be haunting her? "But you think it's something else?"

"Yes," I said. Did I have a choice? The alternative was that Ylva ... I didn't want to finish the thought. "I think she might have been poisoned or something, I don't know. But she had contact with a ... with an older man in the library, and that's when she got sick."

"Is that why she's talking about a book at night?" I turned my head and looked at Justina. Could that be it?

"The man, his name is Lasse, borrowed books about genealogy," I said slowly. "Could these be the books she's talking about?"

"She seems to be talking about a special book," Justina said. "She says it's in the book. Read the book, she says."

"Could he have written something in one of the books? Is that why he keeps borrowing them?"

Justina shrugged her shoulders.

Those books would definitely be borrowed again. By me. It was just a matter of getting hold of them. I put our coffee cups next to Ylva's food tray on the small table and said goodbye. It felt like I had two allies now, one in the library and one in the hospital. It was a comforting feeling, and after pushing the dreaded brain injury far back into the convolutions of my own brain, I walked with a slightly lighter step to the car in the hospital's gravelly and snowy parking lot.

***

The phone did not ring. People came and went; big and small, old and young, all wrapped in thick scarves and pulled-down hats in every shade of beige, brown, black and gray imaginable. Were there no more colors in the world? The phone didn't ring and none of those walking through the glass doors of the library was the little old codger.

I was supposed to be sitting in my office updating the website with the new opening hours during the Christmas period. The stark truth was that I should have done this several days ago. I was way behind schedule. A shrill signal made my thoughts about opening hours and hard truths evaporate like thin smoke in a strong wind, and I jerked the phone to my ear so fast I hit my head.

"Valludden's public library, this is Raili Rydell. What can I do for you?" I said well-rehearsed, feeling my aching skull with my fingers. It was just a woman having trouble logging into her online library account. Solveig poked her head out and raised her eyebrows questioningly. I shook my head as I tried to explain to the woman how to log in.

"Have you eaten today?" Solveig asked, starting to shut down. The day had passed without a little old codger coming by.

"I had a sausage and mashed potatoes before I went to Ylva," I said, and Solveig snorted.

"You shouldn't just live on grilled sausage, Raili," she said, "you're not exactly thin."

Not exactly thin? Thank you, Solveig.

"Not to mention what a diet like that does to your coronary arteries."

"I was talking to the old lady in Ylva's room," I said, trying to distract attention from my coronaries. "She's one hundred and two years old, her name is Justina, and she's perfectly clear-headed. She says Ylva talks at night. Something about a book we need to read."

"Book? What book?"

"I don't know, but I suspect it's one of the books Lasse Legho borrowed. Maybe he wrote something important in it."

"Wrote in the library book?" Solveig said, as if she couldn't believe her ears. "Is the man insane? You're not allowed to tamper with the library books, are you? Well, he'll have to replace that."

"I'm working overtime today, Solveig. I need to update the

website. I would have done that several days ago if this Lasse Legho thing hadn't come up." Someone walked over my grave and I quickly added: "But I'm clocking out first so it won't burden the taxpayers."

6

Water the plants. Water the plants and bring in the mail. Just as I smugly logged off the library website and stretched my arms in the air so hard my vertebrae cracked, I remembered that I had promised Britta that I would water all the plants and bring in her and Ylva's mail.

I should have offered to take care of Ylva's mail and plants when she was hospitalized, I realized as I locked Britta's door behind me and got into the car. They didn't live nearby and Britta must have pushed her disability travel service to the limit, looking after Ylva's mail and plants, visiting Ylva in hospital, going shopping and whatever else you have to do. Are there any restrictions on the travel service? I hoped not, as I drove to Ylva's yellow terraced house many long hills away with my guilty conscience in the passenger seat beside me.

Conny was still present in the various rooms. In fact, I think Ylva had added his presence since my last visit. A large green sweater had been thrown over the armchair in the living room. It smelled faintly of sweat and aftershave, and I suspected that Ylva had rummaged through the laundry basket for clothes that still smelled of Conny. I hoped that I wouldn't stumble over his unwashed underpants when I walked through the house with the watering can. I noticed that Conny's blue coffee mug was on the kitchen counter and there was a crossword puzzle in Conny's unmistakable handwriting on the kitchen table. Many

words were still missing, words that would never be filled in, and I thought that must feel worse than if the crossword wasn't there at all.

Before I left the house, I went through Ylva's mail. Britta had sorted it into different piles, one with advertisements, one with opened envelopes with bills that Britta must have looked through to see when they were due because some said *Paid by mom*, and one with Christmas cards. There was no letter or card from Lasse Legho to be found.

Well, there was also tomorrow, and that was the day Lasse Legho's library books were to be returned. And I intended to be there when he returned them.

But he did not come. Wednesday dragged on like syrup in cold weather, and somehow I knew he wouldn't come. But if he did show up, it would definitely be when I wasn't there. I hardly dared to go to the toilet, let alone go to Ylva during my lunch break.

"Raili, can you help me?" Carmen called out around eleven o'clock.

"No," I said, holding onto the front desk.

"But you're not doing anything," Carmen said, sounding very disgruntled. "You're just sitting there."

"Leave her alone," Solveig said, handing me a cup of coffee. She crossed her arms demonstratively and glared at Carmen. "I'll help you if you can't manage on your own."

At twelve, Solveig sidled up and hissed:

"Do you want me to take over so you can have lunch?"

"No thanks," I said and grabbed the front desk again. "I'll stay here." Fifteen minutes later, Solveig returned with a steaming plate and cutlery.

"We had a ham and broccoli pie in the freezer. I don't know how long it's been there, but it's probably not dangerous. If you put the plate on the shelf under the counter, no one will see you eating it."

I nodded my thanks and started eating, I was really hungry. Ten minutes later, Solveig slipped me a glass of water.

At two o'clock I had to run to the toilet, with my partner in crime Solveig strategically placed on the chair behind the front desk, and at three o'clock she came out with another cup of coffee. We both realized that it was probably over, that the old codger wasn't coming back with the books today.

"I'll call him tomorrow," I said as we turned out the lights and locked up the library.

***

My beeping signal traveled fifteen miles underground until it reached the fjeld. The rasping noises sounded like wind-whipped howls and almost managed to drown out the signal running along the wires between small birches and green-needled firs and pines. One gust of wind too many and the telephone poles would topple like dominoes, severing all long-distance communication between the fjeld residents and the outside world.

"Yes?" it squeaked amidst the scratching. I flinched in surprise. The voice was audible again, but fainter, and I strained to hear it until the first notes of the Lucia song sounded and I understood that it was a radio playing somewhere in the background.

"Hello?" it growled impatiently. "Is anyone there?"

"My name is Raili Rydell and I'm calling from the Public Library in Valludden. Can I speak to Lasse Legho?" I hurried to say.

"Lasse? He's ill. What's it about?" I thought I understood the words and shook the phone to clear the sound. It didn't do any good.

"He has two books that were due yesterday," I said in an unconsciously loud voice. "Do you know when he can come with them?"

"My God, don't you usually have the week to drop books off at the library anyway?"

"Yes, but these very books are very popular. Many people are waiting to borrow them and…."

"Then you should buy more of *these very books,"* it snapped back and the line went dead. Had the last wind finally knocked down all the telephone poles? Maybe the woman had just thrown the phone in my ear.

Majken? Lisen? Ellen? Now I knew that one of them was a real bitch and that Lasse Legho was ill. How ill? In any case, he wasn't going to return the books.

"Well?" Solveig said, and I shook my head.

"Some woman answered and said he was ill. He won't come here with the books. What the hell am I supposed to do now?"

"We'll just go get them ourselves," Solveig said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "Do you know where he lives?"

"On the fjeld above Ljungskile," I said. "I've never been there, but as a child I often went to the Herrestad fjeld with Mom and Dad and I think these mountains are connected. It won't be easy to find, Solveig. Small roads and forest everywhere."

"We'll have to ask around if we can't find it," Solveig said, and I opened my mouth to tell her that there was hardly anyone there to ask, but closed it again. What was I doing? Why was Solveig suddenly the driving force when it was my Ylva who was lying like an unopened Christmas present in the hospital's hopeless cases ward? Obviously with one bed too many, because they had also stuffed Justina and her femoral neck in there.

"We're going," I decided. "The day after tomorrow is Saturday. Are you free then?"

Solveig nodded. "I'll bake a cake," she said. "Will you bring a thermos of coffee?"

***

Saturday morning came without a sunrise. Only a dull black sky, tinged slightly orange by the city streetlights, was visible between my curtains, heralding clouds and perhaps more snow. I curled up under my warm duvet and wondered why I had told Justina that I thought someone had poisoned Ylva. Had I thought that? Had that thought even crossed my mind before the words flew out of my mouth?

I turned around and fiddled with my phone to see what time it was. Seven. Too early to get up and too late to go back to sleep. No, I didn't believe the old codger had poisoned Ylva. Why would he have done that? The truth was that I had no idea what had happened to her, I had no idea and I was horrified and clutching at the smallest straw that could explain what had happened. I should have been relieved and accepted that it was stress induced psychosis brought on by Conny's death as the prognosis looked so good, but I couldn't fool myself. This had nothing to do with Conny's death, any more than a concussion a year earlier.

Read the book, Ylva said at night. Well, then I would. I just hoped it was one of Lasse Legho's library books, otherwise I didn't know where to start looking.

At eight o'clock, the thirst for coffee drove me from my warm nest and I sat down at the kitchen table and saw sharp streaks of cloud appear as the sun raced ahead in the east in its golden chariot pulled by Eos, Pyrois, Phlegon and Aithon. For a moment I thought I heard the rumble of wheels and horses' hooves before I realized it was the snowplow. So it had snowed last night. Sighing, I took another sip of coffee, not even caring that my winter tires didn't have studs. Hopefully Solveig had studs on hers.

Solveig didn't have winter tires, as it turned out. She didn't even have a car.

"Are you kidding me?" I said, frowning as I stared at the hooded creature stomping around in my hallway. "Don't you have a car?"

"I ride a bike, you know that," Solveig said, seeming to be considering whether she should unwind all the wraps of her scarf. "Did you make coffee?"

"To work, yes," I said, not yet done with the car issue. "I walk to work, but that doesn't mean I don't have a car."

"You *have* a car, what's the problem?" said Solveig, leaving her scarf on and taking off her hat and gloves as a compromise. "Have you made coffee?"

"I've got studless winter tires, that's the problem, Solveig. We're going up a bloody fjeld."

"You really don't need to...."

"And yes, I made coffee," I interrupted her before she could feed me one of her morale cookies. "Put your hat back on, we're leaving."

We sat in silence for the first fifteen minutes; Solveig probably annoyed by my sloppy language and heated accusations that she didn't have a car, and me because of a simmering irritation that wouldn't go away.

"Do you know the way?" she finally asked.

"GPS on the phone," I said. "I'll turn it on when we get to Ljungskile."

"Wouldn't it have been shorter to take the old road instead of the highway?"

"Studless tires, Solveig, as you may remember."

Silence.

"Did you bring milk for the coffee?"

"Do you have milk in your coffee? I'm sorry, Solveig, I missed that."

"I brought milk."

"Then why did you ask?"

Silence again.

"So," I said, trying to break the ice that had settled over us, "what are you going to do this Christmas?"

Solveig fingered the basket in her lap. "I think I'll do the usual," she said, "visit my aunt in the retirement home and then eat Christmas dinner and watch TV. There's a lot to watch at Christmas."

I turned my head and looked at her, but she turned away and looked out the side window. "You know," I said, "I won't be doing much this Christmas either. Maybe we can have Christmas dinner together?"

Solveig glanced at me as if she wanted to know if I was serious or just teasing her, but she relaxed when I smiled and raised my eyebrows questioningly.

"Well," she said, "that could be nice." The sheet of ice dissolved as if it had never been there, and the warmth and soothing hum of the car enveloped us.

"This is our exit," I said, turning off the highway to Ljungskile, pulling over at a rest area and fishing my phone out of my pocket. "Last chance to do some shopping before the wasteland. Do we need anything else?"

"What would that be? You have coffee and I have milk and cake," said Solveig and somehow it felt like we were going on an adventure. I typed the address of Lasse Legho into Google Maps, said a silent prayer that we would find the right place, and set off again.

"Why is it called fjeld anyway?" Solveig said as we left the settlement behind us and drove up the narrow, unsalted but at least sanded, icy gravel road. On the left, a farm lay in hibernation, lighted Christmas stars shone yellow in the windows of the large manor house and gray smoke rose from the chimney like a pillar. Then there was only forest.

"Actually, I don't know," I said, wishing my car had four-wheel drive. "But it's only uphill, so that's probably why."

"You can't ski on this fjeld," said Solveig as we passed a car

coming down with skis on the roof rack. “Downhill, I mean. There are no ski slopes here,” she corrected herself before I could point out the obvious.

The road continued to wind its way up. The trees became lower, but not sparser, and the snow cover became thicker. Solveig squeezed the basket tighter in her lap. It was an old basket with two lids that closed it. As we drove over one of the countless bumps in the road, one of the lids flew open to reveal an old Tupperware box made of formerly transparent plastic, now bleached by countless washes, as well as napkins, cups and milk in a glass bottle with a screw cap.

Car lights lit up in the rearview mirror and I saw that we had a line of cars behind us. They probably had both four-wheel drive and studded tires. My question about the traffic on this fjeld was answered as we passed the next bend and the landscape opened up. The clearing on one side of the road made no difference, but the small red house on the other side, with a neat red barn in the background, confirmed that this mountain was not as deserted as I thought. People, some with cross-country skis, others with ski boots or winter boots, most with steaming cups and sandwiches in hand, were walking around in the snow or standing behind open trunks drinking coffee by the cars. All the cars behind us turned into the large parking lot, and I realized that this was where the cross-country ski trails began. The sky, whose heavy clouds seemed to hang just a few feet above the treetops, took the opportunity to relieve itself, and the swirling ice crystals settled over the parking lot with all the cars and outdoor people, filling the air and making visibility diffuse and precarious as we drove deeper into the snowy wasteland.