

## Chapter 6

On Thursday 29th June, the day Ruben Nilsson found a new pigeon in his loft, Mats Eklund was hurrying away from his flat on Donner Street in Klintehamn. He hadn't given himself the time to tie his shoelaces, let alone put a jacket on, despite the chill in the air. He was absorbed in immediate concerns, without the slightest premonition of how much his perspective would have changed by the evening.

Closing the flat door felt like an irrevocable act. The question had been asked. He knew it must be answered, one way or the other, and that going off on his usual jogging round would give him only a short respite. Soon his secure existence would be shattered forever. He admitted to himself that running away was simply cowardly and wished that he had it in him to act decisively. As it was, he badly needed to think things out.

Do you want a divorce? Jenny had been direct and seemingly quite unfazed. Inside, she surely felt as upset and frightened as he did, but she showed no sign of it. Her face was strangely blank. When she saw the confused expression on his face, she nodded briefly, as to get him started. It had no effect. He didn't have much to say. Certainly no self-confident Yes. And no convincing No, I love you. You know that. Darling, why ask such a crazy question?

They were in a no-man's land, fighting a pointless, in every way depressing battle about whose fault it was that the rubbish bin overflowed or the cooker was mucky. Their life as a couple surrounded him on all sides but, despite that, he saw himself as a hopelessly solitary being, unhappy and fed up with everything. Was this all life had to offer? Nursery school, cloth nappies, organic carrots and a lethargic Jenny, uninterested in the pleasures of lovemaking, now that she had the children she wanted. No, not tonight, I'm too tired. No, we'll wake the children! But must the kids really sleep in our bedroom? Yes, Henrik is scared of the dark and Stina was sick this morning. Day after passing day, each one as drab and unchanging. Sleep, work, pick up the kids, put kids to bed, sleep, work ...a perpetuum mobile, only changing gear for a big supermarket session of Saturdays and occasional visits by Jenny's parents. If their sex life had been satisfying, their problems would surely have been no harder to solve than simple equations. Warmth and trust would have helped them climb the mountains of washing and ironing and bridged the yawning dark nights of crying. But, it didn't happen. I'm suffocating, he thought and took his

first running steps. He jogged past the road to Klinte church and continued up towards Vårsände. He decided to complete the round by following the railway embankment and increased his pace to shake off his distress.

Thoughts kept buzzing around in his head, like swarm of flies attracted by the smell of sweat. Next week, Jenny would be away. She was going to be a coach at a football camp and would stay the night. Her parents would have the kids. It would be better if Jenny and he didn't make any decisions until afterwards. They could both use the time to think things out on their own.

How had to got to this point? For them, who had loved each other so much? What had happened to their love? To the cuddles and kisses, the sweet words, the passion? Fear struck him with sudden force, a sense of total helplessness, as if at the edge of a dizzying abyss. Adrenaline surged in his blood. He felt nauseous.

Until that moment he had thought only of himself, of his dreams about what life with Jenny should have been like and, in his heart of hearts, blaming her for her failure to fulfil all his needs and assuming a small child's right to unconditional love. He had no idea what Jenny made of their life together. He had never dared to ask. What if she was the one who longed for freedom? Was that why she had raised the question of divorce? Their marriage mustn't end like this. They had to calm down, think before doing anything rash and irreparable. And consider the children.

Mats Eklund noticed the small tent just as he ran round the corner with the old outdoor privy on the abandoned site at Vårsände. It was an old bivouac, sleeping two under its dirty grey canvas. His boyhood tent has looked like that, with old-fashioned wooden pegs and laces instead of a zip. He couldn't resist having a closer look. It took a while before his eyes got used to the murk inside and an outline slowly took shape in the greyish light. The blood, black as tar, stood out against white skin. The figure was human and the sight made him catch his breath. He staggered backwards and sat down heavily on the ground, then got up quickly and ran back to the road to distance himself from what he had seen. He fumbled for his mobile phone, but couldn't quite trust his senses enough to call the police before he had checked the tent again. This time he undid all the lacing and had a good look around. He stood very still, as if nailed to the ground, and what he saw became etched into his mind. A youngish man, maybe a few years older than himself, lay on the groundsheet. His eyes stared emptily and his mouth hung wide open. A dark, still faintly glistening bloodstain had spread all over the front of the man's light shirt.

Mats was interviewed by a female detective, who had introduced herself as Detective Inspector Maria Wern. Her looks, with her long, blonde hair and brown eyes,

reminded him so much of Jenny that Mats had felt even more shaky and nervous. Her calm, warm voice almost made him lose his grip. I'd like to ask you a few questions. Are you up to it? He started shaking uncontrollably. She had waited for him to settle and then interviewed him gently, taking notes as one question slowly followed another. While they talked, he couldn't resist glancing sideways now and then to watch the work of the technicians in the cordoned-off area round the tent.

The body was carried out and inspected. There seemed to be clotted blood everywhere. If only he had managed to avert his eyes for the next few moments, nightmares would not have been riding him for many nights to come, but the scene held a magnetic attraction. When the uniformed men lifted the corpse to slide it into the waiting black sack, one of them stumbled on the uneven ground and let his hold go for a moment. The dead man's head was thrown backwards in a wide arch, showing the gaping slash across his neck.

Mats Eklund had said he was fine, not in shock and anything. No need to take him to the hospital. Even so, DI Wern, who had driven him home, would have hated to leave him alone and was relieved to find his wife there. When the murder victim was being manhandled into the bodybag, the witness had fainted – simply collapsed in a heap in front of her. She hadn't been able to break his fall, but Maria felt quite certain that he hadn't hurt himself. Even so, he had been terribly pale and upset, with nervously trembling hands.

His wife was called Jenny and Maria knew she had met her before, It was at an information session about a football camp that her Emil was keen on. Jenny was one of the coaches. She seemed reassuringly nice and caring, as she helped Mats to sit down and fixed him a hot drink. She even fetched a warm blanket and wrapped it round his shoulders.

Later, back at the crime scene, Maria made notes of the questions she had not had time to ask. This evening, when Mats had calmed down, she would have another go. She walked towards the police cordon, which by now surrounded the outbuildings, a cottage and a smithy, as well as the abandoned farmhouse and big barn. A technician called Mårtensson was rolling up the groundsheet, trying to avoid touching the blood. The dead man had bled profusely.

'He didn't carry any identification. Seems to have slept on the groundsheet. No mattress or sleeping bag. It must've been rotten cold. And rotten hard, too.'

Mårtensson shivered at the mere thought.

'Another thing, Maria. I checked his clothes and there are no labels giving the size and manufacturer and whatever. Must be home-made.'

'How did he get here? Walking?'

Maria looked around for some kind of vehicle, a car or a bicycle, to explain how the victim had managed to get around.

'Hartman found a car. He's checking it out now. It had been driven up a track and parked behind some bushes. Just down the road, that way'

Mårtensson waved in the direction of the find and Maria wandered off, once she realised that she wouldn't get definitive replies to a few other questions that had occurred to her.

Hartman's voice came floating out from inside a lot of vegetation a couple of hundred meters along the road. Then she saw him standing at a rusty car without hubcaps. She walked round it. The lid on the boot barely held in place with string and it didn't even have registration plates.

'His car? Or not?'

Hartman had pulled on gloves and was opening the driver's door.

'I think so. Look at this.'

He had found a tent bag and a couple of spare wooden pegs.

'You might ask what he was doing here,' Hartman continued. 'Why hide the car? Why is there's a birdcage on the back seat? Homemade from willow branches, I reckon. And here, look, pictures. Really nice oil paintings and a few watercolours, wrapped in old, worn sheets. There's a packet of fags with Russian-style writing on it in the glove compartment, but no documentation of any kind.'

'Neighbours seen anything?'

A few locals had turned up at scene and Maria had talked to some of them, noting their names and phone numbers.

Hartman shook his head.

'Nothing doing, not so far. Nobody seems even to have noticed the tent, so it can't have been here for long. The technical boys are looking into that. The longer it's been in place, the yellower the grass underneath.'

Maria swung round at a rustling noise from inside the bushes. It was Ek, her fellow DI. Without any signs of embarrassment, he thoughtfully zipped up his flies and straightened his trousers.

'You might've thought one of the local peasants would have spotted it,' Ek said. 'Or someone from the preservation society. He wasn't in a proper site, after all. Maybe he didn't know the ins and outs of the Land Access legislation. Everyone finds it tricky. He seems to have thought things out, though. Like, being close to a privy.'

Maria had spent a couple of hours in her office at the station when her son Emil phoned to ask what she was doing. Hey, Mum, you said you'd be home early. Another attack of bad conscience. Oh no, the children! And she who had promised to take them to the beach at Tofta for the sand sculpture competition. She had forgotten all about it and now it was too late.

On her way home it dawned on Maria that she had to do some shopping. Most of the stuff in the freezer had been consumed and she hadn't yet worked out what to make for supper. Whatever, but not another packet of own-brand Mother's Meatballs. She had already served it up twice this week. Who are they, the working mums who prepare a proper home-cooked meal at the end of each day? Maria knew she must think of something that would be easily fixed before the kids became too tired and impatient. Yesterday she had been along to the Vigoris superstore and registered herself as a user of the new electronic checkout system. You scan your goods yourself, pack it away and then hand the scanner at the till. Fast and efficient, if you know what you want. What about salmon filets? Fresh salmon was on special offer that evening and there was a long queue in front of the fresh-fish counter. Maria grabbed a deep-frozen packet. More bad conscience, of course, and the thawing was a waste of time too, but she simply couldn't bear queuing tonight.

Later, waiting to go through the till, Maria watched a woman ahead of her, who was playing with her scanner to pass the time. The woman, model-slim and with short, dark-brown hair, seemed bored and unsure about what to do when she started to scan her purchases. She changed her mind about something, double-clicked and then clicked once more. Her first day, probably. The QuickShop system was designed round microchips lodged in each item, which meant that they were traceable from manufacturer to customer. It would minimise unnecessary storage, which after all was usually added to the shop-price of the goods. The woman was playing again, pulling the scanner across her arm and clicking away. Then she noticed Maria's amused eyes watching her, stopped abruptly and suddenly seemed to remember something important she had forgotten. She dashed off towards the exit, leaving her shopping basket at her place in the queue, complete with her wallet on top. Maybe she realised her parking ticket had run out. Or what? A meeting?

Maria ran after her, shouting about the forgotten wallet.

'Hello! You left your wallet! Wait!'

The woman must have heard her, but didn't stop. Maria was just in time to see her get on a bicycle and disappear round a bend in the road.

Before handing the wallet to the lady at the till, Maria had a look in the wallet. According to the driving licence, the woman's name was Sandra Hägg.

On the drive back, she thought about the murdered man in the tent. It was horrible. The murder scene was only a few hundred meters from the house in peaceful, picturesque Klintehamn, where Maria was staying with her children.

## Chapter 7

The morning of Sunday 2nd July brought an overcast sky and showers of rain. Down in Klinte harbour the wind was almost at storm force. The dark clouds were reflected in a dark grey sea, lustrous like molten lead. Huge, foaming waves came rolling in, slamming against the quay. Several sailing boats lay for anchor and Maria saw, to her disappointment, that the trip to Big Karl Island had been cancelled. A shame, but it was probably just as well. The summer was long and there would be more boats. Anyway, what stays with you for longest is perhaps not so much the special occasions as the rare moments of peace and rest. Earlier that week, on a trip with Linda to the Kettlevik stonemasons' yard, Maria had found seat where she could sit and watch the sea, leaning against the sun-warmed wall of a wooden hut. While Linda had practised scratching runes into the soft limestone, her mother had been listening to the regular tick-tock of a one-stroke outboard engine. It sounded like the beating of a heart. Soothing and just right for meditation.

That Sunday afternoon, when Maria was delivering a torch to Emil, she heard that the camp cook had not turned up in the morning and that there was no message from her either. Jenny Eklund, the coach, said it was so out of character because Berit Hoas was always utterly reliable. Jenny had been trying to phone all morning without finding Berit in and by now she was a little worried. Could Maria please drive over to Berit's house on South Kust Road and find out what had happened? Berit might simply have got the timetable wrong and be busy outside, weeding the strawberry-patch or whatever. Maria agreed easily. She had had no special plans for her Sunday, apart from the cancelled boat trip and, anyway, the weather forecast was too dire to leave any option other than staying in for a bit of spit and polish.

One more Gotland summer – but this time, Maria was on the island to stay. Her married home at Kronviken had been let during the winter. After the divorce it had been such a relief to move out and find something that was her own. They had shared decisions and compromises, which had somehow become part of that old, yellow-painted wooden house. The kitchen, which was too cramped once Krister had got his way and installed his jukebox and a bar-counter. The bathroom, which was never renovated, because Krister had used the loan to pay for a veteran car that wouldn't ever pass its MOT. The veranda floor, which was never re-laid because that

money they had set aside vanished before they got round to contact a builder. True, both Krister and the house had their charms, but that was past history now. Putting it behind her had meant a new freedom, but with it came new worries and a sense of sadness at the failure of their life together. Now, when Krister and his old mate The Mayonnaise had taken Linda for holiday in a hired caravan and Emil was at football camp, Maria felt lonely. Everything seemed empty and meaningless.

Maria had met The Mayonnaise and wasn't very keen on him. Harmless enough, maybe, but so impulsive and freakish that having him around soon became a nuisance. There had been an anxious moment this past Friday, when she had left the pair of them to take responsibility for Linda. Not that she had a choice. It was Krister's right to see the children every second weekend and how he spent the time was his business. As they set out, her last glimpse of them had been The Mayo taking a Coca-Cola can, left to cool in holder next to the wing mirror, and handing it to Linda, who was standing between the two front seats.

Maria had started to run after the car.

'The safety belt!'

She tried gesturing to show what she meant, but The Mayo waved happily in her direction and screwed up the volume on the car stereo. Sappy disco pop drowned out her voice. *Adorable golden-brown eyes smile...*

'...The belt!'

Krister had phoned on the same night to say that Linda had forgotten Helmer Bryd, her cuddly frog. They had gone no further than Tofta camping site and had a couple of beers, well, too many for driving. Maria, the kid won't go to sleep without that sodding fluffy creature, Helmer Thingy, so be an angel and bring it, would you? I'd be eternally grateful and so forth. On her way to Tofta, she speculated on the lack of difference between being married to Krister and being divorced from him. This was exactly the kind of mess that had always followed his attempts to take charge of the kids and one of the reasons why she had wanted to make the break.

When Maria pulled up at Berit Hoas's address, there was police car parked outside the house next door. She was off-duty that weekend and had no intention of getting involved in anything. A single mum had to look after herself and guard her free time like a hawk. After all, she didn't have infinite reserves to draw on. So far she had spent much of the weekend trying to suppress speculating about the murdered man in the tent at Vårsände.

There was the fact that nobody had seen him arrive, for instance. None of the locals seemed to have heard or seen anything out of the ordinary. Searching the

Missing Persons' database had failed to produce anyone who fitted his description. The man had been dark-haired, rather short but strongly built. He looked about fifty years old and had an old scar running parallel to the lower arch of his ribcage on his right side. The unidentified victim, combined with the sparse information from witnesses, did not make for an effective investigation. Pending police work had already been moved into strand-by and cases of domestic violence, robbery and car theft would stay on the sidelines for as long as the murder investigation was current.

Maria tried hard, but when an ambulance arrived and DI Ek came out on the veranda of Ruben Nilsson's house to meet it, her curiosity got the better of her. She went across to find out what was up. Jesper Ek waved his hand in a hold-it-for-now gesture, went inside with the ambulance crew and returned.

'Maria, we don't know yet. It doesn't look like a crime, I must say. A guy called Petter Cederroth, a taxi driver, phoned this morning to say that last night he had found the dead body of old boy who lives here. The woman next door was in a bad way and Cederroth took taken her to casualty. He thought the hospital staff were going to inform the police, but they didn't. Some misunderstanding, I guess.'

'Jesper, it's the woman next door I'm here to see. Is Berit Hoas in hospital?'

Maria hoped it was nothing serious. She knew Berit by sight and they would chat about this and that if they ran into each other in the village shop.

'She is not at all well, I'm sorry to say. I've just been on the phone to the hospital. The taxi driver said she was the last person to see Ruben Nilsson alive, My idea was to set up an interview with her, but it wasn't on. She is unconscious and the nurse said that Hoas's condition is critical. The taxi man had mentioned something about a mushroom casserole. That the dead man up there...' Ek said, waving in the direction of the top floor, '... and his neighbour had shared a dish of morels. Seems that morels are toxic unless they're poached first. Not that I've ever tried.'

'Poor Berit might end up with a death-by-misadventure charge. How awful. She'll never recover from that.'

Without being aware of it, Maria backed away a few steps.

'What about the taxi driver?' she went on. 'Did he eat any mushrooms?'

'No. Well, I don't think so. I was going to talk to him again, but his wife says he's asleep. He kept driving fares until the early hours this morning and is likely to sleep until two or three o'clock today.'

Maria went back to her car to phone Jenny, who became quite upset.

'Oh no! It's so hard to get hold of people now, in the middle of the summer. Today, we can get by with ready-mades, but what are we to do for the rest of the week? Food for fifty kids! I mean, just imagine the amount of milk we need!'

Maria commiserated and offered to do the shopping, but Jenny already recruited another parent. She might get in touch later, she said, unless they found someone to take responsibility for the kitchen. But wasn't Maria at work next week?

'Yes, I am. But Krister, Emil's dad might ...'

Maria interrupted the sentence. It wouldn't work, not if he took The Mayo along. She wanted to spare Emil the embarrassment.

On her way home she stopped by at the kiosk and bought a couple of paperbacks and a large bag of assorted penny sweets. On a rainy summer's day this seemed the best way to while away the time.

DSI Tomas Hartman walked steadily up and down the lawn in front of his house behind his mower. His too-large shorts were flapping in the wind and making his thin, white legs look even stringier. He kept his shirt buttoned up to his neck, but for once wore no tie. It poked out of his pocket like a big, red tongue. He was walking away from the garage drive when Maria arrived and didn't stop to speak to her until he had reached the far edge of the lawn, turned round and mowed his way back.

'I thought I had better do the grass in between showers,' he said, narrowing his eyes and peering at the sky. 'It'll rain again soon, I shouldn't wonder.'

Maria agreed and started walking toward the house.

'Tomas, is your door unlocked? I bought a few books in town and got one for Marianne as well.'

'That's nice of you. She's in the kitchen, waiting for a friend to pick her up for a water gymnastics session.'

Maria had wanted a house by the sea, but the prices shocked her. With a loan against her meagre police salary and no spare money for the deposit, even the tiniest shed with a sea-view was simply impossible. True, Olov Jakobsson in Eksta had offered a seaside let, but she had a shrewd idea that he wanted her to agree to more than just paying the rent. Olov was a nice man, no question about it, but Maria couldn't cope even with the most timid of expectations in that line, not so soon after the divorce. It takes time to pull yourself together.

Renting the first floor rooms in the Hartmans' house didn't commit her to anything. As landlords, they were quiet people, who respected Maria's privacy. If their paths crossed, in the garden for instance, they'd chat or offer a cup of coffee. Marianne Hartman had had emphysema and, after a lung transplant, took early retirement due to ill health. She was delighted to have children round the house and straightaway said she would baby-sit whenever Maria needed it. She'd be another adult around the place, she said, even though she couldn't exactly play football with

the kids. Gardening was Tomas's hobby, which gave Maria the benefit of a green oasis without the responsibility of having to look after it. Other advantages were that Emil could walk to his football coaching and that she could share the drive to work with Tomas Hartman. Apart from the saving – and every little helps when you're bringing up a family on one salary – they could chat about minor police business on the way. All in all, she reckoned the Hartman's deal was better than living almost gratis at Eksta.

'Hi, Marianne. I've bought you the book we were talking about yesterday. You go first and I'll borrow it from you when you've finished it. If you think it's any good, that is. I bought detective stories for myself. I felt like a bit of escapism and *Plague Myths* seemed a little too real right now. The blurb says it covers the lot, from the Black Death to Spanish Flu. Actually, they've come up with new Swedish statistics from the Spanish flu period. In the order of 100,000 people died. That alone makes the book sound heavy going.'

'Thanks, Maria, that was nice of you. By the way, a friend of mine mentioned that Berit Hoas is in hospital. I hope it's nothing serious.'

## Chapter 8

Half asleep, Petter Cederroth was lying in bed and peering at the thin line of greyish daylight below the blind. Sonja had been in a couple of times to wake him, but he had told her to leave him in peace. He wanted to sleep for a little longer. She had told him that the police had called about an interview and that a hospital nurse had been on the line at midday. Something to do with Berit Hoas. People simply don't understand what it means to work nights. If your shift ends at seven in the morning, you're not asleep until, say, eight. By midday, you've had four hours sleep. Four hours! And they have the gall to ask: "Still in bed, are you?" No wonder you lose your temper. No one would dream of phoning a dayshift worker at two in the morning and go: "Fancy, still sleeping", all astonished. Fucking lack of respect, that's the long and short of it!

Driving a taxi all night is no sinecure, especially not at the weekend. Apart from all the folk coming off the late boat from the mainland with enough luggage to cope with a winter on Sand Island, and rabbiting on about the whereabouts of the taxi queue, who got to the Queue-Here sign first and suchlike, weekends bring lads who've been to the pub, and won't stop chattering except for when they try to bargain about the fare. Then there're women in labour, or as near as damn-it and, who need hospital double-quick and woman, who've had a row with their blokes and are off to stay with their sister or mother, except they've left their money behind. The goings-on of the night merge when you've slept on it all for a day. For some reason, sleep is shallower during the day than at night, and you dream more.

Petter had woken up feeling cold. Trying to pull up the duvet, he realised it was the floor and that he was soaked in sweat. Grey skies outside and a cool bedroom. Why sweat? Had he caught something? Supporting himself on an elbow, Petter reached for the glass of water on the bedside table. It was stale and tepid. His throat hurt when he swallowed. Such a bad time to fall ill. What about the trouble he had taken to instruct Sonja about the return of carrier pigeons from the race and how to stop the pigeon-clock? It had been a tough call, but by roping her in he could do a few extra rounds with the taxi and do his bit to save for their autumn holiday, once the high seasons was finished. Sonja had set her heart on going to China.

Petter leaned back on the pillow and closed his eyes. The events of last night were still going round and round in his head. A long time of driving a taxi means that

you got to recognise regular fares, but to most people the driver becomes a non-person, once you've stated your destination and settled down. That means the driver is well placed to observe without being seen. That's how it was last night when he drove one of the doctors at the new health centre. One of these private centres, that is, where the nurses wear airhostess-style tailored outfits, speak to you in clear, posh tones and explain things so precisely, it's as if someone listened in to check on them. Sonja said they have to pass a voice test. It wouldn't surprise him. Anyway, this doc was someone called Raine Hammar. Petter had read an article about him in the paper. Tall bloke, two metres or as near as made no difference. Classy suit and smartly cut hair. But he had a cold or something, kept snorting and clearing his throat. After ten minutes or so the noises he made began to get on Petter's nerves. Hammar's wife, who was a doctor too, had been pictured in the paper. Good-looking woman, but determined, it showed. She wasn't the female in the taxi, though. Hammar's companion was young and pretty, with long blonde hair, short white skirt and knee-high boots. Could've been his daughter, if he let his daughter dress like that. They were going to somewhere on Jungman Street, but according to the paper Hammar lived in grand house on Norderklint, all o 4.5 million kronors' worth.

Risking life and limb of pedestrians and cyclists, Petter had been watching the couple in the mirror. The girl's movements had been easy and confident when she pulled down her partner's trouser zip. This wasn't the first time. When she bent over his crotch, she caught Petter's eye in the mirror, smiled a little and winked. Right then Petter missed the roundabout exit, but going round a second time didn't seem to worry them. When they arrived, Hammer had pressed a five hundred kronor note in Petter's hand and murmured: "Discretion is part of your job, isn't it?" And Petter, who reckoned a handsome tip is never wrong, replied: "That goes without saying."

The rest of the night didn't quite reach the same level of entertainment. Still, the elderly lady he picked up from the midnight ferry was good value. She wanted to go to Fårö, where she had planned to stay for a while in a cottage at Skär, rented from a distant relative. When they got there she was unsure about which house it was, at least in the dark. By then it was almost half past one in morning and no time to go knocking on doors, so she had come back into town again and got herself a room at Visby Grand Hotel. Not short of the ready, obviously. She had even thanked him for the chat, saying it was worth the fare and more. By then Petter had a feeling in the back of his neck that there never was a relative's cottage on Skär. Instead she had paid for a little night-time adventure, for his company and the roundtrip. Not, Petter thought, that he had done much except listening to her fantastic tales from the past. What she had to say was so interesting he wouldn't have minded driving her for

free. There was the story of the newly-arrived Fårö vicar, who had proclaimed that all the farmers must pay their tithes and got a bullet through his ear for his trouble. The bullet had hit the altarpiece and you could still see the hole under Judas's feet, where it served to warn the priest's successors. The lady had gone on to speak, chuckling to herself, about the old eccentrics in Fårö, who had never gone away. Why travel, when you're already living in the centre of things? She had recalled another story about a vicar, an easy-going character, whose foot had slipped on the brake after an evening on the tiles. His car had gone crashing in through the fence at Hilda's, who had a house at the bend. Ah, my dear Hilda, not to worry, it's just me, your father in God. The lady was a good mimic and he had laughed heartily at her unctuous priest. Perhaps the best of her stories was the one about "Everyone's Daddy". It was a man who had decided it was a shame to grow up without having someone to call Daddy, so he took on all doubtful paternity cases in Fårö. Which is why just about the entire population is related.

After leaving the chatty lady, he had driven a chap with chest spasms to the hospital. A big emergency routine started up the moment they arrived. Petter would have liked to enquire about Berit Hoas, but didn't get round to it. No one was paying any attention to him. As it was, he was grateful that his fare had survived the journey, despite his obviously severe chest pain. Should've called the ambulance, of course, but he hadn't wanted to cause any trouble. Then there had been a quiet period, roughly between three and four in the morning, and Petter had managed to get forty winks, still sitting at the wheel. When the infection doctor questioned him, he would admit it straight out, but that was later on and, so far, Petter had no idea of the excitement about to start in the near future.

'Petter, enough is enough. You've got to get up. Someone from the police is here and wants to ask you questions. I'm giving him coffee.'

Sonja pulled the duvet off him and snatched at the blind cord, making the fabric fly up and wind itself one extra turn round its rod. He hated her doing that. Fixing the mechanism was tricky work. Besides, the light hurt his eyes. His whole body was aching.

'If they want to ask about Ruben, I've got nothing more to say,' he muttered. 'I found him upstairs, dead in his bed. And that's that.'

DI Jesper Ek settled down at the kitchen table, watching as Sonja Cederroth brought cake tins from the larder. Fancy, she had the same set of tins as his Gran, stackable, round ones in red and yellow and green. Sonja was obviously a home-baking ace. She produced deep-fried plain biscuits drizzled with sugar, hazelnut slices, iced cupcakes, almond wafers and extra-large saffron buns, and followed up

with coconut yum-yums, a chocolate roly-poly oozing home-made creamy filling, crisp sponge fingers and chocolate-chip cookies.

‘Please, don’t go to any trouble for my sake,’ Jesper said weakly.

Sonja smiled.

‘Come on, we’re not over on the mainland. They might well stop at “seven kinds of sweet-meats”, but we’re on Gotland now. We never stint ourselves, do we? But what about these terrible things I hear about poor Ruben? First he kills all his pigeons and then he eats a dish of poisonous mushrooms. And, as if that wasn’t enough, he gives dear Berit Hoas a portion of the mushrooms. Why should do that to her? Such a nice woman! It’s a dreadful business!’

The kitchen tap was dripping and Sonja turned it off with a dishtowel over her hand. Someone with dirty hands might have been touching it. Well, you never know. Better safe than sorry.

Petter had emerged from the bedroom and interrupted her flow of talk.

‘What you said there isn’t right, Sonja.’

He had managed to dress in shirt and trousers, but his back and arms had been aching too much to pull his socks up properly. In the end he had balled them up and thrown the ball after Sonja when she came along to nag at him for the fourth time. It hit the small of her back, but she didn’t even notice.

Ek made a few preparatory notes.

‘Please, Mr Cederroth, could you start again from the beginning. You arrived at Nilsson’s home at about ten in the morning. Why was your reason for calling?’

Petter launched into account of the weekend’s pigeon race, how Ruben had failed to turn up to register his birds and dreadful sight that had met Petter in Ruben’s loft. When no one answered the doorbell, he got hold of Ruben’s neighbour Berit, and, once Petter had broken a windowpane, they had entered the house together.

‘I suppose Ruben might have taken his own life, as Sonja says, but the mushroom dish was Berit’s. And I for one have eaten her morel casserole in the past without ill effects. Berit is one hell of a cook.’

Sonja bristled.

‘Is that so? And when did you eat at Berit’s? You never told me. Why don’t you carry on having your meals there, Petter? Better still, why don’t you move in? That was the plan anyway, wasn’t it? Before you got lumbered with me.’

‘Let’s stick to the present,’ Ek said to stop Sonja, who was about to carry on in the same vein.

Thoughtlessly, hubby had managed to hit a sore spot and hit it hard. Obviously, Sonja Cerderroth took enormous pride in what she served up and didn’t

care at all to be compared with lesser cooks. Cederroth seemed untroubled by her harangue, so it probably wasn't the first time they argued about that kind of thing. The man was droopy though. Held his head in his hands. As a matter of fact, he didn't look at all well.

'Did Ruben have any enemies?' Ek asked.

In fact, they hadn't found anything to suggest that a crime had taken place. Ruben's body showed no signs of injury and his wallet was in place under his pillow. The question was routine.

'No enemies,' Sonja said. 'But no friends either. As for strangers in the area, a man selling pictures at the door was about last Thursday. But that's all.'

She stood still, holding the coffee pot and trying to think how to put it.

'Ruben lived alone and never let anyone come close, if you see what I mean. I've been thinking about all his pigeons dying like that. You know, there's this illness called chlamydia, you can get it from having sex with an infected person. I read all about it in a magazine. Parrots can give it to you and if pigeons catch it, they develop pneumonia and die. Come to think of it, I wonder how the pigeons catch it ...' Sonja said thoughtfully and shuddered a little.

Petter interrupted her.

'You've got the wrong end of the stick. Björkman developed pneumonia from an infected pigeon and the bird disease is called psittacosis. And it hasn't got anything to do with having sex. You shouldn't speak off the top of your head like that.'

'That's as maybe,' she said sullenly. 'What's going to happen next then? Who inherits from Ruben, his brother or his niece? Ruben's niece is Mikaela Nilsson. She's in the government now. Did you know that? I imagine she's got plenty as it is. You know, no one knows who her father is, Ruben or Erik.'

Petter shook his head, obviously embarrassed.

'Sonja, that's none of our business. Besides, you must know there's no way Ruben would let Erik inherit. He has probably hidden a will somewhere.'

Ek said no to a third cup and thanked them both. Petter thought it only polite to come with him to the door, but it was hard work to get up from the table, what with his thumping headache and sore muscles. For the last half an hour he had wanted badly to go to bed, but Sonja had laid on quite a spread. He supposed she wanted to show the policeman what a good housewife she was. Better than Berit, who was a professional cook.

'What happens next,' Petter asked before Ek turned to walk away. 'I mean, about the funeral and so on? Who deals with all that?'

'Whoever is Mr Nilsson's closest relative, I suppose. Unless the will states something different. But he can't be buried until the investigation is finished. There's no evidence at present of any crime, but we're obliged to wait for the autopsy results.'

Petter's hand went to the stubble on his jaw.

'Autopsy?' Is it worth wasting taxpayers' money on that? For Christ's sake, Ruben was an old man. You must die from something, isn't that right?'

*approx. 7, 080 words*