

# The Girl with No Heart

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The door opens. The sounds from the party are no longer a distant bass beat from the speakers, the music and the hum of voices surge into the room. Laughter billows as they pull the truth down over my head. The truth that I don't fit in. That I'm not wanted.

A pillow over my face. Soft. Dark. And then this cold thing against my belly.

What are you doing? No! Stop it!

I'm naked. They're taking my skin. They're taking everything that's me. I'm disappearing. The laughter never lets up: Haha, haha.

I thought everything was going to be fine. I thought this was the turning point. And it's turning. It's turning. It's turning. I thought Fredrik had locked the door. He said he'd locked it! He's in on this. He's in. He's eeny meeny! And I'm out.

I'm here by mistake. I mean nothing. Might as well put up a new name plate on the door: Home of Nobody.

I have no one, I am nobody.

Nobody.

I'm dead.

Wednesday 26. November

1.

During the day, the world had gotten dirty. A blackish brown, ragged carpet of snow mixed with salt had covered the roads, and the snow ploughs had tossed the sludge several meters onto the shoulder of the road, which had started out white. Now the sudden cold had frozen everything solid.

A couple of drowsy people were the only passengers on board the bus. The driver barely glanced up as Agnar put a hundred kroner bill on the small plate where other people placed their electronic bus passes.

How long had it been since the last time he had sat on this bus, lurching its way through the snowed in orchards of Lier? It had to be at least twenty years. He couldn't remember, usually he treated himself to a taxi. They'd changed the route, too, and he'd forgotten to switch buses at Lierbyen, so he was taken for an interminable detour, up the west side of the valley all the way up to Sylling, before the bus finally headed back down the east side toward Tranby. In places the road was so narrow that two large vehicles could just barely pass each other. The bus slowed down and almost stopped to let a semi-trailer truck get past.

One little drink would do me nicely, Agnar thought and pulled out the bottle he had in his pocket. No. No. That's supposed to be a present. Put it back nicely. I said nicely. That's it.

He had spent over two hundred kroner at the state-owned liquor store on a half-bottle for mother. By the time the bus drove past the old age home, the bottle had magically reappeared in his hand. Just one shot. One little sip couldn't hurt. He unscrewed the cap and put the bottle to his lips, quickly, so the bus driver wouldn't notice.

He remained seated with his hand clapped to his jacket pocket to make sure the bottle stayed put. A pleasant heat burned in his chest.

- Well alright, if you Absolut insist.

Agnar laughed at his own joke and put the bottle to his mouth.

The bus window was covered by a dirty pattern that reminded him of the grey-speckled linoleum floor from the sixties back home in his mother's kitchen. Through the dirt he saw scattered villas with firewood stacked along the outer walls. A narrow ski track crossed a field. He registered everything that sped by with drowsy inattention. Houses, fields, trees, forest, mailboxes, fence, houses, fields, trees. Then he let his eyes rest on the mud pattern again and saw only the contours of the landscape beyond it. Sleep threatened to win him over, but he didn't want to close his eyes. If he closed his eyes, *she* would appear.

If he focused his gaze on the dirty pane, he just might be able to keep her away for a while longer. But it was no good. The mud on the window seemed to shift, and suddenly there she was, in the same way that he could sometimes make out animals and trolls in the clouds on a summer day. She stared back at him and retracted her lips, baring her ruined teeth. Welcome home, she said.

Agnar focused on the landscape again and tried to figure out where he was. His heart sank when he realized that he was getting closer to the sharp curve by the gorge. He had memories of a place like it. Memories that couldn't be erased, that would always be there like a chasm within him, deep and deadly. The brook that flowed at the bottom of it was frozen over and covered in snow, but he knew that the water was still dripping and trickling under the ice. It never stopped.

Drip.

Drip.  
Drip.  
Like torture.

Thursday 27. November

The phone on the nightstand shook. Detective Chief Inspector Verner Jacobsen slapped his hand over the mobile as if it were an insect; quickly and unerringly so as not to annoy Ingrid. He peered at the display as he slipped quietly out of bed. The white, freshly ironed shirt which hung on a clothes hanger on the row of pegs behind the door, crumpled to the floor as he passed.

- Hello? He cleared his throat into the speaker as he fumbled to put the shirt back on the hanger. In the gloom his hand brushed against the dark suit which was also hanging there, pressed and ready, and the room seemed to contract around him. He tumbled out and tried to hear what the voice in the other end wanted to tell him in the middle of the night.

- Did I wake you?

Verner grunted in answer, but Detective Chief Superintendent Thomas Lindstrand pretended not to hear him.

- Can you go to Tranby? There's been a suspicious death. A teenaged girl. Found in a wooded area.

Verner Jacobsen was suddenly wide awake. No more children, he thought. I can't take any more dead kids. Just then a violent rage seized him. Damn it, didn't Thomas Lindstrand know what he was going through?

- Thomas, I'm... he began, but the anger evaporated as quickly as it had appeared.

-...I'm coming, he concluded his sentence, realizing that he'd be better off involving himself in something than lying sleepless in bed waiting for dawn.

- Good, Lindstrand said. - And could you get hold of Bitte Røed? She needs the experience. Besides, Roar is already on his way there, it might be useful for her to meet him.

Verner hung up. Lorca stuck her snout out of the cage and looked expectantly at him.

- Not now, Lorca, he whispered. - We'll take a walk when I get back.

Verner called Bitte Røed from the bathroom. He suggested picking her up at home, since she had only just moved to Tranby. As he spoke, he hunted around in the top drawer under the sink until he found a ~~hair-elastic~~ band. He ended the conversation and gathered his hair in a ponytail, avoiding his tired face in the mirror. Then he snuck back into the bedroom, opened the wardrobe and pulled out a pair of socks from the drawer, grabbed a sweater at random in the dark and the thermal underwear which Ingrid had insisted he needed to walk the dog in cold weather. Ingrid turned over in bed and let out a sleepy sigh.

He stood there for a moment, looking at the clothes hung up behind the door; the white shirt like a pale ghost and the suit which merged with the darkness.

3.

Agnar couldn't remember how he had reached the house. He had gotten off the bus. It had been dark in his head, dark all around him. He had placed one foot in front of the other, he vaguely remembered stumbling and falling flat on his face in the snowbank. He had fought with some branches... he didn't really know. His hands had small cuts and perforations as if he'd had an unfriendly encounter with sharp twigs and spruce needles. But he had remembered the way. And here he was. If only he had had some more liquor. He needed a shot and patted his chest, but the bottle he had had in his pocket, was gone. He held onto the banister and leaned against the entrance door with all his weight.

- Open up the door of your heaaart, let the sun shine in...

The door was unlocked and slid open.

- Phew!

He had been thinking that in the worst case he might have to break down the door if she didn't open. Relieved, he closed the door behind him and turned the key in the lock out of old habit. He tiptoed in but tripped on his mother's slippers which were lying in the middle of the entrance hall and crashed against the wall. A framed photograph fell to the floor and shattered.

- Shhhh!

He put a finger to his lips and leered at a younger and far more handsome version of himself behind the broken glass.

- So you're down there, are you?

His grin became a grimace, he sank to his knees and began picking up the pieces of glass. He cut his index finger and thumb, but felt no pain. Instead he watched fascinated as the blood trickled down his fingers. A sound, someone breathing, made him look up.

- Lilly! Well if it isn't Lillygirl ...

The dog was standing on the threshold. Its nose was twitching, the tail hung down. It gave a low growl.

Here, puppy, you remember Agnarboy, don't you? I know you were just a little pup the last time I saw you, but hell, come over here girl!

He used his fairest voice to coax the dog into approaching.

- Lillybitch, here girl, come here.

The dog edged closer, moving in a half-circle. He grabbed its neck when it got close enough and pulled it to him.

- See Lilly, I ain't gonna hurt you. Don't you be afraid now. Ain't never harmed you yet.

Something let up inside him. It trickled out of him. The dog sat quite still now, it whined, but let him pet it.

- Shhh! Don't wake mother. D'ya know if she's got anything to drink? I just need a small shot. Them wouldn't serve me over at that restaurant. Refused! On my Great Liberation Day. I notice no one was standing in the doorway here either, welcoming me with the bottle ready and the cap off.

He sobbed. The dog licked his face. He got to his feet. Damned-~~it~~ if he was going to sit here blubbering like some snotty kid. Maybe his mother had a bottle of homemade red currant wine in the cellar somewhere? He swayed on the threshold and held on to the banister on his way down the stairs, but even so he slipped halfway and slid down the rest of the staircase on his back. He groaned, couldn't bring himself to stand up, and crawled the rest of the way into the store room. He snickered as he caught sight of the old freezer, locked with a padlock.

- Ain't nobody gonna steal your supplies, mother.

He crawled on and fumbled along the walls until he reached the shelves at the back of the room.

- But you ain't so particular about your bottles any more. Jeez. Cognac!

He unscrewed the cap and put the bottle to his lips. O holy night! His throat was on fire. He staggered to his feet and tottered up the stairs again. Lily was nowhere to be seen. The door to his mother's bedroom was closed. Thank the devil she was a sound sleeper. He considered entering the kitchen to make himself a sandwich, but decided against it. Now that he had cognac, he didn't need anything else. He sat down in the living room. Could have used a cigarette. He looked in his pockets and found a cigarette stub, humming a tune under his breath as he lit it.

- Ooooo, holy night, o holy night before the world ...

He managed to get four puffs out of the half-smoked cigarette before he hit the filter.

- ... and my health my joy my freeedom!

Agnar stood up. The walls spun round. Just one wee little shot in bed, he thought and tried to remember where he'd put the bottle.

- Why, there you are! All alone on the coffee table and won't say a word.

Agnar grabbed the bottle, tiptoed past his mother's bedroom, but stopped for a moment and whispered into the key hole:

- Thanks for the drinks, mom.

Then he made his way up the stairs to the floor above. He sat down on the bed, and as the contents of the bottle diminished, the darkness closed in around him.

4.

Two bus shelters and a taxi sign revealed that the place where Verner Jacobsen turned off from the main road was a bus stop and not a large roundabout. Tall pines towered from the median strip. The place did not quite match the name Birch Crescent, or Bitch scent as someone, using their creative powers and a sharp tool, had scratched out in one of the shelters. Verner Jacobsen let the engine idle as he waited for Bitte Røed. The low row houses from the seventies lined the road like grey barracks, and with the Siberian cold which had held the eastern counties in an iron grip over the last 24 hours, he was reminded of the Soviet Union at its darkest hour. In front of one of the dwellings someone had tried to liven up the scene by twisting a blinking string of red, green and blue Christmas lights around an overgrown Thuja. Just then someone tore open the car door.

- Jesus, it's cold!

Bitte Røed jumped into the seat and hugged her arms around herself.

- Where are we going? Verner Jacobsen asked, rolling slowly toward the main road.

- To the right here and then left at the next crossroads. I don't know this place so well yet, but there's supposed to be a logging road just after the intersection.

The car spun on the ice-covered asphalt as it swung out from the bus stop.

- Are you OK? Bitte Røed asked.

Verner felt his face tightening. He couldn't answer.

- Would you like me to come to the funeral?

Would he? Of course he would like her to be there.

- No, there's no need, he said curtly.

Silence descended between them. He pretended to be busy looking for the turn-off.

- There it is, Bitte Røed said, pointing. - You'll probably need a little speed, it's pretty steep to begin with.

The road was narrow and led through thick forest. Darkness crept up to the car on both sides. They passed a small farm with a ramshackle barn, and a little further on, two houses close together with a shared playhouse in the yard. A small house clad in Eternit siding with a fenced-in dog yard lay on its own still further into the forest. A plain lightbulb dangled from a metal arm over the entrance. The rest of the area was all forest.

- Remind me to note in the crime scene report that there are no lights or any visible activity in any of the neighboring houses, Verner said.

- A little early for most people, I'd guess. Bitte Røed yawned as she wrote down the time: 05.38.

- It's important that we visit the crime scene while it's still warm, Verner mumbled as he parked the car close to the snowbank.

- How warm can it be? Do you know that my thermometer at home showed minus ~~eighteen~~two degrees Celsius[~~Fahrenheit~~]?

Bitte Røed shivered.

- It's a teenager, Verner said as they approached the first barrier tapes. In the distance they could see the jumping beams of a couple of flashlights, in what was probably the center of the crime scene.

- A girl, he went on. - Thomas Lindstrand says there's reason to believe we have a suspicious death on our hands.

Usually a message like that made his body fill up with adrenaline. But not this time. The restlessness which usually accompanied the first questions that sprang to his mind - whether it had been an accident, a suicide or a homicide, had been replaced by a sort of sadness. The dark suit on its hanger behind the bedroom door had made him enter some hibernation-like state, where emotions had to survive on a bare minimum.

Two crime technicians dressed in white were already busy at the crime scene. They resembled ghosts hovering over the landscape. A camera blitz lit up the area with rapid flashes and a laser measure sliced a blue beam through the night. Two officers in uniform were standing by the barrier tape. Verner Jacobsen and Bitte Røed were entered in the log and handed each their paper coveralls and plastic socks to wear over their boots. They walked next to the path so as not to destroy possible traces. Verner Jacobsen felt like an astronaut, as if he were moving in a vacuum. He couldn't see the falling snow, but felt an unpleasant prickling on his face.

- Damn it, Bitte Røed exclaimed. She was following behind in his tracks.

Verner turned round and pointed the flashlight at her.

-Anything wrong?

Bitte lifted one leg and shook it. Verner was immediately reminded of Lorca, lifting her hind leg to make yellow holes in the snow.

-Took my low boots. And forgot to put on tights. I'll freeze to death.

Verner didn't say anything, but he imagined his face must have stiffened, for she shut up at once.

5.

Thursday, 27. November. Night

Ugly diary

Yes. That's what I'll call you from now on.

And no one must ever know what happened last night. It can't be written about, but somehow I have to write it down to get rid of it. Words are painkillers. Words are drugs. Diary, you're all I have now. You're the only one I can talk to about the stuff that can't be talked about. That can't be whispered about, even, can't be thought about. I'm so scared. Much more scared than I thought possible. I'd never imagined that I'd... And Fredrik... I really thought... I didn't think you could... No, stop! Don't write anything more. Not a word.

And if you see this, you who are sitting there now, reading this! If you've read this far... then put away this book right now, or else...

- Marte?

Marte slipped the diary under the pillow, closed her eyes and pretended she had fallen asleep with the light on. If she lay there quietly and didn't move, maybe he would leave her alone.

- You're home, thank God. I've been so worried...

She turned over slowly as if she was being dragged out of a dream. Her brain seemed to be trying to invent new laws which could somehow justify that she didn't want to talk to her father.

- I brought your boot.

She started.

- Did you walk home wearing just one boot?

She shut her eyes tight and felt a thin line of compressed tears trickle from between her lashes.

- Did you lose your phone, too? I tried to call you.

Marte shook her head.

- You have to tell me what happened, Marte.

- Ran out of battery, she whispered.

- What I meant was, you have to tell me what happened tonight. It might be vitally important.

- For what?

Her father hesitated.

- Well, I don't really know. For everything that's going to happen.

- But how do we know whether they're going to do it again?

- What did they do, Marte?

- Nothing.

- It's important that I know. You have to let me help you.

- There's nothing you can do.

- We can report them.

- For what?

The fear hit her hard, flattened her heart. She rolled over and buried her face in the pillow. Her father laid his hand on her back. She shook it off and curled up into a ball under the covers.

- Don't!

- What happened tonight, Marte?

- Nothing.

- Something happened.

- No!

- Alright, he said. - We'll talk about it in the morning. Try to sleep now.

He tried to hide it, but she knew exactly how his voice sounded when he didn't want her to know that he was frightened, too.

6.

The face which poked up out of the snow had an unpleasant whiteness, not unlike the color of an eyeball. The frost had drawn brocade roses on the blue down jacket. At first he thought she was wearing a clip in her hair. A reddish tinge under the thin layer of snow, frozen in the sudden cold. Then he realized it was blood. He breathed in the cold air jerkily



and felt a tugging in his lungs. The girl lay right beneath a steep overhang in the rock wall; there were twelve, maybe fifteen feet to the top. Did she fall?

- Pushed, Bitte Røed said.

- What? Verner wondered whether she had read his thoughts.

- I think she was pushed. Look at the way she's lying. She didn't try to break the fall with her hands. See how one arm is lying under her body, and the other one is flung out to the side? If she was alive when she fell, mind you.

- Must have been cold to walk around bareheaded last night, Verner said.

- And she's not wearing anything on her hands, either, Bitte added.

Her voice cracked, and Verner realized that the girl had to be about the same age as Julie, her daughter.

Verner Jacobsen put his hand on his colleague's shoulder, but Bitte Røed shook it off. He approached the dead girl. On the one hand that was visible, the slightly curved fingers were splayed out, resembling a claw with the nails lacquered purple. She was pretty, but she was wearing too much makeup, and there was a small red scratch on her brow. Did someone get mad at you, Verner Jacobsen wondered and crouched down next to her. Her eyes were wide open. As he looked into the empty, staring eyes, pain rolled over him, it crept under his skin and shaded all his actions. I'm not being objective, he reprimanded himself. But no matter how hard he tried, he just wished that she would suddenly, as in a pre-Christmas miracle, blink her eyes. He laid two fingers upon her throat.

- She's already been declared dead, a sharp voice behind him said.

- Please don't touch her.

Verner Jacobsen withdrew his hand guiltily. He stood up and looked straight into Roar Holm's shoulder. Holm was a sturdily built man; according to Verner, he must be about six foot one, both in height and in width.

- You haven't met Bitte Røed, Verner said, deflecting attention onto his colleague.

- Roar Holm-Hansen, pathologist, the large man said.

- Bitte Røed, uh... detective inspector, Bitte Røed replied.

- What can you tell us, Verner asked.

- She's young, Roar Holm-Hansen said. - And if she's the girl who was reported missing by that anxious couple earlier tonight, then she's only fifteen. It's too early to say anything about the cause of death. When all traces have been secured and the area has been measured and photographed, I'll take her in and put her on the bench. Straight off, it looks as if she's been beaten to death. The blood may indicate that the back of her skull has been crushed. That's some pile of rocks she fell on.

Verner looked around. At first he had had the impression that the whole area was covered by two feet of snow. Now he realized that the place where the girl was lying, was nearly bare. The overhang functioned like an awning above the stony ground.

- How long has she been dead?

- I can't give you an exact time - the cold is extreme, she's poorly dressed and her body temperature has probably dropped faster than normal. I've taken a hypoxanthine test from her eye fluid, that provides a more accurate result than just measuring the drop in body temperature.

Roar Holm-Hansen rubbed the back of his head so that his woolen cap slid down on his brow.

- My estimate is that the accident occurred sometime between eight thirty and eleven p.m. ~~twenty thirty and twenty-three hundred hours~~ last night. The question remains whether she died instantaneously or lost consciousness and then froze to death.

- The accident, Verner Jacobsen thought and felt an anchor hit bottom inside him.

Maybe she just tripped and fell, and lay there unconscious while the cold consumed her. Accidents happen, we accept it, and most people would acknowledge that nature has no mercy. Crimes, on the other hand..

- I'll be able to give you a preliminary report shortly after you finish up here. You'll get top priority.

Verner Jacobsen stood with his back to the girl and watched as the pathologist labored up the hill to the main road with the heavy breathing of the overweight. Frost smoke surrounded him until he was out of sight up on the road. Verner felt the cold creep up his spine. He turned abruptly and shone the flashlight over the dead girl. It was as if she had let out one last icy breath that hit the nape of his neck.

- Nonsense. It's just the wind.

- Pardon?

Verner looked confusedly at Bitte Røed. Had he been speaking aloud?

- Nothing, nothing, he mumbled and turned his gaze back to the body.

The wide open eyes. *Help me*, Verner Jacobsen thought, it's as if she wanted to say, *Help me!* There should be a law against dying with so much un-lived life ahead of you. And somewhere or other a mother and a father were waiting for her with their hearts wrapped in hopeful anxiety.

- What's that?

Bitte Røed pricked his arm and shone her flashlight over the snow-covered rocks and up along something which in the gloom might be mistaken for a thick tree trunk.

- An obelisk, Verner said with surprise. - What an odd place to set up a monument, in the middle of the forest.

The very moment he spoke, he knew that whatever the original intention had been, from now on, the stone would carry a different meaning. He breathed through his nostrils and felt his nose hair freeze to ice. A bird flew up. Branches stirred and a cloud of snow descended as the bird took off. Then silence returned. Cold rippled through him. It was as if a gravestone had already been erected. Or had someone deliberately chosen this very spot to take a young person's life?

7.

*"Stop! Agnar, that's enough! Stop it, do you hear me?"*

*The scream that followed sounded hollow. His mother's voice was inside a speech balloon, like in a cartoon strip, and couldn't harm him anymore. But he was still afraid. He stood by the river bank and watched the snow change colors. Water bubbled up from the ice, as from a wound with a cracked scab on it.*

*"Agnar!"*

*He put his hands over his ears.*

Agnar opened his eyes. The sheet was damp. His throat parched. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth and he reached out for the glass of water which always stood on the bedside table. His hand couldn't find the table. Peering through the twilight he realized that there wasn't any table. At first he couldn't make out where he was, but then he noticed the faded poster on the wall. An old Donald Duck cover page. The model airplane he and his dad had built, still hung from the ceiling. In the happy days. Before. Before Agnar turned violent.

The house was quiet. Agnar lay there listening. He heard the dog padding over the floor downstairs. Then it began to whine. Wasn't the old lady going to let her out? Had the old hag forgotten to turn on her hearing aid? He groaned and retched as he tried to sit up. A yellow mush landed on the rag rug in front of the bed. A half bottle of cognac lay on the floor.

- Dang, where'd you get hold of that, Agnar my boy? I'll be damned. Good boy. Good boy.

He picked the bottle up and shook it. There was still a dash left at the bottom.

- Repair, restore, reverse, uh, repair...

The whining from downstairs was replaced by a loud barking. That's what had woken him up, Lilly's barking. Not his mother's shout, which he now realized had been part of a dream.

- Mom!

His voice sounded rusty. He cleared his throat, brought up mucus and spit into the vomit on the rug.

- Mom! Let the dog out!

The barking stopped, and he heard Lilly bounding up the stairs.

- There, Lilly. Nice Lilly.

He petted and stroked her mottled fur. Then he noticed the dried blood on his hands and frowned. Had he been in a fight? All he could remember of the night before were fragments: He'd been thrown out of the restaurant. A bunch of youths had laughed at him. Flashing blue lights. Blue lights? He wasn't sure. But he remembered the snow in his boots. He'd taken them off and put them back on several times. And then thick forest, an unfriendly encounter with a snowbank. The rest was darkness. And something about broken glass. Had he cut himself? There seemed to be cuts on his hand. Now he saw that his shirt, too, was full of reddish-brown stains. Had he bled that much?

- Let's go find Mom, then, Lilly.

There was something soothing about talking to the dog. Lilly wagged her tail slightly, then she turned abruptly and headed down the stairs.

- Alright, alright, I'll take you out, he called after her. - Just have to take a leak myself first.

He went down the stairs to the ground floor. It felt like he was on the roof of a skyscraper that was swaying vaguely and nauseatingly. Jesus, I'm going to be drunk for a fortnight, he thought and clung to the banister. He had to get himself something to eat.

Half unconscious, he leaned against the door frame and opened the door to the kitchen.

He was met by a sight that made him throw up all over again.

First thought: Oh hell!

Second thought: Oh fucking hell!

Suddenly other glimpses of the night before came back to him. He had opened the entrance door and felt the smell of his childhood home, then tripped on his mother's slippers. The photo of himself as a boy, under broken glass. Then blackness. He had no idea how he had gotten up the stairs to his old room and lain down on the bed. It wasn't the first time he had blacked out from drinking, nor the first time he was close to becoming psychotic. He knew the signs. What he was seeing, might not be real.

It's not true that everything spins around when you're drunk, Agnar thought. It's more like a broken old vinyl record. It doesn't spin. Everything just repeats itself. He saw his mother and the blood. Mother, blood. The blood and his mother lying in a pool of it, next to the sink and the kitchen bench. A plate with glazed leftovers. He had seen this before. How many times had he dreamed of sticking a knife in her back. Watching her fall. Hearing her scream. And in the moment just before she died, he would tell her how much he hated her. But this was no dream. What he saw, was real.

In consultation with the crime scene technicians, Verner Jacobsen decided to erect a tent around the deceased to prevent the blizzard from erasing valuable leads which they might have overlooked up to now. The parents had been taken care of, and he felt a shameful relief at not having had to deal with that part. He wouldn't have managed. Not today. The twenty-seventh of November would be remembered as a dark day by more people than himself.

- Are you cold? he asked his colleague.

Bitte Røed's lips were blue and she moved like a penguin. He couldn't tell whether she was shaking her head or just shivering.

- I think we can head out of here pretty soon, he went on. - We just need to have a chat with the first unit at the crime scene before we go.

The two policemen were still standing guard by the barrier tape up on the road. Poor bastards, Verner Jacobsen thought. Isn't someone going to relieve you soon? He could see that they were trying to keep warm by stamping their feet back and forth outside the barrier. They hadn't been encircled by journalists brandishing long lenses yet, but they were bound to arrive soon.

- I'd like some information about what you saw when you arrived at the scene, Verner Jacobsen began. - Who reported this? Except for the pathologist, the only people I've seen here are police.

- The ambulance was here when we arrived, one of the officers explained. - The District Medical Officer came pretty fast. There were two witnesses present from the start. The boy who found the girl, and the man who reported it. We questioned them briefly, but then we sent them home. They're to give their statements at the station later today.

- Why didn't you take them in for questioning straight away? Verner Jacobsen spoke sharply.

He caught the uncertain look that flared up in the eyes of one of the policemen.

- Well, uh, our assessment of the situation was that it wasn't necessary, the smaller of the two men said. His mouth reminded Verner of a chicken's beak. He pursed his lips and looked anxiously at his mate.

- Yes, the other one continued. - The doctor who was here, assumed the girl had been dead for some time, and this young boy was afraid his parents would get anxious if he kept them waiting up for him. And the man was real upset. He was looking for his daughter whom he hadn't been able to contact. Naturally he was scared to death that something might have happened to her, as well. So we questioned them briefly and let them go. They have been told to report at the station during the morning hours.

Verner looked at the officers. So young, both of them, he thought. Maybe this was their first crime scene. He suddenly remembered how he himself, the very first time and quivering with adrenaline, had strung barrier tape around a garden where an old lady had been found dead along with her cat. He recalled how his hands had trembled as he took out the simple crime scene kit which was in the patrol car, while his thoughts raced in an attempt to remember everything he'd been taught about securing evidence and dealing with witnesses. Stress, Verner Jacobsen thought, chiefly paralyses those areas of the brain which normally make a person intelligent. It was no merit of his, he had realized afterward, that the police had solved the case. He smiled reassuringly at the young men.

- Do you have the names of the two?

Chicken beak looked relieved.

- The young boy's name is Fredrik. Fredrik Paulsen, he said, not without pride at being able to remember without checking his notes. - And the man who reported is called Kristian Skage.

He looked at his watch.

- I suppose you'll be the ones to take their statements? he continued.

- That will be your job, Verner told Bitte Røed.
- Huh? Bitte Røed breathed with her mouth open.

Verner Jacobsen suddenly felt weary.

- Would you mind, he asked. - I would have liked to take those statements myself, but as you know, there are other matters that I need to deal with today.

He felt a surge of irritation and had to bite his tongue so as not to make an inappropriate comment, or worse, start to cry.

- Do you mind? he repeated.

- That name, Bitte Røed said. She ignored Verner Jacobsen and looked fixedly at the officer. - Are you sure?

- Of course I'm sure, replied the man as he took a notebook out of his breast pocket. He showed her what he had written.

- Fredrik Paulsen found the girl. Kristian Skagen reported it. I was the one who spoke with them.

Bitte Røed could no longer feel her own body. The cold suddenly felt as sharp inside her as it did on the outside.

- Do you know them? Verner asked.

The question made her teeth to chatter. She considered back and forth in her mind how much she should say. She recalled the last time she had known one of the people involved in a homicide investigation. That time her daughter's boyfriend had been mixed up in a case where a five year old girl had disappeared. She remembered how upset Verner had been when he realized that she had withheld information.

- He's my boyfriend, she said quickly.

She was unable to look him in the eye as she continued.

- Kristian Skage. He's a journalist. We used to be childhood sweethearts, and now... He lives here at Tranby.

She had known, of course, that sooner or later it would come out that she was in a new relationship, but she had put off telling her colleague. Now she understood why. A sudden, vulnerable look appeared in his eyes, which were normally sharply focused. Verner Jacobsen was not a good-looking man. He was short and skinny, and his face was pockmarked with scars. Nevertheless, something shone through which she mistook for beauty.

- Your boyfriend?

Verner Jacobsen pronounced the two words as if he'd eaten something that made him sick to his stomach.

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Translated from Norwegian by Ingvild Burkey