

1 INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

SARA BLAEDEL

AUTHOR OF THE FORGOTTEN GIRLS

THE

KILLING

FOREST

THE KILLING FOREST

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[Begin Reading](#)
[Table of Contents](#)
[Newsletters](#)
[Copyright Page](#)

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1

He hesitated before grabbing the dead chicken his father held out to him, its white feathers peppered with blood close to where its head had been chopped off. Sune had always hated blood, the smell of it and the intense, dark color when it flows and forms a pool.

He couldn't let his father see his disgust. Not today. It would have been easier if his mother had come, he thought. He blinked a few times. She was dying. He had sat beside her bed almost all day. The worst was the IV; he couldn't stand to look where the needle entered her hand, even though a Band-Aid covered it. She had been asleep when his father said it was time to go.

For several months he had been looking forward to the initiation; to the ritual and party. Many times he had tried to imagine what it would be like to leave the house as a child and return that same night as a grown man. At least he would be considered a man, with the responsibilities and rights of one. Everyone else in his class had already gone through confirmation. But as an Asatro, a believer in the old Nordic religion, Sune had to wait until he turned fifteen to confirm his belief. Today was that day.

He dropped the chicken into the bucket his father had found in the laundry room, then set it on the floor mat on the vehicle's passenger side. Getting in, he sat scrunched up with his feet on the seat. His father had packed the white van with all the necessities for the midnight sacrifice; Sune had brought along two small gifts to the gods. One symbolized his childhood, the other his future. For the former he'd decided on a book he'd grown up with, but he found it incredibly hard to part with the worn-out edition of *Winnie-the-Pooh*, its spine held together by tape. His mother had read it so many times that the pages had begun falling out. The choice of the book had irritated his father, who'd suggested a soccer ball. But his mother sided with Sune.

He would also be parting with the big pocketknife his father had given him. Sune hoped the gods would reward him with courage and strength in his adult life, even though he had no plans to become a butcher like his father and grandfather before him. He just hadn't been able to think of anything better. And his father had been pleased.

Sune would also receive a gift, one that would nudge him in the right direction. His father, Lars, had gotten a butcher knife. Lars hadn't been particularly adept at reading or writing, so after his initiation he had left school to enter an apprenticeship under his own father. Sune had heard about a boy who received an airline ticket, with orders not to return until he stopped being a mama's boy. He never came back.

Sune hoped for a silver chain with Thor's hammer, which symbolized their Nordic belief. Wishing for the chain was actually his father's idea. As the van turned onto a narrow forest road, his father asked him if he was ready. To which Sune smiled and nodded.

He spotted the torches and bonfire in the distance. Twilight was falling, and the night sky threw dark shadows down between the trees, highlighting the fire, which was golden and inviting. Flames from the torches danced in the dark. His chest tingled when he saw that the others had arrived early

prepare everything for him.

Tonight the sacrifice would be in *his* honor. For the first time, he would join the men's circle. As far back as he could remember, Sune and his parents had met in the forest with the other Asatro. He loved the atmosphere, the great feasts held after the adults prayed to the gods, but had never been part of the circle. Until now he'd been under no obligation. After tonight, though, he would be forever bound by his vow. The circle could only be broken by animals and those too young to understand. The ceremony was holy. Usually he was sent with the other children to play behind the enormous bonfire site, with strict orders not to interrupt unless one of them was seriously hurt.

From now on he would be a part of the circle that called on the gods. He would participate when the drinking horn made its rounds, and as thanks for his initiation he would offer up the chicken to the gods, confirming his Nordic belief. During the past few months they had been going through all the rituals. His father had told him about the oath ring and impressed upon him that when you swear on the ring, you make a promise to the gods that cannot be broken.

He thought about the pig lying in the back of the van. At the end of the ceremony, it would be killed, its blood given as a sacrifice: the family's thanks to the gods for accepting him.

His father led the way to the bonfire, around which torches formed a ring a few meters out from the flames. It resembled a fortress. The silence suddenly felt awkward to Sune; it didn't help that the men solemnly lined up and hugged him. He wasn't sure what to say. He didn't dare smile, didn't want to look childish. The gothi slipped his robe on, and silently the men gathered around the fire. The gleam of the torches screened off the forest.

Now, Sune thought. It's happening. In just a few moments, I'll be a man.

He'd thought that the gothi would take charge, as he normally did when the adults formed the circle. But his father stepped forward instead, his head slightly tilted, and smiled as he looked at his son.

"Sune, my son," he began, sounding a bit self-conscious. "Tonight you'll begin your life as a man. You're no longer a child, and there's a lot you have to learn."

A few of the men cleared their throats; a few coughed.

Sune recalled the saga of Signe, King Vølsung's daughter, who sent her sons out into the forest when the oldest was only ten. Neither of them had been found brave enough to survive. The dark forest frightened even Sune, and he was fifteen. He'd never been particularly brave—he knew that. For a moment he thought about his mother again.

"Happy birthday, son," she'd said when he'd brought breakfast to her bed that morning. She didn't eat much anymore; most of her nourishment came through a tube. But she had smiled and taken his hand. "Are you looking forward to what's going to happen tonight?"

Now his father pushed Sune into the center, and the gothi began to sing as he slowly walked around the circle. He stopped at every point of the compass to call on a god. At north, Odin, the greatest of the gods. At south, Thor, the protector of mankind. At east, Frey, the god of fertility. And at west, Frigg, Odin's wife, who symbolized stability in couples and marriage.

"The circle is closed," the gothi declared when he returned to his place.

Should anyone later have asked, Sune doubted he could have repeated what he'd been told during the ritual. The drinking horn was passed around several times; he'd remembered to turn its tip toward his stomach and lift it carefully to his mouth, to avoid creating a vacuum and splattering the mead all over his face. His father had taught him that this was the sign of a newcomer to the circle. His cheeks reddened from the bonfire and the strong fermented honey. He felt groggy as the men stepped into the circle, one by one, to recite a verse for him. Several had chosen lines from the Hávámál, and he also

recognized a few passages from Vølven's Prophecy, but soon the words were jumbled up in his head.

~~Once all the men had spoken, they sang for him. Sune lay his gifts to the gods on the ground. The drinking horn made the rounds again, then the circle opened. Several of the men yelled and lifted him up, and again they all hugged him.~~

Unlike the ritual, he later remembered every second of the magical time when he was sworn into the brotherhood. He stood at the bonfire as the other men gathered a few meters away under the enormous sacrificial oak, which was over a thousand years old. As a child, Sune had loved hopping into and out of the hollow part of the broad trunk while waiting for the ceremony to end. This evening the hole looked like a black eye staring at him in the near-darkness. Chills ran down his spine, though not in a bad way. On the contrary. He didn't feel the least bit afraid.

The gothi dug up a section of peat and stuck it onto two flexible limbs, which were raised and bowed to form a narrow entryway. Sune had always been fascinated by the saga of Odin and Loke, the pact that made them blood brothers. Now he was a part of the same ritual; walking under the peat with the others symbolized their shared rebirth.

Everything happened in slow motion once his father took his hand. The gothi walked right behind him and when Sune came out on the other side, the moon seemed to shine directly on him. He knew it was his imagination, but the feeling was powerful. And even though he feared the moment when they took turns cutting themselves to spill a few drops of blood where the peat had been dug up, it wasn't terrible.

He was then given a bronze spoon with a long, broad handle that looked like a ladle, only heavier. Sune felt a surge of courage and pride as he was told to mix the blood on the ground. Then the gothi freed the peat from the limbs and covered the blood with it to seal the pact. They stomped the peat into place as Sune was pulled back into the circle. He felt like a man when the gothi declared that he was now bound by the vow to honor and safeguard the others.

"We look after each other," his father had explained when Sune asked him what it meant.

Sune stayed behind when his father walked to the van. He wanted to sneak away, to get out of watching them slaughter the pig.

"Won't you help unload everything?" the gothi asked.

He'd taken his robe off. He pointed at the bonfire, where several white coolers from the butcher shop, containing the food for the celebration, had already been hauled in. Luckily they wouldn't be eating the pig, Sune reminded himself. It would only be butchered and hung up so its blood ran down on the ground, a pool of liquid for the gods. The carcass would be brought home and cut up the next day, which was against the food administration's regulations. But what they didn't know wouldn't hurt them, as his father always said.

"Raise the hook!" his father yelled from the van, and two men trotted up with three heavy iron rods sticking them into the ground by the sacrificial oak, forming a tripod held together at the top by a large iron ring. They fastened a butcher's hook onto it, and his father backed the white van all the way up to the tripod, shut the engine off, hopped up into the back of the van, and began pushing the pig out. He'd already anesthetized the animal before loading it; it weighed a goddamn ton, his father had said on the way there.

Sune still didn't understand why his father hadn't just shot it in the head with the bolt gun. Then he wouldn't have had to go through all this. He hated the thought that they hung it on the hook alive, and cut its throat.

He turned his back and continued unpacking the food. The mead was gone, though there were several cases of beer. The men were already soused from the ceremonial drinking. Sune looked around

for a cola but found none. Apparently no one had been thinking along those lines.

~~“Ain’t it about time for the kid to get his present?” someone yelled from the other side of the grounds.~~

It was too dark for Sune to see who had yelled. He glanced around, searching for his father.

“Damn right it is,” another voice answered.

Suddenly everyone disappeared and he was alone at the bonfire, wondering what he should do. A car door slammed somewhere in the forest. The men appeared as a group now.

At first Sune thought they’d brought his mother as a surprise, mostly because of the long, loose hair he saw. He couldn’t make her out until they were close to the bonfire. It was a young woman, much younger than his mother, but older than him. His father stood at the back, his hands in his pockets. Sune felt uneasy, and he began walking toward him.

“Stay right there,” the gothi said.

The men stopped between the bonfire and the old oak, where the white van was still parked with the back door open.

“We’ve brought you a present.”

Sune had never seen the woman before. He looked down at the ground. He didn’t understand; he didn’t know what to do.

“Your father says you spend all your time reading books,” the gothi said. “We intend to change that.”

A raw laughter rose up from the men.

Earlier that evening he’d felt butterflies in his stomach, but now they were slowly turning into a knot.

“Tonight you will honor Freya and perform the fertility ritual.”

The gothi nodded tersely at the woman. She walked toward Sune, the men gathering in a half circle behind them.

“This will strengthen your manhood,” the gothi continued. “And manhood is our gift to you.”

Sune looked up and shook his head. He tried to catch his father’s eye as the woman began unbuttoning her black blouse. She smiled at him as she tossed it on the ground, signaling to him to come closer. But he couldn’t move.

Her hair spilled down over her shoulders, radiant in the darkness with the bonfire’s flames glowing behind her. He tried to look away, but he couldn’t tear his eyes from her naked breasts. It was the first time he’d ever seen a woman’s body in the flesh, the first time he’d trembled this way. She unzipped her black skirt and took another step toward him before letting it fall to the ground.

Sune continued staring at her breasts. He couldn’t look her in the eyes now that she was standing naked in front of him. He sensed that a few of the men were growing restless. The woman ran her hands over her naked body and stepped in closer to him, so much so that her fragrance sent a jolt in his groin. She spread her legs slightly; her hips began to sway as if they were dancing. He felt her unbutton his pants and heard her pull his zipper down. Bewildered now, he tore loose and stumbled a few steps back. Before he got any farther, a hand gripped his arm.

“You’re staying right here, boy!”

Sune looked at the men closing in around them.

“Get down to business now,” the gothi snarled.

The forest darkness seemed to descend and cover him. For a moment all was quiet in his head, as if sound had ceased to exist. He swiveled around, desperately seeking a way past the naked woman and the wall of men looming over him.

He caught sight of his father. Sune wanted to run to him, but his body felt like a lead weight. Before he could move, someone from behind pushed him so hard that he almost fell. The men's voices returned as he tried to wrestle free, but whoever held his arm wouldn't let go.

"Fuck her!" someone yelled.

"No! I don't want to!" Sune screamed.

The young woman stepped back and leaned over to pick up her clothes.

Immediately one of the men was at her side. "You're not going anywhere," he said, ordering her to get back over to Sune.

"No one should force the boy if he doesn't want to," she said. When she made a move to put her skirt back on, she was punched in the face.

"You'll do what we paid you to do." He punched her again, and a thin stream of blood ran out of her nose.

Before Sune could react, two strong hands pulled his pants down and dragged him over to the woman.

"You get that dick of yours up and get to work!"

"No, I don't want to," he whined, shaking his head. His lips were quivering, his cheeks stretched out; he lost all control and began to cry. He bit his lip in a desperate attempt to stop the tears while his father, right beside him now, spoke into his ear.

"Do it, boy. Don't make a goddamn fool out of me."

The young woman rushed over and shoved his father. "Leave him alone!" she screamed. "You can't force him to do this if he doesn't want to!"

The arms holding Sune relaxed for a second, just long enough for him to pull his pants up and sprint into the forest, away from the bonfire's flames, the torches, and the men. He didn't stop until he was dizzy from the blood pounding in his temples. He leaned over with his hands on his knees and spewed on the ground. He gasped for breath as sweat ran cold under his shirt.

The image of the woman's naked body returned to him. Again, he felt an unaccustomed stir down below. He squeezed his eyes shut, but it didn't erase the image of the thin red line of blood. He jerked up at the sound of her screams splitting the darkness.

Reluctantly he stopped, turned around, and began walking back.

By the time he was close enough to see the bonfire's flames through the trees, the woman had stopped screaming. Sune leaned against a tree in shock when he saw why. Her mouth was bound with something white. He couldn't see her face, but she was struggling, desperately.

He tried to force himself to look away, but his eyes locked on to the men holding her. He noticed his father hunched over behind her. Then he zipped up his pants and stepped aside for the next in line.

The young woman kept struggling as the line continued, every man having at her. Each time she was pushed or kicked, they punched her, and only when the last man had finished did the two who had held her arms during the gang rape let go. She sank to the ground and lay motionless.

Sune's scream stopped at his throat. Suddenly he was freezing. He ached for the warmth of the fire but couldn't move. He watched the men pull at the woman's arms, shaking her shoulders. Finally the gothi leaned over and felt for her pulse. He let go of her arm and shook his head.

The men gathered at the bonfire. Sune heard them speaking but couldn't make out what they were saying. Then several of them walked behind the van and disappeared into the forest while the rest began to pick up in the clearing.

Sune had no idea how long he'd stood there motionless, staring. All he knew was that the young woman, the same one who only a brief time ago had stood smiling in front of him, was no longer

moving.

~~“We’re ready!” someone yelled from behind the van. The gothi walked over to the woman and lifted her. Her arms and legs dangled limply as he carried her into the forest.~~

Sune trembled. His right foot was asleep, and his leg gave way when he tried to back into the woods. It was as if his brain refused to accept what his eyes had just seen. His body felt leaden, his heart pounded in terror. He knew the young woman was dead; he’d known it the moment she fell to the ground motionlessly.

He crawled a few meters away. Finally he got the circulation going in his foot. It stung. He should run and hide, he thought, but where to? He peered into the coal-black darkness of the forest. A few limbs cracked as he struggled to get to his feet and grope his way through the trees.

Suddenly he heard voices calling his name. He knew they were coming for him. He held his breath and hunched up, then crawled in under some branches on the forest floor.

The voices called again. They were closer now.

“Sune, come on out here!”

It was his father.

“Come out, now, you’re a part of this. You can’t just run and hide!”

Twigs broke as someone strode by him. He held his breath; then they were gone.

He didn’t dare move. Soon he heard limbs crunching, leaves rustling—they were back. He hugged the ground and held his breath again, the forest floor moist against his cheek.

They crisscrossed the area where he lay until he heard a sudden loud whistle. Then another. Like a siren voice in the oppressive quiet of the forest night. The men returned to the clearing around the bonfire as if the search had been called off.

Finally, when the footsteps had disappeared, Sune relaxed. He breathed deeply and turned, glimpsing the moon shining clearly through the treetops. His heart pounded as he prayed to the gods that the men wouldn’t find him.

Down by the sacrificial oak, the gothi put his robe back on. The men gathered again. The bonfire was dying out, its flames flickering as darkness overtook the clearing. The men formed a circle, and the gothi closed it. Sune stared at what was being passed around from hand to hand. The oath ring.

The chill of the night spread into his chest as he realized that this was the reason they had been looking for him. He was a grown man now, a part of all this. He had sworn with his blood that he was one of them. They expected him to stand together with his brothers as they took an oath of silence, or they could never break.

Louise Rick glanced around the allotment cottage. She had gotten up early to pack and load the car. While on sick leave, she'd been staying in this small, black wooden house in Dragør that she and her neighbor Melvin Pehrson had bought.

She was returning to her apartment in Frederiksberg and her job at National Police Headquarters. Not that the easygoing routine out here she and her foster son, Jonas, had slipped into hadn't been pleasant. In fact, it had fit her frame of mind perfectly. It was exactly what she needed.

Every morning after sending Jonas off to school on the bus, she'd made a pot of tea, packed it in her bike basket, and ridden to the beach with their dog, Dina, running beside her. Dina also went along on her morning swims. Dina had a puzzled look when Louise swam back to land, as if the dog were trying to convince her to stay in the water longer. And once in a while, Louise had the urge to do just that. To swim all the way out and be swallowed by the waves; to disappear. But each time she had signaled to her deaf pet to follow her in.

She'd kept Dina at a distance until she shook off. If the morning was gray and rainy, she would wrap herself up in a thick towel and crawl in under the Scotch roses, gazing out over the sea while drinking her tea. Dina loved to run back and forth across the sand and eat mussels that washed up on the beach.

She'd been on a leave of absence since the shooting at the gamekeeper's house, where a man had been killed while attempting to rape her. But it wasn't the images of her own naked body and the man behind her that haunted her. Nor was it the bullet wound in his head or the blood that had spurted all over her body.

René Gamst, the man who had saved her. The lust in his eyes as he waited to fire the fatal shot, the scorn in his voice when he said it was clear she liked it. That's what she couldn't shake.

But worst of all was what Gamst said about Klaus, Louise's first love, who had hanged himself the day after they moved in together:

"Your boyfriend was a pussy. He didn't have the fucking guts to put the noose around his own neck."

The words had been echoing in her head since the ambulance drove off with her that day.

The hospital examination had revealed three broken ribs on her left side, but otherwise only scratches and bruises. She was released that evening. Her boss, Rønholt, suggested she take sick leave and she had agreed, but only because Gamst's words had reached that private place inside her she had hidden away for many years. Not only from the outside world, but from herself.

She and Klaus had been together since Louise was in ninth grade in Hvalsø School; on his eighteenth birthday he had given her an engagement ring. A year later, after he finished his apprenticeship as a butcher, they had moved into an old farmhouse in Kisserup. Two nights later he was dead.

In all the years since stepping into the low-ceilinged hallway to find him hanging from the

stairway, a rope taut around his neck, she had been plagued by guilt. For going to a concert in Roskilde the previous evening and staying over with her friend Camilla. For apparently not being good enough. Because if she had been worth loving, he wouldn't have taken his life.

She'd never understood what had happened that night, all those years ago. Not until Gamst spoke up.

If he were telling the truth, Klaus hadn't slipped the noose around his own neck.

René Gamst was being held in Holbæk Jail. Shortly after his arrest, he had admitted to firing the two shots, and everyone knew he had shot to kill. The rapist had first broken into his home and assaulted his wife, but Gamst claimed he meant to save Louise. He stuck to that story, and it was difficult to prove otherwise—that he had killed to take revenge.

The day before she prepared to move out of the cottage, she had gone through every detail in the case again with Detective Lieutenant Mik Rasmussen in his office at Holbæk Police Station. She wasn't proud of what had happened. Especially when she had to explain how René Gamst ended up with a broken arm. He hadn't said anything about it, and up until then her explanation had been vague. Yesterday, however, Mik had put her through the wringer when she finally admitted that she'd been rough with him after the shooting.

Many years earlier, Louise had been stationed in Holbæk for a short time, and afterward she and Mik had been lovers. He ended it after a big scene, but even though several years and some distance had passed between them, he knew her well enough to know when she was hiding something.

And it came out. The entire story about Klaus and all the years she'd been saddled with guilt. About the reason she had treated Mik badly, and her anxiety about committing: Since Klaus's death, she had entered relationships only halfheartedly.

Louise knew this last confession hurt him, even though he tried to hide it. But she also sensed that he understood her better now.

She described what happened after René's revelation about Klaus: She had kicked the rifle out of his hands, twisted his arm around his back so violently that he had screamed, and thrown him on the ground and handcuffed him.

"But I didn't hear his arm break," she'd said, trying to forget how it had sounded as she tightened the narrow plasticuffs. "I just wanted him to tell me what he knew."

* * *

Louise hauled the last things out to the car, then went back to see if she'd forgotten anything. Melv had complained a few times about how high the weeds had grown, but she *had* cut the grass. Actually Jonas had, because he thought the old push lawn mower was fun, and because the whole lawn could be trimmed in ten minutes.

A message came in from Jonas when she pulled out of her parking spot. He had stayed overnight with a friend; they were probably on the way to school, she thought. She missed him. This evening she would hang out with him, lie around on the sofa and order takeaway.

Going home to Nico's and out to see a movie, okay?

Louise didn't see much of her fifteen-year-old foster son these days, and even though she would never say it out loud, once in a while she felt rejected when he wanted to be with his friends instead of her. But before that feeling hardened, she scolded herself, so harshly that any hint of jealousy disappeared.

She was happy that he was doing well; very well, in fact. Recently he'd had a difficult period at school, and she had been seriously worried about him. He'd had enough sorrow in his life. Both his

parents were dead, and not long ago he had lost a very close friend. She needed to get a handle on her own loneliness. Which was her fault, she reminded herself, before writing *OK*, followed by a smiley face, a heart, and a thumbs-up.

On her way into town, she thought about what it was going to be like back at the office. The work didn't worry her; questioning looks and, especially, pity from her colleagues did. They all knew what had happened, of course. She just really didn't want to talk about it.

And then there was Eik.

"You go out together, you go back in together," her partner had said when he wanted to ride with her in the ambulance. But she had said no. She'd crawled into her shell, huddled up with René and his words.

Eik had called several times since then, but she hadn't gotten back to him. One day a letter lined with bubble wrap arrived; inside was a Nick Cave CD. She hadn't even thanked him for that.

Louise knew that Eik meant well, but she just couldn't see him. All this about Klaus had simply been too much. So much so that the night she and Eik spent together, right before everything fell apart for her, seemed more like a distant dream than a fresh memory about great sex and the surprising feeling of falling in love.

After parking and turning in the key, she sat for a moment and gazed at the tall windows of her department. Suddenly she felt his presence again, in a way that made her skin tingle.

Remember to check your mail,” Hanne called out when Louise walked past the secretary’s office. She stopped, turned on her heel, and walked back with a smile plastered on her face, only to discover that her mail slot was empty.

She’d known Hanne Munk since the secretary was in Homicide, Louise’s former department. At the time she had thought that Hanne was a breath of fresh air, with her mountain of red hair, loud clothes, and exaggerated gestures, but after Louise transferred to the Search Department her relationship with Rønholt’s secretary had been strained, to put it mildly.

“Thanks for reminding me,” she said on her way out of the office. Even though she knew Hanne’s style, it annoyed her that the secretary hadn’t even in the tiniest way welcomed her back.

Menopause, lack of sleep, too little sex, Louise thought as she answered another message from Jonas, who asked if it was okay for him to stay over with Nico after the movie.

Does that boy ever change his clothes? Louise rushed down the hall to the Rathole, the double office she had been given earlier that year after being chosen to head up the newly formed Special Search Agency in the Search Department. They were responsible for cases of missing persons where criminal activity was suspected.

There was more than enough space for the new unit, which up to then consisted of her and Eirik Nordstrøm. Yet it irritated her that Rønholt couldn’t find a different locale for them; they were right above the kitchen, and they were privy to the menu every day. The shabby office had even been invaded by rats, though Pest Control had finally taken care of that.

She opened the door and immediately froze: A large German shepherd growled viciously at her, its shackles up and teeth bared, its eyes fixed on her. She leaped back and slammed the door shut. Hearing Eik’s voice farther down the hall, she turned to see him walking out of the copy room, stuffing a flattened pack of cigarettes into his pocket.

Earlier, while driving in, she’d thought about seeing him again after all this time; about what to say. And now he was standing in front of her. Her whole body felt warm, all the way to her fingertips, and when he spread his arms to greet her, she completely forgot why she hadn’t felt up to seeing him out at the cottage.

“How are you, beautiful?”

He pulled her close, but then he apparently remembered her broken ribs and let go.

“Sorry I didn’t call you back,” she mumbled awkwardly, and immediately changed the subject to the dog in their office.

“Let me go in first,” he said. “It’s Charlie, and I probably ought to introduce you two.”

“I’ve already met the beast,” she said. “It nearly went for my throat.”

“Don’t be silly, he wouldn’t hurt you. He just has to get to know you. You’re an intruder to him. He’s been with me in the office while you’ve been gone.”

Eik opened the door to the Rathole and sat down in the doorway as the big dog ran toward him.

Louise noticed that the dog limped and that his right rear leg hung in the air. He landed in Eik's lap and began licking his face so eagerly that he almost knocked Eik over.

"What happened to him?" Louise asked. She stayed out in the hall while her partner got to his feet and grabbed the dog's collar.

"Charlie boy here caught a bullet while he was chasing a bank robber in Hvidovre. It tore his thigh up. Luckily the vet thinks he'll be able to use his leg again, though he'll never go back to the dog patrol."

"So he's a police dog," she said.

Eik nodded while scratching the dog's snout.

"And his trainer?" Louise asked.

Eik nodded again, looking sad now. "He's the one who shot and killed the bank robber."

Every police officer knew about the Hvidovre case, an armed robbery. A few months ago two masked men had entered the bank with sawed-off shotguns, forced a few customers down on the floor and confronted the bank's employees. Louise couldn't remember how much they got away with, but it didn't matter. The police had arrived quickly, and in the nearby parking lot they surrounded the two robbers, who were carrying a bag stuffed with money.

One of the robbers began shooting at the police and hit the dog. Not long after, the man also lay on the ground. Dead. Nineteen years old. The other robber was his father. Two men with no criminal record, who chose the worst possible solution to their desperate economic situation.

The tabloids screamed the story of the father whose painting business had gone bankrupt. Two years earlier, he'd had twelve employees and a large residence in Greve. The son had been a trainee in the business. Then it all fell apart, leaving the father hopelessly in debt and the son adrift in life.

"No one robs banks anymore," Eik said. "Everyone knows they'll get caught. He's a ruined man."

"The father?" Louise asked. She hadn't followed the trial. Armed robbery meant a lengthy sentence, and the fact that the other robber, his son, had been killed wasn't going to shorten it.

"Him too," Eik said, nodding again. "But I'm talking about Charlie's father. He's sitting at home now, staring at four walls. I don't think he'll be back. We were at the police academy together. We haven't seen all that much of each other since then, but he and Charlie did drop by occasionally. So I told Finn I'd take care of the dog until he got back on his feet."

And that was that, Louise realized. She couldn't come up with anything to object to, either. She nodded and took a few tentative steps toward the office.

Charlie sat up beside Eik's leg.

"Come on over and say hi to him."

Louise grabbed the dog biscuit he pushed over to her. But before she could offer it to the dog, he was on his feet, teeth bared again. She hopped back into the hall.

"Okay, we'll save the introductions until later," Eik said. He pulled the big German shepherd over to his desk while scolding him as if they were an old married couple.

"Stop!" Louise said. "I want him out of here!"

"Wait a second," he said. He grabbed a leash and wrapped it around a leg on his desk a few times, then attached it to the dog's collar. He ordered the dog to lie down.

Louise finally walked to her desk, accompanied by a low snarl.

"Honestly," she said. "Can't you take him home? It's ridiculous, him lying there growling at me."

"He's used to coming along. Otherwise he'd have to be fenced up, and I don't have a fence."

"That's too bad, because he can't stay here!" she said.

"Come on, Louise. Charlie's a good boy. You just have to get to know each other."

Now she was getting mad. In the first place, she was the boss of this two-person unit. In the second place, she would never dream of bringing Dina along with her to work if the dog bothered anyone. Before she could say anything more, her telephone rang.

“Special Search Agency, Louise Rick.” She turned her back to Eik, who was still talking to the dog, trying to get it to shut up.

Her stomach knotted the second she heard Mik’s voice. She knew he was about to inform her that disciplinary proceedings would be brought against her concerning her treatment of Gamst during the arrest at the gamekeeper’s house. She also realized in that split second that she didn’t regret a thing, even though it could affect her career.

“Hi, Mik,” she said, her voice calm. She sat down.

“We have a case here that I’m passing on to you,” he began. Nothing in his voice hinted that she’d poured out the tale of her shattered life to him the day before.

Louise immediately pulled herself together; after all, she headed up the Special Search Agency of the Search Department.

“Why, what is it?” she asked.

“It’s a missing person report from a few weeks ago, but there’s something suspicious about it. Rønholt asked me to give it to you,” Mik hastened to add, as if he was apologizing. “A boy from Hvalsø disappeared.”

She groaned inside. She didn’t need more ghosts from her past creeping into her life, and certainly no more cases involving people she’d known while growing up.

“The boy’s name is Sune Frandsen,” Mik continued. “He’s the son of Frandsen the butcher. The one with the white van.”

Louise stiffened. The butcher. She had reported him for illegal sale of meat and dealing on the black market. Actually, all she had done was tell Mik about it, because she never could catch the man who once had been part of Klaus’s circle. He’d probably escaped with a warning, she thought.

“Okay,” she managed to say. “I didn’t even know he had a son.”

“Sune disappeared on his fifteenth birthday, which was about three weeks ago,” Mik said. “And we haven’t found a trace of him. He left his wallet and phone in his room. The family is already in a bad situation—his mother is dying from cancer. That’s had a big impact on the boy.”

Louise jotted notes down on a pad.

“He was in the eighth grade at Hvalsø,” Mik continued. “The principal of the school and the boy’s parents are afraid that he ran away from home to take his own life. His father describes him as unusually quiet before he disappeared. As I’ve said, he was very unhappy about his mother’s illness; he was having trouble dealing with it. The school reports that Sune had skipped a lot of classes the past few months, and that his classwork generally wasn’t going well. Apparently that wasn’t like him.”

Louise nodded. She was well aware that boys committed suicide more often than girls. Especially when carrying around this type of emotional burden.

“I still don’t see why you and Rønholt decided to give us the case.”

“Sune’s class teacher has just been in to see me,” Mik said. “He brought along a newspaper, *Midtsjællands Folkeblad*. It’s a local rag. Delivered door-to-door,” he added, as if the explanation was needed.

Louise knew the paper, which her parents got.

“He showed me a photo of a few fox cubs from an article in the paper’s nature section. They were taken from one of those photo hides that nature photographers use, so they don’t scare the animals.”

away. The cameras take pictures automatically; they have a motion sensor or an invisible infrared range. In other words, the photographer wasn't there when the picture was taken."

"Okay," Louise mumbled, nudging him on.

"The fox cubs were, of course, in the foreground, but far back to the right there's a boy sitting on the ground beside a small campfire. The teacher is absolutely certain it's Sune."

"Okay then, so all you have to do is find out where the photo was taken. Then drive out and bring him home," Louise said. She still didn't understand how this involved her unit.

"It's not that simple," Mik said. "Yesterday, when the paper came out, the teacher drove to the parents' home to show them the photo, and it ended up with him being thrown out of the house literally. Sune's father ordered him to keep out of the family's business. He refused to look at the photo, and he didn't want to hear that his son could be hiding, in need of help."

"How much does the boy in the photo resemble the butcher's son?" Louise asked. She looked over at Eik, whose desk was pushed up against hers. Obviously he hadn't been following the conversation; his eyes were glued to his computer screen. Louise realized she didn't even know if any new cases had come in while she'd been gone, or if he was looking at some of the old cases they had been given. Somehow she had managed to push work completely out of her head.

"It looks a lot like him," Mik said. "This seems to be a clear missing person case to me, and we've had it for two weeks now without making any real progress. That's why I'm sending it to you."

He was following procedure. When a missing person hasn't been found within two weeks, local police stations shuttle the case on to the Search Department, which then picks up the investigation, tracking the movements of the person and collecting identification information.

It was almost too strange that the butcher from Hvalsø ended up on her desk, Louise thought. True to her unit—she and Eik—primarily investigated and did fieldwork, while their colleagues in the Search Department for the most part worked in the office, coordinating registers and searching international data banks for personal information pertaining to searches. But she had been back for all of ten minutes and there he was. The butcher. If Mik had called Friday, it would have been Eik or one of the others who would have been sent to the small mid-Zealand town.

"I don't think I've ever heard of parents accepting the disappearance of their child," she said. She glanced over again at Eik, who was still staring at the monitor. "In fact, they usually have a horrible time dealing with the situation, even when there's a corpse involved."

"Exactly," Mik said. "Something's wrong here, and that's why I think you should look at it, too."

4

Camilla Lind picked up the pace. What had looked like a small shower when she left home was now a downpour. Maybe she should turn around, she thought. But she loved the smell of the wet forest floor, the raindrops plunking her sweaty forehead.

She had begun running after moving into her in-laws' large manor house, Ingersminde, in Boserup, not far from Roskilde. She never went very far, but at least she ran, which gave her the opportunity to explore the large section of private forest on the property.

The path narrowed and curved to the right, passing through a small thicket that quickly gave way to the more open space of forest. As she ran, she tried to come up with a good title for the interview she'd been working on all day. She was a freelance journalist, currently taking assignments for the paper in Roskilde, and once in a while they gave her some doozies. But it had been a pleasure to interview Svend-Ole at his little workshop out in Svogerslev. For the past thirty-five years he had emptied the slot machines in Tivoli, and he had a large collection of one-armed bandits in his garage that he and his wife enjoyed playing.

Suddenly Camilla caught sight of something between the trees. She slowed down. Everything looked blurry through the rain, but she could make out a boy crouching under a big tree, eating something he picked up off the ground. Even at this distance, she could see he was soaked to the skin, his wet hair plastered to his head.

She started walking over toward the clearing. As she drew closer, she smelled wood burning, a sort of odor, and she noticed a large area where there had been bonfires, which made her wonder. She had definitely never been here before.

"Hi!" she called out. "Aren't you cold?"

The boy started when he heard her voice, then immediately jumped up and ran.

Which surprised Camilla, who called out, "Hey, wait!"

But the boy sprinted off. Strange, she thought. She decided to run after him.

Just before reaching the tree, her legs slipped out from under her. She swore loudly as she fell, landing on her stomach in a mud puddle.

Slowly she stood up. Besides being shaken by the fall, she was covered with mud. She walked over and sat down with her back against the tree. A wet pile of picked-over food lay where the boy had been sitting. She thought it looked like leftovers from a grill party. It troubled her that the boy had been eating it. Some animals in the forest seemed to have been feasting, too, from the looks of the severely gnawed bones scattered around. But they'd left some of the food. They must have been interrupted. Maybe by the boy, she thought, shuddering.

She was getting cold, sitting there in her wet jogging clothes, but she couldn't stop thinking about the boy. Though the forest was private property, everyone had the right to walk through it, meaning that he had no reason to run. Some people did drive in, which was forbidden, but Frederik or the manager gave them hell when they caught them.

Camilla winced from the pain in her knee. After standing up and carefully shaking her leg, she leaned over to wipe the mud off. Strangely enough, the mud was more red than brown. Suddenly she realized it was blood, not mud.

Desperately, she wiped her hands on the tree trunk, then she jogged through the trees toward the small stream she'd discovered earlier. She felt foul, unclean. Along the way she tore off leaves from saplings and bushes, and tried to wipe the blood off.

She was freezing by the time she found a path down to the stream. Cautiously, she stepped onto the stones sticking up out of the water and squatted to wash her face. She cleaned her arms with leaves and let the icy water run onto her legs. Muddy blood streamed down her thighs and calves. She scooped up more water; the thought of being covered in blood nauseated her.

She heard a sudden noise in the forest behind her, twigs being stepped on, something being dragged along the forest floor. She whirled around in fright and almost lost her balance at the sight of an old woman in a broad-brimmed straw hat, a long braid hanging down over her right shoulder.

"The wagons are rolling on the Death Trail," she said. Her clear, ocean-blue eyes looked earnestly at Camilla. Then, using a sturdy limb as a cane, she turned on her heel and vanished silently and astonishingly quickly into the forest.

Camilla stood midstream, too shocked to speak to her. She had no idea where the woman had come from; had heard nothing until she was practically at her back. She didn't even know if there was an entrance to the forest anywhere near the stream.

She hurried home in the twilight, dripping wet, her heart hammering in her ears.

Sune tried one more time. He'd found some dry twigs inside the hollow tree where he'd hung his hoodie up to dry, but couldn't get a fire started with his lighter.

He thought about his mother. She always backed him up, like the time he wanted to be a Boy Scout. His father had said it was a silly idea, that he'd started playing handball when he was seven, and he couldn't understand why his son wouldn't give it a shot.

Your son doesn't have the talent for it, she'd told him, after Sune did try. In the Boy Scouts, however, he earned every merit badge. Each time he brought one home, she proudly sewed it on his scout shirt.

Now his teeth chattered and his fingers were stiff from the cold, even though the rain had stopped. He'd waited over an hour before returning for the food he'd abandoned when the woman came running up and yelling at him. He knew he shouldn't eat it—he could get sick—but he was so incredibly hungry. His body, not his brain, steered him to the trees toward the clearing. To the food.

Another group of Asatro held their sacrifices at the old oak. It was their leftovers he'd been eating. He'd watched them from his hiding place as they gathered around the bonfire. He had never met them, but they were the ones who had expelled the Asa group his father belonged to. That he also belonged to now. The thought slammed into his chest so hard he could barely breathe.

At first his father and the others in the group had been furious about the decision of the Asa and Vanir religious organization, Forn Sidr, to expel them. Now, however, they seemed to think of themselves as nobler, because they were more faithful to the original customs. Not like the hippie types who were more interested in getting high and drinking their homemade mead, as his father put it.

He had spent many nights in the forest since his initiation. Twice he had found food at the sacrificial oak. What he'd gathered up after the ceremony had lasted a week. The second time, he had packed the food in big leaves, hoping that would help keep it fresh.

Several hours had passed after the horrific events of his initiation before he dared sneak out into the clearing. The cars were gone, and he'd held his breath; the silence and the sharp light from the clear, starlit sky seemed threatening. A few embers from the bonfire still glowed, but he didn't dare approach it to warm himself. He had no way of knowing if anyone had stayed behind to wait for him. At last he snuck around in the shadows of the trees over to the oak, where he knew they must have left a lot of the food his father had brought along.

He had tried to forget what had happened, to banish the image of the young woman smiling at him before she was killed. After the men had returned to the clearing without her, and the gothi had closed the circle and passed the oath ring around, they sat beside the bonfire, eating and drinking as if nothing had happened.

But so much had happened, and everything had gone wrong for Sune. Very wrong. He missed his mother. Every single night, he suffered from nightmares about her death. He saw white coffins and

graveyards. He woke up bathed in sweat. He knew his mother grew weaker every day that he was away. But he also knew, full well, that he couldn't return home without reconciling with his father and the others. And he wasn't going to do that. Not after what he'd gone through that evening. He would never be a part of that; would never be like them.

He jerked around when he heard a car approaching on the narrow forest road, kicking over the small twigs and branches he'd arranged for the small fire before hiding in the tree.

They came looking for him every night. When they got too close, he picked up his things and ran. Like a hunted animal driven from its den, he hurried off to find another hiding place. He didn't know who it was on any given night. They might be taking turns searching, he thought. He hugged his knees.

The fear of being found made his skin tingle. He had to get out of this area, go somewhere they wouldn't be looking for him. He just didn't know where. If only he'd gotten the stupid fire started earlier. His clothes would've been dry by now, and he wouldn't be freezing.

He opened one of the leaves and gnawed on a cold pork chop, thinking about his mother again. Hopefully, his father was taking care of her. Sune used to go into her bedroom and sit and read to her when he'd come home from school. She wasn't strong enough now to hold a book. Once in a while she fell asleep and snored lightly with her mouth half open, but he'd just kept on reading. When she woke up, she'd smile and say, "I guess I dozed off for a moment."

His father didn't like books. They were a waste of time, he always said. But he wanted his son to do well in school, so he didn't complain when Sune read.

School, Sune thought, as he watched the red taillights of the car after it passed by. This was the final week of exams. How had his parents explained his absence to the school?

He swallowed the last of the pork chop, too quickly—and felt a sharp pain in his esophagus. He didn't have anything to wash the food down with. Normally he drank from the stream, but he couldn't go there now.

The car approached again, so he kept perfectly still. It drove by slowly, stopping several times while the driver peered out into the trees. Finally it left.

Sune had asked himself a thousand times if he shouldn't just go home, but he realized that was no longer an option. He had defied the men, the brotherhood, by not receiving the ring and swearing an oath of silence together with the others.

Camilla closed the heavy front door, kicked off her running shoes, and barged into her husband's office in her wet clothes.

"When you gut a buck or whatever the hell it's called, you could clean up, you know. There's practically a lake of blood out in the forest."

Frederik looked up. "What is this, what's happened to you?"

"I fell flat on my face in a big puddle of blood."

Camilla didn't know much about hunting or forest management, though she did know that Frederik had been out several times lately hunting bucks. But she had no idea what happened after the animal was killed, except that it had to be split open on the spot and gutted to make sure the meat wasn't spoiled.

"As far as I know, there haven't been any bucks gutted out there," he said. "We haven't hunted in over a week now. Where was it?"

"I don't know exactly. But there's a big tree, partly hollow, close to a clearing with a bonfire site. It looks like someone has been there."

Frederik stood up. He didn't work at home very often. Most of his waking hours were spent in the management offices at Termo-Lux, a window manufacturer. But the board of directors had just accepted his ultimatum: If he was to stay on as managing director of the family business, he had to have one day off a week to work on his film manuscripts—and also to see something of his wife, he had added, when telling Camilla that they had accepted his demands.

She had met Frederik Sachs-Smith in California, where over the years he had established himself as a film scriptwriter. He'd already had a hand in several big Hollywood productions; she had considered him a mixture of upper-class bohemian and cool businessman. The scriptwriting was something he did simply because he enjoyed it. While doing research for an interview with him, she had discovered that he was a more-than-competent investor; he'd turned his inheritance from his grandparents into a sizable fortune. He didn't need to work.

When they fell in love, the plan had been that she and her son, Markus, would move in with him in Santa Barbara. But after the death of Frederik's brother and the announcement that his sister had been chosen for personal reasons to step down as managing director, their plans changed. He returned to Denmark.

At first, Camilla didn't understand; Frederik had never hidden the fact that he had left Denmark to avoid becoming part of the family dynasty. He'd said numerous times that there had to be many other people well qualified to head up the business. Gradually she came to realize that he had accepted the job for the sake of his father, not for the business. Walther Sachs-Smith had been forced off the board of directors of his own company the year before, as he had begun to prepare for his successor. Greed and a lust for power had driven Frederik's two younger siblings to betray their father, who all too late discovered what they were up to.

Which was why Frederik put on a suit and tie four days a week now, to lead the business his grandfather had established many years ago.

“It sounds like you’ve been out at the sacrificial oak,” he said. “Which means it’s probably pig blood you slipped in. They buy it from the butcher.”

“They? Who in the hell are ‘they’?” Camilla bellowed. She began ripping off her jogging pants.

“The people who make sacrifices to the gods. They believe in Odin and Thor, and once in a while they meet out in the forest and perform rituals.”

“Are they some of the people from over at the Viking Ship Museum?”

“No.” He laughed and shook his head at her. “These people are believers. They’re Asatro.”

“Actually I think I saw one of them.”

She tossed her blouse on top of the wet pile of clothes and grabbed a blanket off the Chesterfield sofa. The office looked exactly the same as it did when Frederik’s father moved out and left the house to them. Immediately they’d changed the property’s name to Ingersminde, in honor of Walther’s deceased wife.

“This old lady appeared out of nowhere and looked me straight in the eye. I almost had a heart attack—I hadn’t at all heard her walk up behind me. It seems to me she could be one of those people. She had this long braid hanging down over her shoulder.”

Frederik laughed harder this time. “That’s Elinor. She lives in the gatekeeper’s house; she has most of her life. She’s completely harmless, and definitely not one of the Asatro or wights.”

“Why do you let them run around and pour blood all over our forest?” Camilla asked. She nestled into the couch to get warm.

“The old Asatro has deep roots in this region, though no one in our family ever believed in it,” Frederik said. “It attracts people interested in the Nordic gods and sagas. A lot of our country’s history comes from this area.”

Camilla struggled to remember some of what she had learned in history class.

“This is where Skjold drifted to shore in an unmanned ship the gods sent,” Frederik continued. “He grew up and became king in Lejre. His was the strongest and bravest army. Did you know that?”

She nodded. Everyone who had gone to high school in Roskilde knew that story. They had heard a lot about King Skjold and his descendants, including the tale of his departure. When he died at a very old age, his body was carried aboard the ship he had arrived on as a baby and laid on his shield together with piles of gold, jewelry, and valuable weapons. The ship was launched from shore; only the gods know where it ended up.

“I met a boy out there, too,” she said. “I think he’s about Markus’s age. He was eating some food on the ground by the tree. But he could have been one of them, of course.”

Frederik frowned. “I don’t think the kids come by themselves. Usually they all meet down by the gate where they park their cars, and then they all walk in together. But I’ve seen their food lying around on the ground, several times. They share it with the gods or something, and that’s fine. The animals out there can have at it, as long as there’s no plastic or other garbage.”

Camilla smiled at him and gathered up her clothes. “We certainly didn’t have heathen worshipers like that when I was a little girl in Frederiksberg.”

She kissed him. “At least not in my part of Frederiksberg.”

Someone knocked on the office door and immediately Charlie was on his feet, growling. Louise jumped; she'd forgotten about the big German shepherd on the folded-up gray dog blanket beside Eik's chair. She waved and shook her head, warning Rønholt not to come in.

"Can I have a few minutes?" he asked, stepping behind the door.

The dog was still growling, even though Eik grabbed his collar and tried to force him back on the blanket. "Settle down. Down now; it's okay for them to be here, too," he said. Louise rolled her eyes and walked out into the hall.

Rønholt put his arm around her shoulder. "It's nice having you back," he said. "We've missed you. So how are you doing?"

"You're going to have to explain to him that he can't bring that dog in here. It's totally crazy," she said, niftily avoiding the question, as they walked down to Rønholt's office. "I've tried to tell him, but it goes in one ear and out the other."

"That's not going to be so easy," Rønholt mumbled, staring down at the gray linoleum.

"What do you mean? You're not going to allow this!"

Rønholt still didn't look at her. "You have to admit he's being very decent."

"The dog?" Louise was incredulous. "You couldn't even walk into our office! If that dog's staying, Eik's going to have to move back to his old office."

"Not the dog. I'm talking about Eik offering to take care of it while his friend is dealing with his very unfortunate situation."

Ragner Rønholt closed his office door and gestured to her to drag the chair over to his desk. Louise could see he was finished talking about the dog.

"I'm having second thoughts," he began, looking a bit apologetic now. "I sent a case from Hvalsø over to you."

She broke in. "I've already talked to Mik."

"You're too close to it," he continued, ignoring her remark. "I was just thinking that coming back to a case would be good for you. You know, right back up on the horse, that sort of thing."

He was wringing his hands, so hard that Louise thought it must hurt.

"But not in Hvalsø. Of course you shouldn't be going back down there. Especially if the father of the missing boy is one of the..."

He seemed to search, in vain, for the right words. "You're too close," he finally repeated. "I've told Olle to take over."

Louise studied her clenched hands. "You can't do this," she said. "I have no problem with working in Hvalsø."

And she meant that. She hadn't seen Lars Frandsen in twenty years, and she could hardly imagine what he looked like now. Back then, he had been rangy with thick, light hair, round cheeks, and a broad nose that wiggled when he laughed. A happy boy with a certain status, he was the butcher's son.

and lived in a large residential home on Præstegårdsvej, with an indoor pool and access to his parent's bar in the basement, where there were pinball machines and a billiard table.

Louise knew all of this because he was the guy Klaus hung out with the most back then. They had finished their apprenticeships at the same time, Lars with his father in Hvalsø, Klaus with the butcher over in Tølløse. When they attended butcher school in Roskilde, they took the morning train together, which was how Klaus had become part of Big Thomsen's gang.

"I just thought it might not be good for you to meet one of them after what happened," Rønholt added in a nearly fatherly tone. "It's better that I send one of the others to poke around."

Louise shook her head. "If anyone's going to poke around over in Hvalsø, it should be me. It doesn't bother me one bit to meet the butcher or anyone else there."

She gave him her stubborn look. "If I was that way, I couldn't walk around Copenhagen for fear of running into someone from the Eastern European mafia, not to mention the gang members I've put behind bars. If I'm scared or have problems confronting people, I should go into private security instead of holding on to this lousy-paying job."

She paused for a moment, then leaned forward. "I'll find that boy. Tell Olle the case is mine."

* * *

She met Olle in the hallway as he walked down from their office, carrying the few case files that Madsen had mailed them. "Welcome back!" he said, and spread his arms.

He was about to keep chattering, so she broke in to tell him that Rønholt had changed his mind: She would continue with the case. "But it could very well be that we'll need your help," she added, smiling at her tall, balding colleague before walking past him.

Louise was about to open the door to the Rathole when she remembered the dog. "Can I come in?" she called out. She felt like an idiot, standing there waiting for the green light to enter her own office.

A moment later Eik said, "Come on in."

She hurried inside and sat down at her desk while Eik held the German shepherd's collar with one hand and pushed three dog biscuits across her desk with the other.

"Try giving him one," he suggested.

"Come on, Eik! You're the one who has to deal with this dog. He shouldn't be here. It's not right that I can't work without worrying about a German shepherd biting my ass."

"Charlie's not aggressive. He just has to get to know you. Give him a chance."

Eik went on to say that the photographer who had set up the camera blind in Boserup Forest had called while she was talking to Rønholt. "He'll call back."

Reluctantly, Louise grabbed one of the square dog biscuits and held it out. The dog growled from deep in his throat.

"Come on, give it to him!" Eik said. "Or else he'll think you're stringing him along!"

"This is bullshit!"

Eik broke out laughing. It flustered her that he looked so great when he laughed; she ignored Charlie's growling and held out the biscuit, which disappeared in a second. The dog began licking her hand.

"What did I tell you?" Eik said, gesturing for her to give Charlie another one.

The dog rested his big head on her lap. "Here!" She pushed him gently and dropped the biscuit on the floor to get him away, but as soon as he ate it, he was back.

"Oh, look. He loves you," Eik said. He folded his arms and looked on with obvious contentment as she gave Charlie the last of the goodies. Louise shook her head.

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