



*Where Have All the Young Girls Gone*

By Leena Lehtolainen

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## PROLOGUE

When the machine gun fire began, I had just nodded off. I recognized the sound of a Kalashnikov through the haze of sleep, and when I opened my eyes, I saw the muzzle flashes on the east side of the street less than a kilometer away from our armored vehicle, which was returning to Kabul.

“Should I try to turn around?” our driver, Corporal Jere Numminen, asked his superior. Behind us there was only darkness. The gunfire wasn’t hitting us yet, just the two four-wheel drive patrol vehicles in front of us. They too were carrying EU police officials who had been participating in the opening ceremonies of the new EUPOL-funded Afghani police academy near Jalalabad.

Captain Lauri Vala didn’t have time to reply before the lead vehicle exploded. Its passengers were the German police instructors Helmut Lindemann and Ulrike Müller, and the young officer driving them. All I could remember about him was that his first name was Sven.

The Germans’ vehicle was the same as ours, a light armored RG-32 utility vehicle. Rifle fire alone hadn’t destroyed it. The shooters were too far away for their weapons to be very effective anyway. But on the road, which was supposed to have been perfectly safe, now there were roadside bombs. The French driving in front of us stopped, and the British driving behind us were already backing up. Lauri Vala pushed his helmet down more firmly on his head. I had taken my own off, because the combination of the helmet and hijab had been too hot. Now I fumbled around for it, even though it didn’t feel like much protection. In the light of the flames started by the explosion, I could see the French vehicle opening fire in the direction of the assault rifle muzzle flashes.

“They only have one weapon,” Vala noted. I could feel the weight of my revolver in its shoulder holster. I felt like rushing over to the Germans to see if anything could still be done, but that would have been suicide.

Antti and my mother had been right: only a maniac would go to Afghanistan to get herself killed. I had been acting like an irresponsible moron agreeing to come on this trip, and now I would never see my children Iida and Taneli again. When Vala picked up a Heckler & Koch MP5 from the back of the jeep and slipped its barrel through the firing port that had just been built into the vehicle, I found myself praying. I realized I didn't know to what god I was addressing my entreaties, the Lutherans' or the Muslims'. The latter felt stronger in these parts.

Vala's face had a blank expression as he opened fire. The attackers were far away, and he was mostly just firing as an intimidation tactic, but he emptied the entire thirty-round banana clip. As the French and Vala continued to fire on the attackers, the distant muzzle flashes gradually faded away. Beyond the flames of the Germans' blazing vehicle, the world was again impenetrable darkness. Vala pulled his submachine gun back into the vehicle and started looking for his satellite phone. Before he had time to punch in the code sequence, the telephone began to ring.

"Moose." That was Vala's codename. He continued in English; apparently the caller was the driver of the vehicle waiting behind us. New Scotland Yard Assistant Chief of Police Albert Shaw was the highest ranking of the officials who had participated in the opening ceremonies of the police academy.

As Vala spoke, Numminen reached back into the rear compartment. In addition to weaponry, backup rations, and water, the standard equipment of the vehicles included a bomb detector. Vala cut the conversation short. I saw the door of the French vehicle open. Its driver also had a bomb detector.

"According to the Americans, this road was supposed to be clean. The French confirmed it with them too. How the hell did anyone manage to get bombs in here! Don't go out," Vala said in command his subordinate Numminen. "If the boys from Paris want to risk their lives, they can be my guests. I'm calling Baxter."

Colonel Steve Baxter of the United States ISAF contingent was in charge of safety for the foreign visitors participating in the police academy opening ceremonies. Vala didn't hold back any of the English expletives he knew as he spoke with Baxter, but every now and then he also dropped a Finnish *perkele*.

So far everything had gone according to plan, and Vala had come across as cool as a cucumber, like the type of guy to whom even a law enforcement professional could entrust her life. Now he was furious that the plan had fallen apart.

I watched the slow movement of the young French officer with the bomb detector. He looked like a Halloween witch dancing around a bonfire with a modernized broomstick. Even though the Finnish soldier's ethic was to never leave a man behind, we had been given strict instructions that we were not to risk our own lives to save our companions. Ulrike and I had been responsible for the training of the female police officers, and we had become friends. I thought of Ulrike's straw blonde bun and the curls that were always trying to escape it and falling to her cheeks and neck. I could smell the stench of burning hair. I could only hope that Ulrike had been killed instantly. It was just by chance that the Germans' vehicle had happened to be on point on the trip back to Kabul from Jalalabad.

The second French soldier had brought out a foam fire extinguisher, but its spray didn't seem to be having any effect on the flames rising into the sky. The Brits came out of their vehicle as well; they had a more effective fire extinguisher. When Numminen tried to leave the vehicle again, Vala grabbed him by his upper arm. Numminen didn't need any more command than that. He sat back down behind the steering wheel.

Vala had finished his phone call. "Baxter doesn't know what went wrong. Fox Company from the 1-12th was supposed to be monitoring the road. No one can get hold of them. Reinforcements are on their way. The choppers are already lifting off from the nearest NATO base, which is about ten clicks from here. The cavalry will arrive, but very late. What did they say in that speech today? 'The new police academy is an important step toward democracy and a spark of hope for a war-torn nation.' Quite a fire for one little spark."

I didn't feel like responding to Vala. People in mortal danger often babble nonsensically. But I wished he would shut his mouth because I couldn't stand any more words. I had never felt so impossibly small and helpless as I did watching while the lives of three people faded into ash in the middle of a dark and desolate wasteland.

The February evening was still light. The sun was painting the waist-high snowdrifts in our yard a delicate blue. When I opened the front door, my nose was greeted by the scent of cocoa. Taneli was slurping from a mug at the kitchen table with a comic book in front of him. I could hear music coming from Iida's room; I recognized Nina Hagen's *femme fatale* voice. My daughter had partially inherited my taste in music. Iida had brought the mail in from the mailbox as she came home from school, as always. On the kitchen table waited the normal Friday magazines, a cell phone bill for Antti, and a thick legal-sized bubble wrap envelope for me, the original address of which had been clumsily blacked out. The letter had first been addressed to the Finnish Interior Ministry Police Division, from which it had found its way to my home. The envelope was so shabby looking that it had obviously gone through the metal detectors, bomb dogs, and X-ray machines.

The postmark said Munich; the sender was Helga Müller from Kurfürstenstrasse 13. I took the scissors from the rack and opened the envelope carefully. Inside it was a glossy polished jewelry box that looked like birch wood and a letter with my name, "Oberkomissarin Maria Kallio," on it. Because I knew who the letter must be coming from, I hesitated to begin reading it.

The letter was written on linden-green paper; the handwriting was meticulous and clear, but there were a few grammatical errors in the simple English. Frau Müller had known that my German wasn't that great.

*Esteemed Inspector Kallio,*

*Only now has my strength returned enough that I am able to fulfill my daughter Ulrike's last wishes. She made out a will before leaving for the Afghanistan, and in it she asked that her jewelry be left to her friends. I have never met you, but I think this piece of jewelry fits a Finn. Ulrike valued you*

*much and said she had her best discussions about the police profession and the place of women in the workplace with you.*

*We held a quiet funeral within the family, even though all the world press and other curious people wished to come see the war casualty. This is why we did not invite you, and the journey would have been long as well.*

*Respectfully,*

*Ulrike's mother Helga Müller.*

“What’s in it, Mom?” Apparently I had let out a choked sob, because Taneli had interrupted his reading and was staring at me, alarmed.

“A gift from a friend. A piece of jewelry. Let’s see what kind.” I tried to look delighted; my work troubles weren’t anything for a nine-year-old. I opened the box, which was lined with green satin. The necklace was a narrow ring with three forged silver pendants, about six centimeters long, in the shape of spruce twigs. I had seen it on Ulrike’s neck when we had last dined with the Afghanis at the celebration marking the end of the police trainers’ course at the Police College in Tampere. After that, our students had gone back to Afghanistan to found the police academy, and Ulrike had returned to Munich. She had lived with her mother near the Englischer Garten and the Pinakotheks. I was supposed to be going to visit her when spring arrived in the southern part of Germany. But then Ulrike had died, and now all that awaited me in Munich was her grave.

I took the necklace into our room. The cats were lying side-by-side on the bed on top of a throw blanket. Gray-striped Venjamin had gotten a new friend the previous fall when Jahnukainen, a tortoiseshell, had come to us from the animal shelter. Iida had been feeling sorry for Venjamin for a couple of years because he was all alone and had promised to handle introducing the kitten to Venjamin. After a couple of weeks of growling and batting at each other, the cats had gotten used to one other. Sometimes they play fought and sometimes they licked each other’s necks like loving siblings.

The music from Iida’s room had ceased; I could hear her coming downstairs.

“Hey. I got an A+ on my math test! What time are we going over to the Koivus’?”

I couldn't help but smile at my daughter: it was the sun's turn to shine today. Yesterday she had been grumbling because she had to go to the Koivus' and hang out with the little kids. Juuso was a good year younger than Taneli, Sennu was six, and Jaakko would be five next week. That was the excuse for the party invitation.

“We'll leave on the 6:45 bus. So, an A+? Where did the plus come from?”

“Teach gave me an extra problem 'cuz I did the others so fast.”

Iida had inherited her math skills from her father. I stroked her dark hair. She was about an inch taller than me, already a young lady physically. Her hair was dyed black, which was also the only color she had been willing to wear for the last year. I still remembered fighting with my mother about clothes, so I let Iida dress how she wanted, even though the goth-style lace and purple eye shadow were sometimes so over the top that I had to disguise my laughter as a fit of coughing. Myself, I had still been wearing jeans and boyish shirts when I was thirteen, but then the safety pins and torn stockings had entered the picture. Ulrike had told me about rebelling against the traditional role of a Bavarian girl with punk music, and our similar adolescent backgrounds had brought us together, even though Ulrike had been ten years older than me.

The grief, which had started to ease gradually, returned with such force that I could have screamed in rage. Luckily Iida retrieved her test paper from her room, because she wanted more praise, and I obliged. With a thirteen-year-old it was best to enjoy every moment when she was looking for a connection with her parents.

I put on only slightly nicer everyday clothes for the visit, but I did wear the necklace I had inherited from Ulrike around my neck. Anu and Pekka Koivu were close friends—I could tell them the story of the necklace. Antti managed to get home just five minutes before we were supposed to leave for the bus and of course didn't notice what I had on. He had returned to the university somewhat against his better judgment to take on a mathematics professorship. Apparently the work itself was still rewarding, but the paper war associated with the requirement to be “results-oriented” chipped away at academic freedom in such a way that Antti came home seething at least once a week. He seemed to be tense right now too, so I didn't even ask how things were going. Iida trudged to the bus stop a little ahead of the rest of us, and Taneli alternated between change-stepping and jumping lunges. Iida had announced the previous summer that she was giving up synchronized skating, but Taneli was training for singles skating as enthusiastically as ever and was already throwing the easier

double jumps smoothly. He was attracted by the fact that skating was no longer just following in his sister's wake. It was his own thing now, and something he was clearly more gifted at than his big sister.

On the bus, Iida began to insist that she be allowed to ride to Tapiola instead of getting off in Leppävaara. The Girls Club where she had been getting increasingly more involved would be having their improvisational theater night, like every Friday.

"You can go next week," Antti snapped, crossly enough that Iida fell silent. Antti didn't usually have a habit of raising his voice at our children; he usually preferred to leave the bossing to me. Iida glared at her father at least as peevishly as he had spoken to her and then in protest began adding gloss to her already mirror-like lips.

The Koivus' house smelled of chili and lemongrass; Anu had fixed Vietnamese food. Despite her grouching, Iida immediately began playing hairdresser with Sennu, while Juuso dragged Taneli off to play Star of Africa, and Jaakko followed after. Pekka brought apéritifs, and after a few sips Antti relaxed visibly. He even noticed my necklace and asked whether it was new.

"It came today in the mail from Ulrike Müller's mother."

"To Ulrike," Pekka said immediately, raising his glass. He and Anu had met Ulrike when we had taken the Afghani course participants on a tour of the Espoo City Police Department. We clinked glasses in silence. Iida and Sennu's laughter came from the adults' bedroom, where they had retired to labor on their creations in peace. Finally Pekka broke the silence.

"Did they ever figure out how the IED got on the road? It was supposed to be carefully monitored and safe, wasn't it?"

"The army company that was supposed to be watching that part of the road had come under attack, so first surveillance failed and then intel. The next week there was a roadside bomb in the same place that killed some Red Crescent workers. There were women in their group too. Most likely drug lords were responsible, because the strengthening of the police forces is a threat to them. It's impossible to negotiate with those types."

During my visit I had toured the Afghani women's prisons. Most of the prisoners weren't criminals at all by Finnish standards. They included, for example, women who had been raped and young teenage girls who had fled arranged marriages to men decades their elders. The prison was almost a refuge, although it wasn't always possible to trust the



rectitude of the guards either. The Taliban also opposed the police academy, even more so because women were allowed to train there. The protocols at the academy we established were not based on Sharia law, but rather on the idea that democratic police forces should be incorruptible and treat everyone equally. Even though I had only been in the country ten days, I had seen the impossibility of the enterprise. Most of the current police officers couldn't even read, and corruption was a matter of course. One of the worst setbacks so far had occurred in the beginning of February when a man dressed in a police uniform shot two Swedish soldiers and an interpreter. There had also been Estonian casualties, and dead Finns were only a matter of time.

After the Afghanistan project, I had continued teaching intensive courses at the Police College in the Hervanta suburb of Tampere. In the next international female police officers' course there had been students from several of the war-torn countries of Africa: Sudan, Somalia, and Congo, just to name three. The end of term party had been in the beginning of February, since the EU-funded police training program was being moved over to Swedish administration. I had been offered work in that project as well, but I wasn't thrilled about flying between Gothenburg and Espoo. Just the periods of time spent in Tampere separated from my family had felt hard.

"In a little more than a week you'll be able to get back to safe work again," Anu said with a smile. "At least you won't be wasting time commuting."

"It's good you can see the positive side of things. And besides the short commute, I already know I'm going to like the people I'm working with."

The last five years I had been working in various short-term positions. Before the international training assignments, I had earned my daily bread in a domestic violence research project under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior, which I had been pulled out of temporarily on orders to the Espoo Police Department. Now I was returning to the same department again, but its organizational structure had been completely turned inside out over the last year. Police departments all over the country had been merged, and the Espoo Police Department was now in charge of the Western Uusimaa Police District, which also included Raasepori, Lohja, and Vihti. The head architect of the reforms at my old workplace had been my former boss, Jyrki Taskinen, who had stretched the limits set by the Interior Ministry Police Division as much as he possibly could. The Espoo Police Department still had a violent crimes unit, which Anni Kuusimäki had been assigned to head up after me, but

Anni had had triplets a couple of years earlier and was on parental leave. Her interim replacement was Markku Ruuskanen, a veteran police officer in his fifties. According to Koivu, Ruuskanen was a decent boss, if perhaps a bit distant.

A year and a half ago, Taskinen had tried to lure me back to fill in for Anni, but to no avail. I didn't want my old job or the stresses that went along with it. Then he had tried a new tactic. He had called a couple of weeks after I had returned from Afghanistan and proposed a meeting at the Espoo Police Station.

“It would be interesting to hear about your trip. My heart almost stopped when I read the news online about the delegation attending the police academy opening ceremonies driving over a mine. Thankfully it soon became clear that the victims didn't include any Finns.”

I was always willing to meet with Jyrki, so I agreed to coffee in the reception room upstairs at the police station. Anyone else in the upper echelons of the police force would have served jelly donuts with the coffee, but as a health fanatic, Taskinen had ordered cheese and lettuce sandwiches. He was still doing the marathon in three and a half hours, even though he was well past his fiftieth birthday. But in reality, Taskinen did more galloping after his grandchildren nowadays: his daughter Silja had moved from Canada to Finland with her family and was coaching in the same club that Taneli skated in.

After my torrent of a travelogue, Taskinen looked at me in that way that told me there was a larger purpose for this meeting. I prepared myself to respond with an absolute no to anything he was going to propose.

“You're up to speed on the organizational restructuring that led to the merging of the police districts, right?”

“Well, I don't know the specifics.”

“Here in Espoo we're theoretically responsible for all violent crimes in the entire police district. Simple cases are still dealt with at the local level, but the more complicated ones come to us, along with all the atypical ones. Anyone can investigate drunken murders and domestic killings or abuse when there are witnesses. And then there are the special ones. Cold cases, racially motivated crimes, threats about school killings—you know what I'm talking about. Investigating these cases requires a separate unit, a cell if you will, comprised of experienced investigators. An inspector and two sergeants. The inspector will also do field work and interrogations, assuming she's the right type. This is not in any way going to be an

admin job or paper shuffling—it's going to be hard work. I want you to be the inspector for our special crimes unit. I've already spoken with Koivu and Puupponen. They've both had enough of messing around with alcoholics and are ready to go along with the reassignment if you come to lead the cell."

"Cell. It sounds more like a terrorist operation." I was so dumbfounded that at first that was all I could say.

"It has a sort of modern, dynamic ring to it. The top brass greeted the term with enthusiasm. In our line of work what everyone's looking for nowadays is a combination of specialization and flexibility, and this is precisely that kind of police work. You will specialize in a particular type of violent crimes, and other staff from the violent crimes unit will be brought in to help the cell as necessary."

"And what if there isn't anything special going on?"

"Koivu and Puupponen will assist violent crime, but we would assume that you would be doing research work in the mean time."

"So you are offering me paper shuffling after all?"

Taskinen grinned. "This was how I got the big boys to swallow it. You have experience both from that domestic violence project and your training work. During any downtime, you could prepare some sort of report about what kinds of unusual violent crimes occur in the Western Uusimaa Police District. Welcome to the modern world. You can get anything past the policymakers if you offer it to them using the right terminology."

I stood up and walked to the window. The pine trees swayed in the November wind. Rain clouds were approaching from the north, darkening the midday sky. It was true that I didn't have any idea what I was going to do after the Police College project ended in February. The coffee tasted sharp in my mouth. Its quality hadn't changed at all in the time I'd been away from the department.

"I don't have very many years left until retirement age," Taskinen said. "I'm giving myself permission to be selfish: I want to work out the rest of my time with the most competent group of people I can. You're part of that group."

I let Taskinen coax me for another fifteen minutes, until I answered in the affirmative. The thought of letting Antti support me was horrifying. I already had enough of a moral hangover from the fact that we had bought our Nihtimäki apartment partially with money he inherited from his father. The package Taskinen was offering included every possible perk.

The independence of the job description was intriguing, and I had been missing Koivu, and Puupponen's corny jokes. I couldn't imagine two better partners.

"A week from Monday and it's back to the mines. But let's not talk about business," I said quickly, because Antti's expression had grown dark again. Sometimes he had complained about feeling like an outsider when Anu, Pekka, and I started to talk policing. Anu was still in the youth unit, and was the liaison between the patrol, violent crime, and youth units, as well as social services. Her gig was also one Taskinen had tailored once upon a time when Anu needed to get into a nine-to-five position. Jyrki had become the veritable *éminence grise* of Finnish police work, pulling the strings however he wished.

Koivu told stories about the strangest crimes that had occurred over the winter, included a flasher who had been skulking around Haukilahti wearing nothing but tennis socks.

"Now there's a special stalker for you. You'd think he'd get some serious shrinkage out in the cold," Puupponen added. "He calls the stalker Helicopter Man."

"Hopefully not where the public can hear. We're not going to be expected to investigate cases like that, are we?"

Koivu answered with a shake of his head. With Sennu and Iida's help, Anu began carrying small servings of various Vietnamese foods to the table, meat and vegetable dishes. Iida thought no food could be too hot, and Juuso seemed to agree. It was amusing to remember what Koivu had been like when we first became acquainted ages ago: in the early nineties fresh herbs had been exotic to the boy from Nurmes.

"We made satay sauce at cooking class at the Girls Club. The week before last we were doing Vietnamese food. When it's the Finns' turn I'm going to make Grandma's Karelian pies." Iida batted her eyelashes at Koivu, her godfather.

"You go there a lot, to the Girls Club?" Anu said. "I'm planning on coming there next month to tell about youth police work."

"What night? Just don't say you know me!"

"I think it's totally stupid that boys can't go there," Taneli muttered. We'd had the same conversation before. When Espoo City had decided the previous spring that it didn't have the money to fund the Girls' House project, the retired former Chair of the Central Chamber of Commerce of Finland Sylvia Sandelin had raised a stink and announced that in that case she would pay for it herself. Sandelin had given notice to the accounting firm that

was operating in the bottom floor of the apartment building property she owned and turned the space into a girls-only youth center. She also paid the salaries for the two Girls Club permanent employees and the activity leaders and spent a lot of time with the girls herself. The seventy-year-old lady, in skirt suit and with never a single hair out of place, was a curious role model for the young women, but Iida thought Sandelin was “totally cool.” The Girls Club was built around a very similar model to the Helsinki Girls’ House one city over. Antti and I had been overjoyed that Iida had found a new hobby after quitting skating.

“Are they still having trouble with those cat-callers over at the Girls Club?” Anu asked once the children had run off to their games again after the main course. “Has Iida mentioned anything?”

“Some boys were hanging around now and then, but Sylvia Sandelin drove them off almost single-handedly. Of course they reacted in the same way as Taneli. It irritates them that there are places they can’t go. It’s hard to explain to some of them that some of the immigrant girls are only allowed to be with other girls.”

Even though we gave up on separate girls’ and boys’ schools a couple of generations ago, sometimes gender segregation is imperative. But did women who had ended up in the Afghanistan women’s prison have any hope for a better life when all was said and done? It had been four months since the police academy opened, and they had been able to remain in operation so far, although students and their families had been threatened. In January, NATO ISAF forces had prevented a planned suicide bomb attack against the training facility at the last minute. I stayed in email contact with my students, but sometimes the lines didn’t work for days at a time. The email addresses didn’t reveal the police officers’ names—they all used initials. Although I had been in mortal danger a few times in my own work as well, those situations were transitory, caused by individual people—they weren’t systematic efforts. In Afghanistan even the authority of the positions they held was no protection for the police: Malalai Kakar, who had headed up a unit working on crimes against women, had been killed in the fall of 2008 as a warning to other women.

Ulrike’s necklace felt heavy around my neck and the silver twigs were sharp. I had to watch my movements so they wouldn’t scratch my skin. Perhaps the necklace was meant to be worn over a high neck blouse. Anu began to clear the dishes from the table, and Antti rose to help her. I drained my wine glass, and was about to go into the kitchen when Pekka Koivu took me by the shoulder and pressed me back into my seat. At first I thought he was just

trying to stop me from helping to clear the table for no reason, but then I saw from his expression that he had something to say.

“I don’t want to say this where Antti can hear, since he is a civilian after all. I’ve been waiting the whole night for an opportunity to tell you that I’m already set to dig into our first case. We don’t have to hem and haw about where to start. No one has taken these disappearances seriously, even though there is reason to.”

“What disappearances? I don’t remember reading about anything like that in the papers.”

“Markku Ruuskanen didn’t think they were that important. He’s a decent guy, but he doesn’t want any trouble, and especially no publicity. Three young immigrant girls have disappeared in the last five weeks. There’s no definitive evidence of a crime having been committed, but what other explanation could there be? The families claim to be completely baffled. These cases have something in common. My gut tells me so.”

“So what do you think, Maria, do we have a case?” Koivu asked excitedly. It was the afternoon of my second day of work, and Koivu had finally gotten to give us the rundown on the series of disappearances he thought was so strange. I was sitting with him and Puupponen in my new workspace. The gentlemen had a spacious shared room next to mine, which we could use as a case room or a conference space as necessary. In addition to a desk, my office also fit a sofa, a coffee table, and an armchair. Koivu was standing in front of the white board, writing. He pinned a picture of a young girl in a headscarf on the cork board. The dark eyes looked full of life on the face framed by the multicolored scarf. On her lips there seemed to be just a hint of light red lipstick.

“First disappearance, January second. Aziza Abdi Hasan, native of Afghanistan, 17 years old. Moved to Finland four years ago. Family has temporary residence. Aziza was in the eighth grade at the Leppävaara Middle School, so she still had one more year of compulsory education left in addition to this one. She was studying with students younger than herself due to insufficient language ability and nonexistent primary education—she entered school only after moving to Finland. Before that she did not even know how to read. In that regard the girl had been progressing well. According to the parents, she went to Stockholm with her uncle over Christmas vacation to visit relatives living there. When Aziza didn’t show up at school after the break and the parents weren’t able to say where she was, the school officials filed a missing persons report with the police. The Finnish Embassy contacted the Stockholm police, who went to interview the relatives. Neither Aziza nor her uncle had ever arrived at their home. The uncle is a Swedish citizen who, according to the cruise travel information, came to Finland on the 27th. There was no indication of a return ticket. The Swedish police have a search underway. The family also has relatives in Denmark. If the girl has disappeared with the family’s consent, they will protect each other.”

“Second disappearance, January 25th. Sara Amir, Bosnian Muslim, 14, also in the eighth grade, but from Espoo Central. Same story as before—parents had not filed a missing

persons report. The school contacted social services, who requested that the police investigate. The parents say the girl has returned to Bosnia, but there is no evidence of that. The family has permanent residency, and all of them have applied for Finnish citizenship. I went with social services to interview the family. The father, Mikael Amir, did not allow the other members of the family to speak. Sara is the family's only daughter, the middle child of five. The mother looked like she had been crying, but she didn't get a chance to speak. The school picture is from last year. She missed pictures this year due to illness."

The girl in this picture still looked like a child. Her face was thin and unsmiling; you could see fear in her eyes. I had been under the impression that the Bosnian Muslims were a secularized bunch, but Sara's scarf was pulled around her head so tightly that not a single lock of hair was visible, and it was tied tightly under her chin.

"I would have liked to interview the mother one-on-one, but no dice. Of course the father promised to notify the police immediately if any information about the girl's whereabouts comes up. We haven't heard anything." Koivu adjusted his glasses higher on his nose. He'd been forced to get bifocals just before Christmas.

"Third disappearance, February 14th. Ayan Ali Jussuf, from Sudan, permanent residence in Finland just like the rest of her family. 18 years old, no longer required to attend school and over the age of consent according to Finnish law. The parents didn't report her missing, but her friends at the Girls Club got worried when they couldn't reach her. The parents deny knowing anything about her. She hasn't registered a new address with the state. There is no information about her whereabouts."

"And what do they all have in common?" I interjected.

"None of these young women has exited the country under her own name by sea or by air. It is possible that they've gone north by car and crossed the Swedish border at Tornio over to Haaparanta, and after that they would be in the Schengen area, where they would be impossible to track. They may also have used false identities."

"Didn't Ruuskanen think these cases were worth investigating? Three teenage Muslim girls disappear without a trace in Espoo. It wouldn't take much of a reporter to start drawing connections between the fates of these three girls. How have they managed to keep this under wraps?"

"The families haven't wanted any publicity, and Ayan's friends have been afraid that it might even hurt her. But Ayan is already an adult, and she could have disappeared



voluntarily. Aziza and Sara could have done the same. Girls have run away from home before.”

“Are there any rumors online?” I asked. Koivu seemed to have been taking the case of the missing girls seriously enough that I suspected he had been making his own inquiries regardless of Ruuskanen’s reluctance.

“There was some discussion of Ayan on the Helmi message boards, but the administrator deleted the discussion because it contained information that violated privacy protections. Apparently the discussion thread was started by one of Ayan’s friends from the Girls Club. Some suspected the family had sent her out of the country because she had a Finnish boyfriend. However, the family denies knowing anything about a boyfriend. Their Ayan only had girlfriends. One of the posters on the discussion board claimed that Ayan’s older brother had killed her, and the messages were deleted after that. I haven’t been able to demand the deleted messages because the investigation hasn’t been official.”

More than ten years of living with Anu Wang-Koivu, who had come to Finland as a Vietnamese-Chinese refugee had shown Pekka what it was like to live as a member of an ethnic minority in our country. Anu was as Finnish as could be and spoke the language perfectly, without any sort of foreign accent, but sometimes people still addressed her in English or treated her like she was mentally deficient. Because police officers with immigrant backgrounds still didn’t grow on trees, Anu had been assigned to deal with new Finns’ issues regardless of race or religion, even though her background was completely different from, say, Somali asylum seekers or Polish cleaning ladies. Koivu had become allergic to all racial characterizations.

Puupponen began to hum a familiar tune, a folk ballad from the 1960’s. “Where have all the young girls gone...” That was how the words went in his version. Koivu pushed the plate of donuts closer to Puupponen, who grinned and stopped singing.

“Hey, guys, isn’t it totally normal to marry off fourteen-year-olds in Muslim countries? What if Sara and the older girls were forced to marry some cousin and so they were carried off somewhere our laws don’t apply?” Puupponen turned the donut over in his fingers, but he didn’t take a bite, even though the pink frosting was spreading over his fingers.

“An eighteen-year-old could have married here too,” Koivu observed.

“Even against her will? What if she was dragged back to Sudan? By now her name could have been changed and her Finnish Social Security number would only be a memory. A person that was more paranoid than me might start thinking we were on the tracks of a serial killer that was going after immigrant girls, but an old-fashioned Savo realist like me isn’t going to go for a theory like that at the drop of a hat. I can understand why Ruuskanen hasn’t taken the case any farther. It would just pour gas on the fire of all those Nazi types.”

“But Finland is a state governed by the rule of law, and in a state governed by the rule of law, when people disappear, we investigate. Especially when minors are disappearing. For God’s sake, don’t smear the frosting on your shirt!” Koivu snapped at Puupponen, who was just wiping his fingers on his extraordinary ugly hand-knitted sweater, which had a pattern that was presumably meant to be bears, but which had stretched so they were more reminiscent of extraordinarily long-bodied pine martens. Maybe it was an expression of Puupponen’s mother’s or sister-in-law’s sense of humor.

Both of my subordinates stared at me like I was a referee. The power to start a preliminary investigation or to keep the case on ice was mine. I knew Koivu well enough that I didn’t believe he would get worked up over nothing.

“We could go and have a talk with the relatives again. Maybe Sara’s mother can talk one-on-one to another woman. Who made the report about Ayan’s disappearance?”

“Nelli Vesterinen, the leader at the Girls Club. Ayan’s girlfriends asked her what to do.”

Iida had mentioned Nelli countless times. Nelli wasn’t a prig like the other Girls Club leader; Nelli tolerated joking around and even some horseplay. Anu would be going to talk at the Girls Club, but she wasn’t my subordinate. I could still tell her to keep her eyes and ears open; maybe Ayan’s friends who had made the missing persons report would be there. But we needed to interview Nelli Vesterinen as soon as possible.

“Pekka, you’ve obviously been collecting the personal information and addresses of the lost girls’ relatives in a folder or computer file?”

“Correctamundo. In a folder, just like in the old days. The computers in this building act up sometimes, so it’s best to keep a printout of anything important.

“You haven’t heard of backup copies?” Puupponen threw out.

“Ville, since you’re such a computer genius, you get online and see what you can dig up. Start by searching the girls’ names; maybe the discussion about the disappearances has

started up again. We'll send a request for assistance to Europol and Interpol. So, Pekka, you met all of the families of the girls who disappeared?"

"Yeah, Ruuskanen palmed the foreigners off on me because I have an immigrant wife and three slant-eyed kids."

"Now, aren't we bitter today. I thought you'd be happy now that Maria is back in the department," Puupponen said, finally biting into his donut in such a way that the topmost marten/bear cross on the sweater got an eruption of jelly on its head.

"It just sticks in my craw how helpless we are with things like this. 'Just don't investigate. One migrant here or there, better they clear out of the country.' Of course Ruuskanen didn't say anything like that, but you can sense the attitude. It almost reminded me of the Ström days. So let's get down to business, even though we are late getting out of the starting gates. How about let's make our office the case room so Mrs. Boss can have some peace and quiet?"

Now Koivu was finally smiling; he had gotten his way.

"It would be good to get the girls' DNA. Hopefully they haven't thrown away the tooth and hairbrushes. Or, the ones who were traveling will have them with them of course... But let's try. Koivu, you make appointments with all of the families. All three of us will go so we can talk to people separately. I'll get in touch with the Girls Club."

"Is that another one of those clubs where they don't let men in?" Puupponen asked.

"A policeman can get in wherever he wants," Koivu said, grabbing the last donut off the plate and exiting the room. Puupponen remained sitting in the armchair.

"Have you had a chance to meet Ruuskanen yet?" he asked.

"We were introduced yesterday. I have seen him before, too, sometime years ago at an officers' function, but I doubt we've ever exchanged more than a few words. But Ruuskanen doesn't have anything to do with this. We operate as an independent unit, and besides, he's just a stand-in. I don't think we should expect too much trouble from that direction."

Puupponen shook his head. There were only a few freckles on his pale skin; the winter sun didn't exactly lure them out. Where the donuts had accumulated in Koivu's midsection, they didn't seem to have any effect on Puupponen, even though we would be celebrating his fortieth birthday that summer. His hair glowed a familiar red; color like that was hard to conjure out of a bottle.

“I found an interesting link when I was doing some Internet searches. Ruuskanen’s twenty-something son Miro Ruuskanen is an active member of an anti-immigrant group called Finnish Heartland. It’s one of these small groups that are disappointed the True Finns don’t condemn immigration strongly enough. Of course, the opinions of the father and son don’t necessarily have anything to do with each other, but it might be good for you to be aware. I didn’t dare mention it to Koivu; his head is already full of conspiracy theories.”

“No point making Ruuskanen’s lack of interest out to be more than it is. It’s probably more a question of the lack of resources that our new unit is designed to address. But you go dig around online; I’m going to try to get hold of our first interview. Shoo!” I waved Puupponen out of my office like a wasp, and it worked. He left, laughing, leaving behind the sticky smell of donuts.

I spent a moment collecting my thoughts. Unlike Koivu and Puupponen, I suspected that in leaving the disappearances uninvestigated, Ruuskanen had been guilty of reverse racism. It might be that because of his son he knew the thought patterns of the immigration critics so well that he guessed they would raise a stink over the girls’ disappearances. In doing so, Ruuskanen had made a big mistake. The girls had probably just been sent out of the country. There wasn’t any reason to suspect dishonor killings, because no bodies had been found.

The Turku freeway hummed its familiar hum outside my window; my new office faced south, and in the summer it would turn into a furnace. I looked up the numbers for the Girls Club and called Nelli Vesterinen’s cell phone. I only got her voicemail, and left my contact information. I took care of the rest of the startup routine for my new job, like sending everyone who needed it my new work email address and transferring the numbers for my family members and other standard contacts onto my work phone. That took a surprisingly long time, and I was just about to go take a look at how the department’s lunch offerings had changed in the last few years when I received an email at my new address. The subject line said “Greetings from Kabul” and the sender was Lauri Vala.

*Hey, Kallio.*

*It looks like you've started a new gig, apparently with a police organization, not POLAMK. Good. A professional policewoman probably has more integrity than a police academy instructor anyway.*

*I'm coming to Finland next week, and we need to meet. I don't feel like saying anything more in an email. I'll let you know when I'm in the country.*

*Lauri Vala.*

Major Vala had been the highest ranking Finnish military official in the unit that was in charge of the safety of the civilians participating in the police academy opening ceremonies. His posting was Mazar-i-Sharif like all the other Finnish units, but he had been at our disposal during the whole trip. At first, Vala had been coldly businesslike, but on the evening after the bomb catastrophe he had tried to get better acquainted. After help arrived and combed the area, not finding any more mines or bombs, we continued our journey to Kabul. The Germans' exploded and badly charred jeep was left behind; the ambulance would come later to retrieve the bodies. We didn't say anything beyond what was absolutely necessary for the rest of the journey. Numminen got us the rest of the way, and after we reached the city we ended up stuck in traffic, even though it was already late. While Vala was in Kabul, he was staying in the same carefully guarded hotel as I was, and when we arrived, he asked for my key as well at the reception desk and escorted me to my room.

"I don't want to leave you alone. I'll be back soon. I'm just going to get something that we both need. I'll knock three times, twice. Bap, bap, bap. Don't open up for anyone else."

Vala had learned to command, and as a police officer, I was used to the idea that the chain of command should be well-defined. At that moment I didn't have a will of my own. My head was a mess of grief and gratitude; I was alive! I sat down on my bed. The stench of burning flesh clung to my hair; washing might not even take it out. I only took off my shoes before lying down. Outside someone was shouting the call to prayer in a shrill voice, and then it was lost in the chaotic din of the traffic. There were dark splotches on the ceiling, like tears.

I didn't know how much time passed before Vala knocked on the door. He had managed to change into a clean uniform and also wash up, apparently, since his short, steel-

gray hair was still wet. The hotel had a functioning plumbing system, which was still a luxury in Kabul. On the streets you saw women carrying water from the public wells. We had been strictly warned against drinking anything but bottled water, and we were supposed to check the seal of the cap even at that.

I let Vala in, even though I wasn't at all sure I wanted company. In his hand Vala had a wooden box that was about 16 inches long and wide, and about eight inches tall. He sat down in the only chair in the room and set the box on the table. On its cover was a picture of a sailboat. Vala lifted two glasses and a bottle of whiskey out of the box. It happened to be my favorite brand, but right now it felt like the taste of peat and smoke would remind me too much of what had happened.

"I think we could both use a drink. How many fingers?"

"Can you drink on duty?"

"Right now I don't give a rat's ass. I'm going to have some anyway." Vala filled his glass half-full. "What now? Are you in shock?"

I sat upright. Probably not, since I could still remember the signs of shock. I was just so tired I was about to pass out. I asked Vala to pour me a couple of fingers. The Laphroaig was cask strength, 120 proof, and its burn flowed from my throat into my stomach. If I drank everything Vala had poured, nothing would hold back the tears.

"What on earth are you doing here? You have two kids; the youngest isn't even 10. Why aren't you at home with them instead of here in a war zone?"

Up to that point, Vala and I had strictly stuck to business in our conversations. He must have overheard when I was telling Ulrike about my children. I had known Ulrike through the European Network of Police Women before she joined the Afghanistan policewomen's project. She had met Iida and Taneli when they visited me in Tampere.

"I was closely involved with the academy project and trained the female police officers in Finland. I wanted to come here because I respect their courage."

"Do you respect it more than your children's right to a mother?"

Antti had asked the same thing, as had my mother. Only my father had been silent, letting me do what I felt was right. He would probably be hearing about it from my mother for the rest of his life.

"My female students, Sayeda, Muna, and Uzuri don't get to choose any other road than the one they have, no matter how big a risk it is."

“But this is their homeland. You’re a Finn.”

“So are you. What difference is there?”

“My sons are already on their own, and my wife left years ago. Listen to me, Kallio. Throughout history men have done the fighting and women have looked after the home and children. That’s just how it’s meant to be. Both things are just as important. Would your children have thought you were a hero if the car bomb had hit us instead of the Germans? No, they would have thought you were a selfish bitch.”

The person I had been before that night probably would have thrown the malt whiskey in Vala’s face. But that person had been left on the road between Kabul and Jalalabad, and the new me just wanly drank the peaty, copper-gold liquid.

“Our safety was supposed to be guaranteed,” I said lamely.

“This country is in a civil war. Nothing is guaranteed under those conditions. They don’t play by western rules here. We’re facing off against a pack of men who think completely differently than we do. Their own lives aren’t worth much, and their enemies’ lives aren’t worth anything. It’s easy to be an optimist off in Finland. You went to the prisons. How soon do you think those conditions are going to change? How long do you think your students are going to stay alive? They’ll be lucky to live past Christmas. A police academy led by westerners is doubly horrifying to the Taliban because women work there too.

I could feel the whiskey starting to make my thoughts buoyant; my head was light; it didn’t weight a thing. I had met Lauri Valas before, and it wasn’t like a professional soldier serving a peacekeeping mission was likely to win any prizes for optimism.

“Don’t misunderstand me. The folks at the police academy are a damn fine bunch. We wouldn’t have anything to do in this country if everyone acted like them. My place is here, but yours isn’t.”

“Why the hell are you preaching at me? I’m leaving tomorrow, and I don’t have any intention of coming back. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“So you don’t intend to agree to the police academy director’s request? He was wanting you to stay on at the academy as a visiting lecturer.”

Vala was drinking the whiskey like water. However, nothing in his outward appearance indicated he was a confirmed drunk. The browned skin of his face didn’t have any broken blood vessels, his nose wasn’t red, and there wasn’t any sign of boating in his

muscular body from the booze. And someone with a drinking problem wouldn't have been able to do his job anyway. Booze was probably just Vala's way of reacting to adversity.

"I might have still been thinking about it when we left the academy. But I don't have any uncertainty anymore."

"So you understand you should be afraid?"

"Hey, soldier boy, don't you think we learn that in the police?"

That was exactly what we practiced: healthy fear and the ability to function regardless. I was drinking my whiskey too fast as well, even though the taste of it was the same as the stink of Ulrike as she billowed away. The strange words that Uzuri had recited in Pashto in a poem during the opening ceremonies grated in my mind. She had written it herself. The poem said that home was like a poppy flower, the seeds of which the birds spread far and wide, and *nanawati*, forgiveness, would fall upon all those who atoned for their evil deeds before the law. There was a direct translation of the poem in English in my bag; Uzuri had written it by hand with a ballpoint pen; even her handwriting was like a little work of art. What did Vala think of *nanawati*?

"You must know, Kallio, what the best way is to drive away the presence of death?" Vala leaned toward me and touched my shoulder. "Sex makes a person feel alive again better than any booze or drugs."

It took a second before I realized what Vala was talking about, and I could hardly believe my ears. I managed to sputter that I was married, even though Valla already must have known.

"Faithfully married?"

I didn't like Vala's smile and drew back farther from the edge of the bed.

"Yes."

"Of course that's an excellent thing, and not terribly common. Guess how many of my subordinates' wives have discovered that they can't stand the waiting and the constant threat of death and so go off with some more stable guy who will actually be around? I made my own sons swear to never get into this job, but the younger one is in cadet school. Even the older one is going to be a commercial pilot."

I felt like saying that even if I was going to have an affair, I wouldn't do it with Vala, but I didn't have time before he got another call. The cell phone network worked unreliably, so the soldiers had two-way radios. I realized that the roadside bomb explosion would soon



be in the headlines around the western world and that I should notify my family that I was uninjured. The hotel had a fax machine, but no one in my family owned one anymore. There was one at Antti's work, but he wouldn't get the message until the morning. Sometimes emails went without a hitch, but other times they disappeared into nowhere.

Vala's conversation in English was short; his part of it was mostly negative responses. While he was talking, I emptied my whiskey glass. I wanted to sleep, even if it meant taking a sleeping pill. More than anything, I wanted Vala out of my room. When he ended the call, I thanked him for the drink and asked him to leave. He got up slowly and looked me in the eyes in a way that made me want to turn my head away.

"My room is number 46. It's on this same floor. Don't hesitate to knock if anything happens. Maybe we'll see each other at breakfast. Numminen will take you to the airport. The French are leaving on the same plane to Frankfurt." Vala shook my hand. To my relief, we didn't run into each other at breakfast.

There was an empty seat next to me on the flight to Frankfurt; it had been reserved for Ulrike. I didn't dare drink any alcohol. I had to keep myself together, to forget... I didn't even want to remember Lauri Vala.

We hadn't exchanged a single word since that night. Now he wanted to meet, supposedly for some reason he couldn't reveal in email correspondence. Of all the things I needed right now.

Vala left my mind when Nelli Vesterinen returned my call.

"Finally someone is taking Ayan's disappearance seriously! We've been completely amazed that the police haven't done anything. Ayan's girlfriends have enough bad experiences with the police in their own countries, and now the Finnish police are letting them down too. Ayan never would have left Finland voluntarily. Here in Finland she had a job and friends."

I asked Nelli who Ayan's friends had been.

"Some people from her work. Ayan was working part time at the Tapiola Stockmann in the grocery department. She often came from there to the Girls Club. I never saw anyone accompanying her but Ayan's older brother, who also came to get her sometimes. But Miina, Ayan's best friend, is sure to know more. She was the one who got worried when Ayan stopped showing up at activities. She went to Ayan's house, and they told her that no one knew where Ayan is. Maybe they really don't."

“What is this Miina’s last name, and how can I reach her?”

“Miina Saraneva. She lives right here close, a few buildings away from the Girls Club, on Otsolahdentie. She’s in her first year at the technical college; math, I think. Tonight she should be coming here, like on every Tuesday. She sits here and waits for Ayan to come back. You can find her here.

In the end, I went to the Girls Club alone, because I didn't want to draw needless attention. I had been to the doors before dropping off and picking up Iida, but I had never gone into the club space itself. Otsolahdentie was the oldest area in Tapiola, an area built in the 1950's, and the snow covered trees already rose as high as the roofs of the buildings in places. The property on the bottom floor of the four-story building had originally been meant to be a grocery store. Sylvia Sandelin owned several units in the building; she herself lived in a town house on the end of the street nearest the sea. The local paper had done a full-page story when the Girls Club was founded, and I had found more articles about Sandelin using Google. She had been written about both in women's magazines and on the business pages.

I had dropped in at home to eat before going over to the club. Taneli was at an extra skating practice, so I would pick him up on the way home. In a fit of belt-tightening, the Espoo Police Department had done away with personal official vehicles; the very highest management were an exception. I realized that I could also go to the grocery store while I was out, so I took my own car. It was hard to find a parking spot on Otsolahdentie because of the piles of snow, but I finally got my vehicle squeezed in along the side of the street.

I recognized Nelli Vesterinen from Iida's description: a small, athletic-looking woman, who had heavy red and green harlequin dreads and several facial piercings. She smiled broadly at me and extended her right hand, the wrist of which was circled by Rasta-colored tribal tattoos. The handshake was firm enough that it was a challenge to match.

"Nelli Vesterinen. Nice to meet you. Contrary to what I thought, Miina hasn't shown up yet. How about let's go back into the employees' office? At least it has a door we can close."

The largest space at the Girls Club was a room about 600 feet square with bean bag chairs, a television and DVD equipment, and a hand loom with a half-finished rag rug on it. Next to the loom was a carpentry bench shielded by a screen. In a side room was the music space where Iida played with her friends every so often. There was a drum set in there, along

with a couple of amplifiers and a 1980's vintage keyboard. The kitchen smelled like cardamom, but instead of sweet rolls someone was cooking flavored oriental rice. At the end of the hall, behind the kitchen, was a closet of a room barely six by six, just enough to fit a table and a couple of chairs. The room didn't have any windows, but the wall sported a wintry mountain vista which could have been Afghanistan.

"Would you like some green tea?"

"Why not."

Nelli opened a thermos and poured tea into two cups. The green liquid tasted a little bitter, but still beat the police station's Lipton bags.

"What can you tell me about Ayan Ali Jussuf? How long had she been coming to the Girls Club?"

"Since the beginning. A whole gaggle of Somali and Sudanese girls, who obviously had nothing to do, joined in, and Ayan was one of them. She wanted to be called Ayan Ali, without the Jussuf. Jussuf was her grandfather, and she didn't want his name, but that was the name she had in the census register. She would have liked to change it."

"Why?"

"As I said, a Muslim's family name is her grandfather's name, and her middle name is her father's name. She must have wanted a name that wouldn't define her through any of her relatives. Ayan admired the Finnish system, where a child can even be given her mother's surname, and a woman doesn't have to change her name when she gets married."

"So was Ayan rebelling against Muslim culture?"

"Maybe in thought, but not in deed. But now we don't know what's happened to her. As far as I know, she didn't have a boyfriend, but Miina can tell you more. We don't go prying into the girls' private lives here, but we help the ones who need it. Ayan asked me about the possibility of changing her name, and according to Finnish law anyone can do that as long as she's legally an adult."

"Did she also want to abandon her religion?"

"She never talked about that, at least not with me."

Someone knocked at the door. Nelli invited whoever it was to come in. The newcomer was a slight, willowy girl with short-cropped hair that was so blond it almost looked white. She was dressed all in white too, and her overalls reminded me of the protective suits used in technical crime scene investigations or the jumpsuits worn by

astronauts. But these overalls were made out of cotton fabric and didn't have any patches on them, just small, bright-red embroidery on the collar and cuffs.

"This is Miina Saraneva. Inspector Kallio from the Espoo Police would like to chat with you about Ayan."

The girl's pale face flushed with color and an angry heat flashed in her eyes.

"The police! Finally! Ayan has been missing for over two weeks now. We were supposed to meet on Valentine's Day—there was a Valentine's Day party here—but she never showed up and didn't even send a text message. I couldn't get hold of her on her phone. The next Tuesday I went to her apartment, but her parents said they didn't know where she was. They didn't let me inside, so I don't know if they were lying. I went to report her missing right then."

"The police have already interviewed Ayan's family, but with the same results. They don't know anything. Did Ayan have a boyfriend?"

"No." Miina's answer was sure and quick. "She didn't want any man ordering her around."

There was another knock at the door, and the Indian-looking girl who had been working in the kitchen before asked for Nelli. Nelli left the room, closing the door behind her. Miina looked at the landscape painting instead of me as she continued.

"Ayan didn't usually talk about these things; she was shy...she was from such a different world than me. But once she said that she didn't want a husband or to have children, because it was so painful. Apparently she had been circumcised in some refugee camp in Somalia when she was only nine years old. She just talked about 'the operation'. Once she was with me when I was buying tampons. She was really embarrassed and barely had the courage to ask why I used them. Didn't it hurt a lot? I explained how they work, and she was totally confused. I could see that she wanted to ask more, but didn't have the nerve, and I didn't want to force it on her. I doubt her mother even told her about periods; Ayan got all her information from the school nurse and magazines."

"Did Ayan fight with her family?"

"No. She didn't like everything that happened in the family, but she didn't talk to them about it."

"Online there was a claim that Ayan's brother killed her. Who could have started a rumor like that?"

Miina's face went white as snow and her voice began to shake so much I could barely understand her.

"Really? Who said that?"

"It didn't say."

Miina closed her eyes. Her head rocked back and forth slowly. "Which brother did the message mean?"

I explained that I hadn't seen the message thread. Ayan had two older brothers, Gutaale and Abdullah. Both lived with their parents and worked at a private cleaning company.

Miina had never visited Ayan's home when the men of the family were there and had never met any family members besides the mother. Ayan for her part had never agreed to come to Miina's house to visit, even though she lived right next to the Girls Club. In addition to the club, the girls had met at various cafés in Tapiola when one or the other had happened to have some extra money.

"Ayan was proud of her job, even though it was just part time. She would have liked to go to high school and then study nutrition. She talked about that sometimes, and she was really excited when she heard about the Finnish student financial aid and housing allowance systems. Earlier this year she went to the Tapiola Evening High School to ask about the possibility of studying while she was working. Of course I encouraged her to do it."

Tears had started to run down Miina's face, but the color of her cheeks didn't change. Her nose just started to redden gradually. She took a paper napkin from the stack on the table and wiped her face with it. If I hadn't known Miina's age, I would have let her travel on a child's ticket.

"Where do you think Ayan is?"

"Somewhere she'll never come back from! Maybe dead, maybe in Sudan with her grandparents, maybe sent off somewhere else where she can't get in touch with me. If she would have disappeared on her own, she would have told me. We were best friends. At least that's what she said. Sometimes she called me Adey; it means light skinned. Sometimes we compared the skin on our faces and wrists. Such different colors, from such different worlds, but so alike..." Now Miina broke down completely. She buried her face in the napkin.

Music had started to come through the door, first the thumping of a bass guitar and then the sound of drum cymbals. Someone was also playing those wood blocks; the rhythm

was six-eight time, which the bass couldn't quite keep up with. Then the drums shifted to five-four and a girl's voice yelled, "You can count to five, can't you, you effing blond bassist!" The bass playing stopped at that, but the drums continued stubbornly, now adding a bass drum which played the first and fourth beats of the rhythm. My foot started to tap along. The music took me back to my days playing in a friend's garage, where I was usually the only girl. In Arpikylä, where I grew up, the only club for girls in the city had been at the local church, and it didn't interest me, even though they did do Scouting.

I let Miina cry in peace. When she finally started talking again, her voice was hopeful.

"If Ayan is alive, she'll get in touch. There isn't any reason to think she's dead, is there? The police haven't found anything that points in that direction, have they?" Miina was a like a dog whose owner had left her waiting at the door of a store. Her face had the same resigned look, mixed with just a hint of hope.

"We're going to do our best to figure this out, but not all cases get solved quickly." I offered Miina my newly minted business card, which had come from the printers just that morning. I asked her to contact me immediately if she heard from Ayan or discovered anything related to her disappearance.

"Will the police tell me things in return? I don't want to have to read online that my best friend has been found dead."

"In theory our duty is just to inform the family."

"They're only her family on paper! Ayan was just forced to live with them. They didn't know anything about her thoughts and dreams. She told those to me. They weren't interested in hearing just so long as Ayan did what she was told! I told her that in Finland an adult doesn't have to account for her actions to anyone, that women can live together or in pairs just as well as with men, that she could be a scientist if she only wanted to... Do you understand? For a lot of us, our friends are a lot closer than our families. We didn't get to choose them. That's what Ayan thought was so lovely about Finland. She didn't have to worry the whole time about her relatives and what they thought."

I promised Miina that she would hear immediately if we got more information about Ayan's whereabouts. When we left the office and went back into the recreation room, she flopped down in an armchair and stared at the wall. Nelli came in through the outside door and asked if I still wanted to interview her. She was followed by a tall woman about thirty years old whose hair was plaited in two thick, blond braids.

“Heini Korhonen, Girls Club executive director,” she said in introduction. “You must be the policewoman. Finally. Three of our girls have disappeared without a trace, and no one has done anything about it. It’s like the police are afraid to get involved in anything involving immigrants.”

“Three? Were Sara Amir and Aziza Abdi Hasan coming to the Girls Club too?”

“Not as often as Ayan, but once or twice anyway. Hadn’t the police picked up on this connection? We try to help girls here to integrate and become independent, but not all immigrant cultures see that as a good thing.” Heini Korhonen had clearly said the same thing before; she seemed used to speaking in public. It was late enough that I would need to leave soon to pick up Taneli. He didn’t have a cell phone, so I couldn’t tell him I would be late. Antti didn’t think kids under ten should have things like phones. Now Taneli was counting down the days to his birthday in April when he would get the coveted gadget.

“So you know Sara and Aziza,” I asked Heini. “Who are their friends here?”

“Aziza only came to the club once, and Sara twice, first with girls from her class at school for a tour and then once for cooking club. But I remember them, just like I remember all the other girls. They’re important to me. It’s good that the police have finally woken up. I’ve been thinking about tipping off a journalist I know about the disappearances. I would imagine the general public would be interested in something like this. I’m sure you can picture the furor that would have been set off if the missing girls had been native Finns?”

The volume of Heini’s voice had made the girls in the room turn their attention to us. I raised my own voice and asked if any of them had known Sara, Aziza, or Ayan. A girl named Niina said she had been in the same school as Sara, but in a different grade. Apparently there were rumors at school that she had been sent back to Bosnia because she had a Finnish boyfriend, some Tommi.

“He wasn’t from our school; he was from somewhere out in Siuntio or something. I never saw him. Someone just said on Facebook that Sara had been seen holding hands with a boy with long hair down at Sello a few days before she stopped going to school. I can look and see if I can still find the message.”

I gave her my business card as well. It felt like an old-fashioned object, in the 21st century I should have been sending my contact information straight to a cell phone or smart device. The girl would probably throw the scrap of paper in the nearest trash can. If she just remembered my name she could find me later using the Espoo Police address.



“One more thing about Sara’s family.” Heini Korhonen’s voice stopped me as I was about to leave. “I’ve met them a few times in other contexts. I speak Serbo-Croatian and work as a public service interpreter when I’m needed. They didn’t like that Sara came here. That’s probably why it was only a couple of times.”

When I asked Heini about the possibility of Sara having a boyfriend, she said she didn’t know anything about it. I had to leave to pick up Taneli. Miina’s pale face kept going through my mind as I tried to come up with something to buy at the grocery store that I could turn into food quickly. Antti was going to a concert, so I was in charge of getting everyone fed. Local perch fillets cost two and a half times more than Vietnamese catfish, but I still chose the perch. There were potatoes left over from the weekend, so I fried them up as a hash with the perch. My first day at work had also been my birthday, and Antti had pampered me with a mutton-chanterelle meat loaf, Iida had made brownies, and Taneli had fixed a salad. At work I had served a raspberry jelly roll, which was the absolute limit of kitchen goddess skills. Koivu had politely taken three pieces. He had of course remembered my birthday, which I personally hadn’t made a big deal about because it wasn’t a major milestone year.

While I was getting the food ready, I thought of the three families that now had an empty place at the dinner table. Maybe the families knew where the person who had once held that seat was, or maybe only some of them knew and the others settled for the lie they had been told. I didn’t have any illusions about being able to see through a person at first glance and tell if he was lying. In order to move forward with the case of these three missing girls, I would have to meet their families. I thought of them as Ayan’s, Sara’s, and Aziza’s families, because none of the families except the Amirs had a common surname. I had agreed to Iida receiving Antti’s last name when she was born. Antti had argued that everyone knows who a child’s mother is, but you can never be completely sure of paternity. This cynical, Strindbergian view had felt logical at the time, and in later life it had turned out to be beneficial that the children had a different last name than me, even though Kallio isn’t a terribly uncommon name.

Because our meal was delayed until a very Mediterranean nine o’clock in the evening, Taneli had to go bed right afterwards. Since Christmas he had been refusing to listen to bedtime stories; it was childish because he knew how to read to himself. Iida asked me to drill her on her Swedish vocabulary because there was a test the next day.

“I just got a text from Anni. She says you were at the Girls Club, but you didn’t notice her. What were you doing there?”

“Work stuff.”

I never talked about work with my children, and I tried to stick to professional confidentiality with Antti too, although sometimes my tongue slipped. Sometimes I had to have someone to bounce things off. But I had openly asked the girls at the club to contact me, and Iida would hear about it from her friends anyway. I explained to her briefly what was going on. Could she maybe help?

Iida only remembered Ayan, and that only because she was best friends with that “weird girl who always dresses in white.” She mostly spent time with girls her own age, although she admired some of the older girls too. When she started to press me about what I suspected had happened to Ayan, I had to cut the conversation off.

“I’m sure we’ll figure it out. Don’t worry about it. There isn’t anything pointing to anything bad having been done to her.”

I hoped that Iida believed me, even though I couldn’t imagine any good thing that could have made Ayan disappear.

It was a cloudy March day. The temperature was close to freezing. The enormous piles of snow in all the yards in Suvela were dirty. Ayan’s family lived in a public housing project building, the address of which was unfortunately familiar to the police. The Amirs lived in the next building over, but we hadn’t managed to contact them yet. Ayan’s father, Ali Jussuf Hassan, was on his way to his evening shift. He worked as a bus driver. We assumed the mother would be home as well, since she didn’t work, according to Koivu.

“I tried to ask my neighbors, the Keiras, if they knew Ayan’s family; they’re from Sudan too. They knew who I was talking about, but the families didn’t see each other except for sporadically at the mosque. The Keiras are going there less and less these days,” Koivu had explained in the car. “Mehdi Keira played soccer with us once and commented on how little spirit Finnish fans have in supporting their teams.”

There was an elevator in the building Ayan’s family lived in, but it had “Out of Order. Repairman has been called.” posted on it in Finnish and two other languages whose characters I didn’t know how to read. Maybe they were Somali and Persian. We climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. Two thirds of the names written on the mail slots were something

other than Finnish. On a couple of doors, the white plastic letters had pieces of paper next to them with more names written on them. One mail slot even had four Finnish names. During my childhood in Arpikylä, divorce and kids growing up without fathers were uncommon. The fatherless boy in my elementary school class had made a Father's Day card for his granddad, but I remember the teacher getting irritated because Minna didn't even have a grandfather and telling her to draw whatever she wanted while the rest of us scribbled flowers and cars on our cards. Nowadays we luckily didn't have to think about things like that anymore. Were Father's Day and Mother's Day culturally neutral enough celebrations that immigrants adopted them regardless of religion? Did Muslims celebrate Women's Day? Iida would probably know these things better than me, because even though there wasn't anything more than a Russian and an Estonian student in her class, a couple of dozen home cultures encountered each other at the Girls Club.

On Ayan's family's apartment door it said Hassan. The man who opened the door looked familiar, and I realized that he often drove the regional bus that went from our house into Helsinki. He spoke Finnish with a strong accent, but fluently. We had left our overcoats in the car and wiped our shoes carefully on the mat in the entryway, which was reserved for that purpose. He led us to a room where Ikea met East Africa: the sofa with light-colored fabric upholstery and wooden legs and the birch veneer television stand could have been from any Finnish living room, but the colorful textiles of the rest of the decoration represented the family's land or origin. When Finns were in far-off countries, they claimed to miss salt licorice and rye bread. What did the Sudanese miss of their homeland's flavors, or was it enough for them that they could get rice from the store and that peace prevailed in the land?

Ali Jussuf Hassan motioned for us to sit. He did not look at me, and no one shook hands. Koivu began by asking if anything had been heard from Ayan and if her mother was home.

"Not a word. Two weeks gone already, and not a word. We don't know what to tell you. No one knows anything, not the neighbors, not the relatives. My wife is in the kitchen. She doesn't know anything either."

Ayan had left for the Girls Club Valentine's Day party, but she had never arrived and no one had seen her get on the bus that went from Suvola to Tapiola. Ali Jussuf Hassan had asked his coworkers who had been driving that night, but no one remembered seeing Ayan.

“I didn’t know that this could happen in Finland. In Sudan, human life is cheap, but here we were supposed to be safe,” he said seriously. He had on straight, black pants, the kind he could also wear sitting behind the steering wheel of a bus; his white dress shirt was pressed and spotless. I heard a clatter come from the kitchen, so I stood up and moved toward the sound. The door to the kitchen was closed. Inside I could hear water gurgling, like the sound of dishes being washed. When I opened the door, a woman turned toward me and cried out in surprise. I don’t know what or who I looked like to her. I didn’t have on police uniform, but I had purposefully put on a black skirt that would cover my knees, violet boots, and a loose wool jacket, because I didn’t want to look aggressive in Aisha Muhammed Ali’s eyes. According to our information, she was the same age as I was, but much thinner. The skin of her face was stretched into a tight mask, the area around her eyes and mouth full of wrinkles. She had round eyeglasses and a long, multicolored dress, the sleeves of which were rolled up for dish washing. She quickly rolled them down when I stepped into the room and pulled the white scarf covering her hair farther onto her head.

“Espoo Police, Inspector Maria Kallio. We’re investigating the disappearance of your daughter Ayan.”

Koivu and Puupponen had received instructions to press Ayan’s father about the Internet rumors that accused Ayan’s brothers of killing her. Puupponen had been in contact with the Internet portal the rumors had appeared on, and the administrators had sent him the documents. They were currently looking into who had posted the rumor. When our cell was first being set up, we had gotten permission to subpoena the identity of anonymous Internet users if it was technically possible and the crime in question was one that could bring at least two years in prison.

Ayan’s mother didn’t answer me. She just dried her hands on a cloth that was just as unwrinkled and gleaming white as her husband’s shirt. There were teacups and a salad bowl in the wash basin. A dishwasher wasn’t included in the furnishings of this apartment.

“Do you speak Finnish?” I asked. Then I closed the door, which startled her.

“Not well. Ayan—found?” There was hope in the woman’s eyes, which told me much more than any other answer. Aisha Muhammed Ali had no reason to believe that her daughter had died.

“No. We’re trying to find her. Do you know where she is?”

She shook her head. “She go to club, never come back. Don’t know what happened. Husband and sons look for her all the time, ask everyone.” Even though she spoke slowly and deliberately, there was a fierceness in her voice.

“Did Ayan have a boyfriend?”

“No. She was good girl. Went to work, came home, brought all money to father. Sometimes at club, but not too much. Someone take her, said beautiful girl, I take picture, you get money. Ayan believe. Then...” she shrugged her shoulders and spread her hands. “I hope that come back. That someone find. Maybe in Finland police good.”

“What sort of relationship did Ayan have with her brothers?”

Aisha stared at the floor and then asked, “Relationship, what does it mean?”

“Were they friends? What did Ayan’s brothers think about her going to the Girls Club.”

She thought for a long time before answering. Perhaps she just had to search for the words. It would have been easier with an interpreter, but we hadn’t been able to get one on such short notice.

“No fights. Ayan good. The boys not like that she walk alone. Finnish boys not know how to respect girls. The boys get Ayan from the club often. Safe. Good boys, work a lot. Bring money home.”

I knew that too much weight couldn’t be placed on Internet rumors. The people who had commented about Ayan’s fate were probably professional immigrant bashers who didn’t have any real information about Ayan. It felt cruel to ask a mother if one of her children could have killed another, but if we wanted to find out what had happened to the girl, we couldn’t shy away from even the most painful subjects.

“There are rumors that your sons killed their sister. Do you have any information about this?”

Aisha drew a quick breath and then said that she didn’t understand my question, but I could see from her eyes that she understood. It was almost like she shrank, as if she had cocooned into herself for protection from the harshness of the world. Even though she clearly didn’t know what had happened to Ayan, she didn’t consider the theory I had presented to be impossible. I felt chills for her.

After my question, Aisha closed up completely and wouldn't agree to tell me anything more than that Ayan had slept in the living room. The family's apartment had three rooms, not including kitchen, but only one of the bedrooms was a reasonable size. It was the parents' room, one wall of which was covered by a wardrobe. The other room was just a box that fit two beds and, between them under the window, a narrow table with a computer on it. The only thing on the walls was a Sudanese flag.

The men were sitting in the living room. It was clear from everyone's body language that my colleagues had presented the Internet murder allegation to Ali Jussuf Hassan as well. He was staring at the floor with his fists clenched, shaking his head in fury.

"We need some of Ayan's things, like a hairbrush or a toothbrush. Where did she keep her clothes?" I asked Aisha. "And did she sleep here on the sofa, or where?"

Aisha pointed at a rug in the corner behind the couch. The sofa was arranged so the corner formed its own little nook you could only see into from one direction, and on that side a wooden chest served as a visual screen.

"There. On mattress on rug. No bigger apartment available. Got used to sleeping like that with sisters in Sudan. Not in bed."

"Sisters? Do you have other daughters besides Ayan?" The information collected by Koivu had only mentioned the two older brothers.

"Two other girls. Left there. No food for everyone in camp." Aisha's voice was faint. "Many have all children die."

What could I say to that? Did it make losing children easier that the same had happened to others too and that you were able to keep at least some of your own? Was it easier to stomach the agony if you had already experienced it once? Would Ayan's parents have voluntarily sent her back to the hell where their other daughters had perished? Suddenly I wanted to be with Iida and Taneli, protecting them, making sure that nothing could threaten them.

“Ayan’s things there.” Aisha pointed at the chest, on top of which was a multicolored sitting pillow. It looked like it could have come with them all the way from Sudan.

I didn’t ask permission to open the chest; I just got to work. Koivu got up from the couch and came behind me to see what was in the chest. I heard Ayan’s father exclaim. It was inappropriate for a man, even a policeman, to see his daughter’s undergarments. That was most of what was in the chest, along with a pair of loose, dark red pants, three colorful tunics, and a black headscarf. Unfinished embroidery depicted roses and cornflowers; I wondered if the latter grew in Sudan too. A lipstick and a tube of mascara were hidden at the base of the chest. Because there was no lock on the chest, it was not a particularly good hiding place. Ayan had slept night after night with only the sofa sheltering her.

I stared at the room, trying to focus all of my senses, to sniff like a bloodhound. But I wasn’t the detective, familiar from television, with supernatural abilities who can see everything that ever happened in a room just by concentrating. Of course I sensed the fears and the stress; they had taught us that in the first interrogation courses at the police academy. Although one lesson had been devoted to the Romani, trying to get the police cadets to understand the unique aspects of their culture, during my basic training we had mostly been taught to understand the uniform Finnish culture. Keeping quiet wasn’t just a Finnish trait. Antti often listened to M.A. Numminen’s *Wittgenstein* recording in which a man crows in German that “whereof one cannot speak, one must pass over in silence.” Nothing was going to change that truth, not even the constant admonitions flooding over us that everything can be worked out by talking. With a lot of things, the most important parts seem to drown in the endless flood of words, the repetition of a memorized mantra. Especially on the white-collar crime side of the house, the crooks were able to talk the investigators silly, although some of them did clam up systematically.

When I was teaching at the Police College, I encouraged the interrogators to be tactful with immigrants who had spent time in refugee camps. Although native-born Finns trusted the police, the situation in the newcomers’ countries of origin was often quite different, and threatening a person who had suffered extended periods of torture could trigger psychosis in the worst cases. But I couldn’t sit around wondering how big a mistake I had made by challenging Aisha about the possibility of the male members of her family being behind Ayan’s disappearance. I had to continue trying to uncover the truth.

Aisha said Ayan's hairbrush was in the bag she always carried with her. She had thrown the toothbrush away, and all of Ayan's clothing in the trunk was clean. Finding a DNA sample wouldn't be easy, but for the time being we didn't really need it anyway. We took the dust bag from the vacuum along at any rate, which made Ali Jussuf Hassan stare perplexed.

It felt like we were leaving the apartment completely empty handed. Koivu and Puupponen hadn't gotten anything out of Ali Jussuf Hassan either, other than a fervent assurance that none of the family members knew where Ayan was. He looked for her every day, asking his bus driver coworkers if they had seen her. He had chalked up the online rumors about his sons' violence to racist Finnish hot air.

"He said the boys had already lost all of their other sisters. Ayan is important to them, and they've been looking for her everywhere too, in the other neighborhoods around and along their route to work, searching every bus stop and the surrounding areas," Koivu said.

"The police can't go around accusing people of crimes just because of something somebody threw out online. But let's have Ville and me talk to the boys tomorrow anyway, okay?" Koivu's voice echoed in the stairwell like in a church. If there had been violence in Ayan's family, the neighbors most likely would have heard, because the soundproofing in the building was poor. We could hear the crying of babies or music coming through some of the doors. However, we didn't start ringing doorbells, instead continuing on out into the yard. A swarm of children was playing on a snow pile. There were a dozen, all of whom looked preschool aged. There were several skin tones represented, from basic Finnish fair skin to very dark. The children's mothers stood around chatting near the wall, sometimes having to resort to gestures. I approached them, introduced myself, and asked if any of them knew anything about Ayan's disappearance.

"Is she missing?" one of the light-skinned mothers in the group asked. "I thought I hadn't seen her for a while. She babysat for us sometimes when my sister couldn't. Has something happened to her?"

"We don't know. Have any of your heard fighting coming from Ayan's home?"

My question was followed by silence. Then one of the dark-skinned young women with a headscarf asked another dressed the same way something in a language that I guessed was Somali. She answered in the same language. The women's animated conversation ended in head shaking.



“Amina does not know Finnish very well and did not know at first what ‘fighting’ meant. She is Ayan’s neighbor. No fights. Very peaceful family. Keep to selves, yes. Not many visitors. Feel a little sorry for them.”

The other Somali woman nodded, confirming the first’s words. The woman who had used Ayan as a babysitter asked more about her disappearance and wondered why nothing had been written about her in the newspapers or on the Internet.

“It would be awful if she were found somewhere around here dead! Like in a trash bin. Or if the children found her. She couldn’t be under that snow pile, could she?” the woman asked, almost hysterically.

“Doubtful. But get in touch with the Espoo Police if you hear or see anything interesting. The switchboard will know who to contact.”

Puupponen had remained standing, watching the children’s snow castle construction while Koivu typed on his phone off to the side. Puupponen didn’t have his own children and he had never expressed a desire to have a family. Of course he had gotten all sorts of ribbing around the department about his single status, including insinuations about his sexual orientation, but Puupponen took it like he did most of the rest of life, with mild humor. Now he was smiling at a little girl whose black curls were spilling out from under her pink winter hat. The girl was only just barely able to stay on her feet, plopping down in the snow every so often, but always stubbornly getting back up.

“Police material,” Puupponen observed to the others. “Falling on her ass the whole time, but keeps stubbornly getting back up.”

“Maria!” Koivu yelled to me. “Let’s go see if anyone’s home at Sara’s place, since we’re in the same courtyard. I tried calling her father, but he isn’t answering.”

Sara Amir was the youngest of the missing girls, just 14 years old. Koivu told us that she had two older brothers and two younger brothers. These last two went to a nearby elementary school, while the younger of the bigger boys was in tenth grade trying to learn the language well enough to start vocational school.

“Sara’s father is a taxi driver and the mother is training to be a florist. They’ve been here since ‘96. The younger children were born in Finland. The father was a teacher in Bosnia, but his education didn’t transfer over here. The mother might be home.”

“And the older son?” I asked, but Koivu didn’t answer, instead tromping off briskly toward the next building over. I followed him and soon heard Puupponen’s steps behind me.

“Nice kid,” he said to me as he opened the door for me. The lobby of the building was dirtier than the last. Someone had spray painted “niggers get the fuck out” on the bulletin board, apparently very recently. Underneath somebody else had scratched an answer in pencil in an alphabet I couldn’t read.

The Amirs’ apartment was on the third floor of the building. There were dents in the white paint of the concrete walls exactly as if someone had been moving furniture in the hallway, so big it was constantly running into the walls. On the Amirs’ door was a wreath made of pink artificial roses with gold Christmas ribbon hanging from it. The family were Bosnian Muslims, but many of the families in that particular population group were religiously indifferent. Perhaps the Amirs had started celebrating Christmas in the Finnish style too, and the wreath was left over from that. Even though it was two months past the holidays, there seemed to be a Christmassy fragrance of cinnamon, cardamom, and ginger hanging in the air in the hallway. Koivu rang the doorbell. The sound was surprisingly loud, as if the normal bell had been replaced. When nothing happened after ringing the doorbell, he pressed the button again. When the echo of the bell had faded, we heard a strange howling coming from the apartment.

“Is there a dog in there?” Koivu wondered and then lifted the mail flap. The howling became clearer, but it wasn’t coming from the entryway. It was coming from somewhere farther back in the apartment. It was hard to say what the source of the sound was. It didn’t seem human, but it wasn’t like an animal noise either. Whoever or whatever was making the noise was clearly in distress.

“Open up, police!” Koivu yelled through the mail slot, but his yell only made the howling intensify. At that moment the door to the next apartment opened, hitting Puupponen square in the back, crushing him between the door and the wall.

“Who’s out here making all that racket?”

When Koivu saw the speaker, his face registered mild shock, and I think my own jaw probably dropped too. The woman was small and round, and the curlers under her babushka scarf, her housecoat, and her slippers were like a costume from a postwar Finnish film. To top it all off, she had a rolling pin in her hand, which she shook threateningly.

“Is someone back there behind the door? It’s your own fault. You should be more careful,” she said as Puupponen scrambled from behind the door, his nose red, but at least not bleeding.

“Espoo Police. Good afternoon. We’re trying to reach the Amir family.”

“Oh, so it’s the police, is it? I’ll need to see your badges. Just to make sure you aren’t lying. Each of you.”

We each presented our police credentials, which the woman looked at carefully from different angles. The name on the woman’s door was Kämäräinen, and she was standing with her feet in the doorway looking like she had no intention of allowing us into her apartment.

“They seem to be real, although you never can tell nowadays with all those fake doctors and all. You can never be too careful. My father was a policeman in Ruovesi, and he taught me that you shouldn’t trust people too much. The ones who look the most pleasant are often the biggest crooks. None of the Amirs are home except their crazy son, Samir. What do you want with them? Nothing bad has happened, has it?”

“Why is Samir making that sound?” If Kämäräinen didn’t know about Sara’s disappearance, I didn’t intend to tell her about it. “Is he in trouble?”

“He was just born like that, or at least he’s been strange since he was a child. Sometimes he’s even afraid of the doorbell. Do you want to speak with him? I have the Amirs’ spare key. I sometimes go over to calm him down when he has those attacks of his.”

According to police law, in missing persons cases we were allowed to enter the missing person’s apartment without a search warrant. Almost three weeks had passed since Sara’s disappearance, so the family would have had plenty of time to hide anything that might contradict Sara having left of her own free will. But because we were being handed the keys on a silver platter, I said, “Yes, thank you.” Kämäräinen closed her door while she went to retrieve the Amirs’ keys.

“When did you last see Sara Amir, Ms. Kämäräinen?” I asked when she returned with the Abloy key. The keychain had the same kind of artificial rose as on the Amirs’ door attached.

“I haven’t seen her since she left on that trip more than a month ago. Strange she hasn’t come back yet. You can’t stay away from school for weeks like that, even though there was the winter break in there.”

“What have her parents said about Sara’s trip?”

“That she was seeing relatives in Bosnia and going to school there. That it’s perfectly safe there nowadays. I do miss Sara though. She’s very helpful. She sometimes goes on little

errands to the store for me and helps me take my rugs out. A nice girl, even though she does chase after the boys a lot. But then they all do at that age.”

I pushed the key into the lock, but Koivu continued questioning Kämäräinen.

“How would you describe her interest in boys?”

“Giggling and flirting, using a lot of makeup. She curls her hair and doesn’t wear a headscarf, but that’s probably not such a big sin in that family, unlike what some of the other neighbors think. Some of the men in the families around don’t even dare look at me if I go out without a scarf, and look at me, I’m just a wrinkled old woman!” Kämäräinen chuckled to herself.

When I turned the key in the lock, the howling started again. The smell of Christmas seasonings grew stronger in the Amirs’ apartment, and when I peeked into the kitchen, I saw a spice cake on the table.

“Is anyone here?” I said into the apartment. Puupponen followed after me. The howling had stopped. The entryway of the apartment opened up into the living room, from which one door led further back. The decoration of the living room could have been from any Finnish home, where practicality and inexpensiveness were the most important considerations in the choices of furniture. The room was dominated by a dark blue sofa group and a flat screen TV. There weren’t many books on the bookshelves, but there were many decorative items and artificial flower arrangements. The bouquet of roses on the coffee table looked like it was made of real flowers, but when I sniffed it, I discovered the flowers were silk.

I heard a scream behind me. I turned to see Puupponen standing in the door of the bedroom trying to fend off a young man who was attacking him. Even though Puupponen was half a foot taller than his opponent, the boy had armed himself with a bread knife and was waving it around blindly. Now and then he would let out a low roar and sometimes screeches that sounded like the cries of a bird.

Hearing the screams, Koivu had charged into the apartment from the hallway. Koivu and I rushed to Puupponen’s aid. Puupponen backed into the living room, allowing Koivu to circle behind the attacker. I threw myself on the floor and grabbed the young man’s legs. They were bare, and there weren’t any nails on the two outside toes of his right foot. I was able to put him off balance by locking his ankles together, after which it was easy for Puupponen to grab his knife hand and disarm him. Koivu pulled the boy’s arms behind him

and pushed his head down. The boy had gone completely limp, and Koivu had to work to keep him upright.

“Don’t hurt Samir!” yelled Kämäräinen, who had come into the room behind Koivu. Puupponen was fishing for a pair of handcuffs in his briefcase, but I shook my head. The boy looked like he was calming down without them. He was very slender; his body looked more like that of a teenager than a twenty-something, but the black stubble on his jaw said otherwise. When Koivu let him raise his face, I saw large, brown eyes surrounded by eyelashes that would have been good enough for any mascara advertisement. The eyes were also filled with terror. Samir obviously didn’t realize who we were.

“We don’t want to hurt you,” I said gently, as if speaking to a shy cat. “We’re from the Espoo Police, and we’re looking for your sister Sara.”

Tears started to trickle from Samir’s eyes. Koivu led him over to sit on the sofa. Kämäräinen sat down next to the boy and wrapped her arm around his shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Samir, Auntie Aune won’t let anything bad happen to you.” Aune Kämäräinen searched for a fabric handkerchief in the pocket of her housecoat and gave it to the boy, who just clutched it in his fist. I guessed that a policewoman would probably be much less scary to Samir than two large men.

“Which room is Sara’s? My colleagues could take a look at her things.” I addressed my question to Aune Kämäräinen, because Samir was still sobbing.

“She slept in the little room with her mother. That door across from the kitchen. They called it the women’s room.”

Puupponen and Koivu didn’t need any instructions; they knew what to do. After they left the room, Samir gradually began to calm down. Even though Aune Kämäräinen was an outsider, she seemed to know the Amir family and Sara’s business so well that I didn’t bother running her off.

“You said that Sara is still in Bosnia. Have...”

I didn’t have time to finish my sentence because at the sound of the word “Bosnia,” Samir started shaking again and screamed,

“Not back there! Not Samir!”

Aune Kämäräinen had to press down very hard to keep the boy in his place, and Koivu poked his head out of the women’s room, ready to intervene.

“No one is taking you anywhere,” Kämäräinen and I both said at the same time, trying to calm him down.

Samir had been born in September of 1989, so he had been a small child when the Bosnian War began. The father of the family had been on the Serbs’ hit list, but the family, only three people at the time, had succeeded in escaping from camp to camp. The family’s second-oldest child, Alen, was born in 1993 amid the chaos of the camps, and Sara had been less than one year old when the family escaped the Srebrenica bloodbath by the skin of their teeth. Samir had been six then and old enough to understand terror and to fear pain and death.

“Sara didn’t want to go back there either,” Samir suddenly said, clearly and sensibly. “But Father said she had to go, that Sara was learning the wrong ways here. She was with bad boys. Uncle Emir came to take Sara to her real home in Bosnia, even though Sara didn’t want to go. Father will be angry that I told about this. He said that I could follow Sara if I wasn’t quiet.”

“Why would it be better for Sara in Bosnia?”

“There the old ways are respected. No infidel boys. It’s better for girls to be there; boys get along just fine in Finland. My younger brothers were born in Finland. They don’t remember anything about Bosnia. They want to play hockey like Finns.”

Koivu had returned to the door of the women’s room.

“Maria, we need your expertise in here. Will you come have a look?” Koivu walked into the living room with the deliberately gentle expression on his face he often used on his own children. Samir retreated toward the back of the couch as Koivu approached him. I stood up and went into the women’s room. It was the same size as Ali Jussuf’s family’s smallest room, but the Amirs had solved the space problem with bunk beds. Next to the windows was a writing desk with a ponderous desktop computer that looked ten years old and a pile of books about flowers.

“There aren’t any sheets on the upper bunk, so it must be Sara’s. There are on the bottom,” Puupponen observed. “But as a woman, can you tell which things here are Sara’s and which are her mother’s? I don’t understand anything about women, and Koivu’s daughter is still too small to be using makeup and wearing trendy clothes.”

I opened the wardrobe doors. One closet was full of linens and the next had mostly long skirts and demure, high-necked tunics that didn’t look like the clothing of a normal 14-year-old. The third closet only had a few pieces of clothing, mostly the latest fashions from

the discount youth clothing chains, but also strappy tank tops, belly shirts, and miniskirts that had already gone out of style. The pink checkered leggings were a style that Iida had worn a couple of years ago before the black phase set in.

“This must be Sara’s closet, but these are the clothes she left behind in Finland.”

“Yep. But if she doesn’t have any intention of ever coming back, why are the clothes still in the closet? Why haven’t they been thrown away?” Puupponen asked. “And what about these?” Puupponen opened the drawer of the desk, which was full of jewelry, and pulled out a package of contraceptive pills. “There’s no name on this. Sara’s mother is 47, so she could still need the pill too.”

“Give them here.” I took the round pill dispenser. Four tablets had been taken from it. They were combination pills. I remembered Sara’s picture in my mind. She had some pimples, but not real acne that the contraceptives could have been prescribed for. I remembered the talk I had heard at the Girls Club about a boyfriend named Tommi.

“See a prescription?” When Puupponen answered in the negative, I told him to keep searching. “We’ll have to ask Sara’s mother about these when we get hold of her. Sometimes the pill is prescribed for teens for completely different reasons than contraception, but a 14-year-old is pretty young to be taking hormones.”

“Better to take them than get pregnant though. All of Sara’s schoolbooks are here, but I guess there wouldn’t be any use for Finnish books in Bosnia.

“I’ll look at Sara’s clothes closet more carefully.” All of the winter clothes and shoes were missing. In the upper closet there were size 36 figure skates, the cheapest brand from the department store sporting goods section, and heavily worn. They had probably been bought used. A small cloth bag behind the skates was full of silly little girls’ underwear. There wasn’t any more jewelry or makeup in her closet; that was all in the desk drawer.

On the wall above Sara’s bed was a poster with a half-dressed Shakira. It told a lot about the Amir family’s religious views. But leaving the poster in place also indicated that Sara would be coming home someday, contrary to what Samir claimed. In the end, how much could we trust the confused young man?

I thumbed through Sara’s schoolbooks. There were a lot of drawings in them; apparently Sara had been bored during lectures, because she had either touched up the pictures in the books or added her own versions of them in the margins. Because the drawing style was the same in all the books, I felt safe assuming the pictures were Sara’s work, even

though textbooks rotated from one middle school student to another, and drawing in them was strictly forbidden. The history book had hearts in it. I noticed that at the center of almost all of them was written S + T. Hearts had begun to appear in the English book as well, just before Christmas. Sara had dated her homework carefully. Finally in the math book I found a large heart, pierced with an arrow and dripping blood, inside of which Sara had written T's name out in full next to her own. Sara + Tommi.

I was going back into the living room to ask what Samir and Aune Kämäräinen knew about Sara's friend Tommi when my phone rang. It played the theme music to *Pippi Longstocking*, Iida's ancient ring tone, which she was constantly demanding I change to something with more street cred. Because Iida never called during school unless it was important, I answered. Was she sick and needed to come home?

I could tell immediately from her voice that it was something serious.

"Hey, Mom, I just got a text from Anni. Noor, our friend from Girls Club, has been murdered. I'm not kidding. She was found in the snow somewhere in the woods in Olari. Anna texted that she'd been strangled with her own head scarf."