

CHAPTER 1

TUESDAY, I WAKE angry. I often do, if I'm honest, but today it's worse than usual. Firstly, because I wake alone – Johan has gone off to London for the third time this month – and secondly, because it's October and it will be completely dark until almost nine o'clock. I reluctantly get out of bed and stand awhile by the window looking out onto the harbor. It's not yet seven, but across the bay, cars are moving in a slow line towards the motorway. The water in the harbor is dully reflecting the moonlight through a thin, eerie layer of ice. Downstairs, my daughters have already started fighting. I glance at my phone and it's full of messages and missed calls, but I just can't face dealing with them right now. With everything going on, I've hardly been in the office the last week, but I am going in today.

I take a few exaggeratedly deep breaths and keep my gaze on the moon, still high in the sky; mindfulness is the way forward, I've heard. I try to see Sandefjord the way it is in summer, when it really is a joy to stand at this window, looking out over the balmy, calm inner harbor full of leisure boats, and that bright, late-evening light. We get more sun than almost anywhere else in Norway, but I must say the winters are especially wet and drab. According to the weather report, we can expect another onslaught of torrential rain this afternoon, but for now, it's

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cool and clear. I take another couple of deep breaths, mentally steeling myself for the day ahead. I guess everyone feels like the world is a dark place sometimes.

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Tuesday is a crap day in my world. Especially now that Marialuz has decided to leave us halfway through her contract and I'm stuck with no au pair. It's like you can't win with those people. I don't particularly enjoy having a stranger in the house but I most certainly don't enjoy having to do all the work myself either. It just isn't possible. Especially on Tuesdays, when the girls both have after-school activities in opposite parts of town. Nicoline dances ballet at five, and Hermine swims at six. Because Nicoline finishes at six thirty p.m. I then have to drive into town to collect her, and bring her back to the pool, where we sit on ugly plastic chairs watching small children bob around in the water until seven fifteen. Nicoline whines for the full half hour we're there, unless I let her watch YouTube makeup tutorials on my phone and buy her candy, which I do. Obviously.

Tonight I'm in a particularly stressed-out, irritable mood, as things didn't exactly go to plan at work. I bend over backwards for my clients, sometimes literally, and still they complain. Angela Salomonsen had the nerve to email me today, saying that the violet raw-silk cushions I commissioned handmade in Lyon look dove-gray in the particular light of her conservatory, and could I call her immediately so we could discuss this situation. These are the kinds of things I have to deal with as interior stylist in a wealthy town full of spoilt, bored wives. Sometimes I think it is a miracle that I work at all, considering I have two small children and my husband is always traveling

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and I have no au pair. It's not really like I have to, but I quite like what I do, and being me is very expensive. Also, in my circles, it's definitely looked upon as a bit lazy to stay at home. Unless you have a cupcake business from the kitchen counter and blog about it, which I don't, as I hate cupcakes *and* blogs.

It's raining hard outside, and as I watch volleys of rain slam against the floor-to-ceiling windows beyond the pool, it occurs to me that I don't remember the last day it didn't rain. I suppose October is like that in many places, but I think I'm one of those people who is particularly sensitive to dreary skies and wet wind – I am a Taurus, and I prefer my surroundings to be beautiful at all times.

A little boy catches my eye as the children line up at the one-meter diving board. I'm not sure why. He's significantly smaller than the other children and his skin is a deep olive-brown and smooth. He's bouncing up and down on his heels, rubbing his arms, but his face is completely void of the goofy expressions of the other children waiting their turn. He looks frightened. I look around at the other parents who are waiting in the steamy, overheated room for someone who might be the boy's parents – I don't remember seeing him here before. There's chubby Sara's fat mother who I always try not to have to talk to – I've heard from several people that she's really needy and the last thing I need is some cling-on mummy friend. There's Emrik's father – a good-looking guy I went to school with back in the day who is now a police officer, and who I occasionally glance up at before quickly looking away. I can feel his eyes on me now but wait ten seconds longer than I want to before meeting his eyes. I give him a very faint smile and he immediately returns it, like a grateful puppy. I'm a good girl these days, though it doesn't come easily to me; there was

a time when I would have felt giddy with excitement at this little game, perhaps easing the top button of my blouse open, running my tongue slowly along the backs of my teeth. I scan the few remaining people for the little boy's parents, now pointedly ignoring Emrik's dad's wanting gaze.

There are the grandparents of Hermine's best friend from school, Amalie, sitting closely together and sharing biscuits from an old, faded, red cake tin. There is also a slim, ginger woman sitting close to the door, a heat flush creeping across her freckled white chest. She, too, is watching the boy intently, and I suppose she must be the mother, though it faintly surprises me that she must have had the child with someone pretty ethnic; the kid is so dark the father must be even darker, and she doesn't immediately strike me as someone with such exotic tastes.

There's nobody else here; I imagine the other parents are out in the parking lot, preferring their own rain-battered cocoons and a newspaper to listening to kids' screeching voices cutting through the clammy, hot air.

Finally, Hermine's class finishes after two rather underwhelming attempts at diving, and she walks over to where Nicoline and I are sitting.

'Did you see that?' She beams, exposing the wide, fleshy gash in her mouth from six simultaneously missing teeth.

'Fabulous,' I say, standing up, gathering our things together and nudging Nicoline, who is watching a ten-year-old in America apply a thick layer of foundation before expertly contouring her elfin face. 'Hurry up in the changing rooms. We'll wait in the foyer.'

Hermine does not hurry up in the changing rooms, and Nicoline and I wait impatiently in the brick-clad foyer, staring out at columns of rain moving back and forth across the parking

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lot like dancers in a ballroom. I keep checking my watch and it's already past 7.30 when Hermine appears, freshly blow-dried and with a lick of pink lip gloss in spite of the fact that she's about to step into a torrent.

I can practically feel the thin, cool stem of the wine glass in my hand and am slightly hysterical at the thought of having to deal with the girls for much longer today. They begin to argue over something as we walk out the door, and over the sounds of their high-pitched squabbling and the crash of the rain, I don't pick out the other sound until I've taken several steps outside. I briefly turn around, and there is the receptionist, an older, tired-looking woman with tight gray curls and a sweater that reads 'Happy Halloween'. She's shouting my name into the downpour, motioning for me to come back inside, and it's so typical – one of the girls must have left something behind.

'Cecilia, right?' she asks as I step back inside, already drenched. I notice the little boy again, the one who'd caught my eye at the pool. He's sitting on a bench, staring at the floor, his hair dripping onto the brown tiles.

'Yes?'

'I... I was wondering if you could possibly take this little boy home? Nobody has come for him.'

'What do you mean, nobody's come for him?'

The receptionist comes over to where I'm standing near the door and lowers her voice to a near-whisper, indicating the little boy on the bench.

'Maybe there's a misunderstanding... He knows where he lives. It's over on Østerøya; I looked at the list, it doesn't seem too far from where you are.'

'I'm sorry, it's really inconvenient,' I say, glancing back out at the black, wet night, longingly now. 'Isn't there anyone else

who can take him? There was a woman in there I thought was his mother.'

'I'm afraid it can't have been; they've all gone.' Damn Hermine and her blow-dry.

'Have you called the parents?'

'Yes. The number he gave goes straight to voicemail.'

'Can't he take a bus or something?' The receptionist gives me a slightly cold look and pointedly looks over my shoulder to the downpour outside.

Nicoline and Hermine stare with open mouths from me to the boy to the receptionist, and back to me. The idea of not actually being collected by anyone from their activities is clearly unfathomable to them, as it very well should be. What kind of parents would not turn up to pick up their child? Some people really should be prevented from reproducing in the first place.

'Fine,' I say. 'Of course I'll take him.' I look at the boy, expecting him to get up and follow us to the car, but he remains sitting, staring at the floor.

'I've never seen him here before,' I say to the receptionist. 'What's his name?'

'Tobias,' she says. 'He only started a few weeks ago. He's eight, but as he's quite little for his age and hasn't swum much previously, we moved him in with the seven-year-olds.'

'I see.' I try not to think of the extra half hour this kid's parents' fuck-up is going to cost me and my plans for a very large glass of Chablis by the fire before Johan comes home. I walk over to where he's sitting.

'Come on,' I say, but realize my voice sounds harsh. I kneel down next to him, and only then does he look up at me. He's like a sparrow, with jittery, nervous eyes, but a soft, sweet face, framed by defined, dark brows. He's tiny – it seems impossible

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that he can be a year older than my solid, tall Hermine. There's something serious and un-childlike about him, and it throws me for a moment, but then I try to empathize – it must be a result of coming from a family that forgets to pick up an eight-year-old from the swimming pool on a biting cold, wet October evening. 'Come,' I say again, softer now. He doesn't take my outstretched hand, but does stand up, gathering his things together.

In the car, the girls are completely silent for once, and the only sound is the repetitive, fast swoosh of the windscreen wipers. Nicoline sits up front with me, staring out at the twinkling lights of the harbor as we drive through town on our way to Østerøya. I glance in the mirror and see that Hermine is looking unselfconsciously at Tobias, whose wan little face is turned away from her, to the window. Hermine begins to draw shapes in the gathering steam on her own window; hearts with arrows through them, her initials – H.W. – little bunnies with smiling faces.

'Mum?' says Nicoline.

'Yes?'

'Can you drop us at our house before you take that boy home?'

Our home is only a two-minute detour, and it would be good for the girls to get a head start on the evening routine. 'Sure. Daddy isn't home yet, though. He's landing at ten.'

'Okay.'

'I won't be more than twenty minutes, so you can get changed into your pajamas and brush your teeth.' I turn into our long driveway and glance at the boy again as our house comes into view. It's quite an impressive sight with its shiny black roof, numerous softly lit windows, a triple garage, swimming pool

just discernible through the hedges, panoramic sea views and welcoming red door. I wonder whether the boy has ever been to a home like this before, but his neutral expression betrays nothing. Back on the road, I try to make some conversation with him.

‘So, which school do you go to?’

Silence.

‘Tobias?’

Silence.

‘Are you in... umm, second grade? Third?’

Silence. I give up.

I pull up at the address the receptionist wrote down on the back of a Sandefjord Svømmeklubb business card: Østerøysvingen 8, but there doesn’t seem to be anything here. I glance back at Tobias, but he sits immobile, as though he’s never been here before.

‘Tobias? Is this where you live?’ He nods slightly, and finally, through the dark and the rain, I make out the outline of a structure set back from the road atop a rocky crag. ‘Okay, bye, then,’ I say, but the boy doesn’t move.

‘Umm, would you like me to walk you to the door?’ Slowly the boy raises his eyes to meet mine and there’s something in the way that he looks at me that makes me anxious. He nods. I look away, back up at what looks like a small, huddled wooden house, cursing this turn of events. I could be at home now, my feet up on the new InDesign footstool, a glass of crispy wine in my hand, flicking through *Scandinavian Homes*, my cashmere Missoni throw across my knees, listening to the snap of flames and the howl of the wind. Instead I’m here in the crashing rain with a mute, strange child, trying to find his parents. I run from the car up a steep gravel path to the

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door of the little house, the boy trailing behind me, seemingly oblivious to the onslaught of icy water. I knock on the flimsy door with peeling blue paint, but as I do, it opens a crack, as though it was never properly closed. I'm not sure whether the booming sound rising above the hammering rain is coming from my heart or from something inside the house.

'Hello?' I say loudly with fake confidence, pushing the door open all the way. The door opens straight into a living room, but the house is clearly un-lived in – there is no furniture except the bare wooden bones of a sofa in the middle of the room. There are mounds of dust everywhere, cobwebs descending from dark, moist corners, and mouse droppings scattered about. I turn around fast, to the boy standing in the doorway, no longer in doubt that the booming sound is indeed coming from my heart.

'Tobias,' I say, taking hold of his bony shoulders with both of my hands. 'Is this your house?' He nods.

'Where are your parents?' No reaction.

'Tobias, look at me! You have to explain to me what's going on here! Do you live in this house? It doesn't look like anyone lives here.' He still does not answer but I follow his eyes up a narrow staircase. I run up the stairs and my steps reverberate in the hollow, empty space. I shudder to think of him just standing there downstairs, in the dark, by himself. For a brief moment I am grateful for my own two girls. For all their shortcomings and the constant annoyance of listening to their never-ending squabbles, they are nowhere near as weird as this kid.

At the top of the stairs is a white, clean-looking IKEA lamp, unplugged, but seemingly recently placed amid the thick dust. I plug it in and look around in the pool of light. There are

two rooms upstairs, one on either side of the stairwell, and a small water basin. In one of the rooms is a dirty mattress, propped up against the wall, and in the corner stands a bin liner overflowing with clothes. In the other room a smaller mattress is placed against the window and a postcard hangs from a nail – Krakow. I turn it over but nothing is written on it.

Downstairs, Tobias is where I left him, standing motionless in the doorway, not letting his eyes wander around the room. I kneel down in front of him, determined to find a way to communicate with him.

‘Tobias, you need to tell me what’s going on, right now. Do you live in this house?’ He nods.

‘Where are your parents, Tobias?’ No response.

‘Look, I’m going to have to call the police.’

‘No!’ he shouts, and I’m surprised by how forceful his voice is – I would have imagined it to be a fragile mewl, judging by the rest of the kid.

‘I have to, Tobias. Obviously I can’t leave you here in this... this empty house. Where are your parents, sweetie?’ I reach into my pocket for my iPhone, only to realize Nicoline still has it.

‘Look, we’re going to go back to my house and make a few calls. You don’t need to worry, Tobias. You’re a child, and you haven’t done anything wrong. There has probably just been some kind of misunderstanding. Okay?’ He shakes his head curtly and his indifferent expression of earlier is replaced by a scowl. I stand back up and reach for his hand, which is cold and wet. ‘Come on, sweetheart. It’s going to be okay. I’m going to help you.’ He looks me square in the eye and nods slightly, eyes distant and sad.

At home, I park outside the garage because most likely

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I'm going to have to spend the rest of the evening driving this forlorn little boy around when the police find out where his parents actually are, because they sure as hell aren't at home in their squat. I switch off the ignition, look quickly in the rearview mirror, and freeze, my hand on the door handle. Tobias is crying silently, big droplets rolling from his eyes and hovering a moment on his chin before dropping off onto his already-soaked jeans.

'Hey...' I say. 'Hey... Come on inside. I'll fix you a hot chocolate and you can watch a movie with my girls until we figure something out, okay?' I think he shakes his head but his sobs are so violent that I can't be sure he isn't just shaking all over.

'Please,' he whispers finally. 'Please can I stay here tonight? Just tonight? They'll come back tomorrow. I promise. I promise! Just tonight! Please don't call the police!'

'But, Tobias, where are they? *Who* are they? Your parents?'

'Yes.'

'Where are they?'

'They're coming back tomorrow.'

'How do you know?'

'They said.' At this, I let out a sharp little sigh. Judging by the state of their living quarters, I wouldn't take Tobias's parents' word on anything.

'Please,' he says again, and there's something so raw and urgent in his eyes that I wait a moment before I speak. I have to say no. This kid can't just stay here. It must be illegal to just take some kid in overnight without at least alerting the authorities. I could call now, and they'd come straight here; serious-looking men and women with briefcases sitting around my living room all night questioning this mostly mute boy.

There would be phone calls, crying, pleading, the astonished expression on Johan's face when he gets home from the airport less than two hours from now. Or... or I could put him up in the guest room, just for tonight, and drop him at his school first thing tomorrow morning and that would be that. Then the school could deal with him if the parents don't return.

'Okay,' I say. 'Of course you can stay here tonight. But just one night.' He nods and smiles a tight little smile at me as we walk the last few steps to the front door. Next to it hangs a wooden heart, made and painted by Nicoline, which reads: 'Welcome to the Wilborg family!' Tobias pauses next to it for several long moments and there is something in his focused, serious expression that unsettles me. There is something else, too; something about his smile – it looks familiar, like I have seen him somewhere before. This is a small town. I could have seen him anywhere, at any time. It isn't so strange. But there was something about his smile... something familiar.

'Welcome,' I say, holding the door open for him, smiling stiffly, and he nods, stepping into the hallway.

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Sometimes, if I wake in the quietest hour of the night, when the house seems to gently buzz with all that sweet normality, I pad across the hallway and stand awhile in one of the girls' rooms. I stand still, listening to the rise and fall of soft, slow breath. In spite of the hell they put me through sometimes, and in spite of the fact that, really, I'm just another working mother trying to hold it all together at an astronomical cost, I am so very grateful for them. That somebody as perfect and wonderful as those two should have chosen Johan and me as parents is astonishing.

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Hermine is contrary, sharp-mouthed and utterly beautiful. She is witty and independent, and has mastered sarcasm since she was tiny. Nicoline takes after Johan – she is truly kind, both in actions and in thoughts, and I don't say that lightly, because nobody else in this family is as completely and uncomplicatedly kind as those two. Nicoline just wants us all to get along all the time, and easily senses when something is even slightly awry. One day, she'll make an incredible mother. The kind who lives for the glee on dirty, sugar-cruled little faces. The kind of mother I'm just not.

I love my girls, wildly, but often my intentions surpass my practical ability. I want to be the kind of parent who reads to them for hours after spending the afternoon baking glittery pink, gluten-free unicorn oat biscuits. I want to be the mother whose facial expression is calm and harmonious even when they shout 'Mommy' for the seventh time – in that minute. 'Mommy, mommy, mommy!' 'Yes,' I want to smile, 'here I am.' A one-woman comfort station, a one-stop shop for food, fun and endless reassurance. But I'm not that mother, most of the time. I'm the mother who fantasizes about a *piscine de champagne* on Mala Beach, the one who wants to smash stuff when they fight and shout, the one whose maternal patience just isn't all that.

But I do adore them. And especially in those silent, dark hours, when their faces are vulnerable and bare by the light of the moon, their breath uncontrolled and peaceful, their little hands clasped to their chins beneath unguarded faces, lingering at the very end of childhood.

Tonight everything is different. For several hours, I lie in bed, unable to sleep, just focusing on syncing my breath to Johan's soft, regular rhythm. A part of me wants to go and

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stand in one of the girls' rooms, to make sure that they really are there, that they are safe. I want to walk quietly around the house, making sure everything is okay, that everything is how it should be, but I don't, because everything is strange and different, and I know I'll burst into tears if I move even an inch.