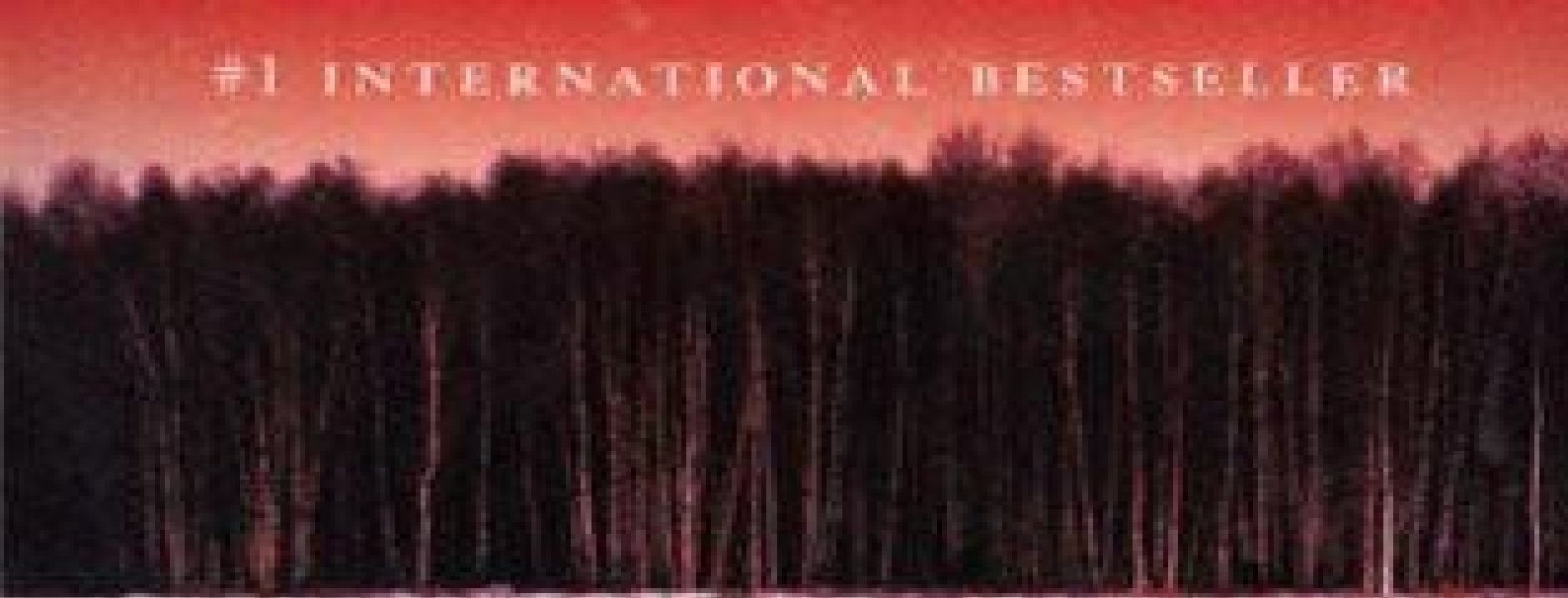


#1 INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER



JOHAN
THEORIN
THE
DARKEST
ROOM

A NOVEL

TRANSLATED BY MARLAINE DELARGY

"Theoria writes so well about the natural world that the island is as much a character as the people who live there." —*The Guardian* (London)

The Darkest Room

Winner of the Glass Key Award for best Nordic Crime Novel

Winner of Sweden's Best Crime Novel of the Year

Nominated for a Barry Award International Bestseller

WORLDWIDE PRAISE FOR JOHAN THEORIN'S DEBUT,

Echoes from the Dead

“An impressive first novel ... It has that mixture of mystery and human depth, which is the mark of a good story. Theorin tells it slowly, writing with authority and an infallible sense of pitch, caring more about conveying a picture and an atmosphere than playing around with words.”

—*Sydsvenskan*

“Theorin has done a masterful job of creating a small, close-knit town where people may seem to know everything about their neighbors; but, in actuality, secrets and subterfuges are rife among the inhabitants. The plot, with its shocking surprise ending, is tightly constructed. ... Fascinating storyline, authentic characters, and accomplished writing make this a top read.”

—*Deadly Pleasures*

“An extraordinary début, both distinct and with a rich variety of expression.”

—*Dagens Nyheter*

“Theorin builds a strong, tightly pulled tension. ... a smoothly intertwined look at two time periods ... an excellent read.”

—*Fresh Fiction*

“The intricacy and suspense ... [do] justice to its wonderfully desolate setting.”

—*The Kansas City Star*

“The book haunts the reader and cannot be put down until the last

page is read.”

—*Ölandsbladet*

“I started reading and couldn’t stop. This book is so remarkable that I give it a high ranking without any hesitation. Complex, suggestive and hair-raising, it invades the reader, and one is swept along to the barren, fatal landscape of northern Öland.”

—*Barometern*

*The
Darkest Room*

A Novel

JOHAN THEORIN

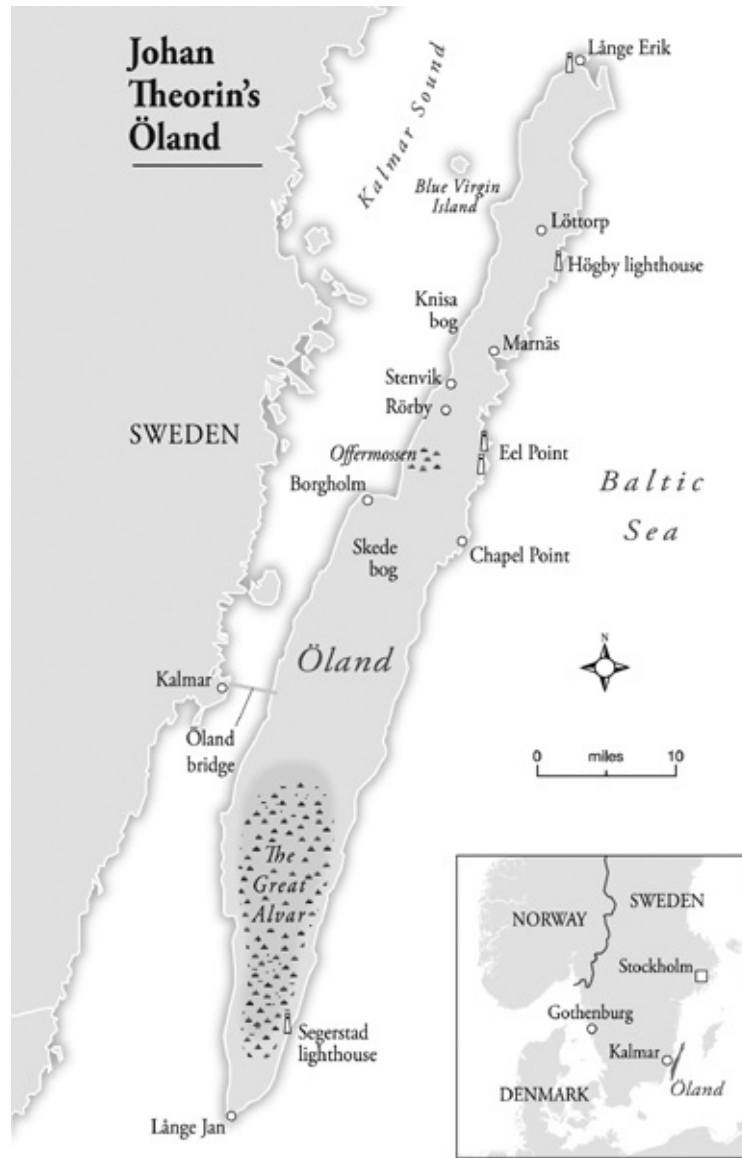
Translated by
Marlaine Delargy



DELTA TRADE PAPERBACKS

The dead gather every winter to celebrate Christmas. But on one occasion they were disturbed by an old spinster. Her clock had stopped, so she got up too early and went to church in the middle of the night on Christmas Eve. There was the murmur of voices as if there were a service going on, and the church was full of people. Suddenly the old woman caught sight of her fiancé from the days of her youth. He had drowned many years ago, but there he was, sitting in a pew among the others.

SWEDISH FOLKTALE FROM THE NINETEENTH CENTURY



This is where my book begins, Katrine, the year when the manor house at Eel Point was built. For me the manor was more than a house where my mother and I lived, it was the place where I became an adult.

Ragnar Davidsson, the eel fisherman, once told me that large parts of the manor were built with salvaged cargo from a German vessel carrying timber. I believe him. On the wall at the far end of the hayloft inside the barn, the words

IN MEMORY OF CHRISTIAN LUDWIG

are carved into one of the planks.

I have heard the dead whispering in the walls. They have so much to tell.

WINTER 1846

Valter Brommesson is sitting in a little stone house at Eel Point, praying to God with his hands clasped together. He prays that the wind and the waves sweeping in from the sea this night will not destroy his two lighthouses.

He has experienced bad weather before, but never a storm like this. A white wall of snow and ice that has come howling in from the northeast, stopping all building work.

The towers, O Lord, let us get the towers finished. ...

Brommesson is a builder of lighthouses, but this is the first time he has built a lighthouse with a prism lens in the Baltic. He came to Öland in March the previous year and set to work at once: taking on workmen, ordering clay and limestone, and hiring strong draft horses.

The fresh spring, the warm summer, and the sunny fall were glorious on the coast. The work was going well, and the two lighthouses were slowly growing toward the sky.

Then the sun disappeared, it became winter, and when the temperature dropped, people began to talk of blizzards. And in the end it came, the blizzard. Late one night it hurled itself at the coast like a wild animal.

As the dawn approaches, the wind finally begins to subside.

Then all of a sudden cries are heard from the sea. They come out of the darkness off Eel Point—drawn-out, heartrending cries for help in a foreign language.

The cries wake Brommesson, and he in his turn wakes the exhausted builders.

“It’s a shipwreck,” he says. “We have to go out.”

The men are sleepy and reluctant, but he gets them on their feet and out into the snow.

They plod down to the shore, their backs bent in the ice-cold headwind. Brommesson turns his head and sees that the half-finished stone towers are actually still standing, down by the water.

In the other direction, to the west, he can see nothing. The flat landscape of the island has become a billowing desert of snow.

The men stop on the shore and gaze out to sea.

They can see nothing in the dark gray shadows out on the sandbar, but they can still hear faint cries mingled with the roaring of the waves—and the creaking sound of splintering wood and nails being torn free.

A big ship has run aground on the bar, and it is sinking.

In the end the only thing the builders can do is to stand there listening to the sounds and the cries for help from the ship. Three times they try to get one of their boats out to sea, but every attempt fails. The visibility is too poor and the breakers too high, and besides, the water is full of heavy wooden beams.

The grounded vessel must have been carrying a huge load of timber up on deck. When she began to go down, the wood was wrenched free by the waves and tumbled overboard. The beams are as long as battering rams and are washed ashore in great shoals. They have begun to fill up the inlets around the point, scraping and banging against one another.

When the sun rises behind the misty gray cloud cover, the first body is discovered. It is a young man, floating in the waves a dozen or so yards from land with his arms outstretched, as if he were still trying to grab hold of one of the beams around him right up to the very last moment.

Two of the lighthouse builders wade out into the shallow water, take a firm grip of the rough woolen shirt the body is wearing, and tow the dead man ashore across the sandbank.

At the water’s edge each man grabs hold of one ice-cold wrist and pulls hard. The dead man comes up out of the water, but he is tall and broad-shouldered and difficult to carry. He has to be dragged up the snow-covered grassy shore, with the water pouring from his clothes.

The builders gather around the body in silence, without touching it.

In the end Brommesson bends down and turns the body onto its back.

The drowned man is a sailor with thick black hair and a wide mouth that is half open, as if he had given up in the middle of a breath. His eyes are staring up at the gray sky.

The foreman guesses that the sailor is in his twenties. He hopes he is a bachelor, but he may have a family to provide for. He has died off a foreign shore; he probably didn't even know the name of the island where his ship went down.

"We must fetch the pastor in a little while," says Brommesson, closing the dead man's eyes so that he will no longer have to meet that empty gaze.

Three hours later the bodies of five sailors have drifted ashore around Eel Point. A broken nameplate has also washed up: CHRISTIAN LUDWIG—HAMBURG.

And timber, lots and lots of timber.

The flotsam is a gift. It belongs to the Swedish crown now, the same crown that is paying for the lighthouses on Eel Point. Suddenly the builders have access to top-quality pine worth many hundreds of riksdaler.

"We must all help to bring it ashore," says Brommesson. "We'll stack it up out of reach of the waves."

He nods to himself and looks up toward the snow-covered plain. There is very little in the way of forest on the island, and instead of the small stone house they were planning for the lighthouse keepers and their families on Eel Point, he can now build a much bigger house made of wood.

Brommesson has a vision of an impressive, enclosed manor with the house itself full of large, airy rooms. A secure home for those who will be looking after his lighthouses here at the end of the world.

But it will be a house built on the spoils of a shipwreck, and that can bring bad luck. Some kind of sacrificial offering will be necessary in order to counteract this bad luck. Perhaps even a prayer room. A memorial room for those who died at Eel Point, for all those poor souls who have not been buried in consecrated ground.

The thought of this bigger house remains in Brommesson's mind. Later that same day he begins to measure out the ground with long strides.

But when the storm has abated and the frozen lighthouse builders start heaving the timber out of the water and stacking it up on the grass, many of them can still hear the echo of those cries from the drowning men.

I am certain those lighthouse builders never forgot the cries of the drowning sailors. And I am equally certain that the most superstitious among them questioned Brommesson's decision to build a large house using timber from a shipwreck.

A house built with timber that dying sailors had clung to in despair before the sea took them—should my mother and I have known better than to move in there at the end of the 1950s? Should you and your family really have moved there thirty-five years later, Katrine?

—MIRJA RAMBE

CHANGE YOUR LIFE—MOVE TO THE COUNTRY!

Property: Eel Point estate, northeastern Öland

Description: Magnificent lighthouse keeper's manor house from the middle of the nineteenth century in an isolated and private location with fine views over the Baltic, less than 300 yards from the shore and with the sky as its nearest neighbor.

Large garden above the shore with flat lawned areas—perfect for children to play—surrounded by sparse deciduous forest to the north, a bird sanctuary to the west (Offermossen), with meadows and fields running down to the sea in the south.

Buildings: Attractive manor house on two floors (no cellar), comprising in total some 280 square yards, in need of renovation and modernization. Wooden frame, joists, and façade. Tiled roof. Glass veranda facing east. Five tiled stoves in working order. Pine flooring in all rooms. Communal water supply, separate waste.

Annex (limestone outhouse) on one floor, approx. 80 square yards, water and electricity, ideal rental property after some renovation work.

Outbuilding (barn made of limestone/wood), approx. 450 square yards, more basic and in relatively poor condition.

Status: SOLD

October

A high voice called through the dark rooms.

“Mom-my?”

The cry made him jump. Sleep was like a cave filled with strange echoes, warm and dark, and waking up quickly was painful. For a second his consciousness could not come up with a name or a place, just confused memories and thoughts. *Ethel? No, not Ethel, but ... Katrine, Katrine.* And a pair of eyes blinking in bewilderment, seeking light in the blackness.

A second later his own name suddenly floated up from his memory: Joakim Westin. And he was lying in the double bed in Eel Point manor house on northern Öland.

Joakim was at home. He had been living here for one day. His wife, Katrine, and their two children had been living on the estate for two months, while he himself had only just arrived.

1:23. The red digits on the clock radio provided the only light in the windowless room.

The sounds that had woken Joakim could no longer be heard, but he knew they were real. He had heard muffled complaints or whimpers from someone sleeping uneasily in another part of the house.

A motionless body lay beside him in the double bed. It was Katrine; she was sleeping deeply and had crept toward the edge of the bed, taking her coverlet with her. She was lying with her back to him, but he could see the gentle contours of her body and he could feel her warmth. She had been sleeping alone in here for almost two months—Joakim had been living and working in Stockholm, coming to visit every other weekend. Neither of them had found it easy.

He stretched a hand out toward Katrine’s back, but then he heard the cry once again.

“Mom-my?”

This time he recognized Livia’s high voice. It made him throw aside the cover and get out of bed.

The tiled stove in one corner of the bedroom was still radiating heat, but the wooden floor was freezing cold as he put his feet on it. They needed to change things around and insulate the bedroom floor as they had done in the kitchen and the children’s rooms, but that would have to be a project for the new year. They could get more rugs to see them

through the winter. And wood. They needed to find a supply of cheap wood for the stoves, because there was no forest on the estate where they could go and cut their own.

He and Katrine needed to buy a whole lot of things for the house before the real cold weather set in—tomorrow they would have to start making lists.

Joakim held his breath and listened. Not a sound now.

His dressing gown was hanging over a chair, and he put it on quietly over his pajama trousers, stepped between two boxes they hadn't unpacked yet, and crept out.

He immediately went the wrong way in the darkness. In their house in Stockholm he always turned right to go to the children's rooms, but here they were to the left.

Joakim and Katrine's bedroom was small, part of the manor house's enormous cave system. Outside was a corridor with several cardboard boxes stacked up against one wall, and it ended in a large hall with several windows. They faced onto the paved inner courtyard, which was flanked by the two wings of the house.

The manor house at Eel Point was closed off to the land, but open toward the sea. Joakim went over to the windows in the hall and looked out toward the coast beyond the fence.

A red light was flashing down there, coming from the twin lighthouses on their little islands out at sea. The beam of the southern lighthouse swept over piles of seaweed at the water's edge and far out into the Baltic, while the northern tower was completely dark. Katrine had told him that the northern lighthouse was never lit.

He heard the wind howling around the house and saw restless shadows rising down by the lighthouses. Waves. They always made him think of Ethel, despite the fact that it wasn't the waves but the cold that had killed her.

It was only ten months ago.

The muted sounds in the darkness behind Joakim came again, but they were no longer whimpers. It sounded as if Livia were talking quietly to herself.

Joakim went back toward the corridor. He stepped carefully over a wide wooden threshold and into Livia's bedroom, which had only one window and was pitch dark. A green roller blind with five pink pigs dancing happily in a circle covered the window.

"Away ..." said a girl's voice in the darkness. "Away."

Joakim trod on a small cuddly toy on the floor next to the bed. He picked it up.

"Mommy?"

"No," said Joakim. "Just Daddy."

He heard the faint sound of breathing in the darkness and detected sleepy movements from the small body beneath the flowery coverlet. He leaned over the bed.

"Are you asleep?"

Livia raised her head.

“What?”

Joakim tucked the cuddly toy in the bed, right beside her.

“Foreman had fallen on the floor.”

“Did he hurt himself?”

“Oh no ...I don't think he even woke up.”

She placed her arm around her favorite toy, a two-legged animal made of fabric that she had bought when they were on Gotland the previous summer. Half sheep, half man. Joakim had named the strange creature Foreman, after the boxer who had made his comeback at the age of forty-five a couple of years earlier.

He reached out and gently stroked Livia's forehead. The skin was cool. She relaxed, her head fell back onto the pillow, then she looked up at him.

“Have you been here long, Daddy?”

“No,” said Joakim.

“There was somebody here,” she said.

“You were just dreaming.”

Livia nodded and closed her eyes. She was already on her way back to sleep.

Joakim straightened up, turned his head and saw the faint glow of the southern lighthouse again, flashing through the blind. He took a step over to the window and lifted the blind an inch or two. The window faced west and the lighthouses weren't visible from here, but the red glow swept over the empty field behind the house.

Livia was breathing evenly again; she was fast asleep. Next morning she wouldn't remember that he'd been there.

He peeped into the other bedroom. It was the one that had been renovated most recently; Katrine had decorated and furnished it while Joakim was in Stockholm taking care of the final move and cleaning the house.

Everything was silent in here. Gabriel, aged two and a half, was lying in his little bed over by the wall, a motionless bundle. For the last year Gabriel had gone to bed around eight o'clock every evening, and slept almost ten hours straight through. The dream of every parent with small children.

Joakim turned away in the silence and crept slowly back along the corridor. The house creaked and knocked quietly around him, the creaks almost sounding like footsteps crossing the floor.

Katrine was still fast asleep when he got back to his own bed.

That morning the family had been visited by a quietly smiling man in his fifties. He had knocked on the kitchen door on the north side of the house. Joakim had opened it quickly, thinking it was a neighbor.

“Hi there,” the man said. “Bengt Nyberg—I’m from the local paper, *Ölands-Posten*.”

Nyberg was standing there on the porch steps with a camera resting on his fat belly and a notebook in his hand. Joakim had somewhat hesitantly shaken hands with the journalist.

“I heard some big moving vans had come out to Eel Point over the last few weeks,” said Nyberg, “and I thought I’d take a chance on you being at home.”

“I’m the only one who’s just moved in,” said Joakim. “The rest of the family have been living here for a while.”

“Did you move in stages?”

“I’m a teacher,” said Joakim. “I had to work until now.”

The reporter nodded.

“We do have to write about this,” he said, “as I’m sure you understand. I know we were informed last spring that Eel Point had been sold, but of course now people want to know who’s bought it ...”

“We’re just an ordinary family,” said Joakim quickly. “You can write that.”

“Where are you from?”

“Stockholm.”

“Like the royal family, then,” said Nyberg. He looked at Joakim. “Are you going to do what the King does, and just stay here when it’s warm and sunny?”

“No, we’re here all year round.”

Katrine had come into the hall and stood next to Joakim. He glanced at her, she gave a brief nod, and they invited the reporter in. Nyberg shambled over the threshold, taking his time.

They chose to sit in the kitchen; with its new equipment and polished wooden floor, it was the room they had done the most work on.

When they were working in there in August, Katrine and the man laying the floor had found something interesting: a little hiding place under the floorboards, a box made of flat pieces of limestone. Inside lay a silver spoon and a child’s shoe that had gone moldy. It was a house offering, the fitter had told her. It was meant to ensure many children and plenty of food for the inhabitants of the manor house.

Joakim made coffee and Nyberg settled down at the rectangular oak table. He opened his notebook once again.

“How did this all come about, then?”

“Well ... we like wooden houses,” said Joakim.

“We love them,” said Katrine.

“But wasn’t that a big step ... buying Eel Point and moving here from Stockholm?”

“Not such a big step,” said Katrine. “We had a house in Bromma, but we wanted to swap it for a house here. We started looking last year.”

“And why northern Öland?”

Joakim answered this time:

“Katrine is from Öland, kind of. ... Her family used to live here.”

Katrine glanced at him briefly and he knew what she was thinking: if anybody was going to talk about her background, then it would be her. And she was rarely prepared to do so.

“Oh yes, whereabouts?”

“Various places,” said Katrine without looking at the reporter. “They moved about quite a bit.”

Joakim could have added that his wife was the daughter of Mirja Rambe and the granddaughter of Torun Rambe—that might have got Nyberg to write a much longer article—but he kept quiet. Katrine and her mother were barely speaking to each other.

“Me, I’m a concrete kid,” he said instead. “I grew up in an eight-story apartment block in Jakobsberg, and it was just so ugly, with all the traffic and asphalt. So I really wanted to move out to the country.”

At first Livia sat quietly on Joakim’s knee, but she soon got tired of all the chat and ran off to her room. Gabriel, who was sitting with Katrine, jumped down and followed her.

Joakim listened to the little plastic sandals, pattering off across the floor with such energy, and repeated the same refrain he’d chanted to friends and neighbors in Stockholm over the past few months:

“We know this is a fantastic place for kids too. Meadows and forests, clean air and fresh water. No colds. No cars churning out fumes ... This is a good place for all of us.”

Bengt Nyberg had written these pearls of wisdom in his notebook. Then they went for a walk around the ground floor of the house, through the renovated rooms and all the areas that still had tattered wallpaper, patched-up ceilings, and dirty floors.

“The tiled stoves are great,” said Joakim, pointing. “And the wooden floors are incredibly well preserved ... We just need to give them a scrub from time to time.”

His enthusiasm for the manor might have been infectious, because after a while Nyberg stopped interviewing him and started to look around with interest. He insisted on

seeing the rest of the place as well—even though Joakim would have preferred not to be reminded of how much they hadn't yet touched.

“There isn't actually anything else to see,” said Joakim. “Just a lot of empty rooms.”

“Just a quick look,” said Nyberg.

In the end Joakim nodded and opened the door leading to the upper floor.

Katrine and the reporter followed him up the crooked wooden staircase to an upstairs corridor. It was gloomy up here despite the fact that there was a row of windows facing the sea, but the panes were covered with pieces of chipboard that let in only narrow strips of daylight.

The howling of the wind could be heard clearly in the dark rooms.

“The air certainly circulates up here,” said Katrine with a wry smile. “The advantage is that the house has stayed dry—there's very little damage because of damp.”

“Well, that's a good thing ...” Nyberg contemplated the buckled cork flooring, the stained and tattered wallpaper, and the veils of cobwebs hanging from the cornices. “But you do seem to have plenty left to do.”

“Yes, we know.”

“We can't wait,” said Joakim.

“I'm sure it'll be fantastic when it's finished. ...” said Nyberg, then asked, “So what do you actually know about this house?”

“You mean its history?” said Joakim. “Not much, but the real estate agent told us some things. It was built in the middle of the nineteenth century, at the same time as the lighthouses. But there have been quite a lot of alterations ... the glass veranda at the front looks as if it was added around 1910.”

Then he looked inquiringly at Katrine to see if she wanted to add anything—perhaps what it had been like when her mother and grandmother were tenants here—but she didn't meet his eye.

“We know that the lighthouse masters and keepers lived in the house with their families and servants,” was all she said, “so there has been plenty of coming and going in these rooms.”

Nyberg nodded, looking around the dirty upper floor.

“I don't think many people have lived here over the past twenty years,” he said. “Four or five years ago it was used for refugees, families who had fled from the wars in the Balkans. But that didn't last long. It's a bit of a shame it's stood empty. ... It's such a magnificent place.”

They started back down the stairs. Even the dirtiest rooms on the ground floor suddenly seemed light and warm compared with those upstairs.

“Does it have a name?” Katrine asked, looking at the reporter. “Do you know if it has a name?”

“What?” said Nyberg.

“This house,” said Katrine. “Everybody always says Eel Point, but I mean, that’s the name of the place, not the house.”

“Yes, Eel Point by Eel Shallows, where the eels gather in the summer ...” said Nyberg, as if he were reciting a poem. “No, I don’t think the house itself has a name.”

“Houses often have a nickname,” said Joakim. “We called our place in Bromma the Apple House.”

“This doesn’t have a name, at least not that I’ve heard.” Nyberg stepped down from the bottom stair and added, “On the other hand, there are plenty of stories about this place.”

“Stories?”

“I’ve heard a few ... They say the wind increases off Eel Point when someone sneezes in the manor house.”

Both Katrine and Joakim laughed out loud.

“We’d better make sure we dust often, then,” said Katrine.

“And then, of course, there are some old ghost stories as well,” said Nyberg.

Silence fell.

“Ghost stories?” said Joakim. “The agent should have told us.”

He was just about to smile and shake his head, but Katrine got there first:

“I did hear a few stories when I was over at the Carlssons’ having coffee ... our neighbors. But they told me not to believe them.”

“We haven’t really got much time for ghosts,” said Joakim.

Nyberg nodded and took a few steps toward the hall.

“No, but when a house is empty for a while, people start talking,” he said. “Shall we go outside and take a few pictures while it’s still light?”

Bengt Nyberg ended his visit by walking across the grass and the stone paths in the inner courtyard and quickly inspecting both wings of the house—on one side the enormous barn, with the ground-floor walls made of limestone and the upper story of timber painted red, and across the courtyard the smaller, whitewashed outhouse.

“I assume you’re going to renovate this as well?” said Nyberg after peeping into the outhouse through a dusty window.

“Of course,” said Joakim. “We’re taking one building at a time.”

“And then you can rent it out to summer visitors!”

“Maybe. We’ve thought about opening a bed-and-breakfast, in a few years.”

“A lot of people here on the island have had the same idea,” said Nyberg.

Finally the reporter took a couple of dozen pictures of the Westin family on the yellowing grassy slope below the house.

Katrine and Joakim stood beside each other, squinting into the cold wind and the two lighthouses out at sea. Joakim straightened his back as the camera started clicking, and thought about the fact that their neighbors’ house in Stockholm had merited a spread of three double pages in the glossy monthly *Beautiful Homes* the previous year. The Westin family had to make do with an article in the local paper.

Gabriel was perched on Joakim’s shoulders, dressed in a green padded jacket that was slightly too big. Livia was standing between her parents, her white crocheted hat pulled well down over her forehead. She was looking suspiciously into the camera.

The manor house at Eel Point rose up behind them like a fortress made of wood and stone, silently watching.

Afterward, when Nyberg had left, the whole family went down to the shore. The wind was colder than it had been, and the sun was already low in the sky, just above the roof of the house behind them. The smell of seaweed that had been washed ashore was in the air.

Walking down to the water at Eel Point felt like arriving at the end of the world, the end of a long journey away from everyone. Joakim liked that feeling.

Northeastern Öland seemed to consist of a vast sky above a small strip of yellowish-brown land. The tiny islands looked like grass-covered reefs out in the water. The island’s flat coastline, with its deep inlets and narrow points, slipped almost imperceptibly into the water and became a shallow, even seabed of sand and mud, which gradually sank deeper, down into the Baltic Sea.

A hundred yards or so away from them, the white towers of the lighthouses rose up toward the dark blue sky.

Eel Point’s twin lighthouses. Joakim thought the islands on which they were standing looked as if they were somehow man-made, as if someone had made two piles of stone and gravel out in the water and bound them together with bigger rocks and concrete. Fifty yards to the north of them a breakwater ran out from the shore—a slightly curved jetty made of large blocks of stone, doubtless constructed in order to protect the lighthouses from the winter storms.

Livia had Foreman under her arm, and she suddenly set off toward the wide jetty

leading out to the lighthouses.

“Me too! Me too!” shouted Gabriel, but Joakim held him tightly by the hand.

“We’ll go together,” he said.

The jetty split in two a dozen or so yards out into the water, like a big letter Y with two narrower arms leading out to the islands where the lighthouses stood. Katrine shouted:

“Don’t run, Livia! Be careful of the water!”

Livia stopped, pointed to the southern lighthouse, and shouted in a voice that was only just audible above the wind, “That one’s mine!”

“Mine too!” shouted Gabriel behind her.

“End of story!” shouted Livia.

That was her new favorite expression this fall, something she had learned in preschool. Katrine hurried over to her and nodded toward the northern lighthouse.

“In that case, this one’s mine!”

“Okay, then I’ll take care of the house,” said Joakim. “It’ll be as easy as pie, if you all just pitch in and help a little bit.”

“We will,” said Livia. “End of story!”

Livia laughed and nodded, but of course for Joakim it was no joke. But he was still looking forward to all the work that was waiting during the course of the winter. He and Katrine were both going to try to find a teaching post on the island, but they would renovate the manor house together in the evenings and on weekends. She had already started, after all.

He stopped in the grass by the shore and took a long look at the buildings behind them.

Isolated and private location, as it had said in the ad.

Joakim still found it difficult to get used to the size of the main house; with its white gables and red wooden walls, it rose up at the top of the sloping grassy plain. Two beautiful chimneys sat on top of the tiled roof like towers, black as soot. A warm yellow light glowed in the kitchen window and on the veranda; the rest of the house was pitch black.

So many families who had lived there, toiling away at the walls, doorways, and floors over the years—master lighthouse keepers and lighthouse keepers and lighthouse assistants and whatever they were called. They had all left their mark on the manor house.

Remember, when you take over an old house, the house takes you over at the same time, Joakim had read in a book about renovating wooden houses. For him and Katrine this

was not the case—they had had no problem leaving the house in Bromma, after all—but over the years they had met a number of families who looked after their houses like children.

“Shall we go out to the lighthouses?” asked Katrine.

“Yes!” shouted Livia. “End of story!”

“The stones could be slippery,” said Joakim.

He didn’t want Livia and Gabriel to lose their respect for the sea and go down to the water alone. Livia could swim only a few yards, and Gabriel couldn’t swim at all.

But Katrine and Livia had already set off along the stone jetty, hand in hand. Joakim picked Gabriel up, held him in the crook of his right arm, and followed them dubiously out onto the uneven blocks of stone.

They weren’t as slippery as he had thought, just rough and uneven. In some places the blocks had been eroded by the waves and had broken away from the concrete holding them together. There was only a slight wind today, but Joakim could sense the power of nature. Winter after winter of drift ice and waves and harsh storms on Eel Point—and still the lighthouses stood firm.

“How tall are they?” wondered Katrine, looking toward the towers.

“Well, I don’t have a ruler with me—but maybe sixty feet or so?” said Joakim.

Livia tipped her head back to look up at the top of her lighthouse.

“Why is there no light?”

“I expect it’ll come on when it gets dark,” said Katrine.

“Does that one never come on?” asked Joakim, leaning back to look up at the north tower.

“I don’t think so,” said Katrine. “It hasn’t done since we’ve been here.”

When they reached the point where the breakwater divided, Livia chose the left path, toward her mother’s lighthouse.

“Careful, Livia,” said Joakim, looking down into the black water below the stone track.

It might only be five or six feet deep, but he still didn’t like the shadows and the chill down there. He was a decent swimmer, but he had never been the type to leap eagerly into the waves in summer, not even on really hot days.

Katrine had reached the island and walked over to the water’s edge. She looked in both directions along the coastline. To the north, only empty beaches and clumps of trees were visible; to the south, meadows and in the distance a few small boathouses.

“Not a soul in sight,” she said. “I thought we might see a few neighboring houses, at least.”

“There are too many little islands and headlands in the way,” said Joakim. He pointed to the north shore with his free hand. “Look over there. Have you seen that?”

It was the wreck of a ship, lying on the stony strip of shore half a mile or so away—so old that all that was left was a battered hull made of sun-bleached planks of wood. Long ago the ship had drifted toward the shore in a winter storm; it had been hurled high up onto the shore, where it had remained. The wreck lay to starboard among the stones, and Joakim thought the framework sticking up looked like a giant’s rib cage.

“The wreck, yes,” said Katrine.

“Didn’t they see the beams from the lighthouses?” said Joakim.

“I think the lighthouses just don’t help sometimes ... not in a storm,” said Katrine. “Livia and I went over to the wreck a few weeks ago. We were looking for some nice pieces of wood, but everything had been taken.”

The entrance to the lighthouse was a stone archway some three feet deep, leading to a sturdy door of thick steel, very rusty and with only a few traces of the original white color. There was no keyhole, just a crossbar with a rusty padlock, and when Joakim got hold of the side of the door and pulled, it didn’t move an inch.

“I saw a bunch of old keys in one of the kitchen cupboards,” he said. “We’ll have to try them out sometime.”

“Otherwise we can contact the Maritime Board,” said Katrine.

Joakim nodded and took a step away from the door. The lighthouses weren’t part of the deal, after all.

“Don’t the lighthouses belong to us, Mommy?” said Livia as they made their way back to the shore.

She sounded disappointed.

“Well, yes,” said Katrine. “Kind of. But we don’t have to look after them, do we, Kim?”

She smiled at Joakim, and he nodded.

“The house will be quite enough.”

Katrine had turned over in the double bed while Joakim was with Livia, and as he crept beneath the covers she reached out for him in her sleep. He breathed in the scent of her, and closed his eyes.

All of this, only this.

It felt as if they had drawn a line under life in the city. Stockholm had shrunk to a gray mark on the horizon, and the memories of searching for Ethel had faded away.

Peace.

Then he heard the faint whimpering from Livia's room again, and held his breath.

"Mom-mee?"

Her drawn-out cries echoing through the house were louder this time. Joakim breathed out with a tired sigh.

Beside him Katrine raised her head and listened.

"What?" she said groggily.

"Mom-mee?" Livia called again.

Katrine sat up. Unlike Joakim, she could go from deep sleep to wide awake in a couple of seconds.

"I've already tried," said Joakim quietly. "I thought she'd gone back to sleep, but ..."

"I'll go."

Katrine got out of bed without hesitating, slid her feet into her slippers, and quickly pulled on her dressing gown.

"Mommy?"

"I'm coming, brat," she muttered.

This wasn't good, thought Joakim. It wasn't good that Livia wanted to sleep with her mother beside her every night. But it was a habit that had started the previous year, when Livia had begun to have disturbed nights—perhaps because of Ethel. She found it difficult to fall asleep, and only slept calmly with Katrine lying beside her in her bed. So far they hadn't managed to get Livia to spend a whole night on her own.

"See you, lover boy," said Katrine, slipping out of the room.

The duties of a parent. Joakim lay there in bed; there was no longer a sound from Livia's room. Katrine had taken over the responsibility, and he relaxed and closed his eyes. Slowly he felt sleep stealing over him once more.

All was silent in the manor house.

His life in the country had begun.

The ship inside the bottle was a little work of art, in Henrik's opinion: a three-masted frigate with sails made out of scraps of white fabric, almost six inches long and carved from a single piece of wood. Each sail had ropes made of black thread, knotted and secured to small blocks of balsa wood. With the masts down, the ship had been carefully inserted into the old bottle using steel thread and tweezers, then pressed down into a sea of blue-colored putty. Then the masts had been raised and the sails unfurled with the help of bent sock needles. Finally the bottle had been fastened with a sealed cork.

The ship in the bottle must have taken several weeks to make, but the Serelius brothers destroyed it in a couple of seconds.

Tommy Serelius swept the bottle off the bookshelf, the glass exploding into tiny shards on the new parquet flooring of the cottage. The ship itself survived the fall, but bounced across the floor for a couple of yards before it was stopped by little brother Freddy's boot. He shone his flashlight on it with curiosity for a few seconds, then lifted his foot and smashed the ship to pieces with three hard stamps.

"Teamwork!" crowed Freddy.

"I hate things like that, fucking handicraft stuff," said Tommy, scratching his cheek and kicking the remains of the ship across the floor.

Henrik, the third man in the cottage, emerged from one of the bedrooms where he had been searching for anything of value in the closets. He saw what was left of the ship and shook his head.

"Don't smash anything else up, okay?" he said quietly.

Tommy and Freddy liked the sound of breaking glass, of splintering wood—Henrik had realized that the first night they worked together, when they broke into half a dozen closed-up cottages south of Byxelkrok. The brothers liked smashing things; on the way north Tommy had run over a black-and-white cat that was standing by the side of the road, its eyes glittering. There was a dull thud from the right-hand tire as the van drove over the cat, and the next second the brothers were laughing out loud.

Henrik never broke anything; he removed the windows carefully so they could get into the cottages. But once the brothers had clambered in, they turned into vandals. They upended cocktail cabinets and hurled glass and china to the floor. They also smashed

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