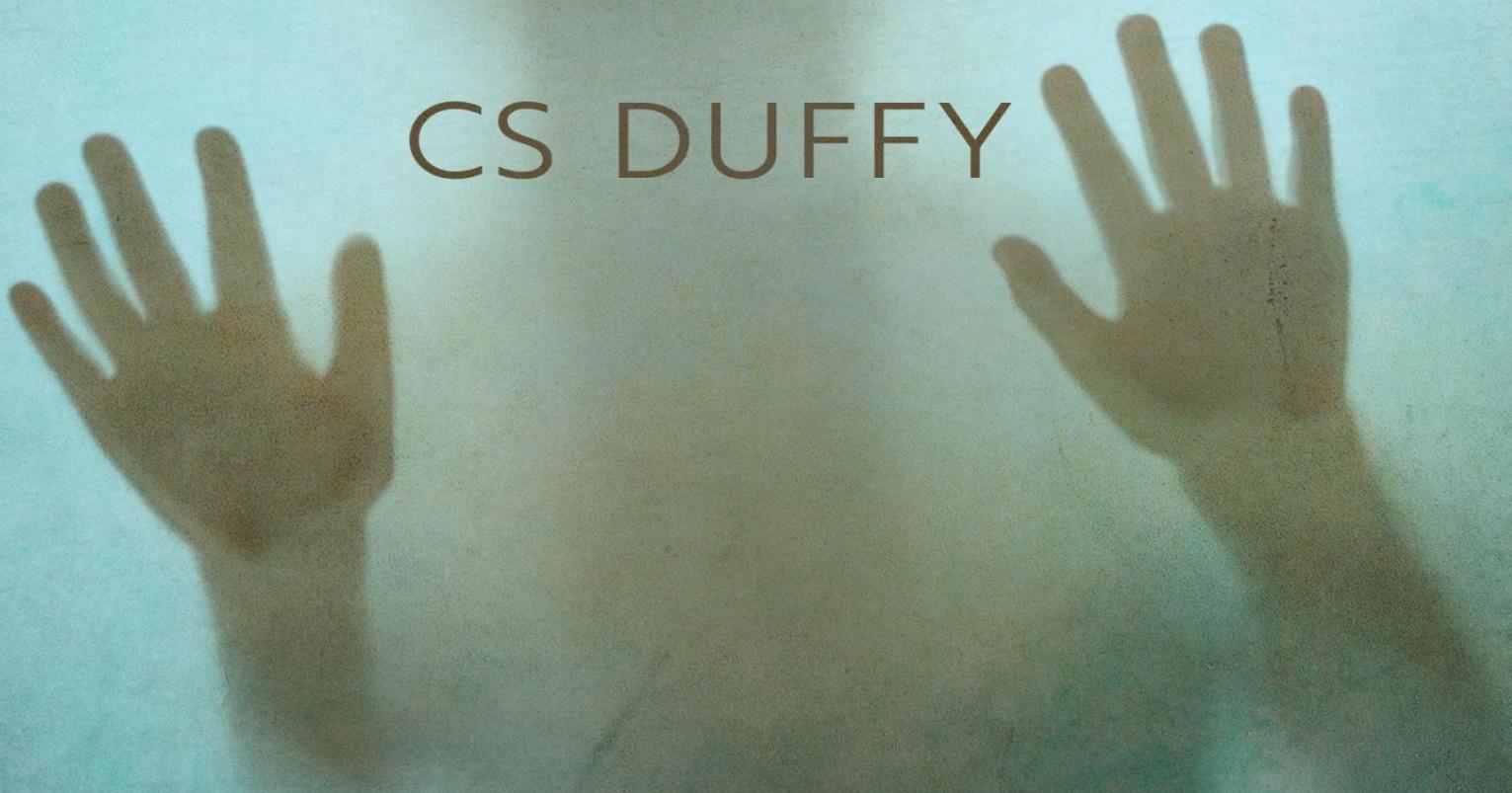


THE STRANGER

CS DUFFY



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Episode One

‘No don’t like it!’ Alfie screeched. He shoved the porridge Fergus had cooked him across the table and burst into tears. The bowl skidded to the end of the table and promptly, inevitably, toppled over. It bounced, then clattered to a rest upside down and porridge globbed onto the linoleum floor. Alfie’s face was red as he sobbed.

Fergus was baffled. As far as he was aware, Alfie had eaten porridge every morning for breakfast since he started taking solids, including yesterday morning, their first as a full-time twosome, which had passed without incident. What could possibly have upset him so much today?

‘We’re gonna have to throw that porridge in the bin now, that’s a bit rubbish, isn’t it?’

‘My porridge, no throw it in bin!’ Alfie roared, beside himself with anguish.

‘But it’s been on the floor, you can’t eat it now.’

‘MY porridge.’

It took Fergus a moment to realise that what he was feeling was fear. Actual fear.

He’s expecting me to fix this, he thought with rising panic. I’m in charge here, I’m supposed to make it all better, but I don’t even know what’s happening.

He glanced at his watch. Tess had left for work not half an hour before. That meant at least eight hours until she returned. She had tried to talk to him that morning about Alfie’s fussy eating phase, but, high on the success of their first day Fergus had breezily cut her off. Which meant that ringing her for advice now was out of the question. He

would manage. If all the Swedish men with their beards and their buggies could manage, then so could Fergus. When in Rome and all that... ‘Men don’t have the same instincts we do,’ Tess’s mother had sniffed when Tess announced their plans. Fergus had been rooting around the fridge for the beer Tess’s dad insisted was there somewhere, and he froze when he heard their voices drifting through the open window from the terrace. ‘It’s very difficult being at home all day with a small child, men just can’t —’

‘I can’t.’ Tess replied quietly, her voice tight. ‘I couldn’t, remember? Fergus has as much chance of managing it as I ever did.’

‘Darling, I know your generation like to believe that men and women are exactly the same, and can do everything just as well as each other, but you have to think about what is right for Alfie. He is more important than any —’ She paused, and Fergus could just imagine her waving vaguely, her nose in the air. ‘Principles.’

‘My child is important, you say? Let me just write that on my hand quickly so I don’t forget. *Important*. How are you spelling that?’

A cold, hard, knot formed in Fergus’s chest. He’d long ago learned that the bolshier Tess came across, the less sure of herself she actually was.

‘We’re doing this for Alfie.’ Fergus could hear the tension in Tess’s voice, knew she was fiddling with the edge of her napkin or piling up lumps of sugar like building blocks on her saucer as her mother watched with a disapproving eye. Sharp pin pricks of sweat formed on his forehead as he stood in front of the open fridge. He heard Tess say quietly, ‘according to just about every bloody Sunday supplement of the last few years, Sweden is supposed to be one of the best places in the world to raise a child. All that gender equality and, I don’t know, fresh air and pickled shit. Alfie will be fine with Fergus. Fergus is great with him. This job I’ve been offered is quite a big deal, as it happens.’

'Yes, but what if Fergus...you know...again —?'

'He won't.'

The knot in Fergus's chest hardened. Somewhere in the distance he heard Tess's dad shouting that the second half was starting.

What if he?

He wouldn't. Never again. Don't look back.

'Well,' said Tess's mum, and Fergus could just picture her pinched face as he heard the tea trickling into delicate bone china cups, the defiant plop of a sugar lump that was Tess's tiny, pointless, revenge. 'You'll do what you think is best. You always do.'

Alfie stared up at Fergus now, tears streaming from the hazel eyes that were a mirror image of Fergus's own. Alfie's mop of fiery curls, present almost since birth, had left Fergus in no doubt of his paternity. 'That's what I get for procreating with a ginger.' Tess had shaken her head with an exhausted grin as she was wheeled back into the maternity ward. 'At least we won't lose him on a dark night.' Fergus had trailed behind, his heart thudding with terror at the unfathomable responsibility blinking up at him from the inexplicably ugly blanket Tess's mum had crocheted.

Two and a half years later, the unfathomable responsibility had now been refusing, at high volume, to eat his breakfast for the best part of an hour and a headache was pounding behind Fergus's temples.

'Why don't you eat a banana in that case, and then we'll see —'

'Not banana!'

'But you love bananas. You have a banana every day.'

In response, Alfie wailed.

Fergus started opening kitchen cupboards. Alfie wouldn't get ill if he skipped breakfast this one morning, he reassured himself slightly frantically. People skip meals all the time; but he's only tiny, he's growing. He needs to eat.

The flat that they had hastily rented had the potential to be grand, with its high ceilings, heavy wooden floors and curious, ornately tiled stove fireplaces in every room, but it clearly hadn't been renovated in decades. It had a vaguely dusty feeling, and the kitchen was a celebration of Formica and linoleum. The rental agent, Magnus, a big cheerful man in an ill-fitting suit who always seemed slightly out of breath, explained that it was owned by a family who had rented it out for years. Thanks to the urgent shortage of rental properties in central Stockholm, it went like a hot cake every time it became available, so there was never any reason for effort or expense to do it up.

'Toast?' Fergus said, with a burst of inspiration. 'Here's some bread. Do you want some toast?'

'No.' The word was spoken firmly, but calmly. Alfie's tears had receded as completely and mystifyingly as they had come. He giggled.

'What's so funny?' Fergus asked, but Alfie just giggled again, pointing into the corner of the room.

In an apartment somewhere in the block, a baby started crying, again. Fergus closed his eyes. The baby had cried all day yesterday, and much of the night. Something about the crying made Fergus uneasy, though he couldn't articulate exactly what. Babies cry, he knew that, but he was sure Alfie hadn't cried quite so incessantly, quite so shrilly, not even back in what he and Tess referred to as the *Dark Days* when he was teething.

'Tell you what. Why don't we go out for breakfast, you and me? We'll have a man date.'

'Yes.'

'That's a plan, then.' Fergus got up, held out a hand to help Alfie clamber down from his chair.

'My toys.'

'Listen wee man, you don't need to bring all your toys. We're only going for half an hour, and you'll be busy eating breakfast the whole time —'

'My toys!' Alfie's voice wobbled dangerously, tears sprang into his eyes.

'Fine. We'll bring your toys.'

It occurred to Fergus that only a couple of weeks previously, he had been well known in the City of London as a fearsome litigator. The more hopeless a case appeared, the more Fergus was like a dog with a bone, worrying away at every last hairline fracture in the opposing side's case, to the point that even if judgement was in their favour they were still destroyed. And now here he was emptying a gym bag of nappies and camera equipment so he could take George Pig and a handful of Legos out to brunch.

Alfie grinned happily as he whispered goodbye to George and zipped him into the bag. He was content. That was all that mattered. It was all going to work out. It had to.

Alex exhaled a deep, rich ohhhmmmm, and slowly opened her eyes. The woman at the far left who had insisted *that she had absolutely no time for yoga but as her friends had bought her a gift certificate she might as well use it*, seemed to be almost dozing, the muscles in her face melted into an insouciant bliss. The others, most of them regulars, were slowly returning to earth, opening their eyes with serene smiles.

'Namaste,' said Alex, and a muttered chorus of responses fluttered around the room.

'Thank you for today. See you all next week, have a blissful day.'

The class filed out of the room, and Alex stayed behind to put away their mats. She took an almost sensual pleasure in rolling them up perfectly so that there wasn't a millimetre of overlap or ripple. Alex liked things to be just so.

At almost two metres, Alex was fully aware that to most casual observers, she appeared androgynous at best. For a

long time she rejected the idea of transition for this reason, fearing that not being accepted as a woman would be worse than hiding that she identified as one. At least she had her hair. 'Wasted on a boy,' her mother used to sigh as she trimmed Alex's thick blond curls. Golden locks would tumble into the kitchen sink and Alex would stare very hard at the floor so that she wouldn't cry. Long hair in a messy bun didn't definitively mark one out as female in hipster South Stockholm, but after the events of the year before, Alex made up her mind that double-takes were a tiny price to pay for living as who she was.

Alex stepped out into the bitingly chilly afternoon. No snow today. There was even a wan sun peeking through a thin layer of cloud, but still she was grateful for the extra scarf she had brought to wrap over her cheeks and nose to protect herself from the worst of the wind as she cycled home. She had locked up her bike behind the yoga studio down on Hammarby Kaj, and as she glanced towards the churning water in the ice-cold granite-grey canal that runs between Hammarby and Södermalm, she took a moment to consider whether she could manipulate the tiny key to unlock it without removing her Lovisa mittens.

Alex's blood ran cold so quickly that it took a moment for her conscious mind to register the source of her terror.

A police van was parked haphazardly on the quay. Two officers crouched behind it, tense, prepared. One of them spoke softly into a radio. Alex's trained eye spotted two more officers pressed flat against the building adjacent to where she stood, and another group of them, three or four maybe, approaching intently from the direction of Skanstullsbron. They're closing in on someone, she thought, and her stomach turned.

A second car pulled up and a young officer, looking barely old enough to have left school, her long blonde hair in a

neat plait stretching down her back, jumped out to open the back door for her superior.

Lia Svensson.

Svensson's haughty, almost regal profile was barely visible beneath her fur hat and full length cashmere coat. Alex hadn't seen her in several months, and the glimpse from nearly a block away sent a shock of white hot adrenaline through her.

Alex tried to tell herself that she was safe, that she was far enough away that Svensson would never see, much less recognise her, but the words rattled frantically around her brain like a trapped bird, devoid of meaning, much less impact. Her heart thudded painfully in her chest. She turned tail and ran, skidding on a puddle of sheer ice, wrenching her ankle painfully.

She just made it around the corner before she burst into tears.

At the coffee shop, Alfie had hungrily polished off the porridge he was served and Fergus decided not to take offence at the implied rebuke of his cooking. As they walked home, the pavement was still covered in a dusting of snow. It was testament to just how cold it was in Stockholm, Fergus thought as they turned into Lundagatan, that such a small amount of snow was sticking around at almost lunchtime. It would have been long gone in London.

'CAT,' roared Alfie, wriggling out of Fergus's grasp and toddling at speed after a hapless grey cat who swiftly darted under a car. Fergus felt a wave of overwhelming love for his son as Alfie, his face set in a determined line, gave chase, the speed making his wobbly Charlie Chaplin gait even more pronounced.

'Where are you Cat?' he shouted. 'Alfie see you!'

'Alfie pal, he's here under the car — look!'

At Alfie's joyful shout the cat took off again, skipping nimbly across the frosty pavement to the sanctuary of another car. 'Cat! *Kom och leka med mig*,' shouted Alfie.

Fergus frowned. 'Are you talking to the cat, Alfie?'

'Cat! Come back, Cat! *Snälla!*'

There it was again: that curious baby talk Alfie had been speaking in for the past few days. Fergus wondered if he should be concerned that Alfie seemed to have taken a step back with his speech since their arrival in Sweden. Before they left London, Alfie's talking had been coming on by the day, and when he spoke directly with Fergus or Tess he was still increasingly articulate, but invariably when he was in the apartment, when he played with his toys he reverted to this new baby talk. Now he was doing it outside too. Fergus made a mental note to have a look online later. Days into full time parenting and he was a regular lurker in forums on which apparently expert mothers doled out advice on everything from tantrums to chicken pox parties. Maybe as a reaction to the move, Alfie was reverting to the security of baby talk Fergus reasoned. That sounded like something the forums experts would suggest.

Alfie squatted next to the car, his head cocked comically to one side as he waved enthusiastically. 'My cat!' After a moment, he observed soberly: 'He's gone.' Alfie looked up at his father, his eyes wounded. 'But Alfie love him.'

Fergus started to laugh at Alfie's stricken face. His smile faded as he thought that he and Tess were horribly, depressingly, like Alfie and the cat. With an irritated sigh that made Alfie stare at him, Fergus firmly dislodged the thought. This was day two of their fresh start, what was the point in thinking like that?

'I'm sure he loves you too in his own way,' Fergus said, holding out a hand which Alfie accepted after a moment's consideration, 'but he had to go home.'

Father and son walked along the snow covered pavement companionably hand in hand.

‘Had to go home — his mummy?’

Alfie’s staccato little voice as he went to great effort to articulate each word never failed to make Fergus smile.

‘Exactly, his mummy was waiting for him. It was time for his tea.’

‘My mummy.’

‘Your mummy’s at work. We’ll see her at our tea time, won’t we? Will we make her something nice?’

‘My Legos.’

That made Fergus laugh. He’d have to tell Tess she was ranked along with Legos in Alfie’s mind. She’d love that.

They still laughed together sometimes. That meant something.

‘You’ve got snow on your nose pal. Do you want to ride on Daddy’s shoulders the rest of the way?’ Maybe parenthood wasn’t so bad after all.

As Fergus carried Alfie into their flat a little while later, he could still hear the baby crying somewhere nearby.

The following day, Fergus locked the front door as they left the apartment and swung Alfie onto his shoulders. Sometime in this morning’s fog, he had made up his mind that he could handle Alfie screeching or the neighbour’s baby screeching, but not both. He was going to knock on their door today. Offer solidarity, if nothing else.

Alfie immediately whacked him on the head.

‘Oww.’

Alfie giggled.

‘Don’t hit Daddy on the head please, it’s not nice.’

Alfie hit him again.

‘Alfie, if you’re going to hit Daddy then you can’t ride on my shoulders, you’ll have to walk yourself.’

Whack.

Fergus felt a flash of temper jolt through him. Seven tantrums so far. Seven. And it wasn't yet lunchtime. Fergus had planned to go shopping this morning, to take Alfie to the local nursery to register him, and possibly — though he had known deep down it was over-optimistic — sign himself up for *Swedish for Immigrants* classes. Instead, it had taken him nearly two hours to persuade Alfie to put some clothes on, and he'd given up on breakfast after the third spoonful of porridge hit him square in the face.

'Right then.'

He plonked Alfie unceremoniously on the ground, and Alfie instantly began to howl.

'Your shoulders!'

Fergus squatted so that he could look Alfie in the eye.

'I told you that I would put you down if you kept hitting me, and you did so I did. That's consequences for you, my wee short grumpy friend.'

Immediately, inevitably, Alfie's face crumpled and he threw himself on the ground and screamed. Fergus sat down on the steps next to the elevator, and put his head in his hands. He was exhausted. Every nerve was jangling; he felt like crying himself.

Alfie had been up most of the night. Even when he momentarily dozed, Fergus had stayed awake, staring into darkness, afraid to drop off in case Alfie's next wails woke Tess.

Through the small window opposite the old fashioned, concertina-doored lift, Fergus could just spy the street four floors below, could see cars coming and going, a taxi pulling up across the road. Pedestrians scuttled by, braced against the gusts of snow being whipped into their faces. A sudden wave of melancholy swept over Fergus and he felt very alone.

'Right. Come on mate. Enough.'

He swooped Alfie into his arms, and held him close while his choking sobs died down. 'There you are,' he murmured

into Alfie's hair. 'You're okay. There's no need for this nonsense, okay? You and me are on the same side.'

'Your shoulders.'

Fergus nearly laughed. You had to give the boy points for tenacity.

'Okay, but no hitting Daddy, okay?'

Alfie nodded shakily, and Fergus swung him up onto his shoulders.

Holding carefully onto Alfie's ankles, Fergus walked up the steps to the next floor. He was almost positive that the crying was coming from above. Fergus hesitated on the half landing. He suddenly felt cold. He turned to glance down at the front door of their flat, convinced for a moment that there would be someone standing there, watching him. He pulled Alfie down to hold him in his arms. Mercifully Alfie didn't object.

I should wait to do this when I've had at least two hours solid sleep, he thought, then he remembered how it had taken them the best part of the morning to get this far — approximately four metres from their front door — and decided that there would be no giving up now.

A door slammed above them and Fergus jumped. Alfie flinched and clutched at Fergus's hair.

'Sorry pal,' Fergus muttered, 'Daddy's being daft today.'

Footsteps clattered down towards them.

The young woman coming down the stairs was wrapped in a floor length sheepskin coat, the sheepskin was battered and shiny and the voluminous fur collar was ratty. She looked like she was in her twenties and was wearing a dark green crocheted pageboy cap pulled low over her forehead and a few strands of dirty blond hair escaped the brim to frame her face.

'Ursäkta --' she said impatiently.

'Sorry. I don't speak Swedish,' Fergus blurted, feeling embarrassed.

‘No problem,’ the woman’s American drawl was evident now. ‘Who the fuck speaks Swedish?’

‘I’m Fergus, and this is Alfie.’

‘Paisley.’

Paisley accepted Fergus’s proffered hand with an amused smile, as though shaking hands was an adorably provincial, archaic tradition. Fergus resisted the urge to apologise, for what he wasn’t sure.

‘We just moved in to —’

‘I know.’

‘My — wife’s job was transferred to Stockholm. For two years,’ Fergus added pointlessly, to fill the silence.

‘Cool.’

Alfie had been silently sizing her up, the way he tended to with new people, and now announced: ‘Him is pretty.’

Fergus grinned, ready to accept the inevitable compliment on Alfie’s utter adorableness, but Paisley didn’t react. Didn’t even look at him.

‘So, it was good to meet you.’ She smiled briefly, insincerely at Fergus.

‘Yes, of course — pop down, sometime, if you like. For a drink or something. I’m sure my wife would love to meet you.’

‘Awesome. Will do.’

With another curt smile, Paisley turned to leave.

‘Hey — sorry, you’re maybe in a hurry, but — do you know which apartment the baby’s in?’

‘Baby?’

‘We’ve heard it crying, quite a bit. I was just going to introduce myself, fellow parent and all that.”’

‘No. Sorry.’

‘You’ve not heard it at — ?’

‘No.’

And with that she took off down the stairs.

When he was sure she was out of earshot, Fergus muttered: ‘Not exactly sweetness and light, was she pal?’

'Him is pretty,' Alfie repeated.

He didn't call. Fredrik, the guy from the gym she finally agreed to have a drink with last week. Whatever. They never do.

At this stage, Paisley is far from sure she even wants them to, it's not like she calls them either. These Swedish guys with their skinny jeans and their man buns and, she has to admit, pretty superior bedroom skills, are basically human vibrators. She knows it, they know it, and that's why they never call. Which is completely fine with her.

The fact that she felt, just a tiny bit, like, *why not?* was simply conditioning. She had been raised to believe that her worth was valued by how desirable she was to men, and though she absolutely, unquestionably rejected that notion and considered it bullshit of the highest order, she figured she had internalised it somewhere along the way and that's why she always felt just very slightly shit when they didn't call. That and the fact that he had made her laugh.

But mostly the patriarchy. Fucking patriarchy.

Whatever.

It was snowing heavily by the time Paisley locked her bike to some railings outside Maja's office. She had been particularly road-ragey on the way that day, weaving her way in and out of traffic along Skeppsbron, roaring at dopey pedestrians who wandered haplessly onto the bike path and once, removing her mitten so as to convey her displeasure with digital clarity at the behaviour of a particularly obnoxious truck. Her breathing was only just returning to normal, the exhilaration of the aggressive cycle still coursing through her as she keyed in the code of the grand sandstone Karlavägen building.

Maja crossed one elegant ankle behind the other, and Paisley noted that even her pantyhose looked expensive. Maja was always immaculately, almost ostentatiously turned out. Today she was in a navy suit that Paisley was fairly confident was Chanel, set off by a spectacular, gold and emerald necklace that looked like something Cleopatra would wear.

The first time they met, Paisley asked Maja where she was from. Used to people who both knew and happily shared their heritage down to the percentage (Paisley herself was half Scottish — hence her name — a quarter German, an eighth Greek and an eighth Italian), she had been a little stung when Maja fixed her with a cold gaze and replied, 'Sweden.'

'How can I help you today, Paisley?' Maja asked, and Paisley blushed, feeling excruciatingly aware that she was wasting Maja's time. Except actually, she wasn't. She had paid for an hour of Maja's time; she could damn well waste it if she pleased.

'I think you know, Maja,' she replied, because Maja did know. 'I want to be updated on what's happening with the case.'

Maja sighed. Did Paisley detect a flash of embarrassment on her face? Good. She damned well should be embarrassed...

'It has been more than one year,' Maja said, 'it is unlikely, at this stage, for there to be a great deal of —'

'It's been too long, no arguments here. So what's going on, what are you working on?'

'The investigation has not been resolved to a satisfactory conclusion,' Maja allowed. 'But you must understand —'

'I don't *understand* a damned thing —' Paisley took a breath, reminded herself to get a grip. It would be no good for her to be thrown out of Maja's office screaming, again.

At a knock on the door, Maja looked up with something Paisley was almost sure was relief. A young guy, his thin hair

pulled into a ponytail, painful looking acne covering his mournful face, backed into her office with a tray of coffee and pastries.

‘*Tack, Kalle,*’ Maja muttered with a brief smile. She busied herself pouring coffee which Paisley ignored.

‘I *understand* that my friend is rotting away while you sit here drinking coffee. The entire freaking country thinks she is guilty. It’s only a matter of time before a god damned lynch mob —’

‘That does not happen here.’

‘You think?’

Maja got to her feet. ‘I will put a call in to the chief investigator —’

‘Lia. Svensson.’

Maja nodded curtly. ‘Without the promise of new evidence I don’t see what she can do, but if it will make you happy.’

‘Right, this whole thing is just shits and giggles to me. It’s a hoot. How can there be no evidence? I still don’t get —I thought with all the, the science and whatever these days there was always, DNA or, I don’t know.’

Maja’s smile was gentle and Paisley felt her hackles rise. ‘I get that it’s different than in movies, I’m not a moron, I just can’t believe —’ Paisley cut herself off again. What was the point? ‘They only suspected Kati because there was no sign that anyone else was there, but that doesn’t mean that there wasn’t.’

She deliberately took her time gathering her bag and coat as Maja waited with a thin veneer of professional patience. ‘For the police not to even consider other theories is nothing but laziness. I know it and you know it, but you’ll never admit it because if you’re terrified that if you acknowledge that any officialdom is less than flawless, the whole goddamned country will catch on fire or something.

Paisley moved towards the door. ‘There are new people living in Kati’s apartment,’ she said.

‘I heard.’ Maja’s expression was inscrutable.

'They hear the crying.'

It had been an okay morning, Fergus thought the next day. He stroked Alfie's tummy and watched his eyelids flutter as sleep washed over him. Fergus glanced at his watch. Alfie had been napping on and off for nearly an hour. The next time he woke, Fergus would get him up even if he still seemed sleepy. Maybe he could have another short nap in the afternoon so that there would be a chance of dinner and bath time passing without the artillery fire of tantrums that normally followed an insufficient nap. Maybe he and Tess would even manage to have an actual conversation.

Breakfast had been eaten that morning, in full for once, due to a rewards system Fergus had stumbled across in which he sang a verse of a song for every bite Alfie ate. He'd started with *The Wheels on the Bus* and *Incy Wincy Spider*, then after a while moved on to Oasis and James. He'd sent a video to Tess of the two of them in fits of giggles as Alfie head banged to the chorus of *Sit Down*, his face covered in a generous layer of porridge and banana.

As soon as Alfie appeared to be in a deep sleep, Fergus gingerly got to his feet and crept from the darkened bedroom. He carefully stepped over the creaky floorboard in the hallway which had spelled disaster for the previous day's nap. The baby had started crying again, though more softly than previously.

Fergus even wondered if what he was hearing was just the echo in his head, because it was less clear than ever from which direction it came. It wasn't an infant, he realised. He had thought it was, initially, but now he realised it was older, probably around Alfie's age. Wherever it was.

Fully aware that the kitchen looked like a porridge-and-banana-bomb had hit it, Fergus padded to the living room and flopped down on the couch. He yawned, and wondered

drowsily if a power nap would make him feel better, or worse.

The day before, he had knocked on six doors in the building before Alfie lost patience. Two neighbours answered, an elderly lady who didn't appear to speak English and a younger guy who shrugged sullenly and refused to meet Fergus's eye. Another three flats seemed to be empty, but when Fergus knocked on the last door, he heard music from inside. Footsteps approached the door, then stopped. Realising that the person inside was peering at him through the peephole, Fergus smiled. Then he heard the footsteps retreat. Feeling absurdly stung that somebody had checked him out and found him not worth answering the door to, Fergus headed back downstairs just as Alfie started to roar for a biscuit.

Fergus had served lentil soup for lunch and opted not to object when Alfie consumed his by dipping a finger in his bowl and licking it clean. As he watched Alfie contentedly smother his face in soup, he wondered about the neighbour who hadn't even opened the door. What was it about the sight of Fergus and Alfie that had caused them to walk away? It occurred to him that they had been in the flat nearly a week and the American they'd met on the stairs the day before was the first neighbour they had spoken to. Nobody had popped round to introduce themselves with a bottle of wine or invite them in for drinks.

He'd had a vision of being adopted by other parents in the neighbourhood with kids around Alfie's age, inducted into the world of full-time parenting with friendly coffees and group trips to play parks. That vision was fading fast. Most days, it felt as though other than the crying baby, he and Alfie were alone in the building.

Then Fergus remembered the fight he and Tess had on the first night they moved in. With a hot flash of mortification he pictured their shouts reverberating around the building just

like the baby's sobs. No wonder everyone was steering clear.

Panic shot through Fergus as he suddenly heard sirens, saw blue flashing lights, heard that calm voice creeping into his subconscious, washing over him, bringing him back to what was real. Bringing him back to the reality he wanted to forget.

Fergus came to with a start; realised he must have dropped off for a few seconds. He felt groggier than when he lay down. He sat up with a wince as his muscles protested. Hauling an energetic two year old around all day appeared to have about the same physical effect on him as running the London marathon. Attacking the kitchen was the very last thing he felt like doing, but the thought of the look of surprise Tess tried to cover up every evening when she came home to find a fed and bathed Alfie and reasonably hygienic flat waiting for her, propelled him from the sofa.

As he crossed the shadowy hallway, particularly dark that morning as the bedroom and kitchen doors were closed, Fergus stubbed his toe and had to grit his teeth to stop from shouting and waking Alfie. He fumbled for the light switch by the front door, then stared around the hallway in horror. He shook his head, trying to clear the sleep away, to check he was properly awake.

Crayon scribbles covered the walls, the wooden floor, even the door of the hallway cupboard. Fergus could hear his heartbeat roar in his ears. When did Alfie do this? Fergus's mind frantically flicked over the morning's activities: the singing breakfast triumph, the Lego tower they'd built in the living room, Alfie's 45 minute tantrum in the bathroom for no apparent reason. Fergus was certain they had been together every moment since Alfie decided it was morning sometime around 5am, but clearly, somehow, Alfie had been in this hallway on his own. It must have been

while Fergus had been napping. The hallway was gloomy, piled haphazardly with the boxes and suitcases they hadn't got around to sorting out yet. Boxes full of sharp things, heavy things that could fall on Alfie, could hurt him. He would never let Alfie roam around in here unattended.

Except, obviously, he had. He must be more exhausted than he realised, he thought. He was a useless father. A useless husband. He wasn't capable of looking after Alfie. Tess's mother had been right, a leopard never changes its spots. The proof was dancing in front of his eyes. Crazed loops and zigzags of blue and green and red and black that now, on top of everything else, had to be scrubbed clean. He didn't even want to know what Tess would say if she saw it.

The tiny window in the basement laundry room was completely covered by a snowdrift, so not a scrap of weak afternoon daylight made it into the gloomy room. Only one of the lights worked, or at least, after a frustrating search in semi-darkness, Fergus had found a switch that turned on only one flickering fluorescent bar by the door, so he and Alfie had to make do with that. Alfie didn't seem fussed, he was happily zooming a set of small wooden train carriages along the tiled floor.

Fergus, on the other hand, was attempting to read washing machine instructions he could barely see in a language he didn't speak. He had started to figure out that once he got his head around the relationship between Swedish spelling and pronunciation, a lot of words were close enough to their English counterparts that it wasn't impossible to start connecting and guessing and thus pick his way through simple text. The other day he'd spent several seconds pushing a door that wouldn't budge, only to finally click that it was marked *drag* which presumably

meant 'pull' — and so it did. On the other hand there had been a confusing incident with a supermarket worker during which it became increasingly clear that *nap* in Swedish doesn't refer to nappies, but dummies.

Either way, this breakthrough contributed nothing towards illuminating the apparently complex requirements of the washing machine which sat silent and dark no matter how many times he pushed what he was sure was the correct combination of buttons.

'Fucking *work*, you bastard,' he roared, thumping the insolent machine with a force that made his fist instantly throb with pain. Alfie looked up in fright and burst into tears.

'Sorry, sorry —' muttered Fergus, scooping Alfie up. 'Daddy didn't mean to frighten you. He's just being silly because he can't work out how to make this machine wash our clothes. Maybe Alfie can help?' Fergus had no idea when, much less why, he had started referring to them both in the third person.

'No!' yelled Alfie, wriggling from Fergus's arms, but at least his tears stopped. Fergus gave up on the washing machine for a minute, sat down on the cold floor and watched Alfie carefully sort the wooden train carriages by colour. Fergus had found the trains in a basket in the hallway cupboard in the apartment and given them to Alfie by way of apology.

Alfie seemed to have forgotten about his father's anger that afternoon, but hot prickles of guilt at the memory of Alfie's heartbroken howls pierced at Fergus and the shuddering sobs that threatened to engulf Alfie's tiny body rang in his ears. *Please Daddy! Not me.*

Fergus had kneeled down so he could look him in the eye, just as the toddler behaviour book he had read told him to. Using a firm but calm voice, he explained that drawing on the walls was naughty behaviour and Alfie shouldn't do it again. Alfie just roared again and again that it wasn't him.

Fergus had tried reasoning. He tried pointing out the irrefutable proof of the wild scribbles on the hallway walls, the crayons belonging to Alfie scattered on the floor. He argued that Alfie had opportunity and motive, concluded that the case was airtight. When none of that worked, he lost his temper and he shouted and Alfie shrank back, suddenly silent, his eyes wide with shock and fear. Fergus forced himself to walk slowly to the living room and count to ten as Alfie's disconsolate sobs gradually blew out to shaky breaths and hiccups and Fergus felt like the worst human being ever to grace planet Earth.

Toddlers lie, the mothers of the internet assured Fergus. *It's perfectly normal and nothing to worry about*, they insisted, but the image of that little tear streaked face, the wavering voice choked with sobs, *p-pl-ease Da-addy*, hovered miserably over him. He ruffled Alfie's hair and kissed the top of his head.

'Daddy loves you, wee man,' he murmured.

'Red train,' Alfie replied, holding up exactly that.

'So it is. Who's a clever boy?'

Satisfied that Alfie had forgiven him even if he'd likely never forgive himself, Fergus got up and returned to the more practical problem of the mystifying washing machine.

He had tried to talk to Tess again last night. She had got home late, as usual, exhausted, as usual, and had eaten the unappetising reheated pasta he had made for his and Alfie's dinner several hours before, in silence.

Later in the living room, he poured them both a glass of wine and she pulled up the next episode of the American series they were marathoning. Fergus was fairly confident that it was something to do with a family of serial killers, though if the truth be told he couldn't make head nor tail of it, which was presumably down to the fact that he nodded off around twenty minutes into each episode. As the urgent theme music filled the room and flashes of Philadelphia — or Baltimore or Chicago, for all he knew — zipped by at

dizzying speed, Fergus hit pause at a particularly gruesome shot of a woman being carried into the woods by her killer, her neck severed almost in two by the bloody axe now hanging from his tool belt.

‘I’m going to ring social services, or whatever they’re called here, tomorrow,’ he announced.

Tess, who had been half dozing beside him, sat up. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘The kid that cries all day. There’s something the matter, it’s not right.’

‘Fergus for fuck’s sake, not this again. I don’t think you should get involved, it’s none of your business. When Alfie was teething he screamed for about six weeks straight, what if someone had reported me?’

‘It wasn’t constant, not like this.’

‘How would you know?’

Fergus flinched and ‘unpaused’ the show.

Despite his resolution to ring first thing this morning, it was now lunchtime and Fergus hadn’t made the call. What if Tess was right and he risked ruining the life of some poor woman who was struggling at the moment, but doing her best?

Or what if he was right and the child needed help?

The door of the laundry room banged open and an elderly lady burst in with alacrity impressive for her apparent age. She was shouting angrily, apparently at Fergus.

‘Sorry,’ Fergus said, with an apologetic smile, ‘*inte* ... understand,’ he finished lamely.

Bugger. He knew the phrase for *I don’t speak Swedish*. He’d downloaded the *Learn to Speak Swedish* course onto his phone, and now that he finally had a chance to use it on another human being, he couldn’t for the life of him think of it.

The woman, diminutive and wiry with light grey hair pulled back into a severe bun, continued to berate him. She jabbed

a finger angrily at a spiral notebook hanging on a string next to the door, which did nothing to illuminate Fergus's transgression. Fergus shrugged helplessly. 'You don't speak English, I take it?'

She ignored him, clearly not comprehending, which answered his question. Fergus sighed. Tess had gone on enough times about how annoying she found it that she never got a chance to practice the little Swedish she had learned on the beginners course the company sent her on as part of her relocation package. The current Swedish generation had grown up immersed in English to the point that it was barely a foreign language anymore, but if this woman could effortlessly quote *Friends* and *The Simpsons* in a flawless American accent as Tess insisted they all could, she was making a pretty decent job of hiding it. Fergus had no choice but to hope that a *mea culpa* smile would suffice as apology for whatever he had done.

'*Men hej, lilla gubben!*'

At the sight of Alfie, the woman abandoned her fury. Her eyes lit up and she grinned, crouching down in front of Alfie who looked up curiously.

'*Vad gör du medståget?*'

Alfie didn't respond, but continued to stare.

'He doesn't speak Swedish either, sorry,' Fergus said, conscious of the intrinsic pointlessness of his words. The woman ignored him anyway.

'*Vad heter du?*' she asked, and Fergus returned to the washing machine, figuring that if chatting to Alfie stopped the woman from shouting at him then it was all good. He had just picked up the maddening washing machine instructions again, when he heard something that made his veins run cold.

'*Heter Alfie, jag bor här,*' Alfie said distinctly.

'*Alfie! Vilket vackert namn! Jag heter Magdalena. Hej hej.*' She waved.

'Hej hej,' replied Alfie with a brief smile, returning the wave.

Fergus's breath caught in his throat. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. He turned slowly to stare at his son.

The woman had asked Alfie his name and Alfie had responded.

Vad heter du?

What's your name?

Fergus had never taught Alfie any of the basic Swedish phrases he knew. Tess would probably know the phrase, but she had barely seen Alfie since they arrived and Fergus was confident she wouldn't have spent the few snatched hours with him speaking Swedish.

Trying to ignore the disquiet growing within him, Fergus wracked his brains. TV? But the odd time Fergus had resorted to TV — feeling furtive and guilty — to keep Alfie amused while he threw together some dinner, it had been British shows he'd found online.

'Alfie, c'mon let's go and get lunch,' Fergus said, deciding abruptly that the laundry would have to wait another day.

'Trevligt att träffas Alfie.' The woman solemnly shook Alfie's hand. *'Vi ses.'*

'Hej då!' Alfie called to the woman's retreating back as, with a final dirty look at Fergus, she took her leave.

Alex woke with a start. She was cold. She opened her eyes, but it made no difference, the dark was so deep it was clearly a long way from morning. She rolled over, snuggled back down and waited for sleep to creep over her again.

It had been a sunny day, one of those rare, precious winter days when the sky was startlingly blue and the snow sparkled, so Alex had taken the opportunity to let some fresh air into her flat as she cooked an elaborate Indian dish.

She could have sworn she had closed the window again before going to bed, but maybe the lock hadn't caught.

Alex's mother was a great believer in the healing powers of fresh air. One of Alex's earliest memories was of waking in the pram, bundled up cosily with only her eyes and the tip of her nose exposed to the elements, and coming face to face with a curious cow. They'd stared at one another, the cow's huge, docile, brown eye filling her vision almost entirely. Alex's mother, Gull-Britt, in the denim dungarees that featured in every one of Alex's childhood memories, her white-blond hair tied up in a brightly coloured scarf, had come running from the kitchen with a broom to shoo the cow back into the field. She had then kissed Alex's forehead before going back inside. Nap time wouldn't be over until Gull-Britt had finished the chores she had planned for the morning, whether the child was awake or not.

Alex remembered feeling a protective glow from the warmth of her mother's lips as she dozed off again. The garden had been only covered in frost then, but, like most Swedish children, she had napped in snow and blizzards throughout childhood. Smiling at the memory, she decided not to bother closing the window. If sleeping with an icy nose didn't do her any harm as an infant, she couldn't see that it was a problem now.

Just as she felt herself sinking back into a contented sleep, something jolted her back to full consciousness. She froze, as she remembered, with a blinding flash of clarity, that she had closed the window. That it had been locked. The cold wasn't coming from the December night.

It was happening.

Alex knew that searching the darkness would do no good. It was nothing but a sense. An awareness of something that drove a hard knot of terror into her core. She didn't hear voices or see visions, there were no ghostly howls or hovering apparitions. No clinking chains or bony hands glowing menacingly. It was just that she knew she wasn't

alone. Sometimes, the awareness came with a strong emotion. She would feel suddenly frightened or thrilled or desperately sad. Other times, it was simply a presence. There was nothing she could do about it. She lived with it. She tried not to think about it.

A curious noise in the darkness made Alex's stomach twist. She listened keenly, the echo of her thudding heartbeat filling her ears. It had never made a noise before. Something had knocked against the wooden floor of her bedroom. Something hard, something small. Not an organic sound, it wasn't an insect or a mouse. It moved closer. It *trundled*. Alex's hand darted out from under the covers and switched on the lamp. She scrabbled to sit up, then stared at the thing on the floor, curiosity overcoming fear.

It was a small, red, wooden train carriage.

'Have you got any idea how tired I am?'

'Keep your voice down — he's sleeping.' Fergus closed the living room door as Tess paced by the window.

'This is the first night this week I've made it home before midnight, and I'm supposed to deal with — with I don't even know what —'

'You don't have to deal with anything Tess, I was just telling you what happened. The neighbour —'

'What neighbour?'

'What does that matter? A woman. A Swedish woman in the laundry room, spoke to Alfie, in Swedish, and Alfie spoke back. I'm just telling you what happened, I'm not saying —'

'He's a baby Fergus, he barely speaks English.'

'He's been talking loads actually, that's, that's the thing — I thought he was regressing, talking baby talk all the time, but it's not baby talk. I just didn't understand because I don't bloody speak Swedish —'