



THE FLAME

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to family and friends in this long project.

In honor of Bill's memory. (1938-2022)

Rosa-Maria Petriné

PROLOGUE

*Silently it arrived. The night.
Old death followed the night.
The moon's glow paled before the flame.
More quietly it departed. The night.
Old death followed the night.
Taking the flame with it.*

A dark figure watched from the hillside as flames rose from the windows of the old castle. The sight was intoxicatingly beautiful in their eyes. In the roar of the fire, they watched the scene entranced, clenching their fingers into fists. On the right hand, a striking ruby ring glimmered—rather large for the finger it adorned.

A wound had opened on the fingertip. A small drop of blood fell onto their shirt. The figure slowly licked the fingertip, tasting the metallic tang. The slight curve of a smile painted a chilling image of madness. And no one in the world was there to witness it.

The flames momentarily loosened their grip on the old castle's structures, burying an ugly secret with them. Eyes glowed maniacally, bright, emerald green. They felt energy flowing through their body, bringing with it a strange peace.

An old, modest canvas bag hung on their shoulder. It contained everything necessary. Besides a passport, bankbook, jewellery, and wallet, there were seeds. They were carefully packed in their own small canvas pouch, wrapped in plastic. It was time to continue the journey.

Au revoir á la belle!

CHAPTER 1

Green moss had taken over the brick of the gable wall. The rainy early autumn morning coloured the trees in the yard. Lulu's gaze swept the yard, evaluating and simultaneously admiring the landscape. She sensed the story of the house's outer walls from times past. They concealed lived life within them. She could smell the patina of time in her nostrils. The scent brought back memories from childhood and a time she had almost completely forgotten.

The house was perfect for her. *A little styling, she thought, perhaps some kitchen renovation and voilà.*

- The lock might be a bit rusty. The real estate agent turned the key far too smoothly.

- May I? This would be important to me, Lulu requested.

The real estate agent glanced at their client and saw a flash in the woman's eyes for a moment. Perhaps this odd client really was interested in the old, somewhat dilapidated hillside house on the

north shore. Right on the side where the sun never shone.

- Of course... Please. The real estate agent handed the woman the bunch of keys incredulously.

He had named the woman Flame in his mind. Her hair truly did blaze—almost flowed—out from beneath a crocheted lace headpiece. A glowing redorange curl bounced restlessly, even irritatingly, into his line of sight. An irresistible urge crept into his thoughts: to tuck the curls back under the headpiece, out of sight.

She took the keyring in her hand and selected a key. She pushed it into the lock. The lock made a clicking sound as it opened. The door opened seemingly effortlessly.

- Well, this hasn't been lived in for decades. The sauna facilities and kitchen were renovated in the 90s, the real estate agent continued restlessly while studying the strange woman and her movements.

Some inner voice warned him. He had a strong urge to flee the scene as quickly as possible,

leaving the woman to revel alone with her dilapidated house.

- Look, the previous owner left their old golf club here in the corner. You might find surprising uses for it, who knows? The real estate agent laughed dryly, trying to be humorous.

The light birch parquet floor welcomed visitors softly into the large entrance hall. The house breathed a 60s atmosphere with its large coat racks and alcoves. The spacious living room ahead connected to a beautiful dining area. The windows created an autumnal artwork overlooking the lake. It was impressive to watch the large, aging linden trees with red leaves that curved beautifully with their branches toward the shore water. The living room windows opened to a magically beautiful view. It brought memories from afar to Lulu's mind.

- What about that garden down there? Is it included? And the shore? Lulu asked curiously.

- Yes! The garden and shore are indeed included in the total price! The real estate agent answered perhaps too eagerly.

A shore where the sun doesn't cast even a single ray, not even in summer, she thought silently, perhaps too sarcastically.

- Wonderful!

xxx

Lulu enjoyed yard work in her large front yard. September's warm sun played in the treetops, bringing light to the otherwise dark yard. She was so absorbed in her favorite activity that she didn't notice the woman watching her for a while from behind the fence.

- Hei då! You must be my new neighbour! Hur går det? A curious voice from behind the fence stopped Lulu. The already partially graying, energetic looking woman in her yellow rubber boots looked at her new neighbour with curious friendliness, as if waiting for an answer to her question.

- Well hello! This place is absolutely wonderful! Lulu exclaimed toward the voice good-naturedly, but simultaneously incredulous at what she saw.

Who was this charming and dignified-looking woman? Was she a threat or an opportunity?

- I'm Rebecca! Who do I have the pleasure of meeting? The voice continued persistently.

- Lulu. Lulu Hasbia. *Oh no, should I have said another name? Hasbia.* The name slipped out before she thought.

- Men hej Lulu! You have a wonderful herb garden on the lower slope. They all seem to still be doing well. For over a decade now. Rebecca continued.

- Yes, I've been lucky! This house is my treasure.

You wouldn't believe how lucky, Lulu thought.

- Hör du, why don't you stop by our place tonight. My husband Robert and I are having a small evening gathering? Local residents from this hillside and Lehmuskuja will be coming? Well then, you must join our community activities and this wonderful group we represent. Rebecca enticed.

- Tonight? I don't know, there's quite a lot here ...

- Nonsense, one must also rest! Six o'clock. No potluck, just bring yourself. See you! Vi ses!

Rebecca knew her own strengths. Willpower and persistence were together infallible combination. Once again she had gotten the other party entangled in her invisible web and had her way. Rebecca had decided to find out everything about her new neighbour.

Absolutely everything.

xxx

The large jingling keyring clinked cheerfully in the pocket. Dozens of keys to different places and the power to use them brought a strange sense of authority. He knew the apartment was empty. Its owners had left well in advance for southern warmth. This would be one of the best perks of the position of trust. He got to see how people in this housing company really lived.

The door opened easily. Upon entering, a slight musty indoor air smell greeted him. The refrigerator had been left on.

Well, that's how you save electricity. *Damn capitalists*, he thought to himself. The refrigerator door opened, and a beer can snapped open. The metal tab flew in an arc behind the armchair.

How uncomfortable these chairs are to sit in, he thought.

His feet rose onto the glass living room table and beer poured from the can simultaneously onto the oriental rug and the plush-covered armchair. He would have plenty of time to go through the place. From the last apartment, he had found a considerable amount of heirloom jewelry at the bottom of a cabinet. They had been easily sold onward. No one had even noticed.

With his eyes closed, he raised the beer can to his lips while enjoying the intoxicating feeling of excitement that took over his entire body. The state was euphoric, but at the same time tense. He slowly opened his eyes, lingering, and then it happened. A woman stood before him. A beautiful, innocent, young woman in her bell skirt stared at him shamelessly.

- What the hell! Who are you?

- The door was open. You don't live here. I know. You're not my neighbor, the girl said childishly.

- As a member of the housing company board, I'm authorized to check all vacant apartments. Now listen here - you need to leave and go far. Get out of this apartment, right now. Shoo! Out!

The girl ran away in distress.

He would never forget the girl's expression. It was simultaneously surprised and empty.

Would the girl tell someone that she had seen him in someone else's apartment? How much could that apparition even comprehend? Would anyone believe her? What if the thefts were connected to him? His social position was more than at risk. What could he do about it? He couldn't be exposed. Not now.

xxx

After measuring herself in the mirror for a moment, she snorted. For her age, time had treated her really well. The red, short bob bent upward at

STRANGE EVENTS AND PECULIAR CHARACTERS
WEAVE A STORY BUILT ON DECEPTION,
PASSION, AND DANGEROUS RELATIONSHIPS.
THE SURREAL TONE OF THE STORY DOESN'T STOP THE READER
FROM IMAGINING THAT HARJUVAARA COULD BE
JUST LIKE ANY SMALL VILLAGE ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD,
WITH ITS RESIDENTS AND HAPPENINGS.
STEP INTO A STORY WHERE NOTHING IS AS IT SEEMS!

MY DEBUT CRIME NOVEL THE FLAME TELLS A DEEP
AND EMOTIONAL STORY SET IN A SMALL VILLAGE.
THE IDEA FOR THE FLAME STARTED IN 2017, WHEN I DREAMED
OF WRITING MY OWN BOOK.

I USED TO WRITE JUST FOR MYSELF,
BUT NOW WRITING HAS BECOME
A REAL HOBBY—AND MY JOURNEY STILL CONTINUES.
I HOPE YOU ENJOY READING THE FLAME
AND FEEL THE EXCITEMENT IN EVERY PAGE!

