

Summer in Black

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Robin Cuypers

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1 The scorching summer

The city seemed to be shimmering under an invisible dome of fire. Antwerp groaned, every paving stone radiated heat as if it had been taken straight from an oven. The Scheldt gleamed languidly and quietly, a silver mirror that offered no cooling. The air was heavy with sweat, exhaust fumes and the smell of garbage rotting away in the sun. It was a summer that shut everything down, intoxicated everything. The heat hung over the city like a rug, a blanket that you couldn't shake off.

Chief Inspector Hannah de Wit sat on the edge of her bed and wiped her sweaty forehead with the back of her hand. It was only half past six in the morning, but the apartment already felt like a sauna. The fan in the corner hummed fruitlessly, only blowing warm air around as if to make fun of her. She had hardly slept. Her eyes stung, her head was pounding from fatigue and from the whiskey she had opened around two o'clock in the morning. One glass to calm down had become three. Her stomach protested with every movement.

She shuffled to the window and pulled the curtain aside. The view offered no comfort at all. The street below was deserted, as if everyone had entrenched themselves behind walls and curtains. An abandoned can rolled in slow motion across the asphalt, propelled by a rare gust of wind that displaced more dust than air. The heat pushed everything down. No children playing, no birds chirping, just a city sweating. Even the sky seemed to stand still.

On the wall hung a yellowed photo of her sister Sarah, smiling broadly, with a bunch of flowers in her hand. The image was a dagger that she stabbed herself in the chest every day. She couldn't get rid of it, but it didn't give any comfort either. Only emptiness, only questions. The heat made the emptiness more unbearable. Sarah, disappeared, never found again. Hannah's own loss was like a wound that never closed and that only felt rawer in this suffocating summer.

She stumbled to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of water. The water tasted metallic, lukewarm, but she drank it greedily. She felt it slide down her throat without bringing cooling. She stared at the photo of Sarah that was also here in the kitchen, as if her sister was following her everywhere. Sometimes Hannah thought that Sarah's eyes were condemning her. Other times, it seemed like she was begging to be found. Both interpretations made her equally distraught.

The sound of her phone cut through the silence. Hannah stared at it a fraction too long, as if she had to decide whether she wanted to answer. Finally, she pressed the green button with trembling fingers.

"De Wit," came her hoarse voice.

'Hannah, there is a report,' said Thomas Vercauteren on the other end. His voice was, as always, controlled, as if nothing could ever completely unsettle him. But Hannah heard the undertone. Something serious.

'Where?'

'City park. You have to see this.'

A short silence. Hannah felt her throat tighten, even before she knew exactly what had happened. The City Park, in the middle of the city, a place of joggers, mothers with prams, children on scooters. The summer had turned that place into a dusty, parched plain. And now apparently... something else.

"I'm coming," she said, her voice louder than she felt.

She didn't shower. She put on a white shirt that immediately stuck to her skin, and dark pants that seemed heavier than ever. Her gun hung familiarly but uncomfortably on her hip. She looked at Sarah's photo one more time, swallowed, and slammed the door behind her.

Outside, the city was burning. Cars gleamed like molten metal, dogs panted listlessly in the shadows, and the air trembled above the asphalt. Hannah drove with the windows open, but it didn't bring any cooling, just the smell of burnt rubber and hot petrol. She drove slowly through the empty streets, past closed cafes and empty terraces where umbrellas hung uselessly. A single cyclist pedaled by, his face red, his gaze directed downwards as if the sky would crush him at any moment.

On the way she thought of Thomas. Reliable, down-to-earth, sometimes frustratingly rational. Without him, she would probably have collapsed already, but at times his calm also felt like a silent indictment of her own chaos. She knew he was worried. About her drinking, her obsession with old files, her nightmares. But he said little about it. He let her be, like a parent a child who stubbornly follows his own path.

The siren in the distance led her to the crime scene. The City Park was cordoned off with yellow police tape that flapped in

the rare gusts of wind. A group of curious people had gathered, their faces red and shiny from the heat and tension. Two officers tried to keep them at a distance. The buzz was muffled, as if even the curiosity of the bystanders was broken by the heat.

Hannah parked her car crookedly, got out and felt the sun like a punch on her neck. Sweat gushed down her temples. The air smelled of dry grass, of soil that had been without rain for too long. She walked along the ribbon and felt the tension increase with every step.

Thomas was waiting for her. His shirt was neat, his gaze fixed, but his jaw muscles betrayed tension. He nodded shortly.

"Prepare yourself," he just said.

They walked together along the ribbon, the dry grass creaking under their shoes. And then she saw it. The body lay in a clearing, on which the sun mercilessly fell. A young woman, in her early twenties perhaps, on her back in the withered grass. Her face stiffens in a grimace of fear and pain. She wore a red jacket and a hood that was half shifted. Next to her head was a wicker basket.

It took a split second for Hannah to realize what she was seeing. Her stomach turned.

The red jacket. The basket. Little Red Riding Hood.

But this was not a fairy tale. This was a massacre. The woman's belly had been cut open, carefully, almost as if someone had wanted to give an anatomy lesson. Her intestines were neatly placed next to her, as if they had to be displayed. In the basket were five severed fingers, carefully arranged, like a bizarre bouquet.

A young officer at the edge of the field was visibly disgusted and turned his head away. His shoulders shook but he held on. Thomas kept looking straight ahead, his hands clasped in his pockets. He didn't show anything, but Hannah knew him well enough to know that he too was hit.

'They have her...' Hannah whispered. Her voice almost broke.

A quiet, calm voice mingled with them. Dr. Elise Dubois, the forensic pathologist, was already there. Her white blouse was full of sweat stains, but her attitude was imperturbable. She knelt by the body and spoke as if she were giving a lesson.

"Knife work," she said, studying the body. 'Very precise. The amputations,' she pointed to the basket, "were performed surgically. Not amateur work.'

"A doctor?" asked Thomas. His voice was low, tense.

Dubois shrugged. 'Or someone with medical training. Either way, it's someone who knows how to open up a body without causing chaos. This has been checked. Calculated.'

Hannah felt a shiver down her spine, despite the scorching heat. This was more than a murder. This was theater. A message. A performance that was staged by someone. And deep inside, in a place she would rather not visit, she felt something else: recognition. As if a long-forgotten echo from her childhood warned her that this was just the beginning.

She turned and looked at the edge of the park, where the curious were trying to see what was happening. Some held their phones in the air, tried to take pictures through the ribbon. Others whispered excitedly, as if this spectacle gave color to their day. Hannah felt anger. This was not a spectacle. This was someone

who had erased the life of a young woman and had made a macabre performance out of it.

"Make sure they keep their distance," she snapped at an officer. Her voice sounded sharper than intended, but she couldn't help it.

She turned to the body again. The image burned itself into her retina. The red of the jacket, the wicker of the basket, the unnatural white of intestines in the sun. She already knew that she would never forget this. And she also knew that this would not be the last victim.

Summer had begun. And he would turn black.

Hannah knelt down, the fabric of her pants immediately taking over the warmth of the grass. She deliberately let her gaze glide slowly over the surroundings. There were no clear traces of dragging. No smeared bloodstreams that indicated movement over longer distances. The victim's shoes were not far away, half hidden in the grass, as if someone had hastily put them back after setting them up. There was a sweet, nauseating smell of blood in the heat, a smell that settled in clothes and skin. She knew she would smell it for days, even if she showered a hundred times.

She looked up at Dubois. What time do you estimate this. Asking was ritual, knowing was necessary.

Last night, Dubois said. Hard to specify with this heat. The insects work against us. But no longer than twelve hours. The tissues are still too fresh, despite the sun.

Hannah nodded. Someone who walked around here with a wicker basket, in the middle of a city that cooks. Someone who

was not deterred by the chance of being seen. Or someone who knew where the park's blind spots lay.

Thomas bowed down to her. Look here, he whispered. Near the head, just outside the place where the forensic cords were stretched, there was something small in the grass. A red ribbon, thin and frayed, as if it had been pulled out of a costume.

Mark and secure, Hannah said. Gloves. Pouch. Photo. She heard herself pronounce the words with the mechanics of routine, as if language consisted only of protocols. It was a bit reassuring. A little bit.

A bystander shouted something from behind the tape. Inspector, please call us when we have to leave. He sounded excited, not afraid. Hannah pretended not to hear. Thomas gave the man a look that silenced every follow-up word in his throat.

Officer De Wilde came with a notebook in his hand. Female victim, in her early twenties, no identity document found. We haven't made her face public yet, in case there is family around. There is a jogger who says he heard something. Not a scream, rather a shock or crackle. Around half past four this morning. He didn't dare to come closer, thought it was a sick animal.

Where is he, Hannah asked.

There, by the path, De Wilde said, pointing to a man with short curls and sweat stains in his gray T-shirt. He clasped his hands together and stared at his shoes.

Hannah stood up, her knees creaking. She felt a flash of shame about last night's whiskey that still hung around her head like a veil. She walked over to the man with Thomas next to her.

I am Chief Inspector De Wit. You are the jogger,

Yes. Karim. I walk here every morning. Today was different. It smelled worse. Like in the harbor, when there is something dead. He looked up for a moment and immediately looked down again. I didn't see that ribbon yet. I didn't dare to go any closer. I heard something, very briefly. Like a cut with metal. He was shocked by his own words and swallowed. I thought I was going crazy.

You have not touched the body,

No. I turned around and walked to the exit. Then I called the police.

You saw someone go away,

Karim shook his head. I only saw the sun. He tried to smile and gave up. It was too hot to lie, Hannah thought. Too hot to keep up something that wasn't true.

Thanks. We will record an official statement later. Drink water. Find shade, Thomas said. He briefly put a hand on Karim's shoulder and then walked with Hannah again.

The press is on its way, De Wilde said as he received them. We stopped them, but you know them. Someone has already shared images on social media. A photo of the ribbon. So far, no recognizable details.

Hannah's phone vibrated in her pocket. She took it out and looked at the screen. Commissioner Wauters. She answered and half turned around, away from the scene.

Hannah, Wauters said, warm and hurried. I have already had two phone calls from the mayor. What is going on in the City Park. Is this an isolated case or do we have a problem that will be shouted from the rooftops.

We have a female victim, Hannah said. Young age. Mise en scène with reference to a fairy tale. Surgical precision is visible. I can't say anything about a pattern yet. It's too early.

Fairytale, Wauters repeated. His sigh crackled through the speaker. No speculation against the press. You know what happened last year when the pressure increased. His voice became just a little softer. I count on you, De Wit. No mistakes. Not now.

Hannah bit her lip. I will keep you informed, Commissioner. She broke the connection and felt how the words sank like a stone in her stomach last year. The Butcher of the Scheldt. The case she had solved and that had emptied her like a house from which the furniture had been carried out. Since then, everything has been crooked. Sleeping was a struggle. Eating a formality. Drinking is a trap.

She returned to the scene. Dubois stood up and slipped her gloves. We take her with us. Preliminary impression. No signs of defense on the hands, which fits with the fact that they are no longer there. No obvious bruises on the wrists or ankles, so she probably wasn't tied up for long. The carving is impeccable. I want to see the edges under the microscope. It looks like a sharp knife with a steady hand. The fingers are placed in the basket as if they form a kind of counting game. Five. The classic number.

Thomas co-wrote. Hannah looked at the edge of the clearing. There, exactly where the path fans out into the grassy plain, there were two flat stones. If you looked at them from above, they looked like eyes. Nonsense, she thought, but the image remained. Eyes that look, always looking.

A drone buzzed above the ribbon for a moment, a sharp insect sound that made everyone look up. An officer gestured angrily and shouted that the thing had to go. The drone slowly moved aside and disappeared, but everyone knew that the images were already on their way to a screen, somewhere in the city, with someone eating his breakfast in the cool shade of an air conditioner.

Hannah walked along the tree line that enclosed the clearing. The trunks were dry and grey. Bark was loose, and the ground was dusty. Behind a low bush she saw a faint imprint in the dust. No shoe profile, rather the impression of a sole without drawing. Someone had walked thoughtfully, or was light-footed. She marked the spot, had pictures taken and looked at the path that led further into the park.

She heard her mother in her head. Don't deviate from the path, Hannah. She saw the leaves of the forest in her memory and her mother's hand on her shoulder. It was an image that did not belong to this park and yet it imposed itself. You have to get off this path, she thought. Otherwise you won't see anything. Thomas came to stand next to her. You're somewhere, he said softly.

Always, she replied. She let her eyes wander over the trees. It was as if the heat erased sounds. Not a bird. Only the singing of insects and in the distance the traffic like a dull sea.

We'll take the ribbon a bit further, she said. I want to map out the approach route. If he set this up here, he has come from somewhere. There must be something. A bag, a car that stopped for a moment, a bicycle that was parked. Something.

De Wilde nodded and started directing officers. Hannah felt how the matter began to take shape in her head. Not clear, not by a long shot, but enough to feel that she wouldn't get out until it was done. It was as if someone had wrapped a cord around her waist and pulled gently. Go on. Further. Deeper.

A woman wearing a sun hat stood at the edge of the ribbon. Her lips trembled. My child plays here, she said without anyone asking anything. My child plays here every day. Please, say it's over.

It's over for today, Hannah said. Her voice sounded softer than she felt. Go home. Drink water. Stay indoors.

The woman nodded, but remained standing. As if leaving meant admitting that the world was more dangerous than yesterday.

The auditorium was driven up. The body was moved with a careful choreography of hands and voices. The red of the jacket contrasted with the white of the wearers and the blue of the plastic. Hannah turned for a moment and looked at the trees, at the play of light on leaves that barely moved. She counted to ten in her head and breathed.

We get her name, Thomas said. We find who she is.

Hannah nodded. That is the beginning.

Dubois came to stand with them. I want to go to the mortuary as soon as possible after this. If there are marks in the cut edges, I want to get them out before the heat makes them work.

Go, Hannah said. We round off here.

The press eventually appeared as a small procession. Cameras, microphones, sunglasses. A man in a light suit tried to pass the ribbon with a smile he had probably practiced in the mirror.

Inspector De Wit, can you confirm that there is a ritual element. His microphone pointed like a finger.

No comment, Hannah said. Her eyes hurt from the light. Your question suggests something you cannot substantiate. Wait for the official message.

The man wanted to say something, but Thomas stepped forward just half a step and the man decided to look for another angle.

She walked away from the cameras, along the edge of the pond where the water was green. A duck floated listlessly, its beak half open. There was a film over the surface that shone in the sunlight. It smelled of rot and stagnation. Hannah thought of Sarah and of the word standstill. She had always hated it. The world had to move in order to survive.

Her phone vibrated again. An unknown number. She hesitated and answered.

With De Wit.

Silence. Then a breath. Hannah, is that you. The voice was old, brittle.

Who is this,

Maria, said the voice. Maria from the past. She swallowed. I saw something on my phone. A photo of ribbon and trees. I felt that you had to be there.

Hannah lowered herself onto a bench that burned her legs. Maria was the woman who had taken her in in the months after Sarah's disappearance, when her mother had no longer been able to bear to have Hannah in the house. A soft person, a safe place in a year that had rubbed her skin like sandpaper.

I'm here, Hannah said. It's hot.

I dreamed of a forest last night, Maria said. And of a girl with a basket.

Hannah squeezed her eyes shut. It's a coincidence, Mary. Drink water. Stay indoors. I'll call you back later.

Do that, child, said Mary. And Hannah felt the old comfort of that word for a moment. Child. For a moment she was allowed to stop being a chief inspector.

She disconnected, got up, and returned to Thomas.

"We have an incipient list of missing women under thirty," he said. The last twenty-four hours in Antwerp and the outskirts. I have photos printed for a quick visual check later in the office. De Wilde has already started with the joggers and the morning walkers who were in the area.

Good, Hannah said. She looked at the wicker basket that was still on the floor, covered with foil. It gleamed in the sun like something innocent, harmless. Five fingers, she thought. Five.

You think of Little Red Riding Hood, Thomas said. No question.

I think of everything, Hannah said. I think of fairy tales that were never intended for children.

Thomas was silent for a moment. Then he said softly, "You didn't sleep last night.

No.

Drunk,

Hannah looked at him. Yes.

He nodded. No sermon. Just a fact that hung between them like the heat between the trees.

They walked around the site one more time, looking under benches, in garbage cans, along the path that led to the exit. An officer came towards them with something in his hand, packed in a bag. Paper, he said. Found under the bench there. He pointed.

Hannah took the bag. On the crumpled paper a sentence was written with a childlike hand. Stay on the path. The letters pounded, as if someone had pressed too hard with the pen.

Someone with an ironic feeling, Thomas muttered.

Or someone who reassures himself, Hannah said. She looked at the bench. It stood right on the border of sun and shadow, as if someone had sat there and waited for the moment to be right.

We'll take it with us, she said. Have it checked for fingerprints and DNA. Although she knew that the heat and sweat had probably done all their work. Still. Hope is also a protocol.

By noon, the heat gathered even more fiercely over the park. The air tremored above the path. The cleaning crew of forensic started to remove the last markers. The yellow ribbon was rolled up and placed in a plastic container. As if you shoved the summer into a box and closed the lid.

Hannah stood by the car and felt her legs getting heavy. Thomas looked at her and then at the sky. We have to go back to the station. Create list. Namur. Routines. Which we always do.

Which we always do, Hannah repeated. She brushed a tuft of hair from her neck and felt the salt of sweat on her fingers.

They got in. The air conditioning blew lukewarm air. Thomas turned off the radio before any news could come in. They drove out of the park in silence. Outside, a small group of people stood

in the shade of a chestnut tree. Someone whispered and another nudged him. Hannah didn't look.

In the mirror of the sun, the city hung like a mirage. Streets passed them by like river arms. At a crossroads, a child with a red cap crossed the road, the edge too big, the shadow over his eyes. Hannah's hand clamped around the armrest. She only let go when the car had taken the turn.

At the station, the heat was not much better. The ventilation sighed, computers glowed and the coffee machine dripped lethargically. Hannah put the photos of the victim on the table and put a glass of water next to it. She took a long sip and felt her stomach protest.

"We'll start with identification," she said. Her voice sounded solid. Social media, missing persons, recent reports. Look at the jacket and hood. Something about that fabric is not mass production. Maybe second-hand. Maybe a theater costume. Call the larger costume rental companies and ask for outgoing pieces in the past month. Have someone call off vintage shops in town.

Thomas nodded and began to divide tasks. De Wilde collected a stack of forms. Someone else sat behind the cameras to go through images of the surroundings of the park. "We're looking for a bike," Hannah said. Or a car that was overheated on the side of the road. Something that stayed where it didn't belong for too long.

She opened a blank document on her computer and wrote in capital letters at the top. Red jacket. Basket. Five. No dragging. Carving exactly. Paper with meaning. Stay on the path. She

stared at the words. They were so clear and yet they still didn't say anything.

She felt her eyes become cloudy. She closed them and saw the forest of the past. Not of a real place, but of all the places where children are sent in stories. A wolf who smiled with too many teeth. A girl who pulled the cloak closer around her. And the voice of her mother who said that the path was the only safe way.

But paths are also traces, Hannah thought. And traces are invitations for those who want to follow them.

Thomas came back with news. We have three missing persons reports that can fit in age and stature. A student at the art academy, a waitress from Borgerhout and an au pair who did not return yesterday after work. Names and photos are here.

Hannah leafed through the files and felt that familiar mixture of hope and horror. Someone will recognize here. Someone will cry later. She looked at the pictures and thought of the woman in the grass, of the red and the white and the sunlight that shone indifferently on everything.

A soft ping went through the office. An email from Dubois. First observations, autopsy tomorrow morning. I expect residue from a special kind of rope or thread in the wound edge. Something that almost does not fray. I'll let you know.

Hannah stared at the word wire. She thought of fairy tales in which girls spin, sit in cloud chambers, of pins and ribbons and skirts that get hooked on twigs. The world of fairy tales and that of the desk crept towards each other, inch by inch, until they would touch.

She bowed her head, pressed her fingers against her eyelids until stars appeared, and then dropped her hands on the desk.

This is it, she told no one in particular. This is the beginning.

In the late afternoon she was in the Stadspark one more time. Most people were gone. The clearing had the emptiness of every other day, except for a color difference in the grass where the auditorium had stood. She walked to the bench where the paper had been found and sat down. The sun was slowly setting, but it remained hot. Something moved in the shadows and for a moment she thought she saw a child with a red hood. Then it was gone. Just a woman with an umbrella against the sun.

She put her hand on the wood of the bench. It still felt warm.

Hannah got up and walked slowly to the exit. At the fence, the yellow ribbon was still hanging in a sloppy knot. She lifted it, loosened it and threw it into the bin for trash and material. Behind her, a leaf blew off a bush, spun in the air, and came to a halt at her feet. It was shaped like a small heart. She bent down and picked it up. She looked at it as if it could answer a question she hadn't asked yet.

She dropped the leaf again and walked on. The sky above the city was copper-colored. Summer, she thought, had decided that he wanted to see everything. And she would let him look. Until the end.

2 Little Red Riding Hood in the City Park

The sun was already high in the sky when Hannah and Thomas re-entered the City Park, this time not as their first discovery but as researchers in full action. The park had turned into an ant's

nest of uniforms, forensic suits, and curious eyes watching from behind ribbon and trees. The grass, still dry and fragile under their feet, now bore the heavy smell of disinfectant, mixed with the irony aroma of dried blood. The scene of that morning lingered in the air, as if the heat itself was holding it.

The victim had meanwhile been taken to the morgue, but the place where she had been lying had been carefully demarcated. White chalk lines marked contours in the grass. A wicker basket was still in a plastic bag waiting for transport. Hannah's gaze got stuck, despite herself. Five fingers. Five. The echoes of fairy tales kept ringing around in her head. She thought of Sarah who used to listen to their mother with wide eyes, while she read the dark fairy tales that often made Hannah sleep badly. Little Red Riding Hood, the wolf, the long teeth. The memory clawed at her ribs.

Thomas stopped her when she wanted to step closer. "We have to do this carefully. Everything here can be a clue."

Hannah nodded, although it was more of a reflex than conviction. She felt a pull, an irresistible urge to see the place again, as if she had missed something. The echo of Sarah's laughter in her head made it even more restless. It was as if time had not passed here since the morning, as if the scene was still moving. She blinked a few times, as if that could erase the images, but they lingered.

Forensic specialists were busy taking soil samples. A young technician carefully lifted a clod of earth into a sterile jar. He looked pale, and sweat was running down his temples. Hannah recognized the look: the mixture of disgust and fascination. It was the face of someone who had not been doing this profession for long. She looked away and let him flounder in his own

silence, knowing that in time he too would develop armor. Or break.

"Inspector?" An officer approached with a folder. "We have the first identification option. A young woman was reported missing last night. Her name is Lien Verstraeten, 22 years old. Art Academy, specializing in sculpture. Her parents reported around midnight that she had not come home."

Hannah took the folder. A passport photo stared at her. A young face, almost innocent, with a sharp edge of whimsy. Big eyes, a small scar near her eyebrow. She felt her throat contract. It fitted. Too good.

"Did the parents mention anything about her clothes?" asked Thomas, who was reading over her shoulder next to her.

"According to the mother, she had a red jacket with her, vintage. She wore it often, even though the father didn't think it was suitable for the heat."

It was as if the air around them became even denser. Hannah closed her eyes briefly. The symbolism was too perfect, too calculated. This was not a random murder. This was a message, carefully wrapped in fairytale imagery.

"Let the parents come in for formal identification," Hannah said, her voice flat. "But keep it discreet. No press, no panic."

The officer nodded and hurried away.

Thomas looked at her. "This is going to be big, Hannah. If this leaks out..."

"It always leaks out," she interrupted. Her voice was louder than intended. "The question is not if, but when."

She walked to the edge of the park, where an old woman with a shopping bag had stopped. Her face was wrinkled, her eyes watery but sharp. She had been watching in silence the whole time. Hannah approached her. "Madam, did you see or hear anything?"

The woman pursed her lips. "I come here every morning. But tonight... Last night I was also outside for a while. Too hot to sleep. I heard voices. No shouting, but voices. Two. A man and a woman. They sounded close, but I didn't see anything. Then silence. And later... Something that sounded like a children's song."

Hannah felt her skin tingle. "A children's song? Can you describe that?"

The woman thought, her eyes turned to the distance. "Something with wolves. But maybe I'm wrong. It was soft, as if someone was humming. I thought I was dreaming."

Thomas noted quickly. Hannah nodded gratefully and let the woman be. She looked back for a moment and saw how the shopping bag tapped against the floor, rhythmically, as if the old woman was still trying to follow the melody.

The afternoon dragged on. The sun was mercilessly high and the air hung heavy, suffocating. The park seemed to be boiling. Forensic teams became more and more silent, their movements slow and tired. Hannah kept herself upright by fixing small details each time. A frayed edge on the ribbon. A footprint in the dry sand. A look that lingered just a little too long at the basket.

Officer De Wilde came up with new information. "A witness has been found, a young mother. She was in the neighborhood with her toddler last night. She says she has seen someone."

Hannah nodded. "Bring her here."

The woman hesitantly approached, her child sleeping in a buggy. She looked sweaty and tired. "I don't really want to..." she began, but Hannah put a gentle hand on her arm.

"Anything you remember can be important. Even the smallest details."

The woman bit her lip. "I saw a man. Thirty at most. He was standing at the entrance of the park with a book in his hand. He read aloud. It sounded strange, as if he tasted the words. It made my child restless, started crying. I thought he was just... was special. But now..."

"What kind of book?" asked Thomas.

"An old book. Thick cover, dark in color. He held it as if it were something precious."

Hannah felt a cold wave go through her. She thought of fairy tale books, yellowed pages full of horror that had often been forgotten in the child-friendly versions that circulated today. "Did you see his face correctly?"

The woman shook her head. "Too dark. But I remember he had a scar. Here." She pointed to her jawline. "And he smiled as he read."

Thomas quickly wrote along. Hannah felt her breath quicken. This was no coincidence. Someone played a role. Someone turned fairy tales into reality.

That night, Hannah sat at her desk. The window was open, but there was not a breath of wind coming in. The desk was littered with photos of the park, the body, the basket. She put the passport photo of Lien Verstraeten next to it. A young face that should never have ended up in such a gruesome tableau. Hannah felt her heart pounding. She wanted to take the bottle of whiskey that was in the bottom drawer, but she restrained herself. For now.

Thomas came in with a pile of papers. "We have more. Lien was not the only one who had contact with the park. Her friends say that she has been restless in recent weeks. She often dreamed, talked about fairy tales, about stories she couldn't get out of her head."

"Who put her on that track?" asked Hannah sharply.

"Nobody knows for sure. She spoke vaguely about someone she had met. An older man, interested in her art. Someone who knew a lot about fairy tales and folk tales."

Hannah felt a chill, right through the heat. "We find him. Whoever he is, this is no coincidence."

She looked at Lien's photo. Behind her eyes seemed to be a warning, as if she had already seen the story coming. Hannah pressed her hands against her temples. She felt Sarah's echo again. Sarah who whispered in her dreams. Sarah who said: "Watch out, Hannah. The wolf is always waiting."

The heat just lingered. Outside, the city glowed. And Hannah knew that this was just the beginning.

By noon, Lien's parents arrived at the office, paler than paper, the mother with strained lips and a look that wouldn't linger on anything. The father walked like a man who had just come out from under water and was still gasping for breath. Hannah received them in a small room with no windows, only a table and four chairs. She had the photo ready, no shock images, just the face of their daughter from a few months ago.

The mother put her fingers on the edge of the table. They were shaking slightly. Hannah pushed the photo forward. The woman looked, just for a second, and nodded very slowly. No sound, no cry, just a small shock in her shoulders. The father squeezed his eyes shut, as if he was trying to exchange the image in his head for another that hurt less.

Hannah spoke quietly. She asked questions that always pricked the silence like little needles. What was Lien wearing yesterday. Where did she go. Who had she agreed with. Anything you remember, even the things that seem unimportant, can help us.

The mother folded her hands together. Red, she said. She wore the red jacket. She said it felt like a talisman. Nonsense of course, but she believed that. She was stubborn. She had bought that jacket in a vintage shop in the South, from someone everyone calls Aunt Noor.

Thomas wrote down the name. Hannah wrote next to it: red fabric, original or adapted. She asked further. Lien had been saying strange things lately. Unrest, dreams, new people in her life.

The father took a deep breath. She talked about stories. About old versions of fairy tales. That everything was once crueler than we now read to children. She said there was truth in that cruelty. I never heard her say that. And there was a man. She said he had pointed her to a book she needed to see. Someone who knew a lot about folklore. I don't know his name. She laughed mysteriously, as if she had found a mentor.

Hannah felt the familiar fatigue like a stone behind her eyes. She thanked them, promised that they would do anything. She knew how empty that sounded, but she said it anyway. She offered water. The mother did not drink. The father took a sip and put the glass down without having seen it. When they went out, there was a smell of sun-heated clothes and salty sweat, the smell of people holding their breath for too long.

Thomas leaned against the wall. It all fits, he said softly. Art academy, a man with a book, the jacket.

Hannah nodded. They shouldn't be the first to hear from us that it was indeed Lien, she said. Call someone from victim support. Don't leave them alone tonight.

It was cooler in the autopsy room than anywhere else in the city. Dubois was ready with her team, hands washed, instruments sharp as promises. She greeted Hannah and Thomas briefly. I'm not going to describe details that aren't necessary, she said. You will receive my report. But listen to this.

She lifted open a drawer and showed a small piece of textile that had been removed from the wound edge, barely bigger than a matchstick's head. Red fibers, tightly woven, with a shine that does not belong to cheap fabrics. There was also a glimpse of silver thread in between. No standard yarn. And here, she

showed a picture, small dot-shaped prints along the edge of the incision. A pattern that may indicate the temporary compression of tissue with an instrument that resembles a clamp. Sturdy, precise, without fraying. Someone has done this with a steady hand and knowledge.

Thomas whispered it out. A doctor. Or someone who has worked for a long time in an environment where cutting is routine.

Dubois nodded. That is the most logical hypothesis. I am going to take samples for microscopy and traces. There were tiny grains on the skin, not just soil from the park. It resembles round sand, but with a specific mineral ratio. I want to compare them with samples from the pond edge and the paths.

Hannah thanked her and looked at the photo of the wound edge. The order in cruelty was the worst. Someone had looked at death as a profession, as an exercise that you could do well. She swallowed.

Back at the station, Thomas handed out tasks. De Wilde called the vintage shop in the South. Within fifteen minutes he let it be known that Aunt Noor was willing to receive them, even though it was actually her closing time. She parked on a narrow street where the stones gave off heat as if they were their own ovens. The bell at the door of the store sounded metallic and tired.

Inside it smelled of old cotton, talcum powder and sweat. Rows of coats, hats, dresses, buttons in pots, ribbons in boxes. Behind the counter sat a woman in her sixties with brightly painted lips and hair in a tight twist. She looked over her glasses. Assume you come for the red jacket, she said without further ado. The whole South is talking about it.

Hannah introduced herself. The woman nodded and pulled open a drawer. I keep cards of special pieces, she said. The red jacket was a find. Not very old, but made with love. Red wool with satin lining. Lien bought it three months ago. She beamed when she put it on. As if she finally found a skin that suited her.

Thomas asked if anyone had been with Lien. The woman squeezed her eyes shut. The first time she came alone. Later I saw her talking to a man at the rack with old children's books and prints, yes, I also have a shelf here with that kind of thing because theater students sometimes come looking for inspiration. He was holding a book that was not mine. Dark blue cover, gold on the spine. He blazed and tapped his finger on the page as if he were teaching. Lien laughed, but she also looked pale.

Can you describe him, Hannah asked.

Middle aged, thin face, a scar along his jaw. Eyes that don't come off a page until they're done. No ring, neat hands. Not a smell of perfume, rather something like old paper and mint. I've only seen him here twice. He didn't buy anything. He looked.

Did he introduce himself,

The woman shook her head. He spoke as if he had come walking out of a library. Not from mine, she said scornfully.

Hannah left her card and promised contact. Outside, she stood in the shadow of the façade for a while. The air trembled. The street was empty, except for a cat that ran its tongue over its paw and stared at them for a moment as if they were doing something inexplicable in this heat.

"We now have it from three directions," Thomas said. The old woman with the shopping bag, the young mother, and now the shopkeeper. A man with a book, a scar, a way of talking like a teacher.

Hannah nodded. He is still floating, she said. We don't have a name. No address. Only a contour.

They drove to the art academy. The building lay languidly in the heat, the windows were open, a limp curtain moved like a slow animal. In the hall it smelled of clay and turpentine. A sculpture teacher took them to the studio where Lien worked. Her work table was an island of chaos in a sea of other islands. Pencils, sketchbooks, clay splashes like dried stains.

Hannah opened a sketchbook. Hundreds of lines stacked on top of each other formed something that only became visible after seconds of looking. A girl with a hood and a basket. A tree where a face was hidden in the bark. A wolf with far too friendly eyes. Further on a sheet with a list of words that sounded like titles. Stay on the path. Strong teeth. The basket of stones. Don't ask about the sun. There was a page that had been torn out. The edge had serrations, as if someone had been in a hurry or had been angry.

We're missing something, Hannah said. She looked around. There was a small cupboard with a lock. Thomas opened a drawer. Empty, except for a receipt from a coffee bar and a business card. She picked up the card. City Library, Special Collections Department. Only a general number. On the back with pen: Monday and Thursday, after four.

She called the number. A polite voice answered. Hannah asked for someone who guided visitors through old fairy tale books

outside opening hours. The voice said that this could only be done with an appointment. Who had helped a young lady named Lien last week, Hannah asked. The voice became vague. Names were not just shared. Hannah lowered her voice just a little. This is an investigation into a deadly crime. Every hour counts.

There was tapping on a keyboard. Then a hesitant concession. There is a volunteer in the reading room who occasionally helps with old children's books and folk tales. He is not a permanent employee. His name is Pieter. I can't say more without permission. Hannah heard the hesitation behind the politeness. She asked if Pieter was there. No, not today. Maybe tomorrow. No last name. No contact details.

Thomas looked at her. It's a start.

Hannah nodded, although it felt like she was trying to grab a shadow that kept moving just outside her hand.

Back at the station, someone from the team had picked up traffic images. They were watching grainy shots from a camera that looked out over the entrance to the park. The heat had dulled the lens, as if you were looking through frosted glass. Yet there was something to see. A figure standing still under the plane trees, a book in his hand. No details, no face. Just the attitude of someone who waits and reads to hide the waiting. A little later Lien's contour loomed, the hood not yet on, the jacket open. She talked to him. The conversation lasted less than a minute. Then she turned around, walked up the path. The man stopped and closed the book. The image jumped and grained and then it was gone, as if it had dissolved into the shadows.

Hannah felt her jaw tense. She is walking along voluntarily, she said. No visible coercion.

Thomas pointed to the timestamp. Four minutes before sunrise. We have a window.

De Wilde came in with a printed overview of telephone data. Lien's SIM card had made contact twice the night before with a number that was not registered. Prepaid, no name. The messages were short. De Wilde read aloud. First message. Park by the pond. Don't ask why. Second message. Stay on the path.

Hannah stared at the words. It was as if someone had written down her thoughts. Don't ask why. Stay on the path.

She asked De Wilde to turn off the number in the networks. If it ever turns on again, I want to know within a second.

The rest of the evening was a list of small movements that had to become big together. Colleagues visited friends of Lien. A fellow student said that Lien had changed the subject in recent weeks. She used to make abstract shapes, but suddenly it had become figurative, girls with hoods, trees with eyes, fish that seemed to sing. She worked late, sometimes until the janitor came to ask her to stop. She said she had to finish something because otherwise it would get worse. What worse, the fellow student had asked. She had shrugged her shoulders and said that the story was still ongoing.

Later in the evening, Hannah sat alone in the meeting room. She had opened the windows but the air came in like a warm breath. On the table were the photos, the map of the park with markings, the receipt of the coffee bar, the map of the library. She wrote in her notebook. A man with a scar. A book with a dark cover. A text that sounds like instruction. A girl who walks along. Five fingers in a basket.

Her phone vibrated. Mary. Hannah hesitated and answered.

Child, said Maria, I know you're busy. I don't want to demand anything. But I feel something in my bones and I trust that feeling. You have been put on a path that is not visible to everyone. If you need to know something, call me in the middle of the night.

Hannah closed her eyes. Thank you, Maria. Drink enough water. I'll come by soon.

She hung up and stared at the map of the park. She drew in pencil the route that Lien could have taken. From the entrance to the clearing. She put a small cross at the bench where the sentence on the paper was found. It was on the route, exactly at a point where you had to choose. Left to the pond, right to the path that leads deeper into the park. Stay on the path. Which path, Hannah thought. One path is life, the other is story.

Thomas came back with two cups of water. He sat down opposite her. I'm going to ask you something you don't feel like doing, he said.

Hannah raised an eyebrow.

Sleep for a few hours. I can take over the night shift.

She looked at Lien's photo. I'll sleep if I can, she said.

Thomas was silent for a moment. Then he told me that he had called home but that he could no longer stay away. His wife had understood. This work ate away at everyone, not just them. He smiled briefly, without glee.

Hannah took a sip and felt the water fall into her stomach like a stone. She thought of the bottle in her drawer. She thought of the smell of whiskey that sometimes softened the edges of her thoughts and blurred everything at the same time. She pushed the thought away.

Just before midnight, a message came from Dubois. A first confirmation. The wound edge did indeed contain residue from a fine metal clamp, possibly from an old model that is no longer used as standard in hospitals. In addition, traces of a hand cream with lavender scent. Not much, but just enough to know that the perpetrator had well-groomed hands and did not use strong industrial ointment.

Hannah didn't smile. But somewhere, very deeply, this little fact did something to her. The perpetrator existed. He had hands, habits, choices. He was not a ghost.

The next morning, when the light was still pale and the heat started to climb again, Hannah and Thomas visited the coffee shop whose receipt was in Lien's drawer. The place smelled of roasted beans and sweet milk. The barista recognized Lien immediately. She came here often, he said. Always with the same card, always without whipped cream. The last week she sat with the same man twice. No love attitude, more teacher and student. He read from a book and she listened with that look of hers, as if the world next to her had stopped existing for a moment.

Hannah asked if he could describe anything about the man. The barista thought. Calm, but tense under the skin. A scar along the jaw, that stayed with me. I heard him say something about the old versions, that the bad in fairy tales is necessary to

understand the good. He spoke to her almost sweetly, but he hardly smiled.

After the conversation, Hannah and Thomas walked silently down the street. The sun was already on its way to merciless. Hannah felt the sweat slide down her back.

We can pull him out of the library later, Thomas said. With a name, with images.

Hannah nodded. First something else, she said. Lien had a list of titles in her sketchbook. Stay on the path, strong teeth, basket of stones. These are not separate words. That's a plan. Someone has not only given her the direction, but the chapters.

They returned to the park, although there was nothing left to be found. Sometimes you had to stand in the place to feel the order in your head shift. Hannah walked down the path that Lien had taken. She stopped at the bench, sat down, and watched the bend that came next.

If I want to let someone walk without her realizing where she is going, Hannah thought, I always give her a reason not to stop. The next intersection, the next tree, a song that may only end at the clearing. She listened. At first she only heard her own breath and the distant roar of the city. Then she put her hand on the wood and closed her eyes. In her head there was a soft humming, not from the outside, from the inside, from memory. A nursery rhyme, but not the kind you learn at school. The kind that grandma's sing when they've seen too much. She opened her eyes again. The sun was merciless. Still, she felt goosebumps on her arms.

Thomas stood a few steps away, his hands in his pockets. He watched her listen. He knew this in her, this moment when intuition and observation met and started something new.

We're going to the library, she finally said. And we take someone with us who is always polite and never threatens. We don't want to put up walls. We want a name.

It was cooler in the reading room of the library. It smelled of paper and ink and of the patience of centuries. An employee with a name tag took them to the special collections department. In a quiet room there were display cases with books that were not allowed to be touched without gloves.

The employee put a register on the table. Volunteers, he said, we note them here. Not always with complete data, some people have been coming to help for years. There was a list of first names and initials. At Monday and Thursday after four there was one name that kept coming back. Pieter M.

Does Pieter have a shift today, Hannah asked.

The man shook his head. Not according to the schedule. But he sometimes comes unexpectedly. He knows the way.

Hannah asked if there was any security footage of the reading room and the hallway. The man hesitated, but when he saw their identifications and heard that there was a murder case pending, he nodded. They watched the images of the previous week together. On the black and white recording they saw Lien sitting at a table with a sturdy book in front of her. Next to her is a middle-aged man, thin, with a scar along the jaw. No smile. He pointed a finger at the page and occasionally leaned towards her. They seemed to be consulting. At a certain moment he closed

the book, put his hand briefly on the cover as if he was making a promise, and stood up. Lien stayed seated and looked at him. Her face had that look that the barista had described. The world stopped for a moment.

Hannah felt everything in her body tighten and become clearer at the same time. She paused the image, made a still of it and asked for a copy. The man nodded and went to an office to arrange that.

Thomas leaned his hands on the table. We have it now. Not by name, but enough to ask around.

Hannah nodded. She held the still as if it could get warm. She thought of the red jacket, of the basket, of the fingers, of the sentence on the paper, of the children's song in the night. This was chapter two of the story someone wrote. A story that didn't stay in a book, but cut through a city like heat through asphalt.

Outside, the sky was white with light. The day seemed to have no end. Hannah felt the craving in her stomach that was not hunger. In her head there was Mary's voice, soft, an anchor. You have been put on a path. Choose when to deviate and when to follow.

She looked at Thomas. We're not going home yet, she said.

He smiled briefly. I thought so.

And together they walked down the stairs of the library, into the street, into the heat, towards the next page of the story.