

CHAPTER 1

Fear is the price we pay for crime.

Did I read this aphorism in a book? Did someone recite it for me? Or was it an invention of my own making? I don't remember any more. So much happened during the two months when the epidemic was raging, that it was hard to be precise about anything. The fever carried off a third of the population of Lotingen. Like the rude cry of a hungry crow, those words echoed in my head whenever I saw the signs of illness on faces that I knew and loved.

When Lotte burst into the kitchen one morning, eyes wide with fright, I heard the flapping wings of the crow above my head before the words were out of her mouth. The baby was in a dreadful sweat, she said. His eyes were open, but little Anders was unable to wake. Hour after hour we sat beside his cot that day, Helena and I, while Lotte kept the house and watched for signs of illness in the other children.

The doctor came and went, shaking his head. "Nervous fever" was his diagnosis. He could offer no prognosis. The child was in the "slow" phase, only time would tell what the outcome would be.

Anders responded to no-one. Not even his mother. The fever was raging, it continued to rise, while his pulse grew weaker. Within two days his face had altered beyond recognition. His once-blue eyes sank deep inside his skull, losing their colour and their freshness. His pupils became opaque at last, his gaze fixed. Each bone in his body grew more pronounced. He had been a chubby baby, but now he was a rasping skeleton. His breathing was irregular, sometimes racing, at other times almost absent. He seemed to slowly fade away. "Consumed" was the word I would have used, if only I had had the courage to pronounce it. The illness ate the baby up, and when it had had its fill, his breathing stopped.

Fear took the place of every other emotion.

Fear for my wife, fear for my children, fear for our friends and neighbours.

...the price we pay for crime.

The phrase rang like a death-knell in my head.

It hung like a noose above the heads of myself and my family. What was the crime that we were paying for? Who had committed it? Was I to blame? Was Helena? The baby had been too young to sin, yet he had paid with his life. Nor were we the only parents to have lost a child. The fever carried off individuals of every age – from the youngest to the very oldest. Was Lotingen to blame, then? Had the town been condemned to pay for sins unknown and unconfessed?

We buried the baby towards the last Thursday in July.

A week later, the worst of epidemic was over.

But the crime, whatever it might have been, had not been paid in full. Fear persisted, death still knocked occasionally, it would not set us free. I was alarmed by every little upset. Nor could Helena be cured of it. And shortly afterwards, I heard the noise which would come to epitomise my fear, though it had nothing to do with death, or with dying.

A long, low, whooping howl...