

The Helsinki Heist

'Time for one last lake?'

Päivi wasn't in any hurry for the day to end, and neither was the midsummer sun which at 7pm was showing little sign of dipping over the swathes of spruce covering the national park.

We'd spent the day swimming, hiking and foraging our way round the lakes and forests of the Luuki Recreation Area, an hour or so outside Helsinki. It had been one of those overcast mornings, so quiet and still that the slightest stirring from deep in the woods had ricocheted off the trees and the sky had been perfectly reflected in the glassy brooding waters of the park.

The names of the lakes—*Halkolampi*, *Väärälampi*, *Hepolampi*—were exotic in a Nordic sort of way, holding somewhat more promise than their English translations—Log Pond, False Pond and Horse Pond, obliging provided by Päivi. Yet there was nothing mundane about this wilderness of clear dark waters, rocky embankments, water snakes and wild cloudberries.

By the time we'd reached *Kaitalampi*—Narrow Pond, the sun had broken through and the forest was filled with the scent of hot pine. We'd jumped in to cool off before cooking pancakes and blueberries over a fire.

We had nothing in particular to hurry back for that evening. The following morning we were flying to Lapland, and our taxi was booked for 7am but it seemed a shame to waste the evening. So we'd agreed, one more lake, and driven on to the nearby Nuuksio National Park where we'd swum our final swim of the day in the vast *Pitkäjärvi*—Long Lake—turned liquid amber by the early evening sunshine.

It was late when we arrived back in Helsinki. Saying farewell to Päivi, we returned to our rooms and I went to retrieve my belongings from the safe. And then it happened, or rather it didn't. I punched in the numbers again, a little more carefully this time, but once again a flashing red error message scrolled across the screen.

'It's ok', I told myself. Reception would know what to do. And they did.

'Don't worry', Jenni behind the desk reassured me. 'We can override the code. I'll be up as soon as I can'.

It was nearly an hour before she knocked on my door, clutching the contraption that would unlock the safe. Except that it didn't. She tried several times but it remained resolutely shut.

'This hasn't happened before'. She appeared nonplussed. 'I'll have to call maintenance.' I was ushered downstairs to the bar, which by now was emptying as the guests returned to their rooms and their working safes. Matti, the barman had clearly been briefed on my situation and he hovered not far from my table, constantly refilling my glass.

By 1am I'd drunk the equivalent of my bed and board in wine and I was starting to feel a little the worse for wear. Jenni approached my table and I knew it wasn't good news. Maintenance hadn't been able to open the safe but would keep trying throughout the night. My small room was now covered in dust and shards of twisted metal so I was moved elsewhere for the night. They'd have it open for me by morning.

They didn't.

By 6am Erkki, a local locksmith arrived, ushering me downstairs as he made a last ditch attempt to break in. I was beginning to panic and he needed to focus.

'You'll have to go without me', I told my friend as she came into reception, unaware of the drama that had unfolded overnight. By now a small group of staff were frantically searching for afternoon

flights to Lapland. I was tired, a little hungover, and about to miss my flight, and the calm of the Finnish wilderness of the previous day seemed a world away.

At that moment, our taxi driver entered reception and behind him, a vision in dust and shrapnel, was Erkki, carrying my small collection of personal effects. A small cheer and a larger sigh of relief went up. They were an unlikely assortment—Jenni, Matti, Erkki and the hotel maintenance man I'd never met. Their methods were neither subtle nor sophisticated but they made a good team, and after a night of drilling, chiselling and battering in sheer desperation they'd pulled off the heist. The safe was open, and passport and money in hand I fled to the airport.

A few hours later, the excitement of the night behind me, we were being shown to our rooms in the old village school in Juoksengi, just north of the Arctic Circle.

'Make yourself at home', said Kalle as he unlocked the door to mine. 'You should have everything you need'.

'But you'll have to keep your personal belongings with you'. He looked apologetic.

'There isn't a safe'.