

1

The Royal Copenhagen coffee cups were still on the table, with just the dregs in the bottom; the cake-dishes were cleaned out and the glasses of juice empty. Blue polka-dot napkins – both fresh and soiled – were lying all over the place. The tablecloth was covered in coffee stains and crumbs, and here and there were red rings left by the glassware. The youngest children had rushed off, leaving the chairs pulled out from the table.

Half of the children were now on the Josef Frank sofa. The other half were running around shrieking, caught up in a heated sugar rush. A tennis ball came out of nowhere, fortunately hitting a gap between the souvenir plates hanging on the wall depicting different cities in Europe: Berlin, Prague, Budapest, Paris, Rostock, Leipzig, Bonn.

During the last week of school, the grandchildren had stayed with their grandparents so that their parents could take a holiday to Brittany. Sisters Malin and Lotta wanted to do it before the summer holidays began, and half of Sweden went down to France.

During the past week, Grandpa Stellan had taken refuge in the study while Grandma Agneta had made breakfast and dinner and driven the kids to and from school and their leisure activities. Not to mention keeping an eye on them as they bathed off the jetty in the unusually warm early summer evenings. It was also Grandma who'd gathered up and packed away the snorkels, flippers, swimwear, goggles, toys and what was left of the sun cream. As well as all the clothes, tablets, chargers and schoolbooks.

And now both of the sisters were there with their husbands, to take their children home again. It was almost as if the house was breathing a sigh of relief at the fact that peace would soon reign supreme and everything would return to normal.

The garden door was open and Lotta was outside, walking by her ageing father's side while he pointed out the latest additions to the flower beds and planters. She knew most of the flowers, but some had been added. Her dad liked to have a few ever-present favourites while varying the rest.

He thought the flowers were at their most beautiful just before they came into bloom. When the buds were beginning to burst open. On this, father and daughter differed.

Lotta listened attentively to her father as he enthusiastically exhibited his floral splendour: coneflowers, hollyhocks, blue delphiniums, bittersweets that had germinated by themselves, oregano, mint, yarrow and lady's slipper. He loved his flowers, and Lotta thought about how much time he'd spent in the garden during her childhood. Dad was not to be disturbed out here – but you always knew where he was.

While Dad stopped to catch his breath, Lotta turned around discreetly and pretended to size up the house – the stylish, functionalist home that she knew inside out and really had no good reason to stand looking at. The large windows and the two terraces with the amazing views over Lake Mälaren and Kärnsön Island.

Then her gaze settled on the garden path, the twelve heavysset stone slabs that she and her sister had run along so many times. Their dad jokingly called them the twelve-step model to a better life, because they led to the garden shed. Inside it, he could dedicate himself to what he loved most, undisturbed.

The stone slabs had been so awkward to lay that Stellan had decreed that they would remain there forever. And they already had forty years on the clock, so her father's prophecy was probably going to be borne out.

She looked at her father. He was eighty-five years old, and just as lucid as ever, but his body was tired, and advanced in years, so much so that he missed parts of his throat while shaving. He had always been tall, but now he was stooping. The big pair of spectacles that

had been his distinctive attribute for as long as she could remember often ended up crooked, and the eyes behind the frames were cloudy.

Lotta was almost as tall as Stellan, but they were otherwise not particularly alike in appearance. Her father's hair had been ash-blond, while his daughter's was black – a legacy from her strong-willed grandmother, according to Stellan. And if his gaze was friendly and warm, then Lotta's was scrutinising and sceptical.

'Can't we sit down for a bit?' said Lotta, because she noticed that her dad was tired and knew he would never acknowledge it.

They sat down on the flaking green bench outside the garden shed. Stellan fanned himself with a paper plate that had been heaped with bulbs, and Lotta wiped the sweat from her brow. The heat felt almost unnatural. It had had the whole country in its grip throughout May, and showed no signs of dissipating now it was June.

How many times had they sat here together? A bench for rest, but with all the tools within reach – a place where one recovered while also being ready to get working.

That was the theory, at any rate.

Inside the shed were stacks of garden furniture and tools that hadn't been used in decades: weed hoes, sprinklers, a copper watering can, a now-mouldy striped hammock and the creakingly old sunbeds that the sisters had loved playing with when they were little. They had sunbathed between the snowdrifts on the very first days of spring, 'cloudbathed' on cloudy summer days, and spent entire summers pretending the sunbeds were boats, cars, planes, space rockets or jetties from which they could jump into imaginary water.

When the sisters had got too big to play, the sunbeds had gone into the garden shed, and there they had remained ever since. Instead, Dad had secretly used them for resting during his gardening, but had been given away by the light squeaking audible through the walls.

Now the shed was more of a monument to a bygone era. Only the garden table was brought out each year by the gardener, Jocke, who continued to put in appearances as regularly as clockwork, despite having retired many years ago. He wouldn't accept any payment, either. He'd been coming weekly ever since Stellan and Agneta had moved into the house as newly-weds in the early 70s, and he'd carried on after retirement without either asking or being asked to. Perhaps he needed the steady routine to maintain his sanity.

Lotta nudged the door to the shed ajar and the heat struck her. The warm summer meant it was like an oven inside.

'Aren't you going to open up that window again?' she said, pointing at the plywood board nailed to the back wall. 'We're not little anymore – there's no risk of us spying.'

'No, but now there are new small spies,' Stellan said with a smile.

'They only care about their screens.'

'I'll ask Jocke to take it down. The window looks on to a lovely beauty bush, but I don't come in here as much as I used to.'

'Not at all, I'd say,' said Lotta, her gaze lingering on the rusty sunbeds.

'This is for you,' said Stellan Broman to his daughter, holding out a flower.

Every time she visited, he gave her a plant or a bulb from his garden for her small kitchen garden, and she was grateful to receive them.

'What is it?' she asked.

'I don't know. Clarkia, I think. Jocke planted it.'

'You always blame him.'

Lotta smiled at her father.

Joachim – 'Jocke' – had always been a natural part of her life, and he and Dad had always bickered gently over who knew the most about flowers. If she were honest, she'd probably learned more about plants and flowers from Jocke than she had from Dad.

But she still had very affectionate memories of her father's passion for gardening during her childhood, since it had meant he had been at home. Not at work, not in the house surrounded by friends and colleagues. No grandiose partying, no job, just quietly pottering about in the flower beds.

His life must have been much calmer over the last thirty years. Did he miss the old days? Being at the centre of attention?

If nothing else, it had provided her and Malin with a different childhood – an existence that all their friends had envied. And what difference would it have made if Dad had been at home more – if he hadn't shut himself away in the recreation room or fled into the garden as soon as he came through the door? They'd always had Mum.

And it had all been very exciting without a doubt: all the well-known faces that had turned up at the house; all the parties and frolics, and all the grown-ups doing strange things.

Perhaps it was their parents' intense social life that had made her into such a recluse? The workaholic within her was definitely thanks to Dad, but even when she wasn't working she preferred not to see people. She just wanted to settle down with a book. Or perhaps meet a friend to talk. *One* friend.

The shrill cry of a child signalled that it was time to go back inside to the others.

As usual, Malin had stayed inside with their mum. She had never liked the garden. 'Urgh, worms and woodlice,' had been her judgement as a six-year-old – and she'd stuck to it.

Dark-haired Lotta and blonde Malin. The responsible big sister and the spoilt little princess.

Like a parody of a typical little sister, Malin hadn't helped her mother with the cleaning, packing or dishes, Lotta noticed. Instead, she'd fetched a box of old clothes from the attic and was hunting for vintage treasures for her children.

'Do they really want old clothes?' Agneta asked.

‘They’re lovely,’ said Malin, holding up a pale blue plush playsuit from her own childhood.

With her blonde hair and dark eyebrows, Malin was a copy of her mother. It was obvious that Agneta had been a stunning beauty, and despite being almost seventy she still attracted glances when out and about. Even if she didn’t notice them herself. Both mother and daughter were beautiful in a way that made the people they met instinctively wish them well. It was as if their beauty radiated from within, and people therefore didn’t begrudge them anything.

While Malin and Lotta had spent time with their parents and the kids had run around, the sisters’ respective other halves had – as usual – withdrawn. There was always something about work or the car or a bathroom renovation, that they could discuss to one side: Christian, in his neatly pressed shirt and patent leather shoes, Petter in shorts and sandals. They weren’t altogether comfortable with each other – a financier and a cultural bureaucrat – but neither of them was at all comfortable with their great father-in-law, the legendary TV presenter, so they sought each other out. Neither of them was especially invested in the issues that interested Stellan: TV in the 1970s and 1980s, European travel or how classical culture, entertainment and public education were connected. Neither of them could quote Schiller.

After noting that the brothers-in-law had followed their usual pattern, Lotta noted that the kids were following theirs. Her own sons were sitting staring at their mobiles, and Malin’s two kids were fighting. Molly was screeching because Hugo had thrown a tennis ball at her forehead and told her to head it. The ball had bounced against the wall and then on the table between two coffee cups.

It was high time to drive the boys to training and get away from Malin’s badly brought-up brats. She had masses of meetings – being away for a whole week was a long time in her job. It was lucky that Christian could manage his own hours, and that the kids had activities all summer.

‘Time to go. Say thank you to Grandma and get dressed.’

Leo shook back his fringe. He went to his grandmother, took her hand and thanked her. Sixten needed telling again, but then he went and thanked her too.

Malin rifled through the remainder of the clothes, threw a few garments into a bag and put the box to one side. She didn’t take it back up to the attic again, Lotta noted. And she was convinced that the bag of old clothes from their childhood that her sister had taken would remain untouched for years to come.

Lotta opened the front door and let her sons out. Petter took the hint immediately, came inside and thanked his parents-in-law and then went out to sit in the car. In the meantime, Lotta helped Malin’s children to get dressed. Her sister had to find Christian and tell him to come inside and offer his thanks, then Lotta herded them all out to the two cars on the driveway, while Malin hugged her mother.

Stellan returned to the armchair in the living room, a well-used Pernilla from Dux, with a protective auditory accompaniment in the form of the *St Matthew Passion*: John Eliot Gardiner’s classic recording from 1988 with Barbara Bonney.

Agneta came out onto the front step to wave off the retreating hordes. Then the sound of the telephone ringing inside the house cut through the air, and she told her daughters she had to take it. Malin couldn’t help but comment with a smile that her mother and father were the only people she knew who still had a landline at home. She said she would never be able to explain to her children what a landline was.

‘It’s your father,’ Agneta said apologetically. ‘He absolutely wants to keep it.’

Then she went back inside the house, while her younger daughter joined her waiting family.

Agneta went into the study and picked up the big receiver attached to a spiral cable that led to an old Ericsson Dialog phone

with a dial. She answered with her surname, just as she always had done.

‘Broman.’

On the other end of the line, a man’s voice spoke in heavily accented German.

‘Geiger?’

It was as she’d feared.

Good God.

The grandchildren.

But she heard the cars start outside, and realised she didn’t have much choice.

She quickly calculated, then she answered curtly ‘Yes’ and hung up.

Then she went upstairs and into the bedroom, opened the drawer in her bedside table, pulled out the instructions for the clock radio and the bathroom scales, and then got out a big, black Makarov pistol and a silencer that she screwed onto it.

On the way back to the living room, she cocked the weapon and noted that it seemed to be functional, despite having lain unused for so long. At least it had been cleaned and oiled.

She approached her husband diagonally from behind, pressing the muzzle against the side of his head.

And then she squeezed the trigger.

Blood splattered onto the book, which fell out of Stellan’s hands: Goethe’s *Faust* in the original German.

It hadn’t been a loud bang, but louder than she remembered – so for safety’s sake she lowered her weapon and went to the living-room window.

Outside, the sisters seemed to have been conferring on something, because they still hadn’t left. But now Lotta walked away from Malin’s car to her own and got in.

Lotta looked back towards the house again from the driver’s seat, caught sight of her mother peering out and waved cheerfully. Malin followed Lotta’s gaze and did the same.

The weapon concealed behind her back, Agneta waved back with her empty hand. Her daughters let down the rear passenger windows so that the kids could also wave to Grandma one last time. They did, and their grandmother smiled and reflected that with such wonderful grandchildren, she must have done something right.

2

‘They’ve called.’

Karla Breuer looked up from her book and fixed her gaze on Strauss, who was standing in the doorway to her office. The Cannonball, as she called him. Short, rotund and deadly efficient.

She knew that he called her the White Ghost because of her long white hair, ice-blue eyes and white clothes. And because he considered her to be a remnant of the past, a spectre from a forgotten time.

‘Who?’ said Breuer. ‘And where?’

‘Beirut. To Stockholm,’ said Strauss, who saw that the White Ghost hadn’t been expecting that.

It was one of many numbers they were monitoring, and one that no one had thought would be used again. That was probably why Strauss and Breuer’s department was going to be one of the last to be transferred: no one thought their targets were current. It felt as if when the BND had deserted Pullach for Berlin they had wanted to leave the old world behind them. But Breuer stubbornly maintained that the past never disappeared.

Breuer was the only person in the department who’d been working in intelligence when the number in Stockholm had been classified as active. And that had been many years ago. But now it was apparently active again, against all the odds.

‘Then we have to go.’

Breuer got up and walked straight past Strauss without looking at him. They had never become friends during the four years they’d worked together, but now they were jointly responsible.

Although the final decision was up to Schönberg.

Strauss glanced into Breuer’s office as she swept past him. Not a single one of the monitors was illuminated; none of the computers were on. On the other hand, there were heaps of books and reports.

He couldn't grasp how a completely analogue operative was allowed to remain. Whom did she have a hold over? During her four decades in the intelligence service, she'd probably gathered all sorts. Then he turned on his heel and hurried after her.

There weren't many people left in these buildings now, he thought to himself as he looked around the corridor. Most people had already moved to the new complex in Berlin, the country's biggest administrative building, with a price tag of half a billion euros.

Its size and location in central Berlin should really have reminded the architects and drivers of the project of the East German Stasi's old headquarters, but apparently that issue had had no impact – or they simply hadn't cared.

In an open society, there was no longer such dread of activities behind closed doors.

Six doors down the corridor, Breuer knocked on Schönberg's door and went in before Strauss could catch up.

Schönberg had a stack of files in front of him, three of them laid out side by side but with the covers closed. He must have shut them when he heard the knock. Even here on the inside, people kept secrets from each other.

'Geiger is activated,' said Breuer.

Schönberg didn't reply, but simply gave her a look that said, *So what?*

'That means that Abu Rasil will be activated,' said Breuer. 'We can take him now.'

'You think he's still alive?' said Schönberg. 'After more than thirty years of silence?'

'He's alive. He withdrew, but now he's been activated again. They wouldn't have called Stockholm if Rasil wasn't alive.'

'And what can he do nowadays?'

'If he's been activated after three decades, it's likely to be something spectacular. We need to go.'

Schönberg sat in silence.

‘What’s the point of our department if we don’t take our warning systems seriously?’

Schönberg merely stared at her.

‘This is exactly what they’re counting on,’ Breuer continued. ‘That no one thinks Rasil is alive. That no one will do anything.’

‘How certain are you about the indication?’ Schönberg said finally. Breuer looked at Strauss.

‘Completely certain,’ said Strauss, because he understood that was what Breuer wanted him to say. It was standard practice for the outgoing head of unit to recommend their successor, and Strauss was keen to take over from her. And it wouldn’t be many years until Schönberg’s post as head of department would be vacant. Strauss could see his career trajectory clearly before him.

‘You’ve got four months to retirement, Breuer. Send Strauss.’

Breuer didn’t dignify that remark with a reply.

Schönberg sighed.

‘How long have you been after Abu Rasil? Forty years?’

‘I was after him for ten years, then he disappeared. And I was close to catching him several times.’

‘That’s what you think, anyway.’

‘Are we going to let the biggest terrorist we’ve ever tracked get away?’

Schönberg took off his reading glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Then he looked at his subordinates.

‘Abu Rasil is a myth,’ he said. ‘A legend that the Palestinians launched in the seventies to scare the West.’

‘And that’s exactly what Abu Rasil wants you to think.’

‘The superhuman terrorist. That one single brain was behind practically every terrorist attack in Europe at the time – the story’s just too good to be true.’

‘As a parting gift, then?’ said Breuer, locking her eyes on her boss. Both Schönberg and Strauss realised she wasn’t going to give up.

‘Go,’ said Schönberg. ‘Take Strauss and Windmüller. But you’ve only got a week.’

‘We’ll leave straightaway.’

‘Straightaway?’ said Strauss.

‘Straightaway. Rasil is naturally already en route.’

Breuer turned around and left, and Strauss ran into his own office to grab his jacket and service weapon. He could buy everything he needed on the road – except a Glock 17 and a customised Zegna in size 60.

There were no stacks of books in Strauss’s office. Instead, there were the same number of computer monitors as in all the other offices, but unlike Breuer’s, they were switched on. Plus the Nick Cave posters and Strauss’s beloved Devialet Phantom Gold – the world’s best wireless system for playing music. As his colleagues had moved across Berlin, Strauss had been able to turn up the volume more and more.

He hesitated for a second in the doorway, but then he couldn’t help himself. He turned on his Phantom with the remote control and started playing ‘The Good Son’ from his mobile.

Heavenly.

Then he quickly left and hurried down the corridor to inform their colleague that he was coming with them to Sweden. Windmüller was one of the many well-trained operatives whose task was to guarantee security and protect their lives.

Breuer’s fixation on Abu Rasil was well known, and questioned by all at the BND. This would be her final chance to prove the legend was true and that she’d been right all along.

Strauss didn’t know what to think, but he would never dare question the White Ghost. Not openly at any rate, and certainly not while she was still on active service. Breuer knew a lot of bigwigs.

None of the three had any family to notify, so all they had to do was get moving. Windmüller got into the mobile operations van, while Strauss opened the door of the BMW for Breuer. He couldn’t judge how serious the assignment was. But *if* Abu Rasil existed and *if* he had been activated, then something big was happening right now.

Something really big.

3

As soon as Agneta's daughters had left, everything became urgent.

She grabbed a rucksack from the hall and hurried upstairs. Way back when, the bathroom had felt like the safest place – for three reasons. You could lock yourself in, there was no way to see in, and no one would ask what you were up to inside. And the many visitors to the house always used the toilets downstairs.

Burying things in the garden or heading off into the woods might seem smart in the heat of the moment, but when the equipment came to be needed, it might not be possible to retrieve it at once. She'd got that far in her thoughts, even back then.

Now she didn't have much time. Naturally, there would already be people on the way.

The only question was: how far away were they?

And who was coming?

The toilet roll holder wasn't up to the job no matter how hard she wielded it, so she had to run down to the basement to fetch a hammer. She hadn't given any thought to how she was going to break up the tiling – nor how noisy it would be – so long ago, when she'd deposited the package in the bathroom wall and tiled over it.

But there was no one to hear her now.

She swung the hammer as fast and hard as she could and cracked the tiling on the first attempt. She continued striking it to remove all the rest of the tile, worked at the seam of the carefully fitted damp-proof membrane underneath and then shoved in two fingers to prise out the emergency package, wrapped up in waxcloth.

A fat bundle of thousand-krona notes – but they were no longer valid, she realised. She would have to make do with the cash she

had in the house. Fortunately, they'd always kept some in the metal tin in the kitchen.

Three passports in different names, but all with expiry dates long since passed.

The codeword for the radio transmitter.

Car keys – was the car still there? When had she last checked?

An instruction booklet on how to survive the collapse of civilisation, which she reluctantly took.

Cyanide capsules.

Good God.

The pistol had never been hidden here – she had wanted that close to hand, and had settled on the bedside table. She'd come up with a laboured story about it being passed down from her father, in case anyone found it. But no one ever had.

She stopped. Was that a car?

She quickly ran to the window on the upstairs landing, carefully lifted the edge of the curtain and glanced down to the street.

Nothing there.

But would they really park outside the house? Wouldn't they park nearby and then sneak up? Although what would people think if they saw mysterious men creeping through their gardens in this well-heeled neighbourhood?

No, it would clearly be easiest to drive up to the house and park on the street, looking as though one had legitimate cause to be there. Perhaps they would even use a courier's van or a pickup truck with the word 'plumber' painted on the side. Something no one would remember.

But they weren't here yet. She had no idea whether she had hours, minutes or seconds.

She needed to get back to work.

'My banana doll!' Molly called out.

'We'll have to get it next time we see Grandma,' said Malin.

'No!' Molly screamed.

Malin sighed.

'I think we need to go back,' she said to Christian.

She knew how fixated Molly was on her oblong, yellow plush character with its wide smile. The banana doll served as both playmate and cuddly toy, and if they didn't fetch it at once their daughter would never stop screaming.

Christian glanced hastily at his Rolex GMT-Master II. It was the Pepsi edition, and he was more than a little proud of it.

Jesus.

This was going to take all day.

But there wasn't much they could do about that.

They'd just gone past Brommaplan where he could have turned around, but he'd realised too late. He had to carry on to the roundabout and do a full lap of it instead – then they were on the way back.

Bloody doll.

The clock was ticking, so Agneta went back into the bathroom, took the packet of quick-drying cement and mixed it with some water using the toothbrush mug. She spread the mixture onto the back of the spare tile that had been at the bottom of her drawer in the bathroom cabinet all these years along with the cement, and then she put the tile over the hole and pulled the basket of towels in front of it. It wouldn't fool anyone if subjected to thorough examination, but she might win a few days and that could be enough. It was all about buying time.

She put the toothbrush mug and tile pieces in her rucksack, along with the money and the passports. Then she went down to the kitchen and made up a bag of food. A sudden impulse made her run to the garage to add the battery charger to her bag.

Good. And now what?

Confuse matters a bit.

How?

The jewellery box. Stellan's wallet. Something else.

The little Munch painting hanging in the guest toilet.

All of it went into her rucksack.

And now to pull out some drawers and mess things up a bit.

What else?

Of course. The reason for all of it. It took her a minute to fetch it.

She checked the time.

Too much time had already passed.

She needed to go.

She couldn't take her and Stellan's car – she knew that much. So she went into the garden shed and tugged out the old bicycle that had been there for decades. Pink with white handlebars. It must have belonged to one of the girls, even if she couldn't remember ever seeing either of them riding a bike.

Over the years, the bicycle had slowly disappeared behind rakes, shovels, trimmers, a wheelbarrow and various planks of wood that might come in useful one day. A broken garden hose was tangled around the frame, handlebars and front wheel. The chain wasn't oiled and the tyres were almost flat, but it could be ridden.

Were any of the neighbours watching? They would be questioned, and she didn't want any of the operatives currently being set in motion finding out about her two-wheeled escape vehicle. Given how rarely her daughters usually got in touch, she ought to have upwards of a week before one of them got worried. For that long, at least, the police would leave her in peace.

The others were more of a problem.

The ones who had called.

And the ones who might have been listening.

She had no idea how much time she had.

Hours or days?

Or perhaps they would be content with the conversation and simply await the result?

She went back inside for one final check. Then she glanced through the pane of glass in the front door. There was nothing out of the ordinary outside. She buttoned up her parka and put the hood over her head. She would be hot, but she had to disguise herself somehow.

Finally, she went over to her dead husband and kissed him on the top of his head.

‘Thanks for all the years. Cross your fingers for me.’

She patted him on the cheek and then vanished outside to the bicycle, before pedalling away.

At the very moment Agneta Broman disappeared round the bend of Grönviksvägen on her old bicycle, Malin Broman-Dahl’s black BMW M550d xDrive Touring came rolling along Nockebyvägen before turning on to Grönviksvägen, with just a few hundred metres to go until it reached the parental home at number 63.

4

The sound was deafening. Cars honking, trucks with students on the back and sound systems worthy of a festival. Old classics and pumping house. Each vehicle was playing music so loudly that the windows of the magnificent stone buildings rattled.

Balloons, champagne bottles, blue and yellow flags. A crowd.

Young people filled with hopes and expectations.

Parents and grandparents and wealthy old aunts were arriving at the school that was always the first to let its graduating students out. There were placards with first names and baby photos and class affiliations. School class, that was. Other class affiliations were marked using watches, clothes and bags – and the makes of the cars that were misparked with malicious disrespect on all the streets around Östra Real upper secondary school. Parking wardens circled until the mandated five minutes had elapsed and they could start ticketing, like hyenas waiting for a lion to have satisfied its appetite on the dead zebras so they could have their turn.

Even the usually deserted upper section of Artillerigatan was crammed with people on the way towards the playground of the exclusive school. Here were ageing directors in yellowing peaked graduation caps, over-made-up trophy wives unhappy that they couldn't wear their fur coats in the heat and young men with slicked-back hair who in their first years after graduating from high school had already had time to found two or three of their own companies. Green and red trousers were still popular among the men here, Sara noted.

All this circus because a bunch of teenagers were finishing school. Heading nowhere.

Enjoy this day, she thought to herself from her position in the sauna-hot car. Because tomorrow you'll be a statistic. Unemployed,

without a place of your own. A problem for society. Enjoy it while you can.

When a three-year-old 'Ebba' floated past on a student placard in the hands of a proud father, Sara realised she hadn't ordered one like it for her own Ebba.

She noted it in her mobile calendar. As soon as her shift was over: get a placard for her daughter.

Sweat ran from her brow, sliding down her cheeks. The small of her back was completely soaked.

Sara and David had made an early start, so they'd secured a legal parking spot opposite the door they were now watching at Artillerigatan 65, just by the long wall running towards Östra Real. Now they were surrounded by empty plastic drinks bottles and greasy fast food packaging, and feeling an increasing need for a wee.

David Karlsson. And Sara Nowak.

Sara had put her hair up in a bun and put on a Ralph Lauren baseball cap in order to blend into the neighbourhood. When she lifted the cap to wipe the sweat from her brow, she saw in the rear-view mirror that it was time to dye her hair again. Her hair was brown, but the roots were fiery red. It looked as if her scalp was on fire.

As a child, Sara had been called 'the Indian' because of her red hair. Not particularly logical, and very tedious in the long run. She'd also been called 'the giraffe' since she was taller than most of the boys in the class – 177 centimetres, just like Naomi Campbell and Linda Evangelista. Her height and distinctive cheekbones meant she'd spent her teens on the receiving end of hundreds of clumsy chat-up attempts, telling her that she looked like a model. So many that Sara had eventually tried out precisely that career, despite mostly thinking that she looked odd.

Modelling had gone fairly well, but she remembered what it had been like sitting around waiting for assignments, feeling uncomfortable. Offered up like a product in a catalogue, while

customers sat there, picking and choosing uncertain girls. A clothes horse with the right length legs.

Being dependent on others' appreciation and opinions about her outer appearance hadn't suited her at all. So she'd terminated the contract with the agency and started training in the martial arts instead, in order to find an outlet for all the rage that the selection processes and touchy-feely photographers had built up in her.

Now she was proud of her height and her hair colour, but she still dyed her hair brown to avoid being easily recognisable during recon-naissance work. She really didn't like having people's gazes on her. Particularly men's, since her job in the prostitution unit meant she'd come to associate covetous glances with very unpleasant people.

'Jesus Christ, it's hot,' said Sara, closing her eyes as she held the small hand-held fan they'd bought in Clas Ohlson to avoid draining the car battery by using the air conditioning.

'It'll be fun to see how long it takes for people to start complain-
ing about the heat,' said David. 'The first hot summer in decades.'

He looked from the door to his watch and back again.

'How long has he been in there now?'

'Don't know. Too long. He's probably done. We'll go in on the next one instead.'

'OK.'

'But maybe we could scare this one a bit when he comes out? Try and put him off, even if we can't get him done.'

David gave Sara a look.

'Harassment?'

'No, just show him that we have an eye on him. Check his ID, hint that his wife might find out. They think they can carry on without any consequences.'

'Either we catch them red-handed or we leave them alone.'

'Look at us now,' Sara said. 'We can take down a bloke, but this girl has ten other clients today. And around the rest of town, hundreds of other girls have thousands of clients. Just today. And

we're taking down a handful. Who get fined. And then carry on as before. It's just crazy.'

'That's how it is.'

'And it's shit!'

'What's up with you?' David asked. 'Why are you so angry?'

'Is it so strange? Isn't it stranger that you're not angry?'

'I don't think you can do a good job if you're angry.'

'It's bloody brilliant being angry,' she said. 'Gives you energy to carry on. What am I supposed to be otherwise? Happy? "Hurrah! What awful people there are in this world!"'

'I think it's stupid. You work less efficiently and you burn out. You can't deal with this job if you get angry at everything you see.'

'It's about bloody time someone got angry at this shit. Instead of just trying to understand and reason, they should get totally raging. Fucking furious.'

'We need to work with a long-term view.'

'I don't want to work for the long term, I want to work for the short term. Like this – "Stop it! Now!"'

David shook his head.

'We need to get them to understand what they're doing is wrong. Anger isn't a good way to communicate. It creates distance, conflict. They won't listen if you shout at them – they'll just become defensive.'

'But do you think what we do actually matters? Everything just keeps going on anyway.'

'What is it you want most?' said David. 'To rescue the girls or take down the punters?'

'Both.'

'But which is most important?'

Sara shrugged.

'If you had to pick one.'

She thought about it. But she already knew the answer.

'Take down the punters,' she said. 'Without villains there are no victims.'

‘I want to rescue the girls.’

‘But they don’t want help. They refuse to testify. Refuse to move to safe houses. Refuse to bloody speak to us.’

‘We need to gain their trust,’ David objected. ‘It takes time.’

“Trust?” Shouldn’t it be pretty bloody easy to choose between us and a bunch of violent pimps? Between us and being raped ten times a day by disgusting johns? With the possibility of being killed at any moment?’

‘This doesn’t sound like you, Sara. Has something happened?’

‘No, not a fucking thing. That’s the problem. No matter how many buyers of sex we arrest, there are thousands more standing in line with their dicks in their hands. All ages, all sorts, all of them. Nothing helps. What’s the point? And the girls don’t even want to testify – not against the pimps or the punters.’

‘They’re scared of what happens next,’ David said, ‘once the perpetrators are in jail and we’re otherwise occupied. Scared of revenge – that something might happen to their families.’

‘I know that. And that’s why we can’t help them. Can’t put away the guilty. Why not jack it all in, if we don’t stand a chance? Maybe we just shouldn’t bother anymore?’

‘If we don’t, who will?’

‘Why doesn’t God do something?’

David sighed.

‘Not again—’

‘Yes, again. I get really worked up when you talk about God the same day as you take care of some teenage girl who’s been gang-banged to pieces. How the hell do you do it?’

David didn’t reply. This wasn’t the first time Sara had challenged his faith. More like the seventieth time. By a factor of seven. She didn’t even seem to want to understand what his faith was about. He understood it wasn’t part of their line of work, but without his faith he wouldn’t have been able to cope.

‘Faith in a God that means you don’t even dare come out to your family!’ said Sara. ‘What kind of God is that, really?’

‘It’s not about my family. I’ve told you that! I can tell them anything. It’s everyone else.’

‘That’s what I mean. Free Church congregations in some backwards hole that force families out if they have a homosexual son. In Sweden, today! Not to mention other countries. The American Deep South, Saudi Arabia, Poland, Russia. It’s not about religion, it’s about legitimising hate, controlling fellow human beings. Freely attacking gays and women and . . .’

Sara fell silent. David looked up and saw her staring at the door.

‘Check on the girl!’ she shouted, leaping out of the car.

David saw Sara run down Artillerigatan towards Karlavägen. Then he hurried in through the door they’d been watching. He knew the flat was up one storey, facing the inner courtyard. It wasn’t their first visit.

He tried the door. Locked.

‘Open up! Police!’

He could only hope there was someone inside who was capable of opening the door. He thumped hard on the door and called out again, and after a minute or so he heard steps on the other side and a click from the lock.

The door slowly swung open.

David knew that the girl who lived and worked here called herself Becky, so he assumed that it was her opening the door. But it wasn’t all that easy to tell, because she was holding her hand in front of her face. And what little of Becky’s face he could see was completely bloodied.

‘Are you injured?’ said David. ‘Seriously, I mean,’ he added, as he saw the woman’s eyes flash. It was pretty obvious she was injured. ‘Are you OK? Can I look?’

David carefully took Becky’s hand and she let him move it aside. Her nose appeared to be broken. One eyebrow was split. And two teeth had been knocked out. Others might be loose.

‘I’ll call an ambulance.’

But Becky waved her hand dismissively.

‘Haxi,’ she mumbled as she took her handbag from the coat rack. She pulled out her mobile, entered the PIN and handed it to David.

‘What? Oh, right – you want me to call?’

‘Mmm.’

‘Taxi to pick up from Artillerigatan 65. Becky. Going to Danderyd Hospital.’ David looked at Becky quizzically to check whether the choice of hospital suited her. The woman nodded in response. ‘The emergency room.’

Then he ran back down to the street.

How had Sara known?

The punter had already realised at Tyskbagargatan that he was being chased by Sara, so he dashed towards Karlavägen. Pushing aside all the families carrying their graduation placards. Stopping cars, which couldn’t actually do more than a couple of kilometres an hour in the throng.

Sara ran after him along the footpath running up the centre of the lush avenue on Karlavägen. Several student trucks were heading for Östra Real: families and friends en masse.

The man zigzagged between the revellers, shoving them aside so he was practically pulling himself through the crowd.

Sara ran, jumping and dodging.

‘Move! Idiots!’

Some protested loudly, others pulled unhappy faces. People weren’t accustomed to being run into in these parts.

On Sibyllegatan in front of the kiosk there was a Chevrolet Bel Air ’56 decked out for graduation, its driver impatiently waiting to turn on to Karlavägen. He took his chances when a gap that was barely big enough appeared. The young man floored it, but was stopped by Sara landing on the bonnet.

‘Idiot!’ Sara cried out, but carried on without stopping.

She registered pain in her ankle and shoulder as she ran on past the ICA Esplanad.

The punter was pulling away.

Jesus – she wasn't going to make it.

Sara plucked a champagne bottle out of the hands of a dumpy middle-aged gentleman with a pointed beard, and threw it with all her might at the fugitive.

And she hit her target.

A bullseye on his back.

Sufficiently hard to make him stumble, which resulted in him running into a gaggle of young lads and tripping over.

As he struggled to get up, Sara caught up with him.

She threw herself down, wrapping her legs around his stomach and squeezing – a scissors move she'd used a lot when training in the Russian martial art of Sambo. She'd learned that her strong legs were particularly useful in that position. Numerous burly blokes had been forced to tap out when they'd been caught in her iron grip during training.

'I surrender!' the punter cried out, and Sara loosened her grip slightly. There was a stinging feeling in her leg, and she saw that the punter had something shiny in his hand. A flick knife. He'd stabbed her with it. Fortunately not deeply, just a scratch. But still . . .

Sara bent forward, grabbed the little finger on his empty hand and bent it backwards. He screamed with pain, and then she struck his knife hand from behind, making the weapon fly out of it.

Then she squeezed even harder with her legs.

'Let go!' the punter shouted. 'Let go! You're suffocating me!'

'And you stabbed me with a knife,' said Sara, pulling out her handcuffs. 'Give me your hands!'

'Fucking whore!'

Sara squeezed even tighter.

'Let go!' the idiot cried out. 'Police brutality!'

Then he turned to the people standing nearby and exhorted them:

‘Video this! Video this!’

At the same time, he carefully concealed his own face.

‘Give me your hand,’ said Sara.

Finally he obeyed.

‘And the other.’

When Sara had locked the handcuffs, she released him from her scissor hold and the punter gasped for air, as if he’d been underwater and needed to catch his breath.

‘Did you think you could run away from me? Huh?’

But he was too exhausted to answer, and she leaned forward and bellowed into his ear.

‘Idiot!’

Then she found his wallet, pulled out the driving licence and took a photo of it.

Pål Vestlund.

The name of a bloody john. Ring on his finger and everything.

‘You never give up.’

The words came from David, who’d come running through the sea of student graduation revellers.

And it was true, Sara thought to herself. She never gave up.

‘How is she?’ she asked, her eyes on the captive punter.

‘Two teeth, nose, eyebrow.’

‘Bloody swine,’ said Sara, grabbing Vestlund by the hair and pulling his head back.

‘I’ll report you,’ he managed to say.

‘For what?’ said Sara. ‘For this?’

And then she kicked him in the ribs.

‘Or this?’

Then she kicked him right in the crotch. Vestlund screamed and curled up into the foetal position.

‘Sara!’ said David, stepping between them.

He looked around to check whether anyone was filming. But everyone seemed to have their sights set on the front doors of Carl Bildt's old school, that were about to open.

'I slipped,' said Sara. And then she added: 'Why should he get off more lightly than Becky?'

'Stop it.'

'He stabbed me,' said Sara, showing the bloody wound on her thigh.

'OK, but we shouldn't be like them,' said David. 'How did you know he'd hit her?'

'Blood on his knuckles.'

'Just that?'

""Just that?""

'No, I mean that was enough, was it? For you to realise. And you saw it from that distance.'

'See for yourself.'

'Yes, I can see it now. But I wouldn't have seen it from across the street.'

'OK, let's get this swine on his feet and bring him in. Buying sex, grievous bodily harm, violently resisting arrest. I struck the knife out of his hand – it should be over there somewhere.'

David found it and then they pulled Pål Vestlund to his feet.

Sara could still feel the adrenaline pumping through her body. She didn't have a lot of time for the theory of catharsis – the idea that implementing violence was an outlet that made one calmer, used by many martial arts trainers as an argument in favour of letting young criminals train at their clubs. Instead, Sara was convinced that it just built it up. The more she trained, the more she let the anger emerge, the more aggressive she became. Even Martin and the kids had begun to notice her increasingly short fuse. And you only had to look at football hooligans – no bloody way did they become less violent by fighting each other. No, sometimes she regretted accepting violence into her life – but on the other hand, it

was good to be able to channel it at times like this. There were two sides to it.

They headed back towards the car, with Vestlund ducking his head in order to hide his face from any passing acquaintance.

As they walked past Café Foam, Sara's mobile rang. The ringtone told her it was Anna, her old study buddy at the police academy, who now worked in homicide in Västerort to the west of the city. Anna had been assigned 'Somebody That I Used to Know' by Gotye as her personal ringtone – although it was mostly a joke. Truth be told, Sara knew her pretty well. Anna wasn't her only friend, but she was one of just a few.

'Nothing bad,' said Sara into her mobile.

'Yes, I'm afraid it is,' said Anna.

'I wanted a proposal that we grab a beer or something.'

'And you're getting a murder in Bromma.'

'OK. Of a prostitute?'

'Only for very kinky customers in that case,' said Anna. 'An eighty-five-year-old man with a bullet in his skull.'

'OK . . . A john?'

'It actually has nothing to do with your job – this is purely private. I think you know the old man. Or knew him.'

Family, neighbours, friends, old colleagues – names and faces rushed through her head. An old man murdered. Someone she knew.

'Who . . .?' was all she managed.

'Uncle Stellan.'

'Uncle Stellan?' said Sara, trying to take it in. Struggling to fit it into the right place in her brain. But Uncle Stellan didn't seem to sit right. There wasn't a spot for him anywhere, actually.

'The old television presenter,' said Anna. 'You knew him, right?'

'Yes. Well, his daughters. Yes – him, too. I was there constantly when I was a kid.'

'Well, then. Perhaps you can help.'

'But hang on – has Uncle Stellan been murdered?'

'Shot in the head.'

'You're kidding.'

'No.'

'By who?'

'No idea. Some dissatisfied ex-viewer? I thought you might know something. An old threat. Row in the family. Crazy neighbour. Bonkers admirer. I don't know.'

'I'm on my way.'

By the time Anna said 'No', Sara had already hung up.