

Anna Tell

Four Days in Kabul

Translated from the Swedish by Rachel Willson-Broyles

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The darkness was a crucial requirement for what was about to happen. Everyone was prepared for their roles and had practiced the whole operation step by step. Most of those in the patrol had done this before. For some, it was their first time. For her, it was just another day at work.

Farouk had given the order.

Apprehend and take into custody. No deaths under any circumstances.

Her uniform was already soaked through.

She tried in vain to dry off her watch.

03:58.

She listened to the rain striking the ground. A musty odor rose as mud splashed onto her uniform. The air was oppressive. Sweat trickled along her spine and between her breasts.

One last sip of water.

She placed her hand on Farouk's shoulder and showed him the time. He nodded and reached for his radio. Ready to give the go-ahead. Their approach to the house had to be fast.

She could make out its contours in the dark. Only one story high.

The door was in the middle. They would enter on the east side. None of their actions would be hasty; everything had been well-planned and methodical.

Then they heard the rat-a-tat-tat.

Shit!

An instant later, automatic weapons began firing in front of her, from several locations. She threw herself down on her belly beside Farouk. He was aiming the barrel of his weapon across the field ahead of them.

"You have to give the order."

Her voice was drowned out by the clatter of their patrol returning fire. Shrapnel flew through the air and the mud in front of them spurted up.

They had lost their chance.

She kicked at Farouk and signaled “backwards” with one hand.

“Order a retreat!”

“But we can take them.”

“There’s too many. Retreat. Now!”

Several seconds passed. Then Farouk’s voice broke through on the radio.

“Alternating retreat!”

The taste of mud and water made her gag as they retreated at a run.

“We have to take shelter and return fire!”

Once again, Farouk’s voice came over the radio:

“Firing positions!”

She could make out the operatives’ movements as they threw themselves down, took hold of their machine guns, and began to fire.

Another round of deafening clatter.

But ahead of her and to the left, it was quiet.

She army-crawled forward. Her chest felt too tight; it was hard to breathe. She inhaled through her mouth. Sweat and rainwater mixed on her tongue.

“Atmar, for God’s sake, retreat!”

No response.

She hauled herself the last few meters through the mud and grabbed his leg.

“Atmar! Can you hear me?”

Farouk’s little brother wasn’t moving. His machine gun, which had just been providing cover to the others, was on the ground. Blood was flowing from his head or face, she couldn’t tell which.

Blood pumped from one of his legs.

He was staring at her. He swallowed and opened his mouth.

“Shh.”

She put her finger to her lips. He need to save his strength.

“Don’t . . . leave me . . . here.”

Atmar groaned and grabbed her arm. The blood colored his beige uniform dark.

“I’m going to get us out of here. But if you don’t let go of me we’ll both die in this mud!”

She shouted right into his ear. A slight nod told her that he understood. She pressed one knee to his back and leaned him backwards. She would drag him out. Firing and maneuvering, that was all that mattered.

“Can you manage my weapon?”

Atmar nodded and moved his forearm.

“Take my Glock and I’ll take your rifle. Don’t fire unless we’re fired upon. Got it?”

He stuck a bloody thumb up in the air. She needed both her hands to drag him backwards, away from the open area. She pulled the strap of the weapon around her neck and adjusted the AK-47 so it was hanging alongside her right thigh.

She opened an ammo pouch on Atmar’s belt and pulled out a fresh magazine. Ejected the old one, quickly shoved the new one in. She worked the charging handle to be safe.

She placed her Glock in Atmar’s palm and squeezed his hands around the handle. His arms rested on his chest.

“Are you sure you can handle it?”

He put out his arms, aiming the Glock at the licks of flame ahead of them.

“Good.”

The others in the patrol had continued to retreat. She and Atmar found themselves between their own people and the enemy. If the patrol had understood what she had taught them, they would provide cover as long as she was moving. She hit “send” on her com radio.

“Farouk! Cover our retreat! Atmar is wounded!”

Someone shouted in Dari behind them.

She hoped it was an acknowledgement.

She crouched at Atmar’s back, gripped him under the arms, and rose. He didn’t weigh much.

As fast as she could, she dragged Atmar backwards. They were exposed and vulnerable. But then she heard two hacking machine guns behind her.

To keep from slipping, she pressed her boots into the mud with each step. The AK-47 banged against her knee again and again.

The radio was one big riot of voices. They were only a few meters away from the rock by now. The blood rushed in her ears. Sweat dripped into her eyes, burning. Atmar groaned.

“Not much farther now.”

Suddenly, bullets rained down just in front of Atmar’s feet.

She caught a glimpse of movement in the corner of her eye.

The shots were close by.

Atmar had seen it too. He immediately lifted his arm and began to fire, just as she dragged him into shelter behind the rock. She quickly grabbed the AK-47 as she slid down and supported herself on her left knee. Atmar collapsed to the ground, still aiming his weapon at the shooter.

With the butt firmly against her shoulder, she put her finger on the trigger. She trembled. Another volley of shots thundered down beside her.

There, the muzzle flash!

She fired off two shots, then adjusted her aim and fired again. She let go of the trigger and threw herself onto her belly. Back in with her index finger, squeeze the trigger. Another two shots. Let go, squeeze again. Her ears were ringing.

She saw that Atmar was trying to use the Glock. That was a good sign.

A shout and a groan came from the shooter's position.

The volleys ended.

She fired off another round. Still quiet.

In the shelter of the rock, she switched out the magazines of both guns.

They weren't out of the woods yet.

She rushed to pull a roll of gauze from her tactical vest. She wound it firmly around Atmar's thigh. Her fingers worked quickly in the dark.

She pressed the "send" button.

"One enemy down! We're still coming, cover us!"

Farouk's voice replied right away:

"Copy!"

He was in control of the rest of the patrol. Once more, gunfire tore up the ground behind them. She grabbed Atmar under the arms and began to drag him again.

She glanced behind her. The stone wall was beginning to take shape. This wasn't by the book, but she was determined to do everything she could to bring everyone on the patrol home again.

Not her job? Screw it.

By the time they reached the wall, she had lost feeling in her arms.

But now they had reached safety. They were as safe as anyone could be in enemy territory in Dowlatabad at four thirty in the morning.

It was never an option to leave your wounded or dead comrades behind. She had hammered it into them over and over, day in and day out.

The retreat had taken a long time. Seconds had become minutes.

Now the medic had to be prepared. Otherwise Atmar would lose his leg.

“Send over a medic and an interpreter,” she panted in Dari.

Although she could make herself understood in both Dari and Pashto, she wanted to make sure there would be no misunderstandings.

“Coming,” said a voice right next to her.

She propped Atmar against the wall and held her water bottle to his mouth, tilting it carefully. He coughed, but he managed to swallow gulp after gulp. She tore away the remains of the uniform trousers that were hanging around his legs in shreds. She smelled blood and gunpowder.

She sat down across from him, along with the interpreter, and lifted Atmar’s wounded leg onto her shoulder. He wiped the blood from his face and looked at his hand.

“Don’t worry. You just cut a blood vessel on the surface. Morphine, an IV, and first-rate care will do wonders,” she said in English, trying to suppress the tears from her voice.

The interpreter translated her words into Dari.

With a faint smile, she patted Atmar on the shoulder and swallowed hard. Her throat constricted and her chest filled with a stifling pressure. She left him in the hands of the medic, who immediately began, in the light from a headlamp, to search for a vein to put the needle in.

She found Farouk in the middle of trying to spur on the other patrol members.

He stopped and looked at her for a long time.

“Thank you, Amanda, he wouldn’t have made it without you.”

She smiled. The last thing she wanted right now was to stand there in the mud in northern Balkh and start sobbing. She wiped off her watch.

04:32.

No one wanted to linger any longer than necessary. The enemy might regroup or start firing rockets at them at any moment.

Her chest ached. She closed her eyes and forced the tears back down. She was alive, and she had saved Farouk’s little brother from certain death. That was all that mattered right now.

Two minutes later, all three vehicles rolled out. Everyone was accounted for; they could head back to base.

She settled into the back seat behind Farouk. She hoped he wasn’t planning to assess the operation yet. She longed for a shower and some strong coffee. Closeness. It had been a long time.

She took her phone from her breast pocket. It had vibrated several times.

Three missed calls from “Bill Work.”

Why was he calling right now? It was two in the morning at home in Stockholm.

She held the phone between her cheek and shoulder. He answered after the first ring.

“Finally! I’ve been calling nonstop.”

“I see that. Must be important?”

“I need you as a negotiator, right away. Can you call back on a secure line?”

She felt her stomach lurch. Her primary job in northern Afghanistan was to build up a national task force, not to negotiate.

“Give me half an hour, and I’ll be back at base,” Amanda replied, giving a brief explanation of what had happened.

She heard Bill sigh on the other end.

“Shit. But you’re all in one piece?”

“Yeah. But I think I . . . I might have . . . terminated someone.”

“Amanda, you’re part of a long-term commitment, as an advisor to the Afghan patrol chief, you’re not supposed to engage in battle!”

She drew air in through her nose and closed her eyes. They burned.

“It’s dark, it’s pouring rain, and we’re slipping around a wet field in Dowlatabād and getting shot at by the resisters we’re supposed to apprehend. Advisor or not, an emergency is an emergency.”

“I understand. But Amanda, have your bags packed and ready to go as soon as we’ve talked on a secure line.”

“How long will I be away?”

“Unknown. Hurry. It’s urgent.”

The package weighed two kilos. He held it in one hand, feeling its heft. It was well-sealed. In two plastic bags. Several layers of duct tape. A padded brown envelope around the whole thing.

He had sniffed it before packing it back up. To his surprise, it didn't smell like anything. He resisted the temptation to lick a finger and stick it into the bag like they did in the movies.

He didn't dare.

He set the package on the table and looked at it. He took a seat on the couch, his hands clasped behind his neck, breathing heavily.

An ingrown toenail was starting to make itself known on one big toe. He yanked off his damp sock and eyed the nail. Typical. Same toe, it always came back.

His eyes landed on a recently purchased painting; it depicted a dramatic fight between a fox and a bird of prey. A dreadful painting. The other artwork showed an eagle setting its talons into a terrified duck. Animals in close contact with nature — no one portrayed it like Bruno Liljefors. That was the reply he got from the Swedish Arts Council when he questioned their choice of motif and artist. Then again, they had certainly taken him at his word when he requested something related to the natural world, preferably including water, something lively and full of action. But he had been thinking more along the lines of something lighthearted, in oils, by Zorn or Carl Larsson. A typical Swedish summer motif, naked bodies in the fresh air, maybe some peasants.

It was dark outside. The noise from the street had died away and the air trickling in through the window felt nice.

He shouldn't do it.

He really shouldn't do it.

But did he have a choice? There's always a choice. He had always told himself so. No matter what.

But at what price?

The radio began to broadcast. The little black screen lit up. Oskar just knew that this call would fall to him. It had been a rowdy night around Stureplan. All he really wanted to do was drive slowly across the Väster bridge to enjoy the sunrise and then stow the car in the garage.

“Zone one from 3-0. 31-9110, over.”

Of course it was for him. There was no getting out of it.

“31-9110, Väster bridge. Over.”

“We have a woman calling in from her morning walk. She’s on Norr Mälärstrand by the Mälär Pavilion. She says there’s someone lying in a bush.”

“A drunk?”

Oskar looked at his watch, noted the time — 05:07 — in his notebook, and sighed. Who was this loser at county dispatch, sending a sergeant to check on a drunk?

“Unclear, but it seems likely. The woman doesn’t want to approach, but she’ll remain on site until you arrive.”

He was about to ask why she would bother, but stopped himself just in time. Imagine, there were still people who would wait for the police to arrive. For the sake of a drunk.

“Copy, we’re on our way.”

Norr Mälärstrand was deserted, save for the woman in workout gear waving from the parking lot. Downtown Stockholm was still relatively empty of car traffic, even though the vacation period was over. Oskar rolled down his window.

“Is he down here?”

“Yes, in a bush, only his legs are sticking out.”

“Then we’ll be able to find him on our own. Thanks for your help.”

He rolled the window back up again and raised his hand in a wave so the woman would know she was no longer needed. At this time of day, he did not have the energy to talk to the general public unless absolutely necessary.

Maybe this wasn’t so bad after all, taking care of a drunk — he could really drag it out. Until quitting time. Then he could go home, shower, and stretch out in bed until it was time for his next shift.

Sure enough, he spotted two legs. Two skinny, bare calves that ended in a pair of white espadrilles. The body was on its stomach. A glimpse of a pink shirt was visible in the bush. The white,



knee-length shorts were accessorized with a narrow belt. What a fairy this guy was. Oskar crouched down and pulled on his gloves.

Never mess with a drunk without gloves. Whether they're homeless or high-brow, doesn't matter.

"Come on now, your beauty rest is over. Time to wake up. This is the police."

He pinched one calf.

It was cold and hard. Not soft and slack like on someone who's passed out. Oskar took hold of both legs and dragged the slender body out, simultaneously flipping it over.

"Shit!"

He recoiled immediately.

It was an awful sight.

Even for a jaded police officer in Sweden's capital city.

The upper portion of the body was covered in blood, dirt, and other detritus from the bushes. The face appeared to have been caught in a grimace and wet earth had stuck to the skin and turned into a layer of powder. The mouth was open, as if he had cried out in sheer terror when he realized he was about to die.

"Rickard, for Christ's sake! Come over here! It's a corpse!"

The rookie ran over and bent down to take a look. His face went pale.

"Oh my god! Is he . . . is he really dead?"

"Without a doubt. Seems like the poor bastard was stabbed. Check this out!"

Oskar cautiously drew aside the shirt, which had once been pale pink. He picked away the big green leaves that had stuck in the dried blood. There was a musty smell. Blood and wet earth. The trainee, who had taken a step back, crouched down.

"Those do actually look like stab wounds . . . now that you mention it . . ."

"Set up a wide perimeter for now, and I'll see what I can call in for reinforcements."

His trainee wasted no time running to the car. *Rookies are such weak little babies these days, they can't handle anything*, Oskar thought as he put a call in to county dispatch.

"3-0, from 31-9110, over."

"3-0, have you found the drunk? Over."

"Found him, for sure. But the drunk is a corpse. A man in his thirties, no wallet or ID. Stabbed."

"Yikes, copy that. I'll send the techs out right away. What else do you want?"

“A couple of patrol cars to search the area, please, you never know — the knife might have been tossed somewhere nearby.”

“Where is the body, exactly?”

“In the bushes between the Mälär Pavilion and the parking lot on Norr Mälärstrand. You know, the gay hangout, rainbow colors.”

“I understand.”

“We’ll come in and write our report as soon as the morning patrol has arrived and taken over.”

Not that Oskar intended to write a single line, but it sounded better if he said “we.” It was a no-brainer that report-writing would be assigned to any rookie who had the good fortune of being assigned to Oskar Karlsson. That was how you learned the craft of being a police officer.

“Copy. Anything else I should enter in?”

“Just that it was ice-cold when we got here. Your typical holdup murder, no murder weapon, no witnesses. Wallet missing.”

“Imagine that. Belongings?”

“An iPhone, powered on. Might be something for the investigator to dig around in.”

It was a lovely August morning and it was going to be an even lovelier day.

*Not for the person or people who’s about to wake up and wonder where the murder victim is, but for the rest of us, Oskar thought, shaking out a yellow county-issue hospital blanket.*

It just barely covered the dead body. At least he wouldn’t have to lie there in full view of the general public once the cheery morning tourists started passing by.

His shoulders ached. They had been drawn up, tense, for way too long. They cried out for a deep, vigorous massage. That was what he needed. And maybe a blowjob too, now that he thought about it.

He shoved his hips forward and fingered his belt.

Looked at his watch.

There was time.

He hurried to the door and locked it. No surprises, please. Quick, back to the sofa. He removed the six-armed brass candelabra from the coffee table. Pointless object, at least in the middle of summer, that Knot-of-Friendship piece. The candles softened in the heat and melted into the strangest shapes; they didn't exactly look like good representations of Swedish art.

The apple glowed from the lid of the computer. He opened it and Googled his way to PornHub.

He scrolled and clicked.

Nothing seemed to feel quite right.

Bad connection.

Low-quality video.

His eyes moved from the screen to the package. From the package back to the screen. He couldn't concentrate.

The porn clip was Russian. He closed it. Selected a new one.

That goddamn package!

Was he really going to do it?

The men in the video groaned like animals. He leapt for the volume button and turned it down. Not really the best time for someone to overhear what was going on behind his door.

His gaze fell back on the package.

What the hell should he do?

Two kilos. There was no doubt that was a lot of money.

He closed the computer and the groaning stopped. His hands moving decisively, he tore open the first seal on the package and turned it upside down. The plastic-wrapped contents landed on the sofa with a thud. He carefully cut through the packaging.

The bags were sealed with red zip-locks. Some white powder floated onto the marble floor. He scraped it under the sofa with one foot.

With caution, he carried one bag to the bathroom. His hands were sweaty and he could hear his own shallow breathing, but . . . goddammit.

Goddammit, he had made up his mind.

As usual, the tactical vest felt way too heavy. She let it fall to the floor the minute she stepped through the barracks door in Mazar-i-Sharif. Her bulletproof vest was sticking to her torso under her uniform jacket. It always stank after a few hours' use, old and new sweat blending together. She yanked off the Velcro strap and stretched her back, vertebra by vertebra. Her spine cracked audibly.

She really needed a chiropractor, same old story after every operation.

She knew the number by heart. She leaned back in the desk chair as the phone rang on the other end of the secure line.

"Finally!"

"I called as soon as I could."

"How are things with you?"

"I'm sure they'll look up once I've washed off all the mud and blood and gotten a few hours of beauty sleep."

The rain outside the window had moved from a downpour to a drizzle. For once the air felt full of oxygen. She heard Bill muttering on the other end.

"I'm sorry to disrupt your plans."

"You're the boss; you're in charge. But it must be important, considering that it's the middle of the night for you?"

She heard the clinking of a spoon as Bill stirred something in a cup, followed by a big gulp. It was probably the white mug with a photo of his kids, Elvira and Emanuel, on it.

Bill had received it for Father's Day the year before and had used it at work every day since.

There was a deep sigh on the phone.

"Two Swedish diplomats have vanished in Kabul."

"What on earth?"

"They've been missing for seven or eight hours by now. Apparently they left the embassy in an armored car driven by a local chauffeur. No one has seen or heard from them or the driver since they called in a position report near a roundabout called something that starts with M, and then once or twice more north of Kabul."

He spelled the name, trying to make out his own notes.

"Are you talking about Masood Circle?"

"I think that's what it says, do you know it?"

“It’s near the American embassy, so a good place to send a position report from, but unfortunately it doesn’t tell us much about where they might have been headed. Or do we know where they were going?”

Kidnapped? Disposed of? She hadn’t expected this when she accepted her mission to Afghanistan.

“That’s the sort of thing it’s up to you to find out.”

“But if someone has assigned this job to us, there must be more information, right?”

“It seems there’s chaos both at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs here in Stockholm and at the embassy in Kabul. The information that’s been pouring back and forth is shaky, to say the least. The ministry doesn’t have the capacity to handle this sort of thing, and the embassy has poor security routines, like they all do. So you can count on having a lot to clear up.”

“What seems most likely?” she asked as she unfolded a map of the country.

She followed the roads leading north from Masood Circle with her index finger. In seven or eight hours they could have reached Mazar-i-Sharif. Or made it into Pakistan. She hoped for the former; the nearly lawless borderlands of Pakistan would be tough for a negotiator.

“They might have had the misfortune of being in an area that was hit by several powerful bombs that went off simultaneously, earlier today. Or, more accurately, last night. The attack was the worst in years, looks really nasty on CNN. The Taliban has taken credit by way of a video on YouTube. But no one at the embassy knows any details. Just that the Swedes are missing.”

“So in other words, they could be dead.”

Once again she heard the sound of a spoon against the porcelain mug.

“Whatever happened, you’re one of Sweden’s best and most experienced negotiators, and this is going to take someone with your kind of grit. Plus you’re already on site in Afghanistan,” Bill added.

“Of course I’ll go, but then there won’t be any presence from our Swedish team here; my two colleagues won’t be back for a day or two.”

“This is higher priority. The Afghans will have to make do without any advisors.”

“So no one down there knows anything, because it’s not even clear where they were going?”

She sighed and wrote down what little information there was. When did you start to miss someone, if you didn’t even know when they were supposed to arrive home?

“All I know is that they were meant to have returned to the embassy a long time ago. Can you jump on the first plane to Kabul, so I can tell the Ministry of Justice you’re on your way?”

“The Ministry of Justice?”

“Well, at the moment the circle is very small. Someone at Foreign Affairs talked to Justice who contacted Alice Bohman, who called and woke me up because I’m the pro tem chief of the force. No one else knows about it.”

“So on our side, it’s just you and me?”

She hoped the answer would be yes. That would mean solo work in Kabul. At least at first.

“Correct. And that’s how it has to stay, initially. Go to the embassy and try to get some clarity about what happened, and call me once you’ve talked to the ambassador.”

“Hey listen, this Alice Bohman? She doesn’t know anything about kidnappings, does she, if that’s what’s going on?”

The last time she saw Bohman speak publicly, she had spoken uninterrupted about the restructuring of the police force, without a script, for over an hour. How successful it would be with some management consulting, budgetary discipline, and uniformity. Unfortunately there had been nothing about the police force’s duty to society and who should do what. The officers who had been ordered to attend had mentally logged out after five minutes.

“Probably not, but she’s along as a safeguard for when Justice comes calling; she’s the chief of the National Criminal Investigation Department, after all.”

Obviously titles came before competence.

“There’s a plane from Mazar-i-Sharif to Kabul every day at ten; I’ll try to get a seat on it.”

“Great, I’ll do what I can to set up reinforcements for you.”

“But no rookies, please, Bill. I’d rather work alone.”

“I know. One more thing.”

“Yes?”

“Keep this under wraps. Your contact person is the ambassador and no one else. Justice and Foreign Affairs want absolute discretion.”

“Got it.”

She closed her eyes. Sleep would have to wait. So would her written report about the events of the night before.

She fingered the police badge on the desk. The leather was wearing down in one corner.

Amanda Lund. 3512. National Criminal Investigation.

She didn’t look a day over twenty-five in the black-and-white photo. The gray shadows concealed the crow’s feet emerging at the corners of her eyes, and the lines that ran from either side of her nose down to her mouth. The freckles that dotted her narrow nose were clearly visible in the photo.

Her light, curly hair framed her face in a childish sort of way. Her looks were quite average, except for her height — her 184 centimeters attracted daily attention in Afghanistan.

She closed her badge and slid it into her backpack along with her passport, vaccination card, and ISAF ID. You were nobody in Afghanistan without an ISAF ID. She carefully folded a suit, three shirts, and a pair of jeans into the bottom of the backpack. A small first-aid kit, a flashlight, and her Dictaphone went into the outer pocket.

One of the magazines of her weapon was empty.

Atmar had managed to fire fifteen bullets at their enemy. But with his hands trembling and blood running into his eyes, it was unlikely that Atmar's fire had neutralized the Taliban fighter.

She lined up five full magazines: one for the gun, two for the pocket on her hip holster, and two for her luggage.

A little while later, she was walking the hundred meters from the air-conditioned waiting room to the Hercules aircraft, its engines already running. The hot, dry air hit her face. Gone was all her post-shower freshness.

The plane was nearly empty. She stretched out on a cot. She was tired and out of breath. She couldn't be getting sick — there was no time for that.

She had hard work ahead of her.

Strange events, but she'd had dealings with Foreign Affairs employees before and few of them seemed to take such little care for their own safety as they did.

She felt around her neck and found the medallion. She slid it back and forth between her thumb and index finger and felt the engraved date. It was nearly two years old and meant a great deal to both of them. And yet they lived in different places. She had a one-bedroom on Parkgatan in Kungsholmen and he lived in a detached house in Näsbyark. They met in secret like teenagers and avoided public spaces when they were together.

It was too early to send a text. Not because of the time difference, but because André probably hadn't dropped his daughter off at tennis lessons yet.

Amanda had fallen for him hard when their paths crossed during an investigation. He, in his role as the prosecutor, had been standing on the stairs of City Hall in Kungsholmen, waiting for a plaintiff. Amanda, who had intervened in the crime while off duty and was called as a witness as a result, had hurried up, out of breath, running late as usual.



Together they had made sure that the world got a little better: a man was sentenced to prison and a woman was able to live her life without a constant tormentor beating the crap out of her. It had been the prosecutor and the police officer against the rest of the world.

The gigantic aircraft slowly taxied onto the runway.

They were punctual.

09:58.

Ice-cold air poured through the vents as the odor of jet fuel filled the plane. The scent of coffee wafted from the cockpit and a chipper pilot welcomed everyone aboard.

Outside, the air was already shimmering above the broiling ground. The sky was blue, but visibility was poor. A thick haze of smog and exhaust hid the mountains she knew surrounded them.

She rested her head on her helmet and summed up what she knew. Two Swedes had vanished in one of the most dangerous cities in the world; shoddy routines and an unnecessarily protracted process had meant that they were reported missing hours after their disappearance. An attack that left many dead and wounded might have taken their lives. No matter their nationality, diplomats carried targets on their backs, and anything might have happened in Kabul.

Had they been headed on a work-related mission? If they were, they shouldn't have left the embassy so late at night. At this point, they could have been gone for fourteen or fifteen hours.

That was anything but a promising start for a negotiator.

Were they even alive?

Steam rose from the hot water as it flowed into the sink. The sound gave him the urge to pee.

He weighed the bag in his hand. Dammit, he had to get rid of it now.

His fingers fumbled at the red zip-lock.

The seat of the toilet was already up from him most recent visit. His hand trembling, he rested the bag against the bowl and poured the white powder in. It mixed with the water until the worn patches in the enamel were no longer visible.

His underarms were wet and he realized that sweat was dripping from his nose into the water. Oh god, he wished here were at home and out of here. Away from this fucking powder and everything else that had happened to him.

He flushed, and the powder swirled around and disappeared.

*Don't do too much at once.*

The last thing he wanted was to block up the plumbing. He poured and flushed. Poured and flushed again. At last all the bags were empty.

He stuffed them into the trash can under the sink and tied the trash liner closed. *No unnecessary risks.* He closed the lid of the toilet and sat down. It was done. A feeling of calm began to spread through him.

He switched the water from hot to cold and cupped his hands under the stream. He closed his eyes and brought his face to the cold water in his hands.

Now it was gone. There was no proof that it had ever been in his possession. He dried his hands and put lotion on his cuticles.

He had never sent it. Thank God he'd never sent it.

Oscar cursed the summer staffing. Eight hours of rest between shifts, and a shortage of officers everywhere. The minister should know — he'd demanded 20,000 officers. Oskar snorted when he saw that morning's murder investigation waiting for him on his desk.

The fairy murder.

Almost untouched.

But that wasn't his problem. When you were a sergeant on the Norrmalm emergency mobilization unit, tasked with leading operations in the capital city, a murder investigation was obviously low priority.

It had already happened. It was passé.

And yet it *was* his concern, at least for the moment. He was the boss, and his unit was supposed to lend support to the investigative unit during the afternoon. Strange that it never went the other way around. The emergency mobilization unit was never allowed to work undisturbed. His eyes were drawn to the memo the patrol officer had written. The information almost filled one sheet of A4.

On August 23, 2014, patrol 31-9220 and 31-9240 searched the cordoned area, but found nothing of interest. K-9 patrol 39-9350 searched the area with no result. At the time of writing no reports of missing persons, with a description matching the murder victim's, have been filed with the police. Patrol 31-9220 has contacted the owner of the restaurant Mälars Pavilion twice for the purpose of questioning, but with no result. No other witness statements have been filed with the police.

Not much had been done, Oskar noticed. No knocking on doors in the area, no measures taken to identify the man. They hadn't even been able to find the restaurant owner for questioning.

Oskar called in one of the rookies — they should certainly be allowed to help with this task. For his part, he was going to book tickets to the match between

Djurgården and Malmö FF for next week, and then he would have a few minutes left over to plan out the day's patrol car schedule.

"Can you get hold of the owner for questioning? When did he close, did he see any scuffle at the restaurant, does he recognize the man by his clothing if you describe it? Ask whatever the hell you can to move us forward."

"Of course, anything else?"

"Check and see if we've received any new missing persons reports that could match our guy. Then we'll have done our bit," Oskar said, clicking his way to the Djurgården website.

He should have bought a season ticket — at this point a single seat cost five hundred kronor, it was ridiculous.

The rookie clicked his heels like he was standing at attention and stepped out of the room, leaving Oskar on his own again. He took large sips of watery tea from the machine and skimmed through the introduction of the report; he'd okayed it himself before heading home.

Maybe it wasn't quite by the book to review and sign off on a report that had been drawn up by his own patrol, but what the hell, he'd been tired after the night shift.

He read the text under the heading "PERSONAL EFFECTS."

A sinking feeling in his stomach.

That goddamn phone!

He had never charged it!

He'd been so tired. So distracted. He hadn't even bothered to look through the contacts for a phone number to identify the poor bastard. Or to find a killer, for that matter. He had been dead sure that an investigator would tackle the phone in the morning. Not that the investigation would be practically untouched by his next shift, and fall into his lap like a real shit sandwich.

Oskar was ashamed. But it was too late to do anything about it now.

He went to the property room and found the brown paper bag; he himself had written the registration number on it a few hours ago.

Sure enough. The battery was drained. Dead.

In other words: a code would have to be entered for it to work again.

So fucking typical. How was he going to hide his mistake? He had been unprofessional and sloppy. He shoved the bag back in its spot.

His last hope vanished when he returned to the office and looked up the property and evidence form.

Black iPhone 5, powered on. No scratches.

Of course the rookie had noted that the fucking phone was powered on! Still, the right thing to do was probably pretend nothing was wrong, just a little misunderstanding, and the days would pass; then no one would know whose responsibility it had been to charge the phone. In any case, this alternative was the least awful right now.

His tea was cold, but it didn't matter. He swished it around his mouth and read the report from beginning to end once more.

The passerby who had called the police. Should have at least had a few words with the woman, if only for the sake of protocol. After all, she had stuck around to wait for them.

But what would she have said? That she had called county dispatch and reported a body. She'd already done that, so what more could there be to say?

Oskar could hear the rustling of a new uniform approaching in the corridor outside his door. He closed the investigation file. One second later, the rookie showed up in his doorway. Red in the face, breathing hard. Sure enough, his uniform still bore its creases from being in the uniform storage room. The older officers liked to say they could smell their younger colleagues coming from miles off.

"Well, how are things going for us?"

"I got hold of the owner!"

The rookie's eyes were round and he was breathing through a wide-open mouth. It would take a few years before he conducted himself with the same calm and confident manner Oskar did.

"And?" Oskar said, spinning around in his chair.

"He says the restaurant closed at three just like usual, no fights or anything."

"Okay then. So we can confirm that the murder happened after three but before five in the morning. There's always something. Anything else?"

"No reports of missing persons, unfortunately."

Oskar sighed loudly and put his feet up on the pale birch veneer of the filing cabinet. Why couldn't anything go his way?

"We'll have to give it some time — maybe he'll be missed at work in the next few days," Oskar said, trying to rub away the black marks he'd left on the filing cabinet.

"Should we question some more witnesses? Other people who were at the restaurant last night might have seen something, right?"

Always so eager. Rookies were all the same. Wanted to overdo everything.

“No, we have other work to do; this will probably turn into a case for the hate crimes unit as soon as the guy has been identified.”

Oskar pulled on his black leather gloves, drenched them in hand sanitizer, and rubbed it around.

“Why? They’re on vacation, almost all of them.”

“Because he’s probably gay, and was killed outside a gay establishment. Hate crime, open-and-shut. It’s their problem if they don’t have the staff. It’s enough that we have to support the fucking investigation unit,” he said, folding the gloves together and putting them into his pants pocket.

Oskar spun around on his chair again. A clear signal to the rookie that this meeting was over. As soon as he was alone, he confirmed his ticket and seat, a corner in the lower stands. At last, some wind in his sails.

He began to page through the pile of paper on his desk. The summary from the crime-scene tech was at the bottom. After a passage about the body’s position when it was discovered and a description of the area, there was a brief text about the victim.

Unidentified man

Age: 30-40

Likely cause of death: thirteen stab wounds to the chest and belly, about 2 cm in width

No signs of defense wounds

No other visible signs of injury

Rigor mortis has begun

A response from the medical examiner to determine identity and time of death is expected tomorrow

Oskar stared straight ahead, his mouth open.

Shit, the guy *had* been stiff!

He’d felt it himself, when he pinched the calf. Now that he thought about it. He took a deep breath.

What the hell did this mean?

## DAY ONE

8

Shāre Naw. A strange place to put an embassy. Right across from the Ministry of Interior Affairs. *It'd be hard to find a place under greater threat*, Amanda thought as she was led to the ambassador's office.

She cast a glance at a whiteboard that displayed the week's transport schedule and who would be heading where. The name "Sven" recurred each day of the week. He must be a busy man.

A brass nameplate adorned the door.

Ambassador Sven Leijonhufvud.

Sounded like he was nobility. That was more than could be said of the Lund family. Her lineage was all average Swede, blue eyes and blond hair, descending from the region around Västerås. So he already had the upper hand, before they'd even met.

She knocked hesitantly at the door.

"Yes?" came a voice from inside.

She opened the door a crack and was met by steamy hot air flowing in through the window.

"Excuse me, I'm detective inspector Lund."

"Lovely. Come in."

He rose from his chair behind an ornate Rococo desk. The features of the man who approached her seemed slack and loose.

"The minister said that task force officers and negotiators were on the way?"

"That's right. I'm an officer and negotiator with the national task force., part of the National Criminal Investigation Department."

The ambassador let his glasses fall to the tip of his nose and studied her. Amanda held out her police badge. As if she had to prove what'd she'd just told him. The ambassador took the badge and sized it up. He actually read what it said.

She felt uncomfortable. This was not the reception she'd been expecting.

"I see, so when Sweden finds two of its citizens missing in one of the most dangerous cities in the world, we send Detective Inspector Lund. The best the Kingdom of Sweden has to offer?"

He closed her badge and handed it back as he called to his secretary that it was high time to serve coffee. Amanda stood there in silence. What a start. He was obviously quite full of himself. She bit her lip.

She suddenly felt out of place in the elegant office, with her dusty uniform and boots. Large, beautiful paintings covered the walls. The sofa and chairs where they would apparently be drinking coffee were upholstered in a bold floral pattern against a pale background. They were from Svenskt Tenn, even a simple constable could tell that much.

The office was so large that the Afghan rug, which had to be close to ten square meters, had plenty of room to spread out between the sofa and the well-preserved desk. Mahogany or walnut. Piles of papers, binders, and books covered most of its surface. This was the sort of man who would claim that a messy desk was a sign of creativity. Or maybe a structured mind. She had seen it before, and it wasn't usually true.

"Have a seat . . . Miss or Mrs.?"

He gestured toward the sofa and chairs.

"I'd prefer to be called Amanda."

She sat on the very edge of the sofa cushion so she would dirty as little of it as possible.

"Amanda. You were born on July 10, 1980. Task force officer and negotiator with the NCID, on a mission to train troops in northern Afghanistan."

The ambassador filled their coffee cups without looking at her.

"Correct."

He sat down across from her.

"Tell me more."

"I think you've already mentioned everything worth knowing for this assignment. I'm in Afghanistan as an advisor and I am taking part in the development and education of the Afghan National Task Force in Mazar-e-Sharif."

"In what capacity?"

"Tactics. I'm working as a mentor to a patrol leader as they go out on operations."

Amanda thought she noticed him raise one eyebrow slightly, but he didn't say anything. She went on:

"The assignment will last all year and is the result of a decision made by the Afghan Ministry of the Interior and ISAF. Normally I work with kidnapping and hostage situations within and beyond the borders of Sweden, on cases that involve Swedish citizens."



He nodded and twisted a signet ring that adorned his right ring finger. An IWC watch with a dark blue face peeked from under the cuff of his shirt as he reached for his cup. He was stylish and timeless.

She was sure the man sitting across from her was normally an attractive, stately man in his prime. His thick, brown hair didn't have even a hint of gray. He was smartly dressed and had without a doubt come up through the government's diplomat program. *He must be a real ladies' man*, Amanda thought.

But he looked tired. He was unshaven and there were prominent bags under his bloodshot eyes, which only added to the exhausted impression he gave.

*Time to take initiative. Age isn't everything*, Amanda thought.

"The clock is ticking, Sven. It's your staff members who are missing. If we're going to make any progress, you have to give me an idea of what is going on."

She watched for a reaction but when he didn't say anything she gathered her courage.

"Now."

He looked up, looking almost as surprised as she felt in the wake of her demand.

"Well for Christ's sake ask me some questions and we'll get moving!"

He stood suddenly and walked to the window. He looked out at the safety barricades on the road, and the booms that were raised and lowered for the traffic. Amanda took the opportunity to slide her hand into her pants pocket and start the Dictaphone. She had the feeling it wouldn't be in the best interest of their relationship to ask for permission.

A bit startled by her sudden advantage, she cleared her throat.

"Right. I need answers to a couple of questions. After that I want to get an idea of the routines here, when people leave the embassy, about your transport and communication equipment, and so on. Okay?"

"Certainly," said the ambassador, without turning back around.

His shoulders were drawn up and his jacket strained across his back.

"To start off, who are the missing persons?"

"Ingrid Larsson and Mikael Berg. Ingrid is the third embassy secretary and Mikael is an aid worker with SIDA, and both of them are part of the permanent staff here at the embassy, so to speak."

"What sort of work do they do, more specifically?"

"Ingrid mostly works on consular issues here at the embassy; Mikel initiates and follows up on aid projects out in the various provinces."

"Ages?" she asked as she took notes.

“In their early forties, both of them.”

“Can you be more specific?”

He sighed.

“I don’t know offhand. Talk to the secretary, she can look up that information.”

Amanda set her pen on the coffee table. Who was this bastard she’d ended up with? If the diplomats were still alive, every minute was valuable. She took a deep breath.

“This isn’t going to work. If I’m going to form an understanding of what happened to your staff members, you’re going to have to sit down with me and tell me everything you know. Furthermore, I’m under orders to communicate solely with you.”

“What if they were in the terror attack?”

He turned to her and ran his hand across his mouth, then through his thick hair.

“Then we need to find out about it before it’s a lead story on the BBC and you’re inundated with questions from journalists. It’d be extremely embarrassing if we don’t know whether the diplomats were killed when the news comes calling, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“How and when did they leave the embassy?” she asked without taking her eyes from him.

“They left around nine at night. Headed out for some private thing; they’re an established couple here at the embassy and they probably wanted some time to themselves. Apparently they called in a position report three times, and there was no contact after that, no one’s been able to reach any of them, Ingrid, Mikael, or their driver. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

“Some private thing? Where were they going?”

“I don’t think that’s quite clear.”

Amanda scratched her head with the pen and took a deep breath. It was too late now to criticize the embassy’s worthless security practices. That would get them nowhere.

“What measures have you taken since you realized they had disappeared?”

“Me?”

She nodded. He responded with a question just like a criminal who wanted to buy time to think in an interrogation.

“As ambassador, I have a personal responsibility for everyone here, not just a handful of Swedes from Foreign Affairs, if that’s what you’re thinking, but also all the local hires. Everyone is worried; I’ve had my plate full just dealing with them. I’ve also spoken with the Foreign Affairs office in Stockholm about what happened. I certainly didn’t get much sleep last night.”

He twisted his ring and ran his hand across his mouth again. The skin of his throat flushed red; the color seeped up toward his cheeks.

"It's not my intention to criticize you, it's just something I need to ask to do my job. Please sit down; we need to continue."

He pulled up suit pants a little and sat back down again. He poured more coffee and stirred it slowly until the sugar had dissolved.

"Like I don't have enough problems to solve. I don't need two colleagues missing from my cadre."

He leaned forward and rested his forehead on his hand. She chanced a gentle touch of his arm.

"First off, we need to find out if they were killed in the attack. No two kidnappings are the same, but if it turns out that's what's going on, we'll work our tails off around the clock until it's solved. I promise you that. This sort of thing is hard on everyone."

He nodded slowly. She looked at her cup. She didn't want to ask for milk now that he seemed to be cooperating to some extent.

"If they are among the dead, there isn't much for us to do, but as long as it hasn't been proven we will assume that they're alive."

A slight nod let her know that he was listening.

"Tell me about the driver. Is he one of the local hires?"

"He's worked here for a few years. Ali."

"Ali . . . what?"

Sven shook his head and looked vaguely ashamed. It was clear he didn't know the driver's last name.

"I need his personal information and a description of where he lives. Can you ask your secretary to find that for me?"

He nodded in response.

"Can he be trusted? How aware is he of security procedures?"

She bit her lip. Two questions at once could be too much for someone under pressure.

"Yes, I believe he is. As I understand it, he knows what's what security-wise, but I'm probably not the right man to judge."

Amanda noticed this first sign of humility and went on.

"Do you have any other local drivers?"

"We have Otman too."

“Does he speak English?”

“That’s a condition of employment.”

“I’d like to borrow him later today and drive the same way Ingrid and Mikael went, to find out what their various route options were like.”

And to take a look at the site of the attack, of course, but she didn’t say that out loud.

“Does the car have diplomatic plates?”

“That’s all we use.”

“Thanks, so now you’re aware that I will take Otman and be gone for a while this afternoon.”

“Do as you wish.”

*Damn straight, it’s my case,* Amanda thought, smiling at Sven.

“Are there any specific threats against the embassy?”

“No, Sweden is a generous country and contributes to the rebuilding of the nation; the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan has actually been here doing aid work for over thirty years. We have undertaken quite a comprehensive engagement here.”

“So there’s no concrete threat beyond the general threat against any embassy?”

“That’s my understanding, anyway, but I’m also aware that some find the Swedish military presence within ISAF provocative. But it’s been like that since 2002 when the Swedish effort began, so it’s nothing new.”

“Is there any threat against you?”

“Me? Not that I know of. Like what?”

“I’m just asking. But if there is any, it’s important for me to know about it. The rest of the staff?”

“I don’t think so. Right now they’re shaken and sad, so if you’ll excuse me we’ll have to wrap this up soon so I can attend a brief informational meeting with them.”

Amanda continued to make notes. Even though she had to drag every word out of him, the page of her notebook was filling up. There was enough information to start her own investigation.

“Let’s say they’ve been abducted. Could you have been the intended target?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“Oh, there’s just as big a threat to any diplomat in Kabul. If they were kidnapped, that is.”

“Where were you when they disappeared?”

“Here at the embassy. I haven’t moved a meter. I’ve given priority to being available to my staff. There are quite a few of them, if you count drivers, interpreters, security guards, and cleaning staff,” he said, extending his arm to look at the watch under the cuff of his sleeve.

“What do you know about the attack in Dih Sabz last night?”

“The usual.”

Jesus Christ, how hard could it be to give her a straight answer? This was worse than interrogating a teenager.

“And what, exactly, might that be?”

“Simultaneous explosions in several places, a number of dead and wounded.”

“Westerners?”

A barely perceptible nod. He turned his face away but Amanda caught his distressed expression and heard a deep sigh.

“Isn’t there anything being said about nationalities in your internal networks? Surely there has to be some chatter, even if it’s just speculation among the ambassadors?”

“All they’re saying is that there were several civilians, Westerners, among the dead and wounded.”

“What other Swedes are there here in Kabul, beyond those who belong to the embassy?”

“The special forces with the military and a couple of people who work at ISAF headquarters or with EUPOL.”

“Have you spoken to any of them?”

“Jesus, I can’t do that! It would spread like wildfire, and presto, it’s all over the headlines at home that afternoon,” he said as he stood up.

He slowly walked to the desk and leaned over it. He rested his weight on his arms. The seam of his jacket looked like it might burst at any moment.

“Anything else for chatter?”

Without turning, the ambassador said in a low voice, “There are burned-out Toyota Land Cruisers along the road where the attack took place.”

“I see.”

“I haven’t said anything to the rest of the staff yet, just so you know,” he said, whirling around and fixing his eyes on Amanda.

“Perhaps, in your meeting, you can stress that they should not talk to friends and family back in Sweden about what happened. If Ingrid and Michael were kidnapped, we negotiators prefer to avoid the media for as long as possible.”

Amanda thought that the same ought to go for him. Headlines about missing Swedish diplomats who vanished under mysterious circumstances did not make for good publicity. It wouldn't help Sven's career either.

“It must absolutely not reach the media that we have . . .”

“ . . . Such terrible security practices?”

She couldn't help finishing his sentence. He needed to hear it, she felt. His lips narrowed.

“Minutes that might be valuable to my staff have trickled away without the least attempt to find them,” he said with a snort.

“That's why it's so important that I have access to all available information.”

“I've told you what I know,” Sven said, taking a seat in the easy chair.

He took off his glasses, exhaled onto the lenses, and rubbed them with a Burberry-patterned handkerchief.

“Who is in charge of the technical investigation at the site of the attack? Can you call someone there and try to worm out some information?” Amanda asked.

“It's solely Afghans right now. We don't have any contacts there.”

*So much for “comprehensive engagement in the rebuilding of the nation,”* Amanda thought. Apparently they were above talking to the Afghans themselves.

“Then I suppose we'll have to wait a few more hours.”

An Afghan technical investigation really just wasn't much to go on. They were often in such a rush to clean up the attack site that they missed vital clues, and then it was too late.

“So what's the most plausible explanation?” he asked, staring into his cup and twisting his ring.

“Sixteen or seventeen hours have passed since they vanished from our radar. That's a long time. It might mean that all three of them are dead. A kidnapper ought to have made contact one way or another if they're interested in quick cash.”

“What do you mean?”

Sven looked up and met her gaze. As she knew from experience, it was a bad sign that there had been no word from a kidnapper.

“If they don't want to negotiate with us, there's no reason for them to contact us.”

“So what do they want, then?” Sven asked, without looking away.

“To make an example. It’s always an attention-grabber to show off some kidnapped diplomats, if you know what I mean.”

Sven groaned. He was probably starting to figure out what had happened, but she might as well be very clear.

“The attack comes at the same time as Ingrid, Mikael, and Ali are out. They *may* have been in the area, depending on which road they chose to take just north of Kabul.”

“So . . . kidnapped by someone who . . . who doesn’t want money,” Sven said, taking a breath before he tried to complete his sentence.

“ . . . or . . . ”

“Or killed in the attack,” Amanda concluded, rising from her seat.

Amanda stepped into the cool air of the car and pulled at the seatbelt. The warmest month of the year. The temperature hadn't dipped under thirty-four degrees Celsius a single day. The air was still, no relief of a breeze anywhere. But at least Kabul was at a higher elevation — 1,800 meters above sea level did make a difference. Mazar-i-Sharif in the north was much hotter at only 400 meters.

"Drive north. The last place they reported passing is in that direction, we know that much," Amanda said, unfolding the map against the dashboard.

"And then what?" Otman asked as he slowly drove out through the iron gates of the embassy.

"The most likely scenario is that they were headed for the American base in Bagram; there aren't many other places that are considered safe. We'll drive that way until I say we should turn off. Okay?"

Amanda observed him in profile. He was young; he couldn't be a day over twenty. Tall and gangly with a long face and narrow green eyes.

"I'll drive wherever Madame likes."

She could hear the mullahs outside, slowly sounding their calls to prayer. A guard acknowledged them with a nod and raised the boom as they drove out of the well-to-do diplomat neighborhood. Vegetable sellers stood on the street outside the first roadblock, trying to drown each other out. One second they were calling out prices of pomegranates and bananas; in the next they were shooing away begging children.

This truly was a land of contrasts. Life in the countryside was quiet and simple, with tools reminiscent of the stone age. In Kabul was the splendor of the five-star Serena Hotel, full of people in suits drawing up plans for the future of Afghanistan.

She opened a bottle of water and swallowed two painkillers. Her head felt heavy and her body ached. The previous night's action in Dowlatabad and the lack of sleep had left their mark. She patted the magazine of her gun and pressed it down an extra time.

She had exchanged her uniform for a black suit and blue shirt, to avoid attracting attention. Her blazer was already dusted with fine sand.

Traffic flowed on, no jams or unnecessary stops. The road north was freshly paved and sported barriers in the median. They gave at least some protection from suicide bombers looking for their targets in oncoming traffic. It was a noticeable improvement over how it looked the last time she was there, when there were potholes everywhere.



The internet cafes they passed were full of cheerful teenagers. They somehow seemed to radiate a belief in the future that didn't exist in the countryside, Amanda thought.

The road narrowed and both sides were edged with long walls that surrounded squatty, square houses. Groups of young men watched them go by. There were no women to be seen. They were on the other side of the walls, protected from sight. Amanda had read that rural women had seven children on average. A dizzying thought for a childless Westerner who wanted to be in charge of her own life.

What had the diplomat couple been thinking when they took off last night? Without leaving detailed information about their destination? Had they been ignoring the analyses about threat levels in Kabul, or was it worse — had they not even read the reports?

Whatever the case, it was a failure. They had been stupid and naïve. Now the department had to get involved, and people like her had to work in a dangerous environment in order to find them.

If they were even alive.

If they had been in Dih Sabz during the attack, no one would need to look for them. The BBC had broadcast a lengthy segment from the site and there wasn't much left aside from burned-out cars.

The number of dead had reached thirty-two.

There was speculation that the bombs had been made of ammonium nitrate mixed with diesel and placed in three different vehicles, which blew up after forcing their way into a Western convoy. When first responders arrived on the scene, and ambulance drove all the way up and detonated as well.

Not that unusual.

A second charge was set off as soon as everyone began to relax.

Ambulances and police cars were in high demand; they were constantly being stolen by terrorists. Guaranteed access, since emergency vehicles were always allowed in.

She leaned back in the passenger seat. What did she think she would find? Driving around randomly wouldn't help her move forward on this assignment. But she needed to see the site of the attack and she wanted to see the route options. Maybe she could figure out where they'd been going based on their final position report.

An American convoy turned onto the road ahead of them. Four military vehicles with a bulletproof shield sticking up from each flatbed. They thundered along at high speeds, using loudspeakers to make two begging women to move aside. Otman braked, automatically leaving space between their car and the convoy. If you got too close, you risked being shot, everyone knew that. Amanda let out her breath and drank the rest of her water.

She had been better.

She found Bagram on the map. They would turn around there, and make their way back along smaller roads. That would have to do for today.

She glanced at her watch. Already three in the afternoon. Even though she'd taken the first flight she could and had time to get an idea of what had happened from Ambassador Leijonhufvud, time was passing way too fast.

If they were still alive, each minute was precious. If they had died in the attack, the lack of confirmation after eighteen hours had passed was an embarrassment. But that wasn't her problem. It was Ambassador Leijonhufvud's.

Then she saw it.

It was carelessly parked just after the curve, at the start of a long straightaway. A white Toyota Land Cruiser with diplomatic plates glinted in the sunshine.

Her heart beat faster.

She had found it. This was so much better than she'd dared to hope.

"Drive past it; don't slow down."

Otman looked at her.

"You heard me, keep going. I want to see how it looks."

"As you wish, Madame," Otman said.

What if they were in the car, dead? The thought hadn't occurred to her until now. She had been operating on two alternatives: abducted or killed in the attack.

Not killed and left in an abandoned car.

She focused all her senses. Only fifteen or twenty meters left to the car. The shoulder behind them was deserted. The car was covered in a thin, thin layer of sand. The Swedish flag attached to the top of the antenna hung slack, amplifying the feeling of abandonment.

"Drive up as close as you can so I look in the car."

Otman slowed down and passed a half-meter from the car.

The backseat was empty.

Something lay on the floor behind the passenger seat. A bundle?

Front seat — empty.

No blood on the windshield. Nothing outside the car.

All of a sudden they were past the car. Her heart was pounding and she gasped for air.

She had been holding her breath.

"Turn around and park behind it," Amanda said.

She regretted she'd changed into a suit. She felt uncomfortable without her hip holster and the magazine pocket on her thigh. Her pants felt tight around her middle and her waistband was damp. Her gun was in a holster on a thin red belt that couldn't hold up to the weight. Her blazer hid the gun, at least, but she wasn't used to drawing from her waist.

She should have practiced more. But it was too late now.

She walked around the car and peered in. The door locks were down. A black shawl embroidered with blue flowers and a couple of empty water bottles lay between the front seats, next to the hand brake. On the floor was a full green canvas bag. *Always something to investigate*, Amanda thought. She photographed the car and took its coordinates with her GPS unit.

She waved Otman over.

"Do you recognize the shawl and the bag on the floor?"

Otman rested his forehead against the window.

"The shawl belongs to Ingrid and the bag is Ali's. He always carries a change of clothes, a packed meal, and water. He sleeps over at the embassy when there's only a short break between trips."

"Do you know where he lives?"

"Yes. He and his family rent a house in Paghman."

She looked at him.

"Do you know the family?"

He shook his head. "All I know is that he and his wife have five children. I drove him home once."

She took a deep breath. She wanted to shout at him, ask him why he hadn't mentioned this earlier, but she knew the answer. She hadn't asked.

"So you know exactly where he lives?"

"Yes, it takes probably half an hour to drive there from the embassy, unless it's rush hour."

"All right. I'm just going to make a call, and then we'll go."

Phone already in hand, she looked up the most recently dialed number. Otman nodded and gave her space. The phone began to ring on the other end.

"Amanda! I was almost starting to worry. Why haven't you called?" Bill asked.

"I'm calling now," Amanda responded, briefing him as quickly as she could about the car she'd found and what she knew about the transport.

She had no intention of staying put for very long on the road south of Bagram and attracting attention. Potential suicide bombers could be driving back and forth between Kabul and other large cities, looking for suitable targets.

Bill whistled in his usual manner when she was finished. Two short whistles on exhalation, as if to sum up.

“So, probably alive?”

“Probably kidnapped. Whether they’re alive or not, we won’t comment on.”

There were no signs of a struggle inside or around the car. On the other hand, the two diplomats were no fighters. Everything might have gone peacefully.

“Could that local, the driver, be a bad guy in this drama?”

“Can’t rule it out. Otman who’s driving me around now knows where the other driver lives, so I’m headed there as soon as we’re done talking.”

“What will that get you?”

“Maybe a wife who can tell me when she last saw her husband.”

“Time is not on our side. I’m going to another meeting with the Department of Justice, and that Secretary of State Tejler is on me like a leech.”

“Secretary of State?”

“Yes, you heard right. What’s more, I don’t like the thought of you roaming around down there all alone, just on speculation.”

“I appreciate your concern. But alone is the last thing I am; our own military special forces are ready to respond whenever I say the word,” Amanda said.

She was about to bring their conversation to a close when Bill went on: “Amanda?”

“Yes?”

“You’re not talking to anyone but the ambassador down there, are you?”

“To the extent that Leijonhufvud is talking, he’s the only one. But he had a whole cadre of staff who might tattle to the press. Maybe you should let the secretary of state know that this sort of assignment is hard to keep under wraps.”

“Apparently this is an extremely sensitive matter.”

Why was he telling her that? She knew it as well as anyone.

“All kidnappings are,” Amanda said, getting back into the car.

Traffic was increasing, and drivers were leaning on their horns. It wasn’t a common sight, a blond woman standing on the shoulder of the road.

“This is going to be classified top secret.”

Top secret? That wasn't a concept they made use of very often.

“Do you know why?”

“We'll deal with that when we have a secure line, but I have my suspicions.”

Bill had never been to the Ministry of Justice before today. And now this was the second time in eight hours.

The sky was bright blue. Ideal weather for a crayfish party. He felt for the shopping list in his breast pocket and wished he could clone himself. Sofia was going to be the exact opposite of happy. They had booked a babysitter ages ago, but when his work called, that was that. He squinted at the sun and read the sign.

Rosenbad 4.

The guard put out his hand and read Bill's police ID, then offered a welcome. The door opened and Bill climbed the stairs. His steps echoed in the deserted building, his black loafers tapping against the stone floor.

He had chosen the pale blue poplin uniform shirt and a tie in honor of the day. A respectable look, in his opinion. Stylish, even. His blue eyes matched the shirt and his brown beard had been trimmed that morning. As usual, his head was shaved. If you barely had hair in the first place, there wasn't much else you could do.

He sat down on the leather sofa and studied the statue of Lady Justice who was standing beside him with scales in one hand and a sword in the other.

A briefing for Justice.

There wasn't very much to brief them on right now, but no one seemed to care. They had insisted on it.

The same assistant who had fetched him a few hours ago opened a glass door.

"Bill Ekman, so we meet again," she said with a smile.

"A pleasure," Bill said, nodding.

"It says here that there will be two of you?"

"That's right. I'm sure she'll arrive at any moment."

At that instant, the front door opened and Alice Bohman greeted them with a nod.

"I'm sorry, I have to ask for your ID," the assistant said, looking truly apologetic.

"Rules are rules," Bohman said, digging through her brown purse.

A membership card to the Royal Drottningholm Golf Club fell to the floor when she held out her police badge. Bohman looked at Bill as she picked it up again.

“I was waitlisted for years, but I finally got a spot. The course is absolutely unique,” she said, sounding so snooty that Bill could hardly keep from laughing.

“And they’ve arranged quite a few big international tournaments, too,” he remarked, just to have something to say.

Bill noticed that her nose had started to flake. A low neckline revealed loose, mottled skin. Decades of tanning had left their mark, Bill thought. A gold Bismark necklace hung around her neck like a thick rope.

The assistant returned Bohman’s ID.

“We’ll take the elevator up to the same room as earlier. Secretary of State Ulf Tejler will join us, along with Chief of Staff Ola Arvidsson, Chief Counsel Lena Eklund-Berg, and Undersecretary Claes Ask.

Bill did his best to memorize their names.

They seemed eager to demonstrate strength; this was, after all, a Saturday. As the elevator dinged, Bohman leaned toward Bill.

“I thought your brief on this matter was good the first time around. If I start us off, you’ll take over from there, won’t you?” Bohman said, clapping Bill on the shoulder.

She probably meant it to be encouraging, a higher-up supporting a subordinate. Bill smiled inwardly; the fact that Bohman had even considered speaking up at the meeting and talking about anything meaningful was a joke.

Bill had expected the secretary of state and his crew to arrive in the conference room after them, but when the door opened they were already waiting around the table. The same four faces as the first meeting. Lena Eklund-Berg had stick-straight brown hair that hung loose to her shoulders. Her lips glistened with red lipstick and the color of her face indicated she’d just been on vacation. Bill thought she was attractive, for being over fifty.

The secretary of state was sitting at the head of the table. It was clear who was boss here. Bill had a hard time not looking at his right eye. There was a patch of broken blood vessels in the white of the eye; it was so large that it extended into the brown iris.

A pair of wire-framed glasses dangled against his chest; they hung from a cord around his beefy neck. His large, manicured hands were fiddling with a pen on a pad of A4 paper.

“Welcome, have a seat.”

The secretary of state folded his hands on the table and leaned forward before going on.

“We suggest that you give us a run-through of the matter. After that we wish to hear a brief description of how you usually handle this type of situation, and we’ll conclude with a discussion of how we can move forward in this particular case.”

Bohman made a sweeping gesture at Bill.

“Bill is the pro tem chief of the international task force for the summer, and he’ll have concrete answers to your questions,” she said.

No one in the room seemed to react to Bohman’s error, so Bill didn’t bother to correct her. He nodded and cleared his throat, hoping he could conceal his nervousness. The chief of staff sat in silence, staring from under unruly, dark eyebrows, his hands resting on his stomach.

“As I said on the phone, we can rule out alternative number one.”

“Which was what, again?” the secretary of state interrupted, his forehead creasing.

“The attack. Alternative number two, again, is a kidnapping, which at the present seems to be the most likely.”

“But we don’t know?” the secretary of state sighed.

Bill couldn’t decide if that sigh expressed disappointment or whether it was just a way for the secretary of state to signal his boredom.

“What we do know is that we can rule out that they died in the attack. Our assumption now is a kidnapping scenario. The car was found by our staff this afternoon, north of Kabul.”

“What was inside it?” the chief of staff asked as he took notes.

“It was empty. Locked. No sign of a struggle. Unfortunately, that’s all we’ve got. A more detailed summary can be found in this document,” Bill said, pushing a folder across the table.

The secretary of state took it with another deep sigh.

“This could get messy. What do you usually do in these situations?”

“We make sure to have personnel on site so they can coordinate everyone involved and handle any negotiations that might arise with the kidnappers.”

“So we have someone in Kabul right now?”

“One of our best negotiators has been there since this morning. She was the one who found the car.”

“She?” asked the undersecretary, who hadn’t spoken up to that point.

“Yes. Amanda Lund.”

Bill couldn’t help smiling at the undersecretary before he went back to explaining their usual procedures.



“We deal with hostage situations and victim situations differently. In this case we’re assuming it’s a hostage situation.”

“What’s the difference?” asked the secretary of state.

Bohman leaned across the table as if she were about to speak up. That would never end well, Bill thought, rushing to continue:

“It depends on the goal. If it’s *only* a victim situation, we set the stage as best we can for a task force to free the abductees. In that case the perpetrators already have what they want. If it’s a hostage situation, and the kidnapper is out after money or if there’s something else they want to achieve, we can negotiate — as soon as we have established contact with them, that is.”

There, he’d gotten through the most important part. Bohman cleared her throat and signaled that it was her turn.

“So the perpetrator wants something from us in return, you understand the difference?”

The group didn’t say anything, but their eyes were on Bill.

“If they don’t want money, what do they want?” asked the chief counsel.

“Political or religious motives aren’t unusual in these countries,” Bill rushed to reply.

“But if you had to guess, what would you say? What’s most common in Kabul?”

“We refrain from guessing in these situations.”

The legal counsel was about to say something, but she was interrupted by the secretary of state.

“Who usually performs the actual rescue, and the armed effort?”

“Typically the country where the crime has been committed takes care of the negotiations and rescue, and the Swedish authorities take a supporting role. But it’s different when it comes to Afghanistan.”

“Expand on that.”

“Because we have military troops already in the country, and thanks to their role and mandate through ISAF, the Armed Forces can use Swedish personnel without the approval of the Afghan authorities. Thus in Afghanistan, we have several options.”

The secretary of state looked pleased.

“So we can choose to ask the Afghans for support in this matter and even allow them to undertake the operation themselves, if we believe that this would bring about the best results?”

Bill immediately felt ill at ease. This was the very last thing they would do if it was up to him.

“In my view —”

That was as far as he got before the secretary of state cut him off.

“Let’s circle back to the decision about who should be responsible for any operation, should it become necessary.”

Bill gulped. This was starting to seem like an unconstitutional overreach for the ministry.

“Do you really want us to bother you with issues on that level?”

“As you may know, the minister and I constitute the political leadership here. For various reasons, this matter is extremely sensitive, but unfortunately I am not yet at liberty to say why.

Bill remained silent. They were expecting miracles, even as he was clearly being deprived of some of the puzzle pieces. Bohman didn’t say a word.

“This has to be kept as low-profile as possible, with absolutely no publicity. We want to remain updated and participate in the matter,” said the secretary of state, looking up.

Bill’s gaze was drawn to the bloody eye. The question was, did he even have any sight in it?

“Participate to what extent?”

“Since this whole thing could become political, we don’t want to be taken by surprise, if you understand what I mean.”

Bill nodded. At which stage would a matter like this become political? And did “as low-profile as possible” mean using Sweden’s special forces that were already on site in Afghanistan? Or would it mean Afghan personnel?

Apparently the meeting was over, and everyone stood. Bohman was the first out of the room. The secretary of state put out his hand and leaned toward Bill, saying in a confidential tone, “These events must be kept under wraps. For the good of the country.”

One they passed the Kabul zoo the traffic lightened. They didn't speak on the ride. Amanda didn't want to show how curious she was about Ali, and Otman didn't ask questions; he only spoke when addressed.

They turned off onto a smaller road that wasn't on the map. She looked at her watch again.

They ought to be getting close.

She sneaked a glance at Otman. He turned his head as if he could sense she was watching him. He revealed yellow, cracked teeth when he smiled at her.

They crossed a muddy river and continued down the narrow road and over a hill. It was slow going. Otman tried to avoid the holes in the tightly packed gravel. Skinny goats stood in the dried mud on either side, staring at them.

"There it is," Otman said, pointing at a low-slung house with the obligatory wall in front of it.

The house was made of mud and couldn't be more than one story high. What a strange place to settle. Why did anyone want to live this way? Isolated, in the middle of nowhere, no neighbors or sense of community.

She asked Otman to park the car and come inside with her. If Ali was in any way complicit in the disappearance of the diplomats, this meeting might demand a greater ability to speak Pashto than she possessed.

What would she say to the wife? Without lying to her face?

The air was heavy and possibly even hotter than in the city. Sunbeams filtered through the treetops. Her lightweight body armor felt tight on her torso, under her shirt. It bulged a little across her chest, but beyond that it would take a trained eye to tell she was wearing it. That extra bulge was unnecessary for someone who wore an A-cup, but the female vests were a little smaller and easier to wear.

She tugged at her blazer to hide her gun; as usual, the stone was in her right jacket pocket. The weight of it made it easier when she had to push back her blazer and draw her weapon. She stuck her hand in her pocket and squeezed the stone for a few seconds. She ran her thumb across its smooth surface to find the rough engraving and followed the straight lines of those letters.

They walked along the wall to reach the opening.

"Do you know each other well?"

“No, but we exchange a few words every day when we overlap, or if we are driving at the same time.”

She didn't know quite what she was hoping to accomplish with this visit. If nothing else, she could at least establish contact with Ali's wife.

Voices came from the other side of the wall.

Otman kept walking toward the opening with long strides. Amanda's fingers searched for the Dictaphone in her left-hand pocket. She had to turn it over to find the On button.

Her mouth was dry. They didn't have much choice about leaving the car unguarded. Otman vanished through the gap in the wall. She double checked that there was no one behind them before following him.

A young teen girl with big blue eyes and a serious face was standing at a clothesline hung between two trees. A wet bundle lay in a tub at her feet. She froze, making no attempt to speak. Amanda nodded cautiously. Otman said something to the girl, but Amanda didn't quite catch it. She looked at Otman and then at the girl, whose arms hung at her sides. Then the girl slowly lifted one hand and pointed at the house.

Amanda searched it with her eyes. Shadows were moving inside, and a rustling noise came from behind an outbuilding. She ought to have listened to Bill; this probably wasn't a good idea after all. All at once, Otman vanished around the corner of the house.

She heard voices again and soon Otman appeared again and waved her over. She could still see the girl from the corner of her eye as she walked toward Otman. Amanda's right arm was slightly bent, her fingers brushing the hem of her blazer. The outbuilding was behind her now. She swallowed and took the last step around the corner.

Three deep breaths.

He was sitting on a spindle-backed chair, wearing a long white shift with dried flecks of blood on it. The shift came to his ankles and strained across his belly. She knew this must be Ali.

What did it mean?

Amanda assumed the woman sitting beside him was his wife. She was dipping a rag in a bucket and washing his face. The woman wore long sleeves, but her face and head weren't covered in fabric. She stood up at once and disappeared into the house after the man leaned over and said something to her.

As she went, she herded three children who came dashing around the corner. One boy and two girls. The scent of burning meat wafted from the house before the woman closed the door. The man remained, looking at them.

He raised a hand in greeting.

“Salaam aleykum,” Otman said.

“Aleykum salaam,” the man responded, picking up the rag the woman had left in the bloody water.

His face was covered in scrapes and blood was dripping from an open wound near his eyebrow. His lips were swollen and bloody, but clean. His nose pointed a little too much in one direction, and there was a deep cut at its bridge. He pressed the rag to his eyebrow. His mouth twisted into a grimace when he smiled.

Amanda was on guard, but she smiled at him.

“I am Detective Inspector Amanda Lund from Sweden. Are you Ali?” she asked in English.

She remained standing a few meters away from him; she didn’t want to embarrass him by putting out her hand in case that would be inappropriate.

He nodded.

“What happened to the diplomats?”

Ali began speaking in a low voice, barely audible.

“It was all my fault. If only I’d locked all the doors they wouldn’t have gotten into the car.”

His voice began to tremble and he looked down at the ground.

“Who wouldn’t have gotten into the car?” Amanda asked, taking a seat on the stool beside him.

“I don’t know who they were.”

“How many were there?”

“Two. I think. I saw two, at least.”

“What happened?”

Ali buried his face in his hands. The backs of them were scraped up — for all practical purposes, they were two very ugly open wounds. He was sniffing and coughing.

“We were forced off the road and I didn’t have much choice when they waved their machine guns around. They yanked open the doors and shouted at us to get out of the car. Then they locked our car and shoved us into a Jeep and drove off.”

“Where did you go?”

“They slammed the butt of a gun into my nose and put a hood over my head. I didn’t see anything.”

“Why did they let you go?”

“They didn’t . . . I . . . escaped.”

His voice cracked and he ran his hand over the stubble on his chin.

“Is that where you got this?” Amanda asked, pointing at his hands.

Ali nodded.

“Tell me how you managed to escape.”

Her voice sounded harsher than she’d meant it to, but he would have to tolerate a little pressure.

“They stopped to take a break after we’d been driving for a while. I jumped out and ran as fast as I could.”

“Where were the diplomats at that point?”

“In the car. With their faces covered.”

“But you managed to jump out and get away?”

There was a lengthy silence before Ali replied.

“I’m not a diplomat. I’m a simple Pashtun who works for the Embassy of Sweden. People like me don’t come at a high premium. No one would pay money to free an Afghan.”

*He’s right about that,* Amanda thought. In Afghanistan, if you were an errand boy for the Westerners, or the “Infidels,” as they were called, you weren’t worth much.

“What do you think they were planning to do?”

“Me, they would have shot and tossed in a ditch. The easiest way to get rid of a Pashtun who’s seen too much.”

“What about the diplomats?”

“I don’t know. It’s my job to make sure that the doors are locked; if I’d done that maybe none of this would have happened. It’s all my . . .”

Ali curled up on the chair and rocked from side to side. There was another lengthy silence.

Otman was walking slowly back and forth along the wall. Now and then he peered out of the yard to check on the car. Blooming rosebushes dotted the flowerbeds; the hundreds of red blossoms showed how much care the wife put into them.

“If what you say is true, why did you come home instead of going to the embassy to report what happened?”

“Believe me, I’ve only been home for an hour or two.”

“In some fashion or another, you ought to have contacted the embassy right away — you’ve had enough time to do that. Now tell me what happened after you escaped.”

“I ripped off the hood as I jumped out of the car, and I started running toward some rocks and boulders alongside the road. They were shooting at me. I crawled along the ground and hid under a ledge of rock. They only looked for a little while before they left, I think they were anxious and wanted to get out of there. But still I lay there all night before I dared to come out.”

“And then what?”

“Then I ran down the road. When a police car drove by I came out and got a ride to Kabul.”

“What did you tell the police officer?”

“The truth. That I had been kidnapped and that I work for the Swedish embassy.”

Amanda closed her eyes. This was the last thing they needed right now. A driver babbling about kidnapped Swedes.

“What did you say about the diplomats?”

Ali just shook his head.

“What do you mean?”

“I didn’t say anything. I was ashamed because I’d left them behind.”

*Thank god for that*, Amanda thought. Ali’s eyes were on the red water in the bucket.

“You never answered my question about where you were heading. If you managed to escape and get a ride, you must know where you were, right?”

“Around twenty kilometers into Baghlan.”

Baghlan. A relatively peaceful province without much NATO or local police presence. Probably a good choice for a kidnapper who doesn’t want to attract attention.

“Where were you supposed to take the diplomats?”

“To a new restaurant.”

Amanda rolled her eyes and went on.

“Where is your phone?”

“They took it. The diplomats’ too.”

*Finally, something concrete to work on*, Amanda thought. If the kidnappers had the phones and they were still on, this would be a big step forward in the investigation.

A quick glance at her watch.

Seventeen minutes had passed. She had to leave. No staying in the same place for more than twenty minutes, which was the amount of time it took for someone with evil intentions to come across a strange car, mobilize his men, and launch an attack. If something were to happen out here she would be alone and help would take a long time to arrive. She rose from the stool and nodded at Otman to indicate it was time to go.

"Listen carefully. You must be at the embassy in one hour. You and I are going to run through everything that happened. In detail. If you're not there, you will be considered complicit in the diplomats' disappearance. Understood?"

Ali nodded and looked up.

"How is the ambassador doing?"

"He's worried, of course."

Ali looked surprised.

"I'm sure he is, but I meant his fever."

"I think he's feeling well today," Amanda responded, eyeing him.

"That's good news, he must have been in really bad shape to cancel the meeting."

Amanda stiffened and spoke in as casual a voice as she could muster.

"The meeting?"

"The ambassadors in Kabul meet at Serena Hotel every month."

"Ali, do you remember when he told you he wouldn't be going?"

"Maybe fifteen minutes before we were supposed to leave. It was after that that the diplomats decided to go to the restaurant."

"Why?"

Ali shrugged.

"I had already arrived with the car. It's not that easy for them to get out of the embassy."

*All right then*, Amanda thought. So Ali had been on site at the embassy with a free car and the diplomats had simply taken advantage of the situation. The pieces of the puzzle were starting to fall into place.

"Just one last question before we leave. The car you were kidnapped from yesterday — is that the same car you would have used to go to Sven's meeting at Serena Hotel?"

"Yes, Madame."



Two flags hung side by side near the entrance to the embassy. One sported a blue background with a yellow cross, and the other had three vertical bands of black, red, and green with a white emblem in the center. The flags were clearly visible against the beige wall and the sandbag security barriers that protected the embassy of Sweden.

It was beautiful and tragic all at once, Amanda thought.

After thirteen years of war and rebuilding, the embassies of the Western world were still found behind walls and barbed wire. So many soldiers from every corner of the world had come and gone; only Sweden had kept around ten thousand in the country throughout the years.

A guard could be seen in the sentry box, which was painted blue and yellow. He greeted them and began to inspect the car. Out came the big mirror. With practiced ease, he swept it under the car before waving them through the gates.

The air felt tropical when she stepped out. Cicadas singing, mosquitos buzzing. The ambassador's window was wide open and she saw a hasty movement within it. When she looked up it was empty again. She headed straight for his office and noticed that the weekly schedule that had been on the whiteboard earlier had been erased.

She didn't knock cautiously this time. Two rapid knocks, and then she walked in. The scent of a cigar filled the room.

"You're breaking two security regulations at once," she said, taking a seat on the sofa.

The ambassador's upper lip glistened with moisture and the muscles of his jaw were tight, as if he were expending a great deal of effort.

"The window is not to be opened; it's supposed to serve as your protection in case the embassy is attacked. And there's no smoking indoors, in case, contrary to every expectation, that is new information for you," she added, nodding at an ashtray made of lapis lazuli on his desk.

His eyes were bloodshot and his gaze shifty in a way she hadn't seen before. He was wringing his hands and twisting his signet ring. Everything about his presence seemed erratic.

"Why are you lying?" she said, leaning across the low table.

She fixed her eyes on him; she wasn't going to give him any chance to wiggle out of this.

"Me? Are you accusing me of lying?"

"The transport was meant for you," she said calmly and matter-of-factly.

A vein was standing out at his temple.

“What does that matter?”

He remained in his chair behind the desk.

“You were supposed to go to a function for ambassadors at Serena Hotel. For some reason you cancelled the visit. The car and driver had already been booked and were waiting outside. But the diplomats took it instead. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you realize that the people who kidnapped your employees were probably out after you?”

“It could be a coincidence,” Sven said.

“If you don’t adjust your attitude and give me everything you know about this investigation, I will contact my boss in Stockholm. He will report to your boss, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, that the ambassador in Kabul will not cooperate and is not giving the NCID any chance to carry out our work.”

“Nonsense,” Sven replied, staring at her.

He walked to the bathroom, moving purposefully. Amanda stood up as soon as she heard the bathroom door lock. His desk was as messy as it had been last time. Three identical frames stood in one corner. She turned them around. Two cute teenage girls. Must be his daughters. The third frame contained a wedding portrait: a much younger Sven beside a radiantly beautiful woman.

The wastepaper basket was empty apart from a Red Bull can and a gold tube of Treo headache tablets. She flipped through some documents. Receipts, the latest UN report on corruption, and the current month’s newsletter from the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan.

She lifted the blotter. Even more receipts. She looked behind the desk. The printer, and the paper sticking up from it, grabbed her attention. She heard Sven clear his throat and spit into the toilet. He would open the door in a few seconds.

She froze.

A deep breath.

Her hand trembled as she picked up the paper.

The photograph was grainy. But there could be no doubt who they were.

The woman had short blonde hair and was sitting on the floor with her hands in her lap. Her head was bent forward. The man was looking into the camera with an angry expression. His hair was tousled. His hands appeared to be bound.

She read the words under the photograph over and over again.

PAY 10,000,000 USD. The deposit did increase, because you did not do what we told you.

No how.

No when.

Amanda sat down in the chair. This was unexpected. The matter was one big, tangled mess from beginning to end.

“Because you did not do what we told you.”

What the hell was Mr. Ambassador up to? She heard him flush the toilet. The door handle was pressed down. She swallowed a few times and readied herself. There was no time to waste.

“What the hell are you doing?” Sven said when he saw her at his own desk.

“Same to you,” Amanda responded, holding up the photograph.

Sven’s face went white.

“I . . . it came to my . . . to my gov.se email a little while ago,” he said, sitting down on the sofa without looking at Amanda.

“I see that. But tell me what you’re hiding from me. Now. Or I will call home and tell them you are withholding information that is crucial to this matter.”

She took out her phone and waved it back and forth. Her features were relaxed, but her large, pale blue eyes were fixed on Sven. He looked small on the sofa.

Behind him hung an oil painting of the king and queen. The king was wearing a ceremonial uniform with a white shirt and insignia; the queen had a red dress and a stiff smile. Next to the painting hung a number of diplomas and honors awarded to Sven Leijonhufvud. Born in 1965, apparently. A well-preserved middle-aged man who appeared to be suffering through the worst crisis of his life.

Sven rested his face in his hands but didn’t speak. His shoulders began to shake. He breathed deeply, trying to regain control.

“Come on. Ingrid and Mikael need all the help they can get.”

“I . . . I . . .”

He had stopped fighting the tears.

He seemed desperate.

His fist in his mouth, he cried openly. She sat down beside him on the sofa and took his hand in her own. Intimacy, at moments like these, would get most people to talk.

"It . . . never occurred to me that I was the one who was supposed to be kidnapped until I got the email . . . but of course I was . . . it's my fault . . . all of it."

Sven sobbed and sniffled and held Amanda's hand in a tight grip. Almost a little panicky.

"All of it?"

Amanda spoke slowly, in a gentle voice. *Don't stress him out.* As long as he was this fragile and vulnerable, she had him in her clutches.

"I'm being blackmailed . . . I received another photograph from a different email address before . . ."

"From who?"

"Erik . . . from . . . Erik's private account."

His voice failed him, but he stood up and walked heavily to the desk, where he moved the mouse to bring up the log-in screen.

"Sven, who is Erik?"

"He used to work here."

"Why did he email you?"

"I don't know," Sven responded as he hammered at the keyboard with shaky index fingers.

Amanda moved to stand next to him. She sensed that what she was about to see was part of a much larger puzzle. He turned the screen towards her without giving it a glance, and sat back down on the sofa.

This photograph was anything but grainy.

She scrolled down.

Three naked bodies. Wound tightly around each other in different positions. Tongues meeting and hands stroking.

Men, all of them.

One of them was Sven.

Bill pulled away from the National Defense Radio Establishment. He took Drottningholmsvägen as he headed back to the office in Sörentorp so he would have some time to think. His contact at NDRE had been optimistic. They would waste no time sinking their teeth into the two email addresses Amanda had sent.

Theskyisblue101@hotmail.com

Erik.g.bjork@gmail.com

Bill didn't know much about how NDRE performed electronic intelligence, but if they could find the IP addresses the emails had been sent from, maybe they would have a geographic point to start from. In the best case, they could get hold of other conversations at those addresses; that might be helpful.

Amanda's email had been short but informative. A photograph of the kidnapped pair with a given sum and a sentence explaining that the photo had been sent from theskyisblue101@hotmail.com.

Sent just a few hours previously.

Nothing about how or where or to whom the payment should be made.

He would take the photograph along to the meeting at Rosenbad tomorrow morning at nine o'clock. Foreign Affairs would have a representative there as well.

Amanda had sent another photograph. Apparently it showed the ambassador having sex with two other men — one younger, blond one, and one older, dark-haired one. Bill couldn't stop looking at it. Three men clearly enjoying themselves. The Swedish ambassador giving in to lust.

The photograph had been sent to Leijonhufvud from erik.g.bjork@gmail.com. Apparently this was the private email of a Foreign Affairs staff member. A message had accompanied this photo too. Bill was curious, but he knew that Amanda must have had good reason not to push the ambassador too hard.

If she had recognized the message, or the other two men, she would have passed the information along to Bill. Sooner or later there would be an opening, and she wouldn't miss it. He was sure.

Amanda had pointed out that this was strange behavior for a kidnapper. Bill would be the first to agree, even though they didn't have the whole picture yet.

As he passed Drottningholm Palace, his thoughts moved to Sofia. Should he go home and help her out for a while? Maybe move a little furniture before that evening's crayfish party? Norra Ängby wasn't exactly out of his way. He turned on the speaker and called her. Her voice let him know right off the bat that she'd been drinking. He glanced at his watch. Just after four.

"When are you coming home? We have a lot to do."

Bill didn't say anything. God, he hated hearing that slurring voice. He had two options: force her to cancel the party because he had to work, or obediently return home to help with preparations and then head back to work. In which case, their friends would arrive to find a lonely, smashed Sofia. Neither option was particularly tempting. He stopped the car on the shoulder.

"How much have you had to drink?"

"Me?"

"Who else?"

"Nothing. A glass of wine."

He took a deep breath.

"I have to work late tonight."

Now it was Sofia's turn to be silent. He knew he was letting her down, but he had a job to do. He was the commander of Sweden's national task force, and there was a high-priority matter on his desk. He had no choice.

Sofia was the one who'd insisted on throwing a crayfish party again this year. He had gone along with it in the end, mostly so he wouldn't be subjected to her various arguments for why *they* had to host the neighborhood's largest crayfish party. He was regretting it now. But it was a little too late. Her voice was chilly.

"You promised to do the shopping and then come home early."

"Sofia, you know as well as I do that I have no control over my job. All I can say is that it's important. I have orders; I have to work."

Sofia snorted.

"You choose to be married to your career instead of to me. No one is irreplaceable. You're the boss — you can order other people to work. You promised me this party. Doesn't that mean something?"

Unfortunately she was right. Other couples dealt with unfaithfulness or went to therapy to get back the spark that had once brought them together. Bill chose to work instead of spend time with his wife.

“This task can’t be delegated, Sofia. I suggest we cancel the party.”

He stared at a spot on the windshield and pictured his overindulging wife greeting all the guests. He shuddered.

“Forget it. I don’t need your help. I’ll take care of the rest of it and handle the party on my own. I’m used to it. You just come home whenever you feel like it . . . maybe a guest or two will still be here when you arrive.”

With those words, Sofia ended the call. Bill closed his eyes. He thought of the children, who were with his parents. He didn’t think they understood, yet, how bad off their mother was. But it wouldn’t take long for them to figure out that all the empty bottles in the basement were why Sofia would be excessively cuddly with her children one minute and tired and uninterested the next. He had seen the way Emanuel looked at Sofia when she gave him wet kisses and talked baby talk at him with her breath smelling like mouthwash.

Once Bill drove through the gates at Sörentorp, he summarized what he knew. After five minutes, his notepad was full of arrows, names, and email addresses.

At the top of his list: why had a Foreign Affairs staffer sent a photo of the ambassador and two unknown men having sex from his private Gmail account? And who was behind the email theskyisblue101?

The cafeteria at the Swedish embassy in Kabul certainly was representative. Swedish art on every wall. Orrefors vases and Rörstrand china. Table linens from Klässbols. Purveyor to the court, according to the oversized book that lay open on the table.

Beside the book was the photograph of a naked ambassador in the midst of satisfying another naked man. He was definitely an Afghan — a dark, hairy man with a full beard, in profile, enjoying the moment with his eyes closed. A gold ring hung from his neck by a long chain; the ring was inlaid with blue stones.

A much younger man with blond hair and freckles stood next to them. His body was sleek and tan and he was smiling at the camera. Next to this man stood a small carved-wood table with two empty wine bottles and three used wine glasses on it.

“Who’s the Afghan?” Amanda asked, fixing her eyes on Sven.

He shrugged and poked at his food with his fork.

“A man I met here in Kabul.”

“Who is the other man?”

She knew the answer before he said anything.

“Erik,” Sven replied, looking down at his plate.

“And he won’t pick up when you call?”

“No. I called home to Foreign Affairs too. He hasn’t been to work either.”

“Does your wife know . . .” Amanda said without finishing the question.

She nodded at the photo.

“Are you crazy? Jeanette must never find out about this, that would be the end of my career *and* my marriage!” Sven exclaimed.

Just as she’d suspected.

The Swedish ambassador in Kabul was living a double life.

“Tell me about Erik,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Aren’t you going to eat?”

The very thought of eating a greasy, fried schnitzel gave her the shivers. She’d hardly gotten anything down all day. She often lost her appetite during periods of intense work, but this was beyond the norm for her. She felt truly sick.

“I’m not hungry. Now talk.”



Sven didn't say anything, but she chose to wait him out. At last he put down his silverware, taking the linen napkin and dabbing cautiously at his lips. She had the feeling the air between them had shifted.

"Erik. Well, what do you want to know?"

"Anything that's relevant."

Sven cleared his throat. Red blotches appeared on his neck. His earlier pomposity was gone and his voice sounded gentler.

"Erik is a very competent diplomat. Kabul was his first post. He could get a brick wall to talk; he's social, extroverted, and a real genius at languages."

"So why isn't he still here?"

A heavy sigh escaped Sven. Then a snuffle. He looked at Amanda. His eyes were shiny. *Fucking crybaby*, Amanda thought.

"Because I . . . I . . . sent him home. Erik wanted us to make it official and tell the whole world we were a couple. I was furious, I'm a successful diplomat with a family. My life would be ruined."

"So you sent him home?"

Amanda couldn't get it to add up. Anyone who said the police were a hierarchical organization must never have taken a field trip to Foreign Affairs.

"I had no choice. He wouldn't stop talking about it and I was afraid the people here in Kabul would figure it out. I wrote home to the director and asked for Erik to be transferred."

"What did you write?"

"That he had serious problems with cooperation and despite repeated conversations in private showed no signs of improvement."

"Then what happened?"

"He received notice from Foreign Affairs that his service in Kabul would be terminated. It's not as if he lost his job; he's just serving at home in Stockholm instead."

"Because you couldn't handle your relationship here at the embassy?"

Sven stared at her, but she was on the warpath; she wouldn't allow him to escape.

"He was the one who couldn't handle our relationship. Not me."

"And that's why Erik is getting revenge by demanding money for an x-rated photo?"

"Exactly, that bastard has gone criminal," Sven replied, tossing back what was left of his glass of red wine.

He was about to slip out of her grasp again. This wouldn't do.

“You’re lying,” she said calmly and matter-of-factly, waiting for his reaction.

Sven looked at the floor and twisted his ring. He wouldn’t meet her gaze. She had seen people lie, clam up, and catch themselves out before, and she knew how to make them talk.

“The message that came with the photo said ‘The deposit did increase, because you did not do what we told you.’ What is it that you didn’t do?”

“I told you, I don’t know.”

“What connection does Erik have to kidnappers in Afghanistan?”

He was crying openly again.

Like a child. His shoulders shook.

Those sobs were coming from a man who had lost his footing. She walked to the door and closed it carefully to spare him the curiosity of the staff.

“What is it that you didn’t do?”

Her voice was gentle. She had broken through tougher facades than this one. She placed a hand on his shoulder and looked around the room.

A gorgeous piano stood along one wall. On either side of its music shelf was a candleholder with a large, white, hand-dipped candle in it.

Piano sonatas.

She could sit for hours, playing Beethoven and Mozart.

André loved to lie on her dark blue chaise longue, eyes closed, just listening. It was like extended foreplay for them. They would make love slowly afterward, for a long time. Sometimes he allowed himself to fall asleep with her, but he always gone when she woke up.

He had called several times, but she hadn’t had time to pick up. She missed his dark, rough voice.

Sven cleared his throat and looked at Amanda.

“Erik . . . he’s gone too far, and now he’s trying to get revenge on me and . . . and . . . he made sure that Ingrid and Mikael were kidnapped . . . when I didn’t do as he said from . . . from the start.”

She nodded.

“When the first photograph arrived in my email . . . that is, the one of us having . . . having sex, it was a message to me. At first I didn’t understand what I was supposed to do, or how, but a day or two later there was a package with my name on it in the embassy mailbox, and my secretary brought it to me.”

The words were pouring from his mouth by now. Spit was frothing at the corner of his mouth and turning dark red from the wine that had dried on his lips. Amanda dug her hand into her pocket to make sure that her Dictaphone was on.

She hummed and nodded again; she didn't want to interrupt his fragmented story. Better to pose follow-up questions later, once he had finished.

"I never thought Erik would do this to me. Force me to take part in criminal acts and sully the name of Foreign Affairs. But I stood tall. It takes more than that to knock me down. I'll tell you that," he said as he blew his nose and puffed out his chest a little.

What was he trying to tell her?

"So what was it you were supposed to do? That you didn't do?"

Sven twisted his ring, looking like he might burst into tears again. Amanda shoved the carved wooden box of tissues his way.

"I was supposed to send heroin to Stockholm via diplomatic mail. Apparently it's a safe way to smuggle things. Once I did that, the photograph of the three of us would be destroyed. If I didn't do it, it would end up in the tabloids. Erik is a fucking pig."

More sniffing. It seemed to Amanda that Erik probably felt the same way about Sven. She took out her notepad and began to write. Time to turn up the heat.

"When did the package arrive at the embassy?"

"The day after the email, or two days, I don't remember."

"What did it contain?"

"Heroin, like I said."

"How do you know it was heroin?"

"It was bags full of white powder. What else would it be?"

Afghanistan was responsible for ninety percent of the world's heroin trade, so if the package contained drugs, it certainly was likely to be heroin. She kept writing.

"Do you have any cameras that might have recorded whoever dropped off the package?"

"It was just lying there one morning, at least according to my secretary. The camera is only on during the day. The secretary turns it on when she arrives."

These were perhaps the worst security routines Amanda had ever heard of at a Swedish outpost.

"What did you do with the powder?"

"Flushed it down the toilet," Sven replied, nodding toward the office.

“May I look at the package, that is, the packaging itself?”

“I threw it all away. Every last trace of it. It felt safest that way,” he said as he stood up.

She laid the pen on the table and watched him as he fetched a bottle of wine from the serving cart. This man was truly an odd duck.

“Didn’t it ever occur to you that the contents were worth a lot of money and problems might arise if it just disappeared?”

“Certainly, but no one saw me receive the package. Someone took a risk and left it in the mailbox outside the embassy. Anything might have happened to it.”

Amanda didn’t say what she was thinking; instead she asked, “So why didn’t you call the police back in Sweden when you received the package?”

“It might seem remarkable that I didn’t do that. I understand that. But I wanted to protect my career. I didn’t want to risk my relationship with Erik becoming the latest hot gossip at Foreign Affairs.”

Amanda nodded and made a note in the margin of her pad.

“To summarize what happened: you received an email with a photograph that existed only on Erik’s phone. Erik took it when the two of you were having sex with an Afghan here in Kabul. The email contained a message that you were to accept a package of heroin and forward it to Stockholm via diplomatic mail, or else the photograph of you . . . of the two of you having sex would be sent to the evening papers. Correct so far?”

Sven nodded.

“You receive a package of white powder a day or two later. Last night, after over a week has passed, you finally decide to flush down the toilet. Voila. Gone. You pretend none of it ever happened and hope that the photograph will never be sent to the media. Yesterday Ingrid and Mikael were kidnapped as they head out in your car, and you receive an email from a second account containing a photo of them and message that someone has upped the ante and you must pay ten million American dollars. There’s no information about who you should pay, or how or when.”

“Fucking Erik, I never thought he would betray me like this.”

“But what is the link? It’s obvious that the kidnapping of Ingrid and Mikael is connected to the fact that you didn’t send the heroin home. They were kidnapped because you didn’t follow instructions. But is Erik really behind all of this?”

Sven poured more wine into his glass. Amanda’s was still untouched. She waved her hand to indicate that she didn’t want a refill.

"I have to admit that I didn't put the events together the way you did," he answered in a low voice.

*People see what they want to see,* Amanda thought, but she realized that he most likely hadn't understood the connection between the heroin and the kidnapping until now. There was no doubt that Mr. Ambassador Leijonhufvud had poor judgment, but he probably wasn't acting with malicious intent.

"Would Erik hire a kidnapper in Kabul to get revenge on you, and then demand you pay ten million dollars?"

"No, Erik would never do that. My darling Erik . . . how the hell did this happen? I never should have let myself be dragged into it, I should have steeled myself . . . should have stopped myself."

Sven gave a heavy sigh and leaned his head back against the tall chair back.

"What's done is done. Let's look forward and focus on how we can save Ingrid and Mikael's lives, okay?"

Sven nodded.

"Okay then. You call Erik on his personal phone right away. At the moment he's the only link between the events. If he answers, ask him to go straight to Foreign Affairs and call us back on a secure line, got it?"

"He'll never pick up," Sven said as he slowly drew his phone from his breast pocket.

"Call from a blocked number — there's a better chance he'll answer if he can't see that it's you," Amanda said, handing him her phone.

Sven shook his head but accepted the phone and dialed a number he apparently knew by heart. Neither of them spoke.

"It's off," Sven said.

"Okay. Hang up. His work phone?"

"Last time I called, it rang."

"Do you understand why it's so important for him to go to Foreign Affairs?"

Sven shook his head.

"If Erik isn't the kidnapper and drug dealer himself, it's probable that someone else is supposed to receive the delivery. Someone is out a lot of money and someone is waiting for the heroin."

She glanced at Sven to see if he was following her reasoning. He had raised his eyebrows a little and there were several creases on his forehead. There was no sign that he understood what she was getting at. She had to be more explicit.

“A gram of heroin costs somewhere between eight and twelve hundred kronor on the street in Stockholm, so you can figure out for yourself how much two kilos is worth. Criminals kill each other over much smaller amounts than that.”

Sven looked around.

“You flushed those two kilos of heroin that Erik was supposed to receive. He could be in danger, don’t you get it?”

Sven’s eyes opened wide and his dry lips parted. A gasp echoed through the room.

“Oh my god. My Erik . . .”

Sven raised his hand to his mouth.

“If he’s not at work, where would he be?”

“He . . . he . . . he’s always at work.”

“Even on a Saturday?”

“He’s a very loyal employee. At least, he was when he was here in Kabul.”

“But that was before you went behind his back and sent him home?”

Sven nodded slowly.

He rose and crossed the room to the landline phone on the wall next to the piano. After a second or two Sven put down the receiver and gazed helplessly at Amanda.

“It goes straight to voicemail.”

The room was large and decorated with furnishings of magnificent dark oak, carved full of scrolled flowers and leaves. Heavy gold curtains hung in the windows and kept the light from reaching inside. A TV was on in the background, showing the latest news report from Al-Jazeera. The room's décor was certainly worthy of a man in his position; he had been to the market himself to pick out every chair, every table and cabinet, and even all the pillows.

He lay stretched out on the sofa, a red plush pillow under his head. His white shirt was wound around his legs. On his chest were bits of shells from the pistachios he was incessantly stuffing himself with. He fingered the photograph, turning it over and over.

What the hell would he say if this leaked?

Him? The macho man — sucking off another man?

His job wouldn't be the only thing destroyed. His whole life would be ruined. His family would be dishonored; there would be no future for them in Afghanistan and they would have to leave the country, every one.

As if that wasn't enough, this wasn't like *bacha bazi*. This was illegal.

He recalled very well when the photograph had been taken. They'd been drunk on wine that evening. Everything had felt so free; time and place hadn't mattered at all. He hadn't even cared when that little white boy picked up a phone and took a picture of the three of them together.

How could he dare? That pale, slender lad. Because it was his phone that took the picture, he was absolutely sure of it.

He suddenly grabbed the thin, fragile tea glass and threw it against the wall. Chai ran down the cracks in the white paint.

Those bastards, they would rot in hell; he would make sure of it. What fuck were they thinking, blackmailing him? He was a man with money and power at his disposal. Every last dog involved in this would regret it, but by then it would be too late.

He picked nuts from his teeth with his thumbnail and took the teapot from the gold tray and filled an empty glass. He rinsed his mouth and then finished the glass in a few quick gulps. The tea nearly burned a hole in his throat, but he didn't care.

His mind was made up.

Two things had to happen. Immediately.

Oskar wanted nothing more than for his shift to end. But he knew the medical examiner's office would fax over the initial statement before he had time to leave for the evening.

Which was too bad.

But after that, he had time off to look forward to. Sun, swimming and soccer, no rookies to look after, and above all, no murdered fairies.

Just because no one had seen the body before 5 A.M. didn't mean it hadn't been there. But how likely was it? For legs to be sticking out of the bush for several hours without any passersby noticing?

Rigor mortis.

By this point, he knew Wikipedia's definition by heart.

"Rigor mortis, the third stage of death, is one of the recognizable signs of death, caused by chemical changes in the muscles post mortem, which cause the limbs of the corpse to stiffen. Rigor mortis can occur as soon as 4 hours post mortem."

He sighed. Couldn't shake it off. Might as well get it over with.

"Head for the reception at Norrmalm, I think the fax might have come in."

"The fax?"

His rookie glanced at Oskar as he turned up toward Fridhemsplan.

"That's right. The fax. That's what it's called. A method of communication."

"And we still use those?"

Oskar nodded. He signaled that they were done talking. He didn't have the energy for sassy eighties babies. Or nineties babies, for that matter.

Sure enough. The fax had come in.

ATT: Oskar Karlsson

So goddamn typical, for them to include his name so it would forever be attached to this. Two pages full of Latin text. Thank god there was also a summary in intelligible Swedish.

Extended forensic autopsy



The man who was found dead on Norr Mälarstrand on August 23 at 05:05 is identical with Erik Gustaf Björk (National ID 800201-7514). Time of death was between 19:00 and 21:00 on August 22.

Cause of death is thirteen stab wounds to the chest and belly. The wounds are between 18mm and 21mm in width. An analysis of bodily fluids indicates traces of cocaine.

Medical Examiner Gustav Olivkrona visited the discovery site at 07:15 on August 23. The discovery site is not the site of the homicide.

So that was that.

The discovery site was not the same as the homicide site.

He looked at his watch. Half an hour left before they could drive into the garage without being ashamed for preparing for the end of shift too early. A few database searches and they could send this crap over to the gay sympathizers over in hate crimes.

“Rookie, search the databases now that he’s been identified. Print it out if you find anything of interest — if nothing else, there must be some family that needs to be told.”

The rookie was already typing at the keyboard.

“He has no criminal record, no judgments or suspicions,” the rookie said without taking his eyes from the computer.

“Did you find any next of kin?” Oskar asked, fingering the fax.

Would anyone really miss the cover page, the one with his name on it, if he tossed it? It didn’t serve any actual purpose, after all.

“Hold on . . . both parents are dead. No siblings, no registered partner.”

“No one to miss him, in other words. Anything else?”

That explained why no one had reported the guy missing. *Tragic*, Oskar thought, stifling a yawn. The last shift of a busy week was always tiring; it took more than internal searches to stay alert.

“No . . . hold on . . . here’s something . . . he is listed as a witness to a minor assault during the Pride festival last year.”

“Imagine that.”

“He gave two phone numbers. One is for work, and one is his private number.”

“We only found one on him . . . does it say where he works?” asked Oskar, who didn’t want to be reminded of his blunder with the phone taken into evidence.

“Foreign Affairs.”

Oskar set his chipped teacup down with a bang.

“You’re kidding! At Foreign Affairs?”

“What’s so strange about that?” the rookie asked, looking up from his screen.

“There was cocaine in his system, for Christ sake!”

“Sure, but I’m sure there are users even there.”

“Well, well, document this and I’ll hand it over to the hate crimes unit and then the admin unit can write up a notice of death and deliver it to his workplace.”

“But shouldn’t we write . . .”

Oskar cut the rookie off before he could finish his sentence.

“There are plenty of things we *should* do, but this case is closed for our part,” Oskar said, folding up the cover sheet and sticking it into his pocket.

If he took a detour to the weapons depot he would pass the paper shredder. Surely no one would miss a fax cover sheet? No way would Oskar Karlsson’s name be linked to a shoddy investigation, even if the initial, catastrophic first steps had been his own.

