

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *SIREN SONG* AND *SOUTHBOUND*

# SMOKE AND MIRRORS

A DETECTIVE LENA FRANKE NOVELLA



A ROUTINE EXERCISE  
TWENTY POLICE ACADEMY STUDENTS  
FACED WITH A DEADLY CRIME  
AND THEIR WORST NIGHTMARES

ERIK BOMAN

# SMOKE<sub>AND</sub> MIRRORS

SMOKE AND MIRRORS

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A Members-Only Detective Lena Franke Novella

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This novella takes place during Lena's last year in the Swedish Police Academy, about nine years before the events in *Siren Song*.

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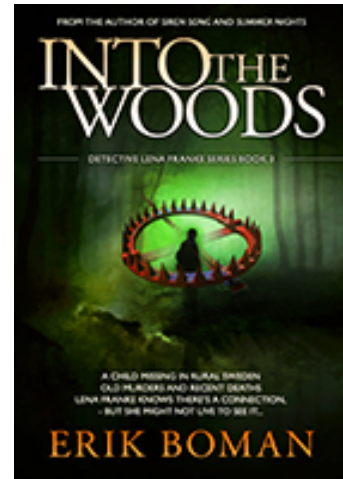
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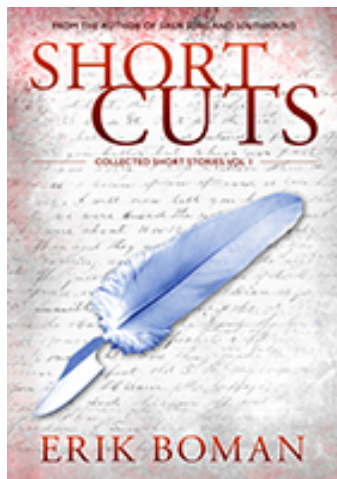


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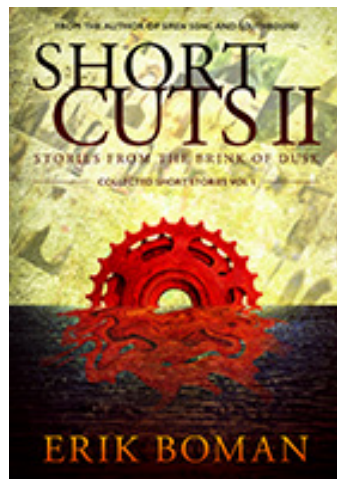


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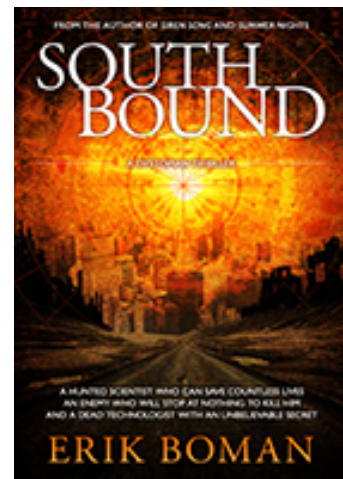
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Smoke and Mirrors by Erik Boman

Published March 2016.

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This eBook uses some actual locations and family names, however all events are fictionalized and all persons appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real people, living, dead or lost in a deadly fog, is entirely coincidental.

Proofread by Pauline Nolet, Editors' Association of Canada

Cover image montage by Wandering Mind

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When the mind is like a hall  
in which thought is like a voice speaking,  
the voice is always that of someone else.

*Wallace Stevens*

# Chapter 1

*Just outside of Stockholm*

*Late May*

*05.52*

Shortly before Lena has to run for her life through a fake house, she lies awake and wonders what's wrong with Stevan Brankovič.

Everyone around her is asleep. The dorm is furnished with twenty metal lockers and as many bunk beds, each occupied by one of the other police academy students. Everyone is dressed in the rough, unadorned green suits they were handed on arrival. Morning light filters through the curtains and fills the room with a pale ambience. A partially open window lets in a persistent, chilly breeze. Real warmth is still a few months away; like every year, winter will hold spring by its neck for as long as possible.

There are no sounds apart from snores and the rustling of blankets. If there's anyone else in the building, they're keeping quiet. Lena suspects that there are people nearby. She's also convinced that they're quiet for a reason. Except from her concerns over Stevan, this is the main reason why she isn't asleep.

Fifteen hours ago, she and the rest of her class were rounded up from the academy, bundled into a truck, and driven to this anonymous, barn-like building. A team of stiff-faced men in white and grey camouflage uniforms led everyone to the dorm and told them to await further instructions. Outside the not-quite-a-barn are two mobile offices, the kind used for large construction works. Half a dozen black cars are parked next to them.

Farther down the wide gravel road, behind a row of green metal sheds, is a strip of straight road flanked by squat three-storey buildings in dark concrete. Their doorways are empty, and so are their window frames. They look like a miniature suburb out of a dystopian story: dirty, derelict, and forbidding. Not the kind of place you'd want to explore on your own or with people you don't fully trust. Which means that's probably exactly what she will end up doing before the day is over.

The barn, the sheds and the distant, grim concrete buildings are obviously military: too tidy to be an industry or a storage facility, and stripped bare of anything that can be removed

without a forklift. There's also a faint but distinct reek of gunpowder in the air. The irregular bangs that echoed in the far distance suggest there's a nearby shooting range. She would bet her student loan that the group of men who collected them from the police academy are soldiers, or something to that effect.

No warning or explanations were given while Lena and the other students were transported here. Not a single word of information has been shared. Clearly, it's a tactic meant to unnerve them. And the situation could've been infuriating, even worrying, if it weren't for the fact that she and everyone else in the dorm know what's going on.

The last exercise has begun.

It's an open secret that every cohort of students is put to the test during their final semester at the academy. The drills are never officially announced, but their existence is well known, passed on and augmented every year by graduates. It usually lasts one or two days. Its structure and location vary, however, so that every fresh class goes in blind. All to better spook and shock those who take part.

According to hearsay, this last drill is also when certain teachers do all they can to weed out students who are seen as unfit for active duty. Some claim that this means everyone who the instructors don't like. This is Lena's greatest concern: if the teachers keep lists of favourite students, she'd be near the bottom of all of them. If she'd even make the lists.

She knows exactly how many hours there are left before she can join the actual force: she has been counting them down since three months back. So far, she has endured five semesters crammed with lectures on procedures and protocols. Much of it is necessary, but that doesn't stop the ceaseless tests and trials to test her patience like a grating iron over bare nerve ends. While she's studied textbooks, watched films and sat through role plays, people outside the academy suffer real abuse. Knowing that one day she will be able to make a difference has only left her more aggravated.

But this day marks the end. Around the bend is a blessed, long-awaited six-month stint as a trainee, when she'll start doing actual police work. The idea appeals to her the way most others think of a vacation. All she has to do is get through one last contrived, time-consuming exercise. She can do this. She *will* pass the test. And ideally, she'll do so without engaging in another shouting match with some hot-headed idiot instructor.

A loud snore makes her flinch and scowl. Resting for a while would be nice, but her blood hums in her head. She's so wired she feels as if she'd cleaned out the coffee stash at a twenty-four seven taxi diner. Soon though, she'll find out what kind of petty torments the teachers

have cooked up. The first stage is obvious, although no one else in the class has commented on it. Most likely they've missed the blatant clues.

That's their loss. If she'd tried to tell them, they would've laughed. Everyone except for Stevan and Arvid. She would've liked to tell them, but they could have mentioned her idea to anyone else, and she's had enough cattiness aimed her way.

Stevan, however, is a different problem. Her eyes turn to the bed in which he lies. In the weak light, his black hair and pale skin look almost artificial, as if he were a puppet dyed in exaggeratedly contrasting colours. Judging by the way he twitches and murmurs, he is dreaming. She suspects that his dreams are unpleasant.

They started the course at the same time, almost exactly two and a half years ago. After a bout of awkward conversation, they realized that they both were of Slavic descent. Both had also been twenty-five, which meant they were slightly older than most other first-year students. It made for a helpful icebreaker during the awkwardness of the initial weeks.

Ever since those days, he'd been a persistent blip on her radar, but not on the subconscious sensors busy with attraction. He'd been interesting on that wavelength too, but she'd left a handful of confused, doomed relationships behind her when she started at the academy, and she'd vowed to stay single throughout the course. And she keeps her promises. Even the stupid ones.

Stevan is funny, impulsive and quick to help, but within a few months his upbeat façade began to crack. A loud debate between two opinionated classmates sent him running from the classroom. Later, a less-than-appropriate shove during a game of football pushed him over the edge. The brief scuffle lit some well-hidden but short fuse, and it'd taken three people to wrestle Stevan away from his opponent. Lena caught a glimpse of the tussle, and Stevan's face was chilling: he looked ready to kill the man under his fists.

After each slip, Stevan made an effort to pretend nothing strange had happened, but she wasn't having any of it. The man needed to come clean. After some pressing, it turned out Stevan had omitted to mention the time he'd spent in former Yugoslavia, where his family had settled just in time for the country to collapse into civil war.

He escaped the onslaught of tanks, bombs and missiles by fleeing empty-handed. But he hadn't managed to outrun the horrors brought on by the bands of soldiers who roamed the countryside. Stevan refused to go into details, which she thought probably was just as well. Soon she understood that Stevan's cheerfulness and eagerness to talk didn't spring from a natural enthusiasm. On the contrary, his constant flow of ideas and desire for company stemmed from a deep, uncontrollable fear.



But sharing his past with Lena didn't help: Stevan's moods grew worse by the month. After realising that he couldn't keep up appearances, he became silent and withdrawn, interacting as little as possible with the rest of the class and darting away after each lesson. His tempers grew worse as well: he is second only to Lena in the tally of heated exchanges with various teachers.

Lena has pushed back simply because she refuses to play along with the unwritten law that states that instructors unarguably are more competent than their students. Stevan's outbursts are different, and more unpredictable. It's a marvel he's kept it together this long. Any surprise of the wrong flavour can make him flare up. Rough and sudden events, such as this exercise, are the ones most likely to trigger a fit. All she can do is keep an eye on him and hope to get hold of a teacher if he goes off the rails.

Hopefully he'll make it. If he crumbles this close to the finish line, he will have spent two and a half years studying and sweating for nothing. Besides, she needs an ally right now; virtually every other student in the room carries a grudge against her. Too many tests completed too fast.

The only other friendly face apart from Stevan is Arvid, a lean, constantly smiling man who dozes in the bed next to hers. Although given how many times Arvid has asked her out, he might have a slightly different reason for being amiable. It'd be nice to feel singled out, but from what she's seen, Arvid has tried his limited repertoire of moves on every woman he's met on the course.

She checks her wristwatch. Two minutes left until the exercise will start. Not that any times have been announced, but if life has taught her anything, it's that people are predictable. Especially those who are in charge.

Agitated voices come from outside the barn. A man and a woman, arguing while at the same time trying to keep their voices down. Her trainers squeak softly as she pads up to the window and looks out. Whatever is going on probably isn't part of the upcoming exercise, but it won't hurt to make sure.

A middle-aged woman and a younger man stand outside one of the mobile offices. Both wear dark shirts, jeans, and trekking shoes. They're teachers from the academy, and they are also more than a little pissed off. The woman points repeatedly at the green sheds down the road. The man shrugs in the universal body language that says *it isn't my fault*.

The woman who's doing most of the near-shouting is senior lecturer Karolina Dahl, a short, thin woman in her late forties with greying hair and an iron physique. She's also a former prosecutor and one of the academy's most serious hardliners. More than one student has

mistaken her size and composed manners for the signs of a pushover, but Lena had seen the glint of steel in the woman's eyes early on.

Lena squints at the shed that seems to be the focus of the argument. Its large door is partially open, and unless she's mistaken, one of its hinges is bent at a funny angle. Perhaps there's been a break-in. Or maybe this scene is a rehearsal for the exercise: *inspect the vandalised storage in the middle of nowhere, then search for the imaginary offender in the wilderness until you pass out*. That'd be suitably pointless and infuriating.

Lena checks the time again. One minute to six a.m. She crosses the dorm, leans against the door, and listens. As she expected, hushed voices come from the corridor outside. She quickly walks up to a small cleaning cupboard and opens the door as quietly as she can, then climbs inside and closes the door behind her.

A few seconds later, the fire alarm goes off, and water explodes from the sprinklers in the ceiling.

\*

## Chapter 2

### 06.03

Before most of the drenched students have time to make sense of what's happening, a pair of instructors with megaphones burst into the room.

“Get up!” they bark. “Put your shoes on; assemble outside the barn. Move it!”

The students rush out of the dorm. Some notice that Lena's clothes and short, dark hair are dry and give her suspicious glances. She ignores them and follows the stricken group as they mill out the front door.

Waiting outside is the academy's head of physical exercise. She can't recall the man's name, but knows that his speciality is long-distance running. He's also known for not stopping until the unfortunate souls in his care are wrecked. He orders everyone to follow him and starts to jog at near-running speed. Lena sighs and follows. So far, the day is not looking up.

At least the weather could be worse. The air is cool, but laced with the promise of a warm day. Sunlight cuts across the treetops and colours the pines in a greenish, golden hue. If it weren't for the running, and the lack of breakfast, it'd be a fine morning. She suspects the other students don't agree, seeing as they're soaked and reeling from the shock of waking to an indoor rainstorm. Although that doesn't keep them from outrunning her.

She hates running. It can't be as important to general police work as it's said to be. When she finally gets to wear a uniform, anything that makes her run for more than thirty seconds will either have caught up with her or deserves to get away. Although being this winded is terrible; she is by far the worst runner in the class. At some point in the future, she promises herself, she'll start to work out.

“Wait up,” a man shouts behind her.

Expecting to see an instructor, Lena slows down and turns around. To her surprise, Arvid is running down the road, smiling at her as he comes closer.

“What's going on?” Lena keeps running.

“Dahl wanted me to find you.” Arvid stops and puts his hand on Lena's arm. “She wants to see you in her office after we're done running. There's an older guy there, too. Probably a high-ranking officer, by the look of him.”

“Why aren’t you up ahead with the rest of the pack?” Lena glances down at Arvid’s hand, which disappears off her arm when he notices her expression.

“I was called to Dahl’s office too.” Arvid shakes his head. “Apparently I have a problem with my attitude. As usual, I had no idea what she’s talking about.”

Lena considers telling Arvid that hitting on every female in sight isn’t the smartest way to pass courses or to get any measure of respect. But explaining this to Arvid would be like speaking to the wind. He was a lost cause even before he arrived at the academy, and he hasn’t improved.

“I bet they’ve dragged us out here because of the pretend houses,” Arvid continues as they run side by side.

“The what?”

“Those.” Arvid points at the concrete hollowed-out residential area farther down the road. “It’s like a tiny suburb. Flats, storages, sewers and so on. One can move between most rooms through holes in the walls and floors. And via tunnels, too.”

Lena looks between Arvid and the buildings. She too knows that it’s a mock-urban area, but Arvid seems to have more information.

“You know a lot about this place,” Lena says. “Have you been here before?”

“The site’s famous.” Arvid winks at Lena. “In its own way.”

“Would you care to elaborate?” Lena asks. “I don’t follow any celebrity blogs.” She wants to stop and take a break; speaking makes running harder, but she pushes on.

“There aren’t many places like this in Sweden. Or the world, for that matter. All troops that’ll be deployed in the city use them as training grounds in case there’s a war. The instructors will probably try to spook us with the stories, too.”

Lena looks back at the buildings. Arvid has never made any secret of his obsession with the Swedish military and all its camouflage-painted facets. He must’ve read up on this area at some point or even been here. It’s highly likely that he’s at the academy in the first place due to one or more failed attempts to enlist for army service. She’s never asked him, and she doesn’t plan to. Even an idiot can see that it’d be a sensitive subject.

After a moment, she registers exactly what Arvid said.

“Which stories?” she asks.

“You haven’t heard?”

“Go ahead and enlighten me.”

“About ten years ago, a rookie soldier got himself killed inside one of those buildings. They wrote it off as an accident, but word got out that he’d been strangled, or so it looked on the

morgue's report card. And another man who was there during the drill later hanged himself years later. But the police never found a connection."

"Jesus Christ." Lena winces at the thought. Arvid and Stevan aside, she hasn't got many friends, but it's unlikely that she's pissed someone off so badly they'd want to take her life.

"There's more." Arvid winks at Lena again.

"I'm not sure I need to hear it."

"Since that day," Arvid continues, "others have reported that they've seen him during exercises in there. The dead man, I mean. And people have written online about voices, shouts and screams from deep inside the complex. Perhaps he's returned from the dead to haunt the rooms and look for his murderer." His face contorts in a theatrical grimace of horror.

"Let's hope they've got something else planned for us than going in there."

"Another rumour," Arvid says, "mentions a group of soldiers who were lost for an entire night in one of the buildings. When they were found, they all had to be rushed to a hospital because of nervous breakdowns."

Lena studies the distant gathering of dirt-coloured façades. Empty windows dot the surfaces like black squares set in a solid wall of fog. From what she can tell, the buildings are scraped clean of original features, every quirky slant or surprising angle eradicated already on the drawing board.

The buildings might be meant to represent a generic block of flats, but it's like illustrating a human being by using only a skeleton. The blocks look dark even in the crisp morning light. It is easy to picture how one can get lost inside them, especially during the night.

"All right," she says. "I'm disgusted now. Job well done."

"Don't you want to hear the rest?"

"Maybe on the other side of today."

"I just want you to be prepared for the worst if, or should I say when, they make us search those rooms."

"If they've hidden our breakfast in there, I'm ready to go now." She tries to smile, but she's too hungry and much too annoyed. And the actual exercise hasn't even started yet.

"Don't go in without us," Arvid calls over his shoulder as he runs away. "I'd hate to miss out on all the fun."

## Chapter 3

06.42

Thirty minutes crawl past while Lena tries and fails to catch up with the other students. Gravel shoots away from her shoes as they scrape against the ground. The sun angles for a good spot in the clear skies, but struggles to chase away the morning chill.

There's no one in sight ahead or behind her. Apart from the occasional distant bang from the shooting range, everything is quiet. Any birds in the forest must've been startled into silence by the shots.

The track is scenic, but also strangely claustrophobic: a narrow, winding road flanked by pine forest so dense it resembles a green-grey haze. Other roads lead away from the one she runs on, although they all soon curve away out of sight as if she were inside a huge, unkempt garden maze. Fortunately, the track is marked out by strips of orange plastic, or she'd be lost.

In a way, losing her way would be relieving. Abandoning the exercise means throwing countless lectures and essays out the window, but if it weren't for that, she'd keep on running. And she wouldn't stop until she was back in the city and its homely snarl of paved roads and ever-shining lights. Out here, she has no idea what will happen next.

This exercise resembles the life she led before enrolling at the police academy: always lost, usually frustrated, sometimes furious. Maybe this is how her parents felt, too. She spent her entire childhood watching them deal with sleep deprivation and financial insecurity, all while working underpaid shifts cleaning hospitals around the county. Most of the time, they ran on willpower alone. Just like she's doing now.

She can easily imagine her dad running by her side and urging her to work harder. He'd wanted her to get an education, a good job, and a safe future. A better home than the run-down, freezing flat in suburban Stockholm where they lived. Seemingly simple things that always stayed outside of their reach. Likewise, Lena's mother, on the rare evening when she wasn't working, did what she could to teach Lena resilience and good judgement. Her parents wanted her to do well and get far.

Life made sure neither of them got to see her get anywhere. A few weeks before Lena turned eleven, cancer snatched her father away. Lena's mother, who shifted from soft-spoken to almost completely silent following her husband's death, lasted six more years before her

life was snuffed out by a speeding driver in a hit-and-run. It was then that Lena swore to dedicate herself to fighting crime, even though it took her many years before she'd shaken off enough grief to make good on her promise.

Her parents deserved better. They should've had more success, spread out over longer lives. Their quiet stalwartness hangs like a framed portrait at the back of Lena's mind. It's an image that often slides into view, especially when she needs a shove forward. Her memories have saved her from running down more than one dead end.

She missed foster care by a hair's breadth. On an icy winter's night, one month before she turned seventeen, she moved into her first own home. It became her base for nearly six years of swinging between total isolation and adrenaline-fuelled partying.

Every waking hour, she was driven by a need to rebel against an undefined injustice. She started more fights than she can remember; anyone who looked at her the wrong way was an agent of the unfairness that had stolen her parents. Only luck saved her from getting snapped up by the police more often. She kept waiting to be hit by the same fate that took her mother and father: death was always present, like a reptile waiting patiently for its prey to come within striking range.

Eventually, it struck. One day, a party in someone's flat descended into a booze-fuelled, free-for-all brawl. One of her friends got between Lena and a woman armed with a smashed bottle, and ended up in hospital. Lena fled before the police arrived, but not before she'd recognized the grimy, violent scene for what it was: the absolute bottom of her own, private pool of self-pity. Two days later, she'd cleaned every corner of her flat and applied to the academy.

After a long slope, the road widens into a straight, wide stretch. Up ahead, the sharp lines of large buildings break up the uneven treeline. Shadows too deep for pines fall across the ground, as if her path is taking her down into a dim valley. She's reached the make-believe suburb.

She slows down to get a better view of the area. Just like the forest, the would-be residential blocks come right up to the road. Five monstrous slabs of concrete on each side, all of them punctuated by holes for windows, doorways, and other passages. The forest's branches and vines cling to the intrusions, as if trying to hold them back.

In the shadow of the façades, the air is cool and undercut with sharp whiffs of gunpowder. Car tyre tracks and the imprints of boots crisscross the dirt. Here and there, spent rifle cartridges gleam on the ground. Just enough light manages to reach inside the constructions

for her to make out more doors. It's impossible to tell how deep the buildings are, but judging by the gloom and the long, narrow alleys that run between each block, they're not small.

She picks up speed again. There are graveyards with more mirth and colour than this place. Then again, if the rumours Arvid mentioned are true, it makes sense that there's a tomb-like feel to the buildings. Some poor soul met his end here. Hopefully, Arvid is wrong or lied in hope to provoke a reaction from her. It wouldn't have been the first time. Perhaps she won't have to see the inside of these would-be abandoned homes, but Arvid is probably right: they must be the reason she and the other students were brought here.

Keen to leave the depressing area behind her, she runs faster until she is clear of the buildings and continues down the track. In the distance are the barn and the mobile offices. There's not much further to go. Soon, she can have a shower and tick off another conquered obstacle. She prepares to dash the last distance and then catches a flash of white inside of the forest.

Lena slows down and peers at the wall of trees. The light she saw could have been a reflection of a sign, but its ambience had been familiar. After a moment she hears the purr of an engine. There's a car somewhere behind the trees. It must be parked and pointed at the road, and she'd seen its headlights when the driver turned the ignition. Perhaps there's a parking lot just behind the edge of the forest.

But there's also the chance that the instructors are preparing some new devilry. This could be an opportunity to stay one step ahead. She walks into the forest towards where she saw the light, treading gently on the dry twigs, and using the trees as cover whenever possible.

She reaches a small clearing after half a minute of careful zigzagging. Parked in the middle is a large, grey Volvo with tinted windows. Its engine is running. Behind the car is a covered trailer large enough for a motorcycle. A large steel cylinder that looks like an oversized fire extinguisher is propped up against the trailer.

Lena takes a step back. There could be a thousand reasons why there's a car here, and she's supposed to be running. She can't risk being seen. If the driver is from the academy, he or she might recognize her and report back to Dahl, which would be a disaster. Better to jog back to the barn and get this over and done with.

Before she turns away, the driver's door opens and a man steps out. He's pale and tall, with a muscular frame and a classic military haircut, these days sported by army recruits as well as art directors. His white tracksuit looks new and expensive.

The man looks around and ducks back inside the car. He leaves the door open.



Lena edges in behind a tree and continues to watch. Something about the man's posture is off. He'd appeared very watchful for someone who's parked inside a forest. More like someone on a mission, tense and alert.

The passenger door opens and another man steps out. Shorter, darker, and with a shaved head, although his tracksuit is identical to the other man's. A moment later, the driver emerges again. Both men look around at the forest and nod at each other. Neither says a word.

The tallest of the pair reaches inside the car and pulls out two black canvas bags. He throws one of the bags over the car roof to his friend, who catches it, unzips the bag and pulls out a camouflage uniform. When Lena looks back at his friend, he too has taken out a uniform. Silently but quickly, the men pull on the uniforms while they pause occasionally to look up.

Lena wonders where she's seen the taller man before. Her guts tell her she's come across him at the academy. Moving as quietly as she can, she makes her way back to the road and continues to run. The uniforms suggest the men are soldiers, and if the army's involved in this drill, it's even more likely that she'll have to go inside those depressing pretend houses. Possibly on an empty stomach.

Much later, when the smoke has settled and she has washed away the blood, she'll think back to this moment and wonder why she thought hunger and darkness were the worst that could happen.

\*

## Chapter 4

06.55

The track leads her in a big circle. Eventually, it takes her past the shed that was the reason for the heated discussion between Dahl and the other instructor. A quick look won't hurt. Everyone else is far ahead, but an extra minute to her time won't change anything, and it'd be interesting to know why they were shouting at each other.

She runs up to the metal door. As she guessed, it's been pried open. Around the lock are the telltale black smudges of a cutter-burner, and the bolt is reduced to a mess of gleaming metal. A textbook break-and-enter. Looking over her shoulder to make sure no one's watching, she pulls the door slightly open.

The inside of the shed is dark, but there's enough light to make out a trio of rectangular metal boxes. Each is the size of a large shoebox and about three times as long. Their lids are secured by latches rather than locks.

The boxes can't contain guns or rifles; there's no chance they'd keep weapons this poorly protected. At least so she hopes. She takes a step inside and accidentally kicks a small, round object out of her way. It bounces off one of the boxes and lands near her foot again. It's made of what looks like dark, coarse felt. Some form of insulation or padding, perhaps.

Lena straightens up. She's spent enough time here. Whether or not the shed is connected to the exercise, there'll be questions if she's spotted here. In fact, there might be more than questions. Maybe even strong language or a single ticket for her back to the city.

After another minute of jogging, she reaches the open space in front of the barn. The other students are nowhere to be seen. They're probably showering and getting changed. The door to one of the mobile offices swings open, and a man looks out. She recognizes him as one of the academy's more sensible instructors. He closes the door behind him and waves for Lena to come closer.

"Dahl wants a word," he says.

"I know. Arvid told me." Lena nods at the office. "Any idea what's on her mind?"

"Not a clue. But she isn't smiling."

"Is she ever?" Lena says under her breath.

"Excuse me?" The man raises his eyebrows.

“I said thanks for the warning.” Lena rests her hands on her knees. This idiotic run has almost drained her. Hopefully the next part of the exercise can be completed while sitting down.

The inside of the mobile office is cramped and stuffy. Weak lights concealed in the ceiling wash the entire space in a café-like glow. Its sparse furnishing consists of a desk along a wall, an empty bookshelf, and a trio of tent chairs. The walls are painted in a watery blue that would be any designer’s last choice. On the floor next to the desk is a bag in green rough textile. It’s the size and shape of a tiny backpack, but vaguely military-looking.

Dahl sits behind the desk. Her mood doesn’t seem to have improved since earlier that morning. Maybe she didn’t come out on top of the argument.

Sitting next to Dahl is a man who, like Arvid said, may be in his early fifties, although the creases on his face make it hard to tell. He wears the full-on uniform of a senior officer. His glasses and high forehead could make him look like a caricature of an aging chess champion, but he has the unruffled calm Lena has come to recognize in police veterans. He gives Lena a fleeting look before turning back to a stack of papers in his lap.

“You wanted to see me?” Lena says to Dahl.

“Who’s this?” the man asks without looking up.

“This is cadet Lena Franke,” Dahl says. “Who I’ve been told has a problem with sticking to the rules. But I thought I’d hear her side of the story.”

The man looks up again, this time for a moment longer. There is a flash of interest in his eyes.

“This is Superintendent Krister Gren,” Dahl says and gestures at the man. “He’s with the Stockholm Police Department. The reason he’s here is to form an opinion about the performance of this year’s finalists. To the matter at hand: I’ve been told you cheated during the beginning of the exercise.”

“That’s incorrect,” Lena says quickly.

“Your clothes are dry,” Dahl points out. “Which means someone tipped you off.”

“Negative. I figured it out on my own.”

“You also kept the information you gleaned from your teammates. That suggests poor judgement as well as a tendency towards disloyalty. What have you got to say to this?”

Lena sighs. “No one’s told me anything about ‘teams’. And I didn’t share my suspicion because if I’d been wrong, I never would’ve heard the end of it.”

“You normally don’t care about other people’s opinions. And you’re smarter than this. In the last test, you came out third from the top.”

“Second,” the superintendent says, still looking down and browsing his papers.

Dahl blinks. “Really?” she says to the superintendent.

“Just like she was on the previous test.” The superintendent looks up at Lena and smiles.

“That’s impressive, especially for someone who dropped out of high school. Twice, I should add. Isn’t that right?”

“Am I in some sort of registry?” Lena asks, wondering if she’s been flagged as a troublemaker. Dahl looks both surprised and concerned.

“Of a sorts,” Gren says with a gentle shrug. “It’s not a blacklist, though. Let’s just say that we keep an eye on students we find interesting. Now please, tell us how you knew what was going to happen this morning?”

“Simple deduction,” Lena says. “Which can’t be cheating, unless the whole idea of policing is based on breaking the rules.”

“Just tell us how you evaded the drill,” Dahl says.

“I didn’t,” Lena says. “I stayed in the room, just as instructed. And I took part in the run.”

Her head spins lightly as she tries to get her thoughts back on track. Why are they keeping an eye on her? Has she managed to get in the face of one instructor too many?

“Your time wasn’t the best,” Dahl notes. “I saw you come back only minutes ago.”

Lena shrugs. “Sprinting isn’t my forte. Besides, I’m going to be a detective in Stockholm. I won’t need to run that much.”

“Interesting ambition,” Gren says. “And a competitive one, too. But I have to ask what Stockholm has to do with your performance?”

“If I have to run this far in the city,” Lena says, “I will either already have received backup, lost sight of the individual I’m pursuing, or have him or her cornered.”

“What if you end up in a rural district?” Dahl wonders.

Lena stares at Dahl in silence. *I simply won’t*, she thinks. *Take me away from streets, curbs and stairwells, and I lose my nerve. No one sane likes open spaces where anyone can see you stumble around like a hapless deer. And only madmen enjoy complete isolation. I need the cover of architecture, noise and conversations.*

“If you were to work in the city,” Gren says, “I can assure you that you have to run quite often there too. Take it from me. Back to the matter at hand: how come you’re dry?”

“My nose works,” Lena says. “By the way, was there a break-in last night?”

Gren tilts his head while Dahl raises her eyebrows.

“How did you know?” Dahl asks.

“My eyes work, too. I just noticed that –”

“That’s enough,” Dahl snaps. “No more dancing around. Give us a straight answer.”

Lena sighs. “The dorm stinks of mould. There are signs of rot along the skirting boards, as if the floor has been repeatedly flooded. The seal on the fire alarm control panel is missing. Pretty handy if it needs to be disabled from time to time.”

“Was that really enough for you to conclude what would happen, and at what time?” Dahl asks.

“The stories I read online helped. More than one officer has blogged about these pranks, you know, and a few mention harsh wake-up calls. Which most said happened at six o’clock sharp. So I added up the facts at hand.”

“Huh,” Gren says. He studies Lena and looks over at Dahl.

“They’re not ‘pranks’,” Dahl says wearily. “They are drills. And they have a purpose.”

“To piss us off?” Lena raises her eyebrows.

“They create a high-stress environment,” Gren explains. “And so will the remaining exercises today. The idea is to simulate demanding situations that’ll prepare you for active duty.”

“I’m going to be a police officer,” Lena says tightly. “Not a rescue diver. Why not get some actors, arm them with beer bottles and syringes, and let them barge in on us? That’ll be a more likely scenario.”

Dahl points at Lena. “Consider this a warning,” she says. “No more slip-ups today, or you won’t pass the test. Which means you might fail the exam.”

Lena opens her mouth and snaps it shut. *I can do this. One more day of this nonsense, then it’s over.*

“Get back to the exercise,” Dahl continues. “The next stage is about to begin. And this time, no more hiding.”

\*

## Chapter 5

07.17

Just like the rest of the building, the changing room is worn and sparse, and smells of old metal and more grime than any amount of disinfectant ever will defeat. Lena exits the shower next to the dorm while she mulls over the conversation she had with Dahl. The superintendent's casual summary of her past left her mildly stunned.

It'd been only a few words. None of them were incorrect or especially surprising. And yet, for all the man's easy manners, his face suggested that he hadn't stopped at reading up about her parents. A few more minutes browsing her records would have given him a rundown of her parent's history of unlucky turns. Some more time, and he would've found Lena's list of teenage mishaps: one crashed car, two cases of public intoxication, and a near-arrest following a brawl during a demonstration.

Those misadventures are too harmless to get between her and the upcoming graduation. What unnerves her isn't so much that he knows about her background, but the fact that he looked her up in the first place. Drawing attention from high-ranking people is rarely a good thing.

She glances out the window. As if hoping to match her mood, the weather is changing for the worse. It's still warm, but a lid of ashen grey is creeping in over the treetops from the west, partially eclipsing the sun. They're Stockholm's unique brand of clouds: thick, sudden, capable of leaving even the hottest days overcast and glum. Too pale for rain or thunder, but enough to give the impression that it's late evening.

She finds a vacant booth and puts her sweat-soaked clothes back on. So far, they've had no more information about what will happen, and there's no sign of food. At least the cool water cancelled out her normal post-running comatose mood. Determined to find food or a hint of what'll happen next, she leaves the changing room just as Stevan comes bounding down the corridor.

He stops and stares at her for a moment, as if he needs seconds to place her face.

"Hey," he says, his voice loud and shrill. "How did the meeting go?"

"As expected," Lena answers. "But at least I'm not kicked off the course, so I call it a win."

"Did you find out anything about the man who was in there with Dahl?"

“He’s some kind of superintendent.” Who also happens to be working for the exact department Lena wants to join.

“Maybe I should introduce myself,” Stevan muses, all sudden keenness.

“Something tells me he already knows our names.” At least he knows her name.

“Really?” Stevan says. “Do you think they’re here to give us marks?”

“Maybe. Or perhaps they just like to watch us squirm.”

Although the superintendent hadn’t seemed gleeful. He didn’t even look down his nose. Instead, he was calmly observant, leafing through his papers while at the same time watching Lena from the corner of his eye. She can’t shake the idea that he actually liked how she eluded the pretend fire drill.

When she looks up, Stevan’s eyes are wide and dark, despite the glare of the strip lights in the ceiling.

“Are you okay?” Lena asks.

“I’m good,” Stevan says. “I’m totally fine. Never better. Really, I mean it.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.” Stevan nods. “And I’d say it all day.”

“Are you absolutely sure you’re all right?” Lena asks.

“Didn’t you hear me?” Anger fills Stevan’s eyes like the doors to a furnace swinging open, but he calms down just as quickly.

“Sorry,” he continues. “That came out wrong. I’m just nervous. But it’ll be fun, too. Let’s *do* this.”

Lena watches Stevan run down the corridor and dart inside the dorm. One doesn’t need a course in illegal stimulants to recognize the look in Stevan’s eyes. And his hysterical manners are unmistakable. He must’ve had something tucked away, perhaps for moments when he feared his unstable psyche will let him down.

This is bad. In fact, it’s the total opposite of anything remotely positive. But she can’t put her hand up now and cry for the exercise to be called off. There’s a possibility she’s mistaken about Stevan, and Dahl had been clear: if there are any more disturbances that can be linked to Lena, she’ll fail the test. That cannot happen.

Inside the dorm, the atmosphere is cold despite the warm morning. By now, everyone knows she eluded the sprinklers, and the glares she gets are enough to make her long for another shower. No one speaks, and no one has to.

On everyone's bed except hers is a bag identical to the one that rested against Dahl's backpack. They must've been handed out before she came back to the dorm. Hopefully their contents aren't vital for getting through the exercise, or she'll have to chase down a spare.

Stevan sits on his bed and stares at the wall while his mouth moves. One of his legs stamps out a silent staccato against the linoleum. He's tense, but at least he's in control of himself. It's anyone's guess how much the poor idiot has popped into his mouth, nose, or veins. Hopefully enough to make him pass out before he does something radically stupid.

A whiff of chocolate makes her sit upright. She realises that the other students are chewing on cereal bars or wiping crumbs from their hands. At some point they've handed out snacks, and someone has nicked hers as a petty reprimand for not getting soaked.

Lena looks up and sees Lovisa, one of the few other women in the class, staring at her. Lovisa holds up an empty wrapper and drops it on the floor.

"They must've forgotten about you," Lovisa says with a smirk. "Or maybe you've been hiding under your bed again?"

"Perhaps she's afraid of monsters?" Another student laughs. "Makes you wonder how she plans to face real dangers. Put your weapon down, or I'll run for cover," he adds in a high-pitched tone.

Laughter bounces off the bare walls. It's the harsh snicker meant to mark the distinction between *us* and *them*. In this case, it's the rift that separates Lena from everyone else. Only Stevan and Arvid refrain from joining in.

She closes her eyes and breathes out. Explaining that using one's head is different to cheating would be futile. Taking a stand might also lead to worse retaliations.

She pictures the tension as a thin film wrapped around the students in the dorm. A sudden noise can prick a hole in it and vent the frustration. A confrontation might send someone off the rails. Fights are common on these exercises, or so the rumours say. The instructors must be interested in finding out who cracks under stress.

She decides to keep what she saw in the forest to herself. Either no one would listen, or they'd think she is trying to be clever.

When the last laughter has died away, Lena sits up and puts on her trainers. The atmosphere is suffocating. They had better get on with the rest of this repulsive event soon, before people end up at each other's throats.

Arvid walks over to her bed and sits down next to her.



“Ignore them,” he whispers. “They’re just pissed off because you didn’t have the same wake-up call as the rest of us.” He grimaces when he remembers that the mattress is soaked, but he remains sitting.

“I’m trying to ignore them,” Lena says, “but it’s a little hard when we’re stuck together.”

She sits up and shifts away from Arvid. He has a tendency to sneak inside her personal zone, and the tense circumstances seem to make his habit worse. Or perhaps he’s gone into protector mode and plans to stick to her side until the exercise is over. That kind of attention is the last she needs.

If she’s to get through this without losing her temper, she doesn’t want any interference. Especially not from Arvid, who oozes an unhealthy eagerness since they arrived, probably due to his interest in all things military. The thought sparks a connection at the back of her head: she realises why one of the men in the car looked familiar.

“I saw a couple of soldiers preparing the exercise,” Lena says.

“Where?” Arvid asks. “I haven’t seen anyone.”

“They were hiding in the forest. I recognized one of them, but it took me a while to place him. He was one of the tutors at the academy.” She describes him, and Arvid nods.

“His name’s Liam,” he says. I know who he is, or I mean I know about him. We weren’t friends or anything.” He stresses the last sentence.

“But he disappeared, didn’t he?” Lena asks. Hearing the name brings back memories of the teacher. Loud, aggressive, and insecure. She never saw him after her first year. Not until today, that is.

“Don’t you remember?” Arvid looks surprised. “It was a big deal, although they tried to hush it up.”

“He quit?”

“They sent him packing. He was caught trying to make copies of skeleton keys for the academy. Not a great career move.”

“So he joined the army instead?”

“Damned if I know.” Arvid shrugs. “Maybe he’s part of the home guard. Or he might’ve been given a formal apology. Although I heard some pretty juicy rumours around the time he was fired.”

“Such as?”

“Links to some small-town biker outfit with big schemes. It can’t have been him you saw.”

“Maybe,” Lena says. “Although he really looked like –”

The door slams open, and five men in black overalls storm into the room. All are lean, have short-cropped hair, and wear bulletproof vests, backpacks, and radios. Everyone carries a holstered gun at his belt.

This time, the instructors have taken greater care not to be noticed: there wasn't so much as the scrape of a boot outside the room before they burst in. Moving on reflex, Lena flings herself sideways and stumbles out of her bed, banging her knee on the adjacent bed frame. She hisses at the pain and rubs her leg.

"On your feet," the man who entered first shouts. "You've got one minute to get ready for departure. Prepare yourself, and pay attention."

The man who is giving the orders is dark, short and heavily muscled. There's a flint-hard intensity in his eyes, but his voice is surprisingly soft. A red plastic name tag on his chest reads *Chevarin*. He must be the team's leader.

"You heard him," Arvid shouts. "Let's get ready, everyone."

"Ready for what?" Stevan stutters. "Come on, you have to tell us what we're doing here?"

Chevarin looks between Arvid and Stevan. His eyes linger on Stevan, and he mutters a curse under his breath. Lena wonders if he's noticed Stevan's eyes and reached the same conclusion as she has.

"You're wasting time chatting," Chevarin snaps. "Listen closely."

The students quieten down while they scramble to pull on shoes and jackets.

"There's a hostage situation in a flat a few minutes from here. A group of militants have barricaded themselves in a flat, and they've made threats to set off a dirty bomb."

"What kind of terrorists?" asks one of the students.

"They're whatever kind of boogeymen you like," Chevarin continues without missing a beat. "What matters is that they have to be stopped, and before they set off their major explosives. Which means you need to hurry. Is that clear?"

The students nod and murmur agreement.

"You have to neutralise the terrorists and save the hostages," Chevarin continues. "And you must do so without taking unnecessary risks. Such as getting shot or putting yourselves in dangerous positions. Understood?"

More nods. The silence is compact.

"Good. Form a line here, quickly." Chevarin points at the floor in front of him.

Lena prods Chevarin's arm as she moves past him to stand in the queue. When he looks at her, she nods at Stevan, who has his back turned to her.

"I think he's –" Lena begins.

“We’ll keep an eye on him,” Chevarin says. “Join the rest of the group.”

Lena considers asking how they plan to monitor Stevan’s behaviour once he’s inside the building, but she’s already asked too many questions. She backs away and lines up with the other students.

The box turns out to contain a row of standard-issue police force guns arranged upright in slots in thick foam padding. The small battery-like cylinder attached to the muzzles mean that they’re loaded with blank rounds. Not that she expected a drill with live rounds, but the sight of the guns makes her uneasy.

The guns also shift the exercise into a more serious and intense dimension. She thought it’d be a day of general stress and physical tests. Judging by everyone else’s expressions, so did the other students. Now most of them look sweaty and tense. There’s a pair of exceptions: Arvid looks as if he cannot wait to get his hands on a pistol, while Stevan is pale and slack-jawed. Maybe the presence of the guns has dislodged some tucked-away memory from his harrowing days in former Yugoslavia.

Lena knows that one thing is clear: Stevan is ready to fall apart. Whatever substance he’s taken doesn’t seem to help against his nervousness. On the contrary, his eyes look almost inhumanly large, and he trembles as he stares at the weapons. She tries to get his attention to signal that he isn’t alone in his apprehension, but he’s too withdrawn to notice.

The guns are handed out to the students, who sign for them on a sheet. Each weapon comes with several spare clips tied into bundles by rubber bands. There’s enough ammunition for a prolonged siege. The excess underlines that this is only a drill, but the joyful gleam in some of the students’ eyes is unsettling.

“It’s a SIG Sauer P228,” Arvid whispers. “Thirteen cartridges in the clip. Really great gun. The US military use them, you know?”

Lena nods and turns the pistol over in her hand. It’d be better to concentrate on the briefing, but the weapon distracts her as badly as if the fire alarm had gone off again. Heavy and awkward as the gun is, it fills her with a sense of authority she hasn’t considered before. A light twitch of her finger can tip the scales in her favour if the gun is loaded with sharp ammunition. It’s a package of possibility, a crowbar that can be rammed into the cracks in the wall of helplessness.

The sensation is terrifying as well as seductive. She vows never to fire the gun unless necessary. If she begins to slide down that hill, there’s no telling where she’ll land.

“I’ll sum it up again,” Chevarin says. “A terrorist cell has barricaded themselves in one of the properties down the road. You know which ones I’m talking about. They’re in possession

of an unknown number of weapons, and they are firing at civilians. They'll definitely be shooting at you. And they might have taken hostages."

"But –" Arvid says.

"We – that is, the police's tactical response team – will enter first. We're heavily outnumbered, so the local police department has sent in reinforcements. That's all of you. And your job is to stop the terrorists by any means necessary."

The students digest this information in silence. Lena glances out the window at the buildings inside which the pretend terrorists are hiding. More members of the task force, she guesses, instructed to scare and intimidate the aspiring police officers as much as possible.

"How do we know if we succeed?" Arvid asks.

"We have referees monitoring your actions. As soon as the referees think you're done, they'll blow a whistle, and you'll regroup back here for evaluation."

"But exactly what are we meant to do?" Arvid insists.

"As I said before, you'll help us secure the area by using any tactics you deem fit. Reasoning, stealth or force, it's your call."

"But how can we –" Arvid begins.

"Move out," Chevarin commands. "Now!" He and his team turn on their heels and run off.

After a second of stunned inaction, the room erupts into nervous frenzy. The students curse and tread on each other's feet as they rush back to their beds, pull gas masks out of their canvas bags, and leave the room. Arvid shouts something unintelligible as he dashes away. Stevan looks positively sick, but he manages to follow the others, moving robot-like as he leaves.

Many look down at the guns they're holding while they stumble out through the door. Everyone has spent hours on the academy's shooting range, but the unpleasant awakening and the unfamiliar environment have people on edge. Even though it's only a drill, the presence of the tactical response team adds to the notion that the situation is serious, and so do the stories Arvid has been spreading. By now everyone will have heard the tale of the dead soldier.

After a few seconds, only Lena remains in the room. The gun hangs from her hand like a leaden pendulum. Everyone has a mask except for her. Some comedian must've stolen or hidden her bag, probably as a way of getting back at her. If they need masks, they'll be using smoke, perhaps even tear gas. It might be impossible to take part in the test without one.

She cannot ask Dahl for a new mask. The woman had been clear: more trouble from Lena, and she's out. On the other hand, she must at least try to complete the test, although entering

without a mask is reckless. Perhaps even hazardous. Both her options are almost equally bad. The situation is hopeless, and she has no more cards to play.

Unless there's a wild card up for grabs.

The bag she saw in Dahl's office was identical to those that'd been handed out to the other students. It makes sense that the instructors have gas masks too; they would want to monitor the students close up. Outside the window, her classmates jog stiffly towards the mock suburb like a pack of uncertain animals. Dahl stands halfway between the mobile office and the buildings where the imaginary terrorists hide. She is not wearing a mask or carrying any bag. Her mask might still be in her office.

Lena runs her hands through her hair. Stealing equipment from the academy's staff is madness. If she's caught, she'll be in so much trouble that being kicked out will be the least of her worries. It's against all reason. Except without a gas mask, she's bound to fail anyway.

Ultimately it's an equation. A dangerous move that might pay off versus inaction and inevitable defeat. Which means it's no contest: freezing up is always the worst option.

She sprints down the corridor as fast as her aching legs can manage and takes the stairs five steps at a time. Dahl might return to her desk at any moment. This could be Lena's only window to pinch the mask. If it's still in the office. And if no one else is around.

To her surprise, the area outside is empty. Shouts roll down the road from where the students are milling around outside the building. In want of a designated leader, a no-holds-barred shouting match goes on as the loudest students try to come up with a plan.

Lena peeks around the corner of the offices. Dahl is standing together with a handful of other teachers outside the burglarized shed. Far away, two other uniformed individuals carry a large steel cylinder across the road. It's the men she saw earlier. Perhaps they're the ones who are responsible for the smoke Chevarin said would appear.

Lena pulls back and tries the door to the office. It's open. A quick look inside confirms that the bag is still there. She also spots a wide box in green metal that she didn't notice before on the floor behind the desk. It looks like those stacked in the shed, although this one is open. Inside is a neatly arranged row of textile bags. More masks, perhaps stored here as backups.

She darts in, snatches the bag by the desk, runs back outside and pushes the door shut behind her. As she'd hoped, there's a gas mask in the bag. It's made of heavy black rubber and greasy metal, and it's clearly old. But it looks functional. Mission accomplished: she's equipped for the task ahead. She is also guilty of a crime punishable by law. A beautiful start to this final challenge. Clutching the mask, she turns the corner and sprints towards the fake suburbia.

In the short time that has passed since she left the dorm, several smoke bombs have gone off inside the buildings. Thick clouds the colour of dirty snow pour out of the windows on every floor and rise from gaps in the ceilings. It must be an attempt to mimic the conditions of fires, but the organisers have gone too far; the smoke is so dense it's almost impossible to make out the façade.

The sight almost makes her stop in her tracks. Merely getting inside will be tough. She thought the area looked forbidding in broad daylight, but the artificial fog amplifies the impression. How she's meant to find her way, let alone disarm a group of would-be terrorists, she has no idea.

Most of the other students have ventured inside the haze. Only a few are still visible, receding out of sight like fading shadows as they edge deeper into the smog. The smoke dissipates a little as it leaves the buildings, but in the sweltering calm, it lingers close to the ground in dense sheets of pale grey and blocks out the sun. The area is sinking into a temporary, premature dusk.

A sharp bang echoes between the buildings. Before Lena has time to realize what's happening, she veers off course and takes cover behind a tree. More bangs follow in rapid series. Automatic gunfire, and lots of it. Probably the so-called terrorists. The noise crashes back and forth between the concrete walls, making it impossible to pin down where it's coming from.

She curses and backpedals as a series of bangs on the ground near her feet sends sprays of dirt and pine needles past her face. It takes several seconds for her to understand what's going on: some kind of firecrackers are concealed in the dirt and rigged to go off around the feet of anyone treading too close. They must be meant to simulate bullets.

They certainly haven't spared on the effects. Pity she's too strung out, and that there's too much at stake, or she might have enjoyed the spectacle. Had those firecrackers been real bullets, she'd been dead several times over before she'd made it anywhere near the entrance.

A flash on her right is followed by a tremendous boom. It's so loud and unexpected she stumbles to her knees and covers her ears with her arms. Farther away on her left is another explosion, but there's no sign of flames or flying debris. The bangs must come from devices supposed to resemble grenades or bombs.

Her heart hammers in her chest as she edges around a tree and looks for a way inside. A monotone beep rings in her ears. This exercise is a bad joke; the police would never want to move in on an enemy this heavily armed. It would be a purely military operation preceded by evacuations and negotiations. At least that's what should happen.

Perhaps this drill is meant to emulate the pandemonium of situations that escalate too fast and spin out of control. Which, she reminds herself, is a scenario that can happen at any time when she's an officer. Or at any other point in her life. Reality will at best be many levels more stressful and dangerous. The notion makes cold sweat break on her back.

She moves forward again. Her gun no longer feels reassuring; even though this is a drill, the chaos is almost unbearable.

And for the first time in as long as she can remember, her nerves begin to wilt.

\*

## Chapter 6

*08.21*

Lena runs up to the nearest wall, where she finally locates a door. She stops to catch her breath. Ahead of her is a maze of coarse edges emerging and withdrawing as the artificial fog swirls through the confined spaces. The relentless gunshots make stealth pointless, but she can't resist trying to walk silently.

Oblivious to what happens around her, she walks on.

She believes the tension in her chest is a cage only she can feel, that the dread that weakens her legs is a sensation confined to her own body. But fear is more than an abstract perception. To some, it's a thick scent spreading untouched by smoke and on currents out of sight. Also, just like any other fragrance, fear can be noticed. Sensing it is only a matter of being attuned.

As Lena enters, something stirs in the depths of the building.

And opens.

\*



## Chapter 7

08.22

Enough daylight penetrates the smoke to outline the room. Her mind fuses together hints of lines and glimpses of corners into an approximate layout, too vague for fast movement but enough to avoid running head first into a wall. In a corner is a scratched fifties-era wooden dining table surrounded by worn, dented chairs. It's lighter than she expected in here; from the outside, the space looked almost completely black. Maybe she's adapting to the chaos.

After making sure there's no one hiding among the furniture, she presses on. A long gun salvo in the distance is followed by more explosions as she moves into the next room. She must hand it to those who set this up: they've managed to create total bedlam. *Use any tactics you deem fit*, Chevarin said. His instructions make sense in this chaos. Her best bet is to find the supposed terrorists and try to look sharp if she happens to stumble into an instructor.

Three rooms later, she finds a large room partially filled with chairs and tables pushed up against a wall. In the ceiling is a hole large enough to climb through. Above is what seems to be another similar room, although the smoke and lack of light make it hard to be sure.

Going up is a gamble. If one of the so-called terrorists is there, he or she can easily mock-kill her and see that she fails the test. That would be both catastrophic and embarrassing. But up should also be the right direction: any marginally intelligent hostage-taking, gun-toting maniac would seek higher ground. So far, she hasn't seen any stairs. There might not even be any.

She drags a rickety chair to the middle of the floor and climbs up to reach the edge of the hole. After three clumsy and painful failures, she manages to pull herself up onto the next floor. No terrorists in sight. Groaning, she sits down on the floor to rest her aching arms. The absence of hand- and footholds made the short ascent much harder than she expected, but this is pathetic.

The room is empty. It's also darker than the previous one, or perhaps the smoke is denser. Her mask blocks her peripheral vision and forces her to turn her head sideways more than normal. On her left and right are tall, rectangular outlines: doorways into other rooms. Unless she's spun around without noticing, she should head left to get closer to the shooting, which ought to take her nearer the goal. If this damned exercise really has one.

A tremendous bang makes her shout out in surprise. Another blank grenade, its echoes rippling through the rooms until the sound becomes a flat hum that takes seconds to fade. She decides on the left-hand door, but stops and backs up when a dark shape emerges through the opening. A person, moving fast and coming towards her.

The gun in Lena's hand seems to rise of its own accord. It might be one of the instructors, in which case she needs to pretend to arrest him or her.

"Stop!" Lena shouts and takes aim. "Drop your weapon, and put your hands on your head."

The person steps into view: it's Pierre, another student. She knows little about him, other than that he usually smiles at sarcastic remarks sent her way. Another face she won't regret never seeing again. Unless, heaven forbid, they end up at the same department.

Lena lowers the gun and takes a step forward.

"Lena?" Pierre's eyes narrow inside his mask. "What the fuck are you playing at?" he demands. "Use your bloody eyes. I'm on your team, unfortunately." He coughs hard and holds his hands to his head.

"Have you seen the rest of our class?" Lena asks. "Or the people we're meant to find?"

"If I knew where to find them," Pierre says tightly, "I wouldn't walk around like this."

"Let's stick together. We'll stand a better chance that way."

"Oh, you want to be a team player now?" Pierre laughs sharply. "After years of being totally impossible, Lena Franke wants to be in the game. That's really rich."

He blinks slowly and sways, then straightens up. Lena frowns and squints at the man; he looks as if he's working hard to focus, or even remain standing. Maybe he's caving in to the chaos.

"Are you sick?" Lena asks.

"Back off," Pierre mumbles. "I'm not going anywhere with you. Everyone knows Dahl wants you to crash and burn. I'm not failing this exercise because of some pig-headed bitch."

Lena raises her fist to punch him in his mask-clad face, but stops and pulls back. For all she knows, this scene might be part of the drill. Only that uncertainty stops her from knocking the miserable excuse of a soon-to-be police officer in his teeth.

Pierre stomps past Lena into an adjacent room. Tendrils of smoke follow in his wake, as if they're trying to cling to his back, before they slow and form a vertical whirlpool of swirling white. Lena shakes her head and turns away.

She steps up to the door through which the man had entered. Inside the next room is only more smoke. Thankfully, it's lit by the weak ambience that seems to pervade the whole floor. No sign of movement, however, and certainly no pretend terrorists.

Lena searches two more rooms in the same fashion. At least she's heading in the right direction; the constant banging is growing louder. Too bad that she has no idea how deep inside the building she has walked. The street could be just outside the window or several rooms away.

A shadow moves through the smoke. Someone in a bulky uniform, turning this way and that, as if searching. In a quiet moment between the gunshots, she hears the blip of a radio followed by a series of muffled curses. She pieces together the voice and the shape: it's Chevarin, the tactical response team's leader.

"Is everything all right?" Lena steps into view. She keeps her gun ready, in case Chevarin's presence means the people she's meant to find also are close.

"You could say that," he says tightly. "There's too much of this damned smoke. They've put some bloody amateur in charge of that bit."

"Then what are people shooting at?"

"Most of your lot is running around firing at anything that moves. And probably at things that don't. We might have to write off this entire exercise. The radios don't work, either. All I get are echoes and interference. It's as if we were in a damned cave."

Lena nods to herself. Hearing that the smoke is unreasonably thick is a comfort; it confirms her suspicion that it's worse than planned.

"So are you calling off the exercise?" Lena asks.

A new boom rings through the building and makes the smoke itself shudder. She's definitely close to the bottom of the cauldron.

"We've been told not to stop." Chevarin turns to face her. "Your supervisors want the event to run its full course. They were clear on that. But this is a total travesty. We could just as well have run the exercise at night." He waves at the smoke that rolls around him.

"You should get Stevan out of here," Lena says. "He's a risk. I think you know what I mean."

Chevarin coughs and nods. "I planned to keep a close eye on him, but he snuck away. And he seems to know how to stay hidden. Oh, bloody hell." He reaches out to lean against a wall.

Lena pauses. Seeing Pierre winded isn't surprising, but Chevarin looks like the type who can fight a bear and come out unscratched and unruffled. Given his job, he must be extremely fit and also used to exercises like this one.

"These damned masks are useless. I should've brought my own." Chevarin shakes his head and glances at Lena. "Get moving. The sooner this is over, the better." He coughs again and leaves.

Lena stands still and watches him disappear. The gunfight continues unabated, and the torrent of sharp bangs are taking their toll on her ears. Soon she'll be hearing only a flat whine.

Chevarin is right: this is a total farce. The instructors should blow their whistles and cancel the debacle, ideally before someone falls through an opening in the floor or starts an adrenaline-fuelled fight. There's no way it can be decided if the objective has been met. Searching this mayhem is like stumbling around inside a thundercloud full of sharp edges and scared people.

Although that might not be her biggest problem. Chevarin had looked ready to go asleep on the spot, just like the arrogant student she met a while earlier had done. Two out of two. A lousy statistical base for an analysis, but the team leader had complained about his mask, too. Then there's the bizarre amount of smoke. That's enough to weigh down the scales way past the line of coincidence. The conclusion is sprayed in angry red all over her intuition.

Something's wrong.

The fear she felt when she entered the first door returns. It's a nest of cold needles in her stomach, making her weak and nauseated when she has to stay strong. The shooting is make-believe, or at least harmless. So are the terrorists they've been ordered to find. Safety and sunlight is within easy reach, if she can get her bearings. This is a fabricated cocoon of temporary chaos.

And still, the sensation of imminent danger refuses to go away. Instead, it fills her like a mist, slowing her thoughts and urging her to sit down and succumb to the overwhelming racket. Even worse is the irresistible idea that her dread somehow is external, as if it's leaking from her pores and blending with the smoke.

The last notion brings with it a taste of bile. There's a limit to how much madness she can handle. Appalled by the idea of being sick in her mask, she pulls it off her face and goes down on her knees. It must be the smoke. Chevarin is right; there's too much of it. Neither she nor her mask can handle this. And the ongoing imaginary bloodbath a few rooms away doesn't help.

She realises that she's holding her breath. After a moment she understands why: the air's thick with the hot, dry texture of the smoke, but it's laced with a whiff of sweetness. It's unfamiliar and out of place. There's also an unpleasant sharpness to the smell, so faint it's almost imperceptible, but enough to make her reflexes kick in.

She inhales slowly and spits out the air in her mouth. Artificial smoke has a specific, unnatural smell that she would recognize, but this is different, more intense and acidic. It

could be a fire, the weather has been dry for weeks, and all the shooting and special effects will generate plenty of sparks.

Yet it's not the smell of burning wood; there's a chemical tang that reminds her of melting plastic. Perhaps the flames have ignited some kind of material that generates only pale smoke and no stench. She quickly pulls the mask back on. The mysteries can wait. Only one thing is clear: she needs to get the hell out.

Backtracking her way through the rooms, she comes upon stairs leading down. In the opposite wall is the dark rectangle of another doorway. Smoke wells up through both openings. Down is the right way, so she takes the stairs and enters a small chamber with four doors. Lots of options, but at least she should be on the right level. Now to find an exit.

She edges towards one of the doors and spots a dark shape just beyond the doorway. It's the sole of a boot. Someone's lying prone on the floor in the room ahead, unless it's a trap to put her off her guard. She crouches down and looks around the corner.

It's Pierre again, the man who sneered at her after she told him to drop his gun. He's resting in a crumpled position that must be painful. Unless he deliberately lay down to sleep, he has caved in to dehydration or maybe stress overload. Pieces of his mask lay next to his face, which supports the idea that he fell.

She's tempted to walk away and leave the misogynist bastard to his fate, but if there's a fire, he might end up caught in the flames. A new explosion shakes the building as she pokes his leg. If only they'd stop this idiotic drill. She can't be the only one who's noticed that something is wrong with the smoke.

"Hey." She prods his leg harder. "Wake up. You need to get out of —"

Pierre rolls onto his back and turns his eyes to the ceiling. Or rather, he stares at some horror visible only to him: his pupils are so small his eyes look almost entirely white, and his face is contorted in pain. *No*, Lena corrects herself. It's not agony that's behind the man's fixed grin.

Pierre is scared. Something has terrified him to the brink of collapse, and then beyond it.

\*

## Chapter 8

08.36

“What the hell?” Lena backs away.

She can't see what would frighten him this badly, but he's obviously unable to walk, so she grabs his shoes and pulls him along the floor. Bastard or not, she can't leave him behind.

As soon as she starts to move Pierre, he claws at Lena as if she were trying to tear his leg apart.

*“Biting, gnawing and gnashing,”* Pierre screams inside his gas mask. *“Get them off me, wash them off, scrape them away, rip them out!”*

Lena lets go of his feet and stumbles backwards. Pierre isn't unconscious; he's frenzied, and in a dangerous way. She's losing valuable seconds: those in charge must stop the smoke and get everyone to safety. Uncontrolled fires are lethal and move fast. Toxic fumes might kill Pierre before the flames reach him.

That thought sparks an idea: perhaps she can repair his mask, calm him down, and put it back on him while she searches for help. She bends down to pick up the pieces and realises that the mask's filter is missing. It must've rolled away when he struck the floor.

An epiphany runs its nails down her back. Unlike popular belief, misery doesn't like company: repeated snags and hiccups can be accidental only up to a point. By now, she's left that point far behind her.

In theory, the presence of the tactical response team and a handful of soon-to-be police officers should make for a safe environment, but that hasn't deterred thieves from breaking into a nearby shed. This exercise is so chaotic it's a blank map open to opportunities. In here, an unscrupulous person can take a shot at the unthinkable. Such as, for example, dialling up the terror level way past what's reasonable, in hopes of making the students truly panic.

Dahl hasn't struck her as the vindictive type, but perhaps she's hiding a darker streak. Another scenario is that Stevan has fallen off the tightrope of self-restraint he's been dancing on for years. He might've gone on a violent rampage, triggered by the war-like environment, and set fire to some of the furniture.

Or maybe someone is out to get her. It's the most extreme idea, but it is possible that avoiding the sprinklers has marked her as a target.

Movement in the corner of her eye makes her look up. Two shadows pass behind a doorway on her right. There are people in the next room. Walking slowly and hunched, and backlit by the weak light, they look like a pair of partially realized ghosts.

Whoever they are, they can help her raise the alarm and get everyone out. Although if it's Stevan, she'll do best to approach him gently; the look in his eyes had been as unsettling as seeing the terrified man on the floor. She walks up to the doorway and peers through the smoke.

They're the two men she saw first in the forest, then later crossing the road. The former academy teacher and his friend. Their haircuts make them easy to recognize even behind the masks, and their uniforms are familiar. For some reason, they have more modern-looking gas masks than the students and the other instructors.

She moves out from behind the wall to get their attention, then stops and holds her breath.

Both men hold guns with unusually long and thick barrels. At first, she thinks the weapons are some kind of sub-machine guns, then realises they're pistols equipped with silencers. The bald man also carries a heavy spring baton. A crude, illegal weapon, but also brutal and soundless.

Silencers and spring batons aren't part of the Swedish police force's regular range of arms. Maybe the men are meant to pose as the terrorists; however, there are no hostages in sight, and there's no reason why they would wear uniforms. Or move around, for that matter.

She risks another peek around the corner. The men are still there. They aren't hiding, but neither do they want to be seen. On the contrary, they're searching for something.

The tall man shakes his head and bats his hand at the smoke in irritation.

"How are we supposed to find the bitch in this fog?" he says, so softly Lena barely can make out the words.

"It's your fault," the bald man hisses. "If you'd used my contact, he'd have given you the right fucking wares. Now keep your mouth shut."

Lena bites down on a curse and shrinks back behind the wall again. Cold sweat breaks on her back as the pieces fall in place. Her legs seem to lose their strength as she inches away from the doorway. The men aren't pretend terrorists. They're out to get someone, and to succeed, they've filled the entire building with poison.

As a former teacher at the academy, the tall man must know how these drills are run and where the gas masks are kept. He and his friend broke into the shed to remove the filters. The steel cylinder she saw propped up against the men's car isn't a smoke machine; it contains something much more vicious. An airborne substance strong enough to knock people out or

leave them crazed with fear. If Lena hadn't got her mask from Dahl's office, she too would've been unconscious or at the mercy of some waking nightmare. Dahl must've retrieved her box from the shed before the break-in. Unless, of course, Dahl is part of the scheme.

Lena backs away, sneaks inside another room, and runs as fast as she dares. The time for subtlety is over. As dangerous as fires are, they don't compare to people willing to gas an entire class of police students as well as a whole tactical response team. She must get out of here.

Walls flash by like stiff grey curtains as she dashes through the rooms. Moving this fast is reckless; if she tumbles out through a window, even a one-storey fall can leave her with a broken neck. But she has no choice. She enters a new room, looks around quickly, and stumbles to a stop.

A shape lies sprawled on the floor inside the door. It's Chevarin. He breathes fitfully, and his eyes are closed behind the gas mask. Along his face is a streak of blood that oozes from a wound above his ear. Just as she is about to lean down to try to wake him, a hand lands on her shoulder.

Lena gasps and spins around. In front of her is Arvid breathing heavily and swaying from side to side while he studies her. He stands so close their masks almost touch.

"I found you," Arvid rasps.

Lena backs away until her shoulders hit the wall behind her. Arvid has her cornered. All she can do is raise her hands to stop him from coming any closer.

"You have to listen to me," Lena urges.

"They said I can kill them," Arvid wheezes inside the mask.

"What?"

"They told me I can do whatever I want." Arvid raises his voice. "Murder, torture, anything I can get away with. Does that make sense to you?"

Lena looks for a trace of reason in Arvid's eyes but sees only an unhinged man. In difference to Stevan's chemically addled gaze, Arvid's stare is fixated, yet also chillingly disinterested. It's the look of an animal on the hunt.

"Listen to me," Lena urges. "This is a set-up. We're being poisoned."

"I can still hear them." Arvid shakes his head and looks down. "Urging me on, goading me, telling me to use my hands, my fingers, my teeth. But I don't trust them." He stumbles again and catches himself a moment before he falls.

"I don't trust them either," Lena says slowly.



She needs a window of opportunity to escape. It's unclear what kind of delusions are ripping through Arvid's head, but his rambling sets off warnings in her mind. He's feeling the effects of the gas, too; his mask has been tampered with, just like the other ones. Maybe he's been hiding on the fringe of the tumult and that way avoided inhaling too much of the toxins. That would be just like him.

Arvid seems to nod off; then his head snaps upright again.

"But what if they're right?" he says and locks his eyes on Lena. "There are so many I hate. I want to hear them beg, plead, and cry. Maybe it's my turn now."

Lena balls her fists by her sides. Self-defence isn't one of her strengths, but she went toe-to-toe with people many times during her teenage brawls. The rage that steered those punches fills her again as Arvid advances on her.

"Back off," she says and raises her fists. "Please, snap out of it. You're not thinking clearly. It's not your fault."

"My head's never been clearer." Arvid takes a slow step towards her.

"Don't you see?" Lena asks. "We've been tricked. This is a heist. We have to get out, and you're not helping."

Arvid tenses while his eyes drift towards her throat. He's going to do something stupid. Fortunately, he signposts his intention before he lunges forward towards Lena, who dodges his hands and rams her shoulder into Arvid's stomach.

Her shove sends Arvid backpedalling into the opposite wall at almost running speed. She manages to stop and find her footing just as the back of Arvid's head connects with the concrete wall. There's a loud *clack* as his teeth click together behind the mask. His arms go limp by his sides, and he slides down along the wall until he sits slumped with his head lolling to one side.

Lena breathes so hard the filter rattles inside her mask. She watches Arvid for several seconds, expecting him to spring up and come at her again. When he doesn't move, she walks up to him and carefully checks his pulse. He's seemingly unconscious, but still alive. Treading as softly as she can, she walks on and prays she'll find an exit soon. She has long since lost all sense of direction.

The next room is larger and murkier than the other rooms she's visited so far. Not a good sign. Even worse, the men with the silenced guns could be anywhere. She must keep moving. If she can press on in one single direction, sooner or later she's bound to find an exit.

Shivers run down her arms as she walks farther inside the room. The air is frigid, as if the heat of the summer is unable to reach this deep inside the complex. It's quieter too, although

at the same time her cautious footsteps leave a faint but long echo. After a moment she understands that the room is even bigger than she first thought. Its walls are out of sight, but she has the impression that she's standing in a cathedral.

She walks on. The smoke is less dense; instead of whirling around, mist-like tendrils flow past her face and drift towards the centre of the room. The middle of the floor is cloaked in shadow, but the movement of the smoke suggests there's an opening ahead.

After a few seconds, the smoke parts, and Lena stops in mid-step.

In front of her is a large, circular hole. Apart from its uneven edges, the opening is similar to the one she climbed up through earlier, although this one is much bigger. Inside it is smooth, tar-like darkness.

She shivers and takes a step forward. It feels as if the chill in the room radiates out from the opening in the floor, but that makes no sense. Neither does the smoke's behaviour: in every other room, it parted without resistance, and outside the house it rose towards the sky. In here, the smoke streams into the hole like a thick fluid and disappears as if sucked down a drain.

Lena takes another step towards the rim. Smoke orbits the opening in a lazy dance that tugs at her. She doesn't want to get any closer, but this might be her best bet to leave. If the hole leads down to a basement, there could be tunnels to other stairs or even a way to get outside the entire building.

As she's coming closer, a new, unexpected calm comes over her, and her fears fall away. Part of her screams that the sudden sensation is wrong, but Lena brushes the warning away. She needs tranquillity after so much stress. All the shooting, running and searching has worn her down. It has also left her full of rage, and she wants to channel it. Her hands tremble with the need to cause damage.

The hole doesn't look intimidating anymore. Nothing harmful waits for her inside its cool, black emptiness; she's just allowing her imagination to run riot in her head. The men with the guns can't harm her. They'll come here eventually, and when they do, she'll deal with them. They will learn real suffering. She'll make them beg for mercy before she slits their throats.

The closer to the edge of the hole she gets, the more convinced she becomes: only she matters in this place. Nothing else is of value, interest, or consequence. Around her, men and women mill around like confused cattle. Some of them have made her life difficult. They deserve to be on the butcher's block, where they can experience the pain they've put her through.

By the time she reaches the edge of the hole, she's smiling at her newfound insight. Smoke twists around her ankles while she stares into the black nothingness. Her resolve grows: this

is the moment when she'll get even. She will hunt the others down like the cretins they are, cut their scrawny necks, and peel off –

All of a sudden, Lena realises what she's thinking, and repulsion hits her like a blow in her stomach.

She slumps down on her hands and knees, and crawls away from the edge. It's the damned gas: the poison is filling her lungs with toxins and her head with vile ideas. Her mask must be leaking, or maybe the filter is wearing out. The hole no longer looks inviting, only quiet and cold, more a dead end than a way forward.

Whatever confusion that came over her has passed. Going down here won't take her closer to freedom; it'll only trap her deeper inside this damned construction. Hoping to find another way, she turns around.

The men with the silenced weapons stand just behind her.

Lena has time only to shout in surprise before a hard shove sends her crashing to the floor. She throws up her hands to break her fall, and hisses when the rough concrete scrapes away skin from her palms. Her gun slides away into the smoke and out of sight.

Absently, she sees a slumped shape on the floor behind the men: it's Dahl, unconscious or dead. Her mask is gone and her face is smeared with blood. They must've dragged her into the room behind them.

Groaning, Lena tries to stand up, but a kick in her ribs throws her off balance. She hits the ground again, this time shoulder first. Pain flashes through her arm as the bald man's boot stamps down on her chest.

The two men look down at her while they line their guns up on her face. Thoughtless horror hammers on the doors to her mind, but Lena concentrates on being absolutely still. A small move of either man's finger and she's gone. Better to wait for an opening.

"I told you I saw someone." The bald man's hand flexes around his weapon.

"Why is she even awake?" the tall man asks. "All the other ones are wasted."

"The same reason this whole job is a damned mess. The gas you got hold of isn't what we wanted; everyone's gone off the rails. This one must have a different mask."

Before Lena can protect herself, the man who has her pinned reaches down and tears away her gas mask. She tries not to breathe, but stress and pain make her want to hyperventilate, and the pressure on her chest makes matters worse.

"What should we do with her?" the tall man asks.

"She's a witness, so she comes with us. We'll just have to dig a little deeper."

Lena twists under the boot and tries to roll to the side. The men's discussion about how to dispose of her might be a trick to scare her, but the alternative is too alarming to ignore. Dahl's body underlines Lena's fears: the men aren't here to steal anything. They were looking for Dahl, and they found her.

"Keep still." The bald man presses his boot harder into Lena's chest and looks up at his friend. "I say we finish them off right here. It'll be too much work getting them to the car alive."

Lena stops squirming. The way things are going, she's only going to get herself killed sooner. She turns her head slightly and glances at Dahl. What the men just said suggests that the woman is alive, and she sees the instructor breathe, although very slowly.

The tall man shakes his head. "We'd have to carry them if we do them now," he says. "I don't want them found too soon, or they'll block the roads."

"We can toss them in there." The bald man points at the large opening in the floor. "What is that, anyway? The sewers?"

"Must be some kind of freak pit. I've never seen it before, which means they won't look there in the first place."

"Sounds perfect. It's time to leave before we end up two babbling idiots like the rest." He shakes his head. "We should've used regular sleeping gas, not this cheap shit substitute."

"I was told it'd do the work. And it knocked them out, just as it was meant to do."

"Sure, after it made everyone go nuts. Which, as you might remember, was not part of the plan. We have a plan, then?" he asks. "Cap them here, and get the hell out?"

"Works for me."

*Don't breathe*, Lena tells herself. Her blood thunders in her ears. She looks from side to side as she searches for a weapon, but there's nothing within reach.

*Don't you dare breathe.*

Ache and sickness roll around inside Lena's body. Her eyes refuse to focus, and moving her arms takes unbelievable effort. Her next attempt to get away will be her last.

The bald man aims his pistol between Lena's eyes. She must try to lash out, although she knows she'll be too slow. With a low growl, she balls up her fist, and freezes.

There's a shift in the darkness behind the men. A shadow slips inside the room and glides over the floor, quiet and smooth as the smoke itself. The shape looks translucent at first, but grows features as it comes closer.

It's Stevan. His mask is gone, and he gestures at Lena to be quiet. In one of his hands is a large, grey brick. Within the space of a few seconds, he crosses the floor and rises up behind the taller of the two would-be assassins.

The bald man realises that Lena is staring at something behind him. He turns around, sees Stevan, and raises his hand to warn his friend just as Stevan's hand whips up. With a loud grunt, the tall man topples and falls forward down on the floor.

"You little *fuck*," the bald man shouts. He takes his boot off Lena to find his balance and turns his gun on Stevan.

As soon as the man moves his weapon away, Lena uses the last of her strength and throws herself at him.

It's a wild, uncoordinated tackle, but it's propelled by the desperation of almost certain death. Her rage helps too: the man's words and actions have fanned her nervousness into a blistering anger.

She wraps her arms around the bald man's legs and pulls hard. He's much heavier and probably an experienced fighter, so her best bet is to get him off balance and hope that Stevan makes the most of the window.

The man curses and throws a kick at Lena's face, but his focus is torn between her and Stevan. His foot swings past Lena's head and leaves him wobbling on the spot. Before he recovers, Lena swings around and slams her elbow into the side of his knee.

A noise somewhere between a gasp and a grunt erupts from behind his mask. He tries to aim at Lena, then staggers when his injured knee threatens to give in.

"You'll pay for —" the bald man roars and raises his gun.

Lena rolls onto her side and kicks out. Her foot catches him on his ankle, forcing him off balance again. The man falls sideways and disappears without a sound into the hole.

She listens for the sound of the impact when he lands at the bottom of the hole but hears nothing. She must've missed it. It would've been nice to hear the thud and picture the man breaking his back, although one can't have everything.

Stevan leans down and looks at her with a strangely calm expression on his face. Not too long ago, she was afraid that Stevan would hurt himself, wreck the exercise, or ruin her chances of graduating. After what's happened, seeing his face is like watching the sun rise after an everlasting night.

"Are you hurt?" Stevan asks.

Lena almost nods but then shakes her head. She's covered in cuts and bruises, but she can move. After a moment she frowns: either something is wrong with her eyes, or the ceiling is

the wrong colour. The concrete above her should be grey and peppered with cracks. Instead, it's a mess of grey hues, boiling and churning like dirty colours on a palette smeared around by an unseen brush.

*Clouds, she thinks. The vast, icy herald of a wintertime storm, sinking down to smother me.*  
A trail of ice runs down her back: she's forgotten to hold her breath. The toxins are seeping into her blood. She has to leave, or she'll become as erratic as Arvid.

"Do you know the way out?" Lena rasps.

"I think so."

"Then lead the way," she says, "before I lose my mind like everyone else in here."

\*

## Chapter 9

### *10.13*

A near-successful assassination of a senior police academy teacher is enough to raise concern in many places. Add a large military regiment, plus a sprinkling of unidentified airborne toxins, and the affair quickly snowballs into a boulder of panic that raises hell in police offices across Stockholm.

The four instructors who hung back at the offices are stunned when Stevan and Lena stumble into the room. After Stevan gives them a rundown of what has happened, the staff dig out their firearms and run off to search for the missing students, the other teachers, and the tactical response team. One unfortunate junior teacher is left behind in the office to make a hundred phone calls while looking after Stevan and Lena.

Soon police cars flock to the scene, followed by three ambulances. The local fire brigade brings its team of smoke divers to assist with the search. Platoons of uniformed soldiers arrive from the nearby regiment and take up positions throughout the compound. The tactical response team arrive in larger numbers.

Within forty-five minutes, several hundred people jostle for space outside the barn. Phones ring, shouts echo between the buildings, and sirens start up and are cut off.

Lena watches the chaos from where she sits on a rock near the offices. Stevan sits in an ambulance to have his vitals checked while the other students lie on blankets or stretchers around her. All are accounted for. Dahl has recovered, possibly because she didn't spend long inside the smoke, and is doing her best to micromanage the commotion.

All who were inside the smoke are required to go to a hospital. Given that each ambulance has to make at least two round trips to make that happen, it's an order easier issued than observed. Luckily, the effects of the gas seem to wear off quickly, although many still suffer from convulsions and fevers. Nurses dart from spot to spot as they help those who need urgent attention. Arvid is among those worst off; he lies catatonic and trembling on a blanket.

Lena can't feel much beyond the dull pain of her various wounds and an oncoming headache.

Standing a few metres away from Lena is a group of scientists from Stockholm University, rushed to the site in order to figure out what kind of unpleasantness has been emptied into the

air. They assemble a range of outlandish sensors and pore over the readings, all while keeping up a rapid and eerily enthusiastic discussion.

So far, they think it's a heavily concentrated, highly potent mind-expanding substance, but it'll be days before they know exactly what kind. That's one kind of horror Lena doesn't expect to be subjected to ever again.

The men behind the failed raid have been swept away to a cell. Most likely, it'll be just a stopover on their way to a permanent home in a high-security prison. One of the paramedics let slip that he'd seen them being forced into a police van, and apparently it didn't go smoothly: the bald man had flailed around and babbled incoherently. *I saw them*, he'd shouted, over and over. *I saw them, they're real, I could see them I could touch them.*

Eventually, Lena is guided to Dahl's mobile office, where Dahl and a number of other officers spend hours bombarding her with questions and requests for more details. It's not an interrogation, but not far off. A doctor arrives to check Lena's vitals and take countless blood samples. The debriefing goes on until the doctor runs the officers out of the room, claiming that she needs a break.

Dahl asks Lena to wait in the office until she returns. The doctor leaves as well, but only after Lena promises to rest. Those instructions are easy to follow; she's ready to fall asleep while sitting upright.

Dahl enters some twenty minutes later. She closes the door behind her and sits down on a chair. Her clothes are crumpled, and her face is grey with fatigue. The large Band-Aid over the wound on her head is on its way to falling off.

"Just a few more questions," Dahl says wearily. "If that's all right?"

"What do you want to know?" Lena asks. "I don't think there's a single thing I haven't told you already." She sits up straight and blinks hard to shake off the worst weariness.

Dahl looks out the window for a long moment before she speaks.

"We got some answers out of the perpetrators before they were taken away," she says.

"Did they confess?" Lena asks. Maybe the men know they're facing life in prison and hope to shave off years by coming clean.

"Well, one of them spoke." Dahl raises her eyebrows and sighs. "The shorter of the two men was too delirious." She pauses. "Or maybe I should say scared witless."

"Did he inhale the gas too, then?"

"That's our theory."



Dahl pauses again. Lena studies the woman while she waits for her to continue. The teacher is working towards the questions she truly wants to ask, but she's not quite ready to go there yet.

"What do you think happened, Franke?" Dahl asks after a few seconds of silence.

"Why ask me?" Lena wonders. "I've explained everything I saw and did at least ten times over. And one of them has confessed."

"I'm referring to their motive. What do you think they were after? I'm not testing you, but I'd like to hear your ideas."

Lena sighs. "I saw both men in the woods during our run this morning. One of them was familiar. When I described him to Arvid, he said the man was a former, disgraced teacher."

"And you didn't pass this on to anyone else because there wasn't enough time," Dahl finishes. "You've been clear about this."

"I think they were here for you. I'd guess you were involved in getting the ex-teacher fired, and that he wanted revenge."

Dahl nods. "You're right," she says. "It was a messy affair. I received drunken threats for months afterwards. But when that ceased, I thought he'd moved on."

"Why didn't he go to prison?"

"Lack of evidence."

"And then he sank deeper," Lena speculates. "He joined a gang, maybe even the mob."

"Indeed. And it turns out I've been involved in putting some of their members behind bars, back when I worked at the court. So they decided to get me out of the way as a warning."

"They took a huge risk."

"Depends on how you see it," Dahl says. "As a prosecutor, I made many enemies. My home's a fortress. Out here, he could easily get close, and the smoke helped."

"So they broke into the shed last night," Lena continues, "and removed the filters from the masks. Then they pumped a gas into the buildings during the exercise, hoping to stun everyone and assassinate you."

"Precisely, or at least they planned to kidnap me and kill me later. Although they couldn't get hold of the gas they wanted, so they used a substitute that reacted with the smoke and doubled its effects. It also made those who inhaled it deranged rather than asleep."

"And they didn't expect anyone to stay conscious and trip up their scheme." Lena rubs her face. Every time she closes her eyes, she can see those godforsaken rooms before her.

"They certainly did not," Dahl says. "I think I know why Stevan remained awake. It's less obvious why you lasted so long." She pauses. "You stole one of the spare masks, didn't you?"

“I had no other option,” Lena says, too tired to think of an excuse or other explanation.

“Except for failing the test, you mean?” Dahl points out.

“That wasn’t an option.”

Dahl crosses her arms and sits back in her chair. For the first time since Lena arrived at the academy, she sees the lecturer smile.

“One last thing,” Dahl says, “I was nearly unconscious when Stevan appeared, but I wasn’t completely out. I’m sure I saw you kick one of the men.”

“He fell into the hole,” Lena confirms.

“That’s what I’m unclear about. The officers who found the two men say they were lying on the floor.” Dahl pauses. “Right next to each other.”

“They were on the same floor?” Lena shakes her head. “Then one of them must’ve climbed back out of the hole and passed out again.”

“In fact,” Dahl says, “the officers didn’t see any hole at all.” She taps her fingers on her desk while she watches Lena. “And there’s no basement in any of the buildings.”

“Maybe they came to, tried to crawl away, and fainted again in a different spot. It’d be unusual, but not impossible.” Lena shrugs and holds up her palms.

“Do you think that’s a reasonable explanation?”

Lena hesitates and looks out the window. Her belief is stretched so taut it threatens to snap.

“What’s the alternative?” Lena says quietly. “That we were drugged out of our minds and shared a vision of a hole where there isn’t one?” Her question is aimed at herself as much as at Dahl. “That’s impossible.”

“Yes,” Dahl says after a moment. “I guess you’re right. Somehow, the men must’ve left the room. That’s the only alternative.”

“Are we done here?” Lena asks. She needs to rest, just like the doctor said, but she must also find time to think. Preferably in solitude, and a long way away from here.

Dahl nods. “There’ll be more interviews throughout the week.”

“One more thing,” Lena says.

“Yes?” Dahl rises from her chair.

“Did I pass the test?”

“Everyone did. We can’t include this fiasco in the assessment, so what happened here today won’t go on any records. Oh, and Gren asked me to give you this.” Dahl hands Lena a business card.

Lena turns the card over in her hand. On one side is the emblem of Stockholm Police Force. The printed name on the other side reads *Krister Gren, Superintendent*. Below his name, someone has written *Get in touch after your graduation*.

She looks at the rain and considers the message. It's professional, or else he wouldn't have asked Dahl to pass the card on to her.

"Thanks," Lena says.

"I'm the one who should thank you," Dahl replies. "You'll do great. If you can keep your cool. Head back to the dorm now while we work out a way to get you all back to town."

\*

## Chapter 10

13.27

Lena sits on the floor outside the dorm and rests her back against the wall while she waits. Outside, a drizzle has grown into a hard rain, lashing against the windowpanes like waves breaking against a shore. The air is cool, bordering on cold. Some of the windows are skewed and threaten to swing open under the assault of the wind.

Over two hours ago, while she was in the dorm to pack up the few items she'd brought, Stevan came past. He handed Lena a cup of coffee he'd managed to get from who knows where, and asked her to wait while Dahl debriefed him. Lena agreed and accepted the coffee almost reverently. It was stale and lukewarm, but it'd still been bliss in liquid form.

A door opens and Stevan walks down the corridor. His face is gaunter than usual, his eyes are bloodshot, and his skin is an unhealthy pale. He looks like an unfit man who has been forced to sprint a marathon. Two military police cadets move into view at each end of the corridor. Lena might be free to leave, but it seems Stevan's position is less clear.

Stevan walks up to Lena, slides down along the wall next to her, and sits down with a long sigh.

"Well, that was that," he says. "I'm out."

Lena sighs and closes her eyes; she suspected as much. Stevan had had a look of both determination and defeat when he followed Dahl into her temporary office.

"Are you sure?" Lena asks. "You saved lives today."

"Only because of dumb luck. I'd like to say that what happened was the drop, but my bucket's been full for a long time. Policing isn't for me. It never was."

"They might reconsider."

"It was my decision, not theirs." Stevan grimaces. "But I just wanted to beat them to expelling me. I've given them a whole alphabet's worth of reasons to kick me out, starting with *a* for *amphetamine*."

"That's how you stayed conscious when everyone else passed out," Lena guesses. "Is that right?"

"I suppose so." Stevan pauses. "I'm an absolute idiot, you know. My only comfort is that I didn't hurt anyone."

“Well.” Lena shrugs. “Maybe stuffing your face with various illegal substances during a police school test wasn’t the brightest of ideas.”

She swirls the coffee around and tries to make sense of her mixed feelings. No one with Stevan’s catastrophic lack of judgement should be an officer, but applying logic to the behaviour of friends can be tricky. Especially when the friends in question have saved you from being murdered.

“Will you reapply in the future?” she asks.

Stevan shakes his head. “They took blood samples, so they’re aware of what I did. But I shouldn’t have signed up in the first place. You must’ve realised that I’m not exactly a tight bundle.”

“I know you’ve got some baggage,” Lena admits. “And sometimes it shines through, although that’s no surprise. You must’ve gone through more than anyone else in the academy. I think you’re as good as the rest of us and a damned lot nicer than most.”

“You’re better cut out for this,” Stevan says. “Officers can’t be just nice. They need to be level-headed, firm, and smart.”

“I’m doomed, then.” Lena offers Stevan a small smile and puts her cup on the floor. “Frankly, I can’t begin to tell you how glad I am that you showed up back in the house. Just at the right moment, too.”

Stevan looks at Lena, turns his eyes to the floor, and takes a deep breath.

“I saw him,” he says.

Lena wonders who Stevan is talking about. When he doesn’t continue, she raises her eyebrows and nods encouragingly. Stevan balances on a fence: he wants to go on, but he’s afraid she won’t believe him.

“One of the crooks?” Lena asks after a while. “The ex-teacher or the bald one?”

“I saw the soldier who died in there,” Stevan says. “Look, I know I was high and that the rooms were full of some kind of poisonous gas. But I’m dead sure.”

Lena works her mouth while she tries to think of what to say. She doesn’t want to offend Stevan by pointing out that the only thing he’s seen is an illusion brought to life by airborne toxins, the drugs he’d already consumed, and his traumatic past.

But she can’t bring herself to suggest that she believes him, either. And any kind of compromise would be doubly offensive.

“I heard the story years ago,” Stevan continues. “Some rumours say the poor guy was strangled, but I thought it was just talk. Now I’m not so sure.”

“So you saw a ghost and then you found us,” Lena says eventually, deciding to bypass the entire topic. “I must’ve used up all my luck for the upcoming decade.”

Stevan gives her a sidelong look: he knows what she’s trying to do.

“It wasn’t luck.” He sighs. “You don’t believe me. I get that. All I can do is tell you what happened and what I saw in there.”

“Go ahead. I’m listening.”

Stevan looks around, as if expecting the mirage he’s experienced to come walking down the corridor any moment.

“I almost ran right into him,” Stevan says, lowering his voice. “When you and I met just before the exercise started, I was so jacked up my eyeballs hurt. A couple of minutes later I only wanted to get the hell out.”

“That makes two of us. But it must’ve been worse for you. I mean, considering –”

Lena swallows the rest of her sentence. She’d been sickened by the constant bangs and the overall mayhem, but any normal person would’ve reacted the same way. Stevan, on the other hand, spent months in his youth trying to outrun roving bands of armed madmen. Not quite the same thing. Time to shut up and listen instead.

“So I was searching for an exit,” Stevan continues. “But all I managed to do was get more lost. I was pretty hysterical by the time I turned a corner and saw him standing there. He was completely still, as if he’d been waiting for me. In fact, I think he was. And he was as real as you and me.”

“Keep going,” Lena says. There’s a time and place for everything, and debates about the state of Stevan’s sanity could wait. Right now, she wants to hear what he thinks he saw, and he clearly needs to share it.

“At first I thought he was an instructor,” Stevan says. “Or a member of the tactical response team. After all, he wore a uniform and carried a gun. He even had a mask. Then I saw his eyes.”

“What about them?”

“I can’t describe them.” Stevan clears his throat. “But you know how strangled victims look.”

Lena nods and shudders as images flash through her mind. Some classes at the academy covered basic forensic knowledge. She sat through all them, and without fault, she always hit the nearest bar right after each session. The slides they were required to see were like postcards from hell.

“Well, that’s what he looked like,” Stevan says. “Or his eyes did, at least. I’ll never forget them.”

“Jesus Christ.” Lena swallows and shakes her head. “I can honestly say that I would’ve bolted.” She means it, too. Things in the fake block of flats had been distressing enough without those kinds of hallucinations to cap the chaos.

“I was too stunned to run,” Stevan says. “He looked at me and slowly pointed at a door. It led to the room with that hole in the floor. At the time, I didn’t know you were in there, but I was so desperate for directions that I just turned the way he wanted me to go.”

“I’m glad you did.”

Lena picks her cup up again and pulls her legs up close to her chest. For all her scepticism, Stevan’s story doesn’t leave her untouched. Even the weather seems to pay attention. The temperature in the corridor appears to have dropped, and the rain’s relentless bashing against the house sounds louder than before.

“Have I ever told you I’m afraid of ghosts?” Stevan smiles ruefully. “They’ve been my companions since I fled the war. Women, men, children, even animals. All the ones who got in the way of the mercenaries. Most of the time, they show up only in my dreams. Sometimes, though, I feel as if they’re closer.”

“That’s terrible,” Lena says.

The delusion he suffered from in the smoke must’ve been unpleasant, but recurring visions at night and constant unease when awake sound like being stuck in a permanent nightmare. She raises her cup to her mouth and hopes she never has to face that kind of torment.

“He mentioned you,” Stevan says. “The ghost, I mean.”

Lena lowers her cup in mid-gulp, wipes her mouth and stares at Stevan. “Come again?” she asks.

“When he pointed at the room, he spoke six words.”

“Save the dame, save the dame?” Lena asks. Her suggestion is meant to take the edge off Stevan’s story, but his words leave a cold emptiness in her stomach.

“I’m afraid not,” Stevan says quietly. “He said *save her before they take her*. Pretty weird, don’t you think?”

The window above Lena’s head slams open. A gust of wind is followed by a spray of rain, showering Lena’s hair and washing down her back. She jumps up and turns around to close the window.

The forest outside the window is reduced by the downpour to a wall of jagged dark grey contours. Hazy dark edges rise above the treetops in the distance: the edge of the false suburb still visible despite the deluge. Groaning, she slams the window shut and sits down again.

“I can’t wait to get out of here,” she says under her breath.

A door opens, and Dahl enters the corridor. She stops a few steps away from Lena and looks down at her.

“Everyone who’s injured or still unconscious is being taken back in ambulances,” Dahl says, “but it’s taking them all day, so we called for a coach to take everyone else to the hospital for more check-ups.”

“When is it here?” Lena asks.

“Not today. It’s broken down, and finding a replacement will take hours. If you want to get back to town before tomorrow, you’ll have to go by bus and then train. The army wants us gone. They’ve already emptied the regiment down the road to comb the forest. I suspect they want to make sure there aren’t any collaborators lurking in the woods.”

“Then I better get walking,” Lena says.

“My car’s outside,” Dahl says to Lena. “I can give you a ride if you want.”

“Thanks,” Lena says. “But I’ll make my own way back. I need some fresh air.” The idea of being stuck inside a small space, even a car, makes her want to stand up and run from the barn.

“It’s your call,” Dahl says. “The offer stands until I leave.” She turns to Stevan. “As for you, the military police will escort you to headquarters, where there’ll be more questioning.”

“What happens after that?” Stevan asks.

“It depends. I know that several high-ranking members of the force are looking for a way to have you jailed. The results from the blood test aren’t in your favour. Substance abuse during a law enforcement drill, and at a military facility on top of that.”

Stevan tries to look unfazed, although he sags at the news.

“But given that you’re the reason I’m alive,” Dahl continues, “I’ll do what I can to cushion the blow. Although you never heard me say that.”

“Thank you.” Stevan looks as if he expects Dahl to tell him she’s joking.

“Thanks for what, exactly?” Dahl asks and raises her eyebrows.

“Nothing in particular?” Stevan says tentatively.

“Just so.” Dahl looks at Lena. “If you insist on catching the bus, you better get going. And look after yourself. That goes for both of you.”





## Chapter 11

14.31

Lena says goodbye to Stevan and sets off. By the time she reaches the bus stop, she is wet down to her skin and so frozen she cannot speak. But she isn't taken hostage or buried in an anonymous grave. And nothing in the world will ever force her to crawl through dark, dirty shafts again.

A bus arrives after a small eternity. Soon she's on a commuter train, which lulls her into near-sleep in minutes. Somewhere behind the clouds, the sun has given up trying to reach the ground and instead eases down into a long, hidden dusk.

Her scrapes and bruises sting no matter how she sits. Every muscle and joint in her body will be sore for weeks. On her back and elbows are several Band-Aids that somehow have survived the rain. Still, the worst wounds aren't visible to anyone but her: they consist of memories, indistinct but discomforting.

They make their way through every attempt to ignore them: Arvid's threatening behaviour, and the calm rage that gripped her at the first sight of the hole. The beating she suffered at the hands of the men, the weakness that filled her when she thought she was as good as dead, Stevan's intervention and his hallucinations. She'll spend months trying to bury the disjointed images.

But not only is she alive: she passed the test as well. Stevan is safe, as far as he can be. And there's a superintendent who wants to talk to her.

She closes her eyes and drifts away while the train plunges into the midnight of a tunnel.

*Count your blessings, she tells herself. And keep them close. You might need them for later.*

\*

## Chapter 12

Lena falls asleep hoping that this day will be the most dramatic of her career. She wishes that her time as an officer will be relatively untroubled, as uncomplicated as possible, and followed by retirement in a lakeside villa surrounded by sane people and not-too-deep forests.

Life, however, has other plans.

Lena doesn't expect plain sailing. Police duty will inevitably bring its share of hazards, friction, and collisions. But she doesn't yet know that she'll rouse enemies so dangerous they make the men she fought in the test look harmless in comparison.

Some adversaries come in the shape of people. They are vengeful, merciless and more uncompromising than she ever can dream of being. Still, they share the city and its streets with her. She has a chance to hunt them down and lock them away.

But she's also gained the attention of less tangible foes that aren't as easily imprisoned. They are entities who linger on the outskirts of our consciousness, where they whisper without words, feed on our fears, and urge us towards the shadows.

Drawn in by Lena's persistence and frail discipline, they gather on the horizon of her existence.

Waiting.

Watching.

And scheming.

\*

THE END

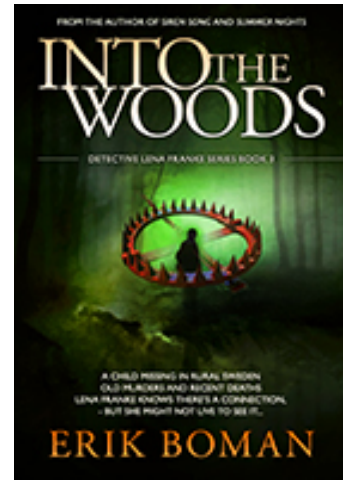
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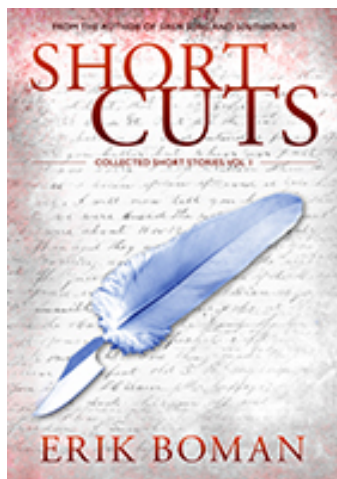


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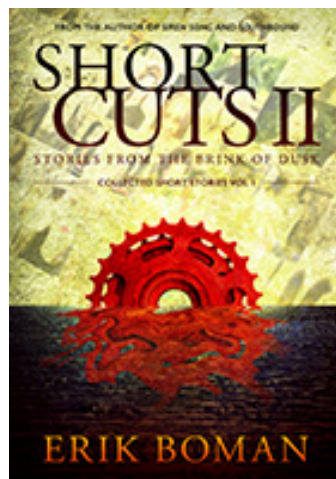


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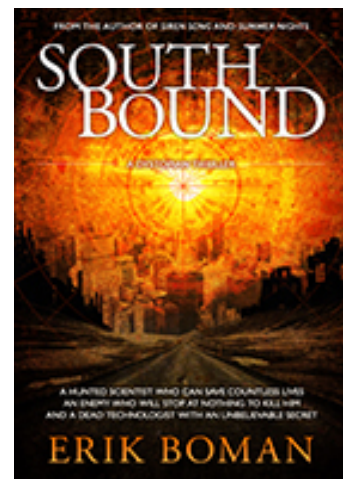
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